No one was awake to see it happen, except Rickman.

He was taking one of his midnight prowls, padding past the bedrooms of sleeping people, hoping to find something interesting to eat. He was nearly always hungry. Against the wall he found a dead fly, a chocolate chip, and a small piece of red crayon, which he also ate. He was not a picky cat. At the end of the hallway, he slipped into Mr. Rylance’s studio. In front of the drafting table was a chair he liked, and Rickman heaved himself up. It took two tries because he was heftier than he should have been.

On the drafting table, Mr. Rylance’s big sketchbook lay open. Animals and buildings and people jostled on the pages. Some pictures had scribbles through them, some were very sketchy, and others looked like they were ready to make an
The ink rippled, like dark water with something swimming beneath the surface. Then it was on the move again, flowing down the crease until it reached the bottom of the page. It thickened along the edge, as though it was trying to pour itself over—but it couldn't. It seemed to be stuck.

Rickman’s ears flattened against his skull. A thin tendril of ink lifted from the page, maybe half an inch or so, like a tiny arm desperate to escape quicksand. Then it got slurped back in.

Next a thicker spike of ink rose up, straining, reaching over the edge of the sketchbook, one second, two, before it collapsed back. Almost a minute passed and nothing happened.

Rickman yawned, showing his still-sharp teeth. This was getting boring.

All at once the ink rippled, as if a stiff wind blew across it, and then the entire splotch contracted and rose into a little mountain peak. It trembled, tensed, and then sprang. All the ink lifted right off the sketchbook—leaving the pages totally blank—and landed with a small splash on the drafting table.

Rickman purred low and deep in his throat. This was getting interesting again. This might be something worth eating. Already little strands of the ink splotch were being pulled back toward the sketchbook, as if it were a magnet or a black hole. The splotch struggled, fighting its way inch by inch across the drafting table. The book had a powerful pull, dragging some stringy tendrils of ink toward it. But just when
they were about to touch paper, they recoiled as if burned, rejoining the main inky splotch.

When it finally reached the far edge of the drafting table—leaving no trace of ink in its wake—it came to a rest, quivering slightly like something exhausted, but also amazed, and maybe even excited, because it started doing some kind of dance. It swirled round and round, spinning itself into all kinds of strange and beautiful shapes. Like it was celebrating its freedom.

Rickman’s paw came slamming down on it, claws extended. The splotch went spiky in surprise, then streaked between the cat’s claws and right over the edge of the table. It scurried along the underside, tested a table leg with a black, inky tongue, and then slid itself down to the floor.

While Rickman sniffed at the drafting table, the ink started flowing across the floor. It had no plan except to get as far away as possible. When it was halfway to the door, Rickman turned and his sharp eyes caught it. But by the time he’d eased himself off the chair, the ink had seeped out into the hallway.

There was light in the hallway, so the ink made itself skinny and slunk cautiously along the baseboard. Anyone looking would have missed it, or thought it was just shadow.

But Rickman knew better. He was old, arthritic, and overweight, but he hadn’t forgotten how to hunt. He prowled down the hall, head dipped low, then pounced. The ink must have sensed him coming, because it shot straight up the wall, faster than any shadow. Rickman banged his nose against the baseboard and landed clumsily on the floor. His nose wasn’t the only thing that hurt. Nothing is more important to a cat than its dignity, and he glared up at the ink splotch. The fur on his back lifted. With a hiss, he leapt, claws extended.

The splotch darted higher, just out of reach, and then swelled itself into a terrifying imitation of Rickman: an enormous black cat, back humped and jagged. Its vast, inky claws shot down the wall to swat Rickman. Yowling, Rickman somersaulted backward, then bolted.

The ink shrank back into a small blob and jiggled a bit as if laughing. It left no marks on the wall as it moved higher, onto the framed poster of Mr. Rylance’s best-known character, a mutant superhero called Kren.
The board had been divided up into squares and rectangles of different sizes. Most of them had stick figures penciled inside them, but in the very first squares were ink drawings. They weren’t very good. There were lots of smears. The ink splotch slid across, erasing as it went, and then stopped in the middle of the board.

This seemed like a good hiding place. The splotch stretched, then made itself as small as possible. It liked it here. The feel of the creamy paper was pleasing. The ink turned itself round in circles a few times, like a dog trying to get comfortable, and then was still.

But the moment the splotch tried to climb the glass, it slid right back down to the frame. It shuffled along a bit and tried again, with the same result, pouring off the glass like water. There was no getting a grip on this stuff! The ink gave up, moved back onto the wall, and kept going.

It wanted to find somewhere safe. When it reached a doorway, it slid inside the darkened room and down to the floor, where it paused. It sensed all the things in the room without knowing what they were. It had no words yet, no names for things like a desk, a bed, and a boy sleeping on the bed in a knotted tangle of sheets that made it look like he’d been battling something. The boy’s feet were on the pillow, and his head was where his feet should have been.

Beside the bed was a pile of books, and the ink splotch stopped warily. It waited. It sent out a tiny tendril, but these books didn’t try to suck it in. Only Mr. Rylance’s sketchbook seemed to want to do that. The ink slid closer.

It moved over an open math textbook and erased every word, number, and diagram it touched. It actually slurped the ink into itself. The ink paused, and formed itself into an isosceles triangle, and then a rhombus, before flowing on, erasing as it went. It left a blank trail behind it like a slug trail, except it wasn’t slimy. It was just shiny blank paper.

Off the math book and onto a novel. It wiped out most of the title and the cover illustration—it was in color, and the splotch seemed to like color because it gave a happy shimmer—and then found itself on a piece of illustration board.