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MAX GRAY

HEALTHY AND HAPPY

CORY SNUCK AROUND the side of the house, skirting the gravel path. “Stay, Randi,” he hissed.

Elephants were useful for a lot of things. Randi could flatten anything or anybody, he could make a trumpet sound, he was a dignified creature, and he could fly. Cory was proud to have the world’s only flying elephant at his side. Often they’d go flying at night, after Cory’s parents went to bed. With the cold wind whipping his ears, Cory leaned on Randi’s leathery neck and snatched stars like fireflies. They circled the house from so high his dad’s pickup truck looked like a tiny red button.

The neighbor’s dog, Stephanie, whimpered in Randi’s presence. Elephants were powerful and Cory understood the responsibilities that came with owning a pet, so they tried to avoid the dog whenever possible. Cory’s art teacher, Mrs. Shelly, told him that elephants needed water to stay healthy and happy. So the two of them hung around the fish pond on the far side of the lawn. Their neighbor kept Stephanie tied up to the back porch of her house.

Randi could do practically anything, except for stealth invasions. Unfortunately, this mission called for it. Black ops. He rubbed dirt under the elephant’s eyes to camouflage him.

Coincidentally, the enemy resembled his mother. Cory’s eyes, just above the windowsill, took in the scene: the woman, forehead wrinkling, yellow rubber gloves and soap suds. The walls were covered in white tiles. Papers, strewn napkins, and scattered fruit cluttered the table behind her. In case a

strike team needed to be debriefed, Cory noted the exits. The enemy was unarmed. She would never expect—

“Cory!” The woman jumped. Through the window pane her voice sounded submerged. “You scared the heck out of me!”

He sighed. “You blew our cover. Good job, Randi.”

“Come inside right now if you want any dessert. Hop to it, young man.”

The elephant turned and moved slowly through the backyard, tail flipping languidly from side to side. Cory followed, mouthing the intelligence information he’d gathered. First rule of double-confidential team was never to keep written reconnaissance records.

At Concord Elementary School, next to the swing set, he’d attempted to introduce the double-confidential game to a boy named William. William had hair the color of dead grass and never looked at anything for more than a few seconds, giving the impression either of restlessness or extraordinary indifference. The boy glanced up from an ant writhing beneath a dirty fingernail to briefly consider the word “confidential.”

“It’s not the same here though,” Cory said, “because my elephant can’t come to school.”

The boy squinted as if Cory was very far away and asked if he believed in God.

“I don’t know. Maybe. My mom does.”

“That’s smart because He’s real.” William concluded the ant’s agony with the palm of his hand. “That’s why they bury you when you die. It’s because God lives under the ground, where He can get you and take you to heaven. If you’re smart you believe that.”

Cory’s stomach made a sound like a boot coming down on a mud puddle, and he wondered if he ate too much for lunch. He tried to locate the ant, but the wood chips had swallowed it. William muttered something and wandered off, inspecting the flecks of dirt that stuck to his palm.

Cory’s mother called him again from inside the house. The elephant wandered over to the far corner of the yard and began sucking water out of

the fish pond. Cory put his hands on his hips.

“Hey, I have to go get ice cream,” he said. “But hey.”

The elephant blinked.

“Do you know anything about the Bible?”

Randi tore up some grass with his trunk and put it in his mouth.

“Fine. Never mind.”

Cory walked across the lawn, dandelions whispering against his ankles, and opened the back door. His mother dried her hands on a dish towel, still wearing her blue jacket and skirt. She had a special name for the outfit.

“Mom,” he said, accepting a small bowl with two scoops of vanilla ice cream, “what do you call your clothes?”

“What?”

“Randi!” He scowled. “Stay outside. I’ve said it a million times, you can’t come in the kitchen, you’ll get the floor dirty.”

“Oh, you mean my ‘grindstone getup.’ That’s nice you remembered that, darling. Now eat up quick, you’ve got to get to bed. Your father’s tired, so he won’t be helping with homework tonight.”

The ice cream rested in an indecisive mass at the bottom of the bowl. He saw the elephant outside the window and made a face.

“And honey, please stop talking to your pet friend. Bobby.”

“Randi!”

“Randi. It’s very strange.”

He licked the spoon using his best iguana tongue and thought of the first time he met Randi.

The town had been mummified, coated with big flakes that packed together to form perfect little missiles. Uniformly buried, the houses in his neighborhood creaked and stretched beneath the snow.

Cory’s dad parked the truck at the bottom of the hill. The emergency brake locked with a nice grinding sound. His dad wore the red and black flannel, Cory’s favorite jacket that did not belong to him. Gazing out the window, he told Cory to go ahead and play, and reminded him again in his tired voice not to ask about a snowball fight, he wouldn’t be doing that,

run along now. After prolonged resistance, his father succeeded in getting him out the door with a sled wedged under one thickly padded elbow. As Cory slipped effortlessly down each side of Dooley Hill, launching clumps of frost into the sky, his chapped lips repeated his dad's words. Run along now, run along.

He couldn't remember exactly when the elephant appeared. Randi accompanied him on several sled rides. Neither of them spoke. They let the burdened pine trees sail by quietly.

Then they lay together (Cory lay while Randi sprawled on his haunches, snow flakes drifting from his flopping ears) at the base of the hill. They talked about baseball, how many stars there were, and, upon the elephant's suggestion, the heat of the Serengeti. That made Cory feel warm, and when he looked at his hand, it was a vivid red. When he looked past his trembling, numb fingers he saw the red pickup truck with his dad's small, dark figure huddled inside. Randi asked why Cory's dad wasn't sledding and he said he didn't know.

The ice cream had melted into a lumpy puddle of cream. Cory abandoned the table and went into the next room. His father sat on the couch, outlined by fuzzy television light. Cory settled next to him and listened to the television cheering and laughing.

"Daniel," Cory's mother called in from the kitchen, "did you hear the news?"

His dad grunted softly.

"The neighbor's dog died. The one that used to go on the roses."

"Stephanie?"

"That's right. Isn't that sad?"

"You bet," his dad said, and turned the volume up.

"I told them it was a shame," she called. "They said they don't know what caused it. Didn't expect it at all."

The house was noisy with the sound of the television and clattering dishes. Cory sat still and looked at the carpet.

"Dad?"

“Yeah, buddy?” His father’s voice sounded tired.

“Is that true about Stephanie the dog?”

“Probably, pal.”

The sounds of the dishes and kitchen faucet stopped.

“Dad?”

“Yesss.” He drew out the word in a deep rumble.

“Does that mean my elephant Randi could die too?”

“Well.” His dad sighed and lowered the volume again. “I just don’t know, buddy. Isn’t it time for bed? I can only answer so many questions in one night.”

“Honey,” Cory’s mother said. “Daddy’s right. I think it’s time you went upstairs now.”

Cory didn’t hear her. The sounds around him faded to a muffled buzzing. He went through the kitchen, opened the backdoor, and stepped out onto the porch.

“Randi?” he said quietly.

He couldn’t see the elephant in the darkness.

“Randi?”

Cory heard the fine screeching of crickets, and above him there were too many stars to count. Later, when his mother touched his shoulder, tired of repeating herself, he was still there, standing on the porch, staring at the black, silent earth.