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GLADYS

EMILY MORRISON

“Gimme that bicep, sugar.”

Gordy wrestled with his sleeve. Even though he was sequestered to his own canvas cubicle, he could tell the glares from the line snaking through the gymnasium/cafeteria would eventually cause the cheap fibers to ignite and expose him to the mob waiting outside. Soft yelps chorused from his neighbors’ cubbies.

The nurse cleared her throat and clicked her nails together: acrylic castanets. “Look, kid, the line ain’t getting any smaller while you shoot the breeze with me. Now let me see those muscles of yours, unless you’d prefer a prick on the fanny.”

God, didn’t the hospital have a nurse under fifty who hadn’t just come off a smoking break? This model could use some new upholstery. Gordy groaned and held a limp arm to the woman. The nurse squished it around and settled on a particularly fleshy part. She balanced an alcohol swab between her pincers and swiped a quadrant. She then stuck him without a one-two-three or a how-do-you-do. He gasped, but couldn’t pull away from the nurse’s grip. She’d had years of experience with jumpy little boys.

“Good job, tootsie pop, you were a very brave little fella.” She peeled a sticker from the roll next to the bouquet of needles and slapped it on his shirt. My Little Pony proclaimed him to be a “Super Sweet Patient.”

“Have a nice day at school. Learn something.” She smiled.

He almost told her that there was lipstick on her teeth, but then again, she’d spent a little too much time manhandling his non-muscle for his liking. He’d let her figure it out herself.

Gordy half-smiled back and stuck the sticker to the canvas

panel as he ripped it aside.

There they were. Every kid he'd gone to school with since kindergarten, branching into lines and all staring. He gauged each face for even a twitch of sympathy. Dallas. Justin. Harry. Rachel. Jennifer B. Jennifer H. Jennifer M. Morgan. Nothing. But really, they were preoccupied picturing how big the needle must be for their peers to be yelping like that.

He bypassed the hostile troops marching two by two into the booths and trundled to the playground.

It looked more like a prison exercise yard from some movie. There were two sets of monkey bars, sure, and a propped circle with chained handles hanging off. Gordy supposed the fun came from dangling from the handles, but said appeal went unrealized among the seventh graders. Every day, he half expected to see a burly man bench-pressing out there, so that the "Mom" heart tattoo on his pec bulged. The real fun of the recess pit was the rocks. Pebbles of every shape, size, and type carpeted the plot. Squatting kids dotted the gray, pounding rocks against bigger rocks.

Some boy was trying to crush a deep brown rock like an idiot. Now, the pros knew the trick was to pick the extra sparkly rocks; they crumbled the best. And the pale ones, Gordy discovered, marked up the walls of the building most vividly. He hid his best rocks under a patch of weeds that interlocked the chain-link fence. Some fifth-grade girls were harvesting the weeds, weaving them into nests to put their rocks in, but they had yet to stumble upon Gordy's treasure trove. Rubbing his arm, he selected the best medium from the horde and stared at his blank canvas, the west side of the maintenance shed.

He couldn't decide what to draw, so he made a circle, a typically safe start. Then, a triangle. Another circle. He stood back and... Jesus H. Christ, he knew this would happen. After last week's events, nothing else occupied his conscious or subconscious. Gordyn couldn't stop thinking about Gladys.

...

"Gordy, look what Cat Damon brought in the house."

Lorie Gilkins called from the hall.

Gordy rounded the corner and almost stepped on a bloated, black lump caked in dirt. “There’s a bat on our floor, Mom.”

“Correct.”

The assassin was nowhere to be found, but Cat Damon was always bringing dead crap into the house. At least he’d only dragged it to the foyer. Gordy still didn’t like to make eye contact with the stain in the carpet upstairs. He’d plodded to the bathroom in the middle of the night and only noticed the frog underfoot when its guts squirted like a New Year’s confetti popper.

Maybe the cat hadn’t dragged it in. Maybe it had visited of its own accord. It could’ve easily walked — wait, do bats walk? No, Gordy thought, pretty sure they pitter pattered up trees and whatnot. It could’ve easily climbed through the cat door and pattered along the floral hall runner by itself, desperate to spend its final moments amongst Walmart posters of the Eiffel Tower and Mom’s teddy bear collection.

It could happen.

Gordy’s mom nudged it with her clog. “Yep. That’s a doornail if I ever saw one.”

“What were you gonna do if it started flapping around?” he asked.

“Step on it with the other foot.”

“Fair enough.”

She perched over it, cocking her head. It did nothing exciting. “What should we do with the poor beastie?”

“Dunno, Mom. Bury it?”

“You could hide it in your father’s car the next weekend he’s got you. Or,” she slid to the kitchen in her fuzzy socks and came back with a plastic barrel of Utz pretzels. “You could take it to school in this, you know, for biology.”

“But there are still pretzels in there. I don’t think we need to pack him a snack.”

She rolled her eyes, unscrewed the lid, and munched. When the bat continued to do absolutely nothing, she flipped through a stray paperback on the counter and kept eating. They migrated all over the house, the paperbacks, on top of the cabinets, in the

freezer, under sheets.

There was still a good quarter of the pretzel container left, but Lorie had never met a pretzel she didn't like. She and her mom would sit at the kitchen table and eat them by the crate, dragging them across a stick of butter.

In about an hour, the deed was done and they'd managed to squeeze the bat into the jar, a bizarre ship in a bottle.

She held up their work with gusto so the fluorescent lights cast ripples on the floor. "There, maybe you'll get some extra credit or whatever." Enthralled, she squashed her nose up to the plastic. "She looks like a Gladys to me. Isn't that the face of a Gladys?"

"What if it's just really good at playing dead, Mom?" Gordy asked warily. "What if Gladys just starts flopping around in there?"

She puckered, then gave the whole apparatus a terrific shake, like she was coating a chicken breast with breadcrumbs. When she relented, Gladys had not reanimated. She peered through the warped plastic at Gordy, a fine blanket of pretzel silt and salt dusting her fur and open eyes.

Gordy took it and started upstairs.

"Wait," Lorie called, "Don't you think we should say a few words?"

"Mom. It's a dead bat. We're not having a service for a dead bat."

She wrapped herself around the bannister, pouting up at him. "Why not? We had a funeral for your goldfish that only lived for a week. Besides, we've named it, I'm attached."

Gordy sighed and placed the Utz barrel on the hardwood between them, clasping his hands.

"Dearly beloved. We are here not only to mourn the death, but also to celebrate the life of Gladys, a wonderful, kind, champion of a bat if ever one breathed. I assume." Lorie nodded solemnly. "And now, we shall hear a hymn to help us through this hard time."

"What?" Lorie whispered.

"The only funeral I've ever seen was Grandpa's and the ones on TV," he hissed back. "I don't know many variations."

Lorie looked at Gladys. Then, she sang the only hymn she knows to this day:

“When I die and they lay me to rest,
gonna go to the place that’s the best,
when I lay me down to die,
goin’ up to the spirit in the sky...”
“Spirit in the sky,” Gordy echoed.

...

The sun rose, and Gordy dashed about his room, readying for the day. He stuffed his backpack with all the notebooks, rulers, protractors, and sour gummy worms he’d need for his Wednesday classes. The brand-new pack of Bic pens didn’t fit, after everything was aboard, which was a pity because he had English with Alexis today, and he wanted her to admire his penmanship. Gordy settled on putting them in the barrel with Gladys. She wouldn’t mind. Thus armed, he headed out the door.

In the warmer months, everyone’s plot of land on Heritage Street was clipped and groomed, the backyard growths peeking up over the picket fences to snoop into the neighboring yards. October through December was seizure inducing. Heritage alone must buy out the holiday section of Kmart in order to properly bedeck their lawns. All of Gordy and Lorie’s neighbors were retirees and teachers, and no one can slather synthetic cobwebs on a bush like an elementary teacher.

His mom’s garden was always Gordy’s favorite, though, the only one that felt like it had any heartbeat at all. Lorie was somewhat of plant enthusiast. His dad had hated it, and would always mutter that he wished she had a black thumb, but Lorie had ignored him. She’d come home after her shift at the North Valley Public Library with the back of the truck bursting with foliage. It looked like an Almond Joy commercial.

The copy-and-paste houses of Heritage Street ebbed into the bustling metropolis of Stevensville. Gordy passed the old-fashioned soda fountain, waved to the same table of old men that spend every morning there, and crossed the street. He shuffled past the laundromat, a fabric store, six churches, and finally arrived at school.

He shoved his backpack into his locker upside down and went straight to Mr. Kuchel's room. Gordy spent most mornings and afternoons in there, the smell of formaldehyde soothed him. If anyone would truly appreciate Gladys, it was Kuchel.

"You, huh." Kuchel didn't bother spinning around in his chair, fixated on the National Weather Service's website. Overcast, 43 degrees, 65 % humidity.

"Morning, Kuchel, can I keep something in here until class?"

Grumble.

"Thank you."

Gordy tucked Gladys in an open space of a bookshelf otherwise brimming with National Geographics. He didn't want anyone to see his bat until class, the satisfaction was in the reveal.

The minutes slugged by. Social Studies. Reading. Art. P.E. Recess. English (Alexis did comment on his writing, but it was just to say that he misspelled "restaurant"; what a bust). And, finally, Science. His peers shuffled in and took their seats around the lab desks, expertly positioning their backpacks so Kuchel couldn't see them texting for fifty minutes solid. Gordy plopped his backpack at the very front seat in the room, close enough to count the stripes on Kuchel's socks through the straps of the Chacos.

Everyone was afraid of Mr. Kuchel, though Gordy never could figure out why. Sure, he was a grouch, but Gordy always figured himself a bit of a curmudgeon as well, so it never bothered him. To the right of the whiteboard was a crack fracturing the wall at a slant, all the way to the foam ceiling tiles. Rumor had it that some freshman made a smart-aleck remark to Kuchel in the eighties, and Kuchel established scholarly dominance by pushing the kid up against the wall so hard that the wall cracked and his head caved in like a cantaloupe. Kuchel never denied the story.

Gordy sat right next to the crack. The way he figured, even if Kuchel was in a concussing humor, he'd want to mark up some new territory. It would be a waste to overlap.

"Pipe down, urchins. Today we're dissecting worms."

Simultaneously, every girl made a face and every boy exchanged bets on how many they could swallow before Kuchel

noticed. Gordy's hand popped into the air.

Kuchel sighed. "What."

"I've got something pretty cool that we could dissect, too, maybe, I think it would be pretty fascinating."

The teacher eyed Gordy's backpack. From under a stack of magazines emerged Gladys in all her glory. Gordy carried her to the front of the room like the Olympic torch, gesturing grandly to the black wad.

"Gordy."

"Yes, sir?"

"Is that a bat in a jar?"

"Yes, sir."

Kuchel gingerly took it and rolled it around. Gladys flopped with each rotation. "Silver haired." He sniffed. "*Lasionycteris noctivagans*. Pretty common, but I guess we can take a look at it." Unscrewing the jar, he tilted it onto the table. Gladys double tucked with a perfect dismount onto Sierra's notebook. She squealed. Kuchel scooped her off with a pen.

The class gathered around the bat, ooing and aahing.

"Look at that thing, it's so rad."

"Hey, he's kind of cute, look at the little squishy nose."

"It kind of looks like a black puppy if you close one eye and really squint the other one."

Gordy beamed. Gladys was a hit. Guys he'd never talked to before told him how cool they thought his bat was. One even chased his girlfriend around with Gladys, holding her by each veiny wing and telling the girl that the sun was setting and she would change back into a vampire soon. Kuchel went back to the National Weather Service. Biology was happening and thus his work was done.

For the rest of the day, kids brought their friends in to see the scary bat, touch the cute bat, make the bat riverdance.

When Principle Backus caught wind of a bat in her school, not her school, she charged into Kuchel's room with a baggy and gloves. Rolling Gladys into yet another plastic sarcophagus, she gestured to Kuchel with the bat swinging from her fist. "What do you think you're doing? Don't you know a safety violation

when you see one? Never in all my years have I witnessed such unprofessionalism, no not on my life.”

Kuchel grunted. She slammed the door behind her, and Kuchel swiveled back around. He was older than dirt, what could she do, make him retire? Perfect, bring it on.

Gordy heard about Gladys’ abduction the following morning, and rushed to Kuchel’s room. Kuchel rooted through a cluttered back counter.

“Morning, Mr. Kuchel, what happened to Gladys?”

“Who in the hell is Gladys?”

“My bat, sir.”

“Oh. Bat’s gone.” He pulled a Yoplait Light from the rat nest and popped the lid. “You got a spoon?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Pity.” Kuchel rifled once more and unearthed a disposable pipette. He shrugged, suctioned a glob of strawberry yogurt into the tube, and went back to his desk. Kuchel always felt a little bad for Gordy, who spent every lunch jabbering in his classroom. And now they took the kid’s bat. As Gordy left, Kuchel mused that he didn’t seem to be mourning the loss too badly yet. Maybe Gordy’s stages of grief were askew. He always thought the kid’s wires might be a little loose. His mom was an odd bird when he taught her, it could be genetic.

Gordy’s bat popularity blew over, but days after he still got nods from some jocks, smirks from a pretty girl or two. Things were rosy, just peachy keen.

An envelope from the Montana Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory arrived on Principle Backus’s desk Tuesday morning.

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The morning announcements garbled at 8:23 the following day. Chairs screeched as everyone slumped down after the Pledge of Allegiance, the speaker barely audible above the din.

“Lunch will be corn dogs with tater-tot smileys, peaches, and graham crackers. The Winter Dance committee is meeting in Mrs. Stock’s room at 12:30. Don’t forget it’s Earth Day. All

those who came in contact with a dead bat in Mr. Kuchel's class Wednesday of last week are to report to the weight room directly after school. Go fighting Yellow Jackets!" Click.

Huh, thought Gordy, maybe they want to suggest some kind of science club to look at other animals just like Gladys.

Not so.

The entire seventh grade draped themselves across various machines of the weight room. Gordy was surprised to see his mother slumped across a leg press. She perked up when he crossed the room.

"Gordy, I got a call. What's going on, did you win some kind of award? Are these all your friends? Are they here to see you get it? Is it a medal?"

"I haven't got a clue, Mom."

Backus sliced through the teenagers and towered over her. "Lorie."

"Aubrey," Propped at a 90-degree angle on the floor, Lorie could only meet the gaze of Backus's knees, but did so warmly. She compressed her legs to her chest and pushed out again, testing the weight. Unsatisfied, she added 20 pounds and tried again.

"Did you know about the animal your son brought into his science class last Wednesday?"

"Sure, Gladys. Did the kids like her?" She bobbed up and down on the splitting vinyl, revealing the yellow foam underbelly. Backus's lips curled. She was always the one who had to deal with Lorie Gilkins, the one to whom she had to make up an excuse as to why they never needed her for bake sales or fundraisers or the PTA. And yet she had snuck back into Backus's school to cause trouble, like always.

Audrey remembered when they both graduated from that very high school. Her whole family had come to visit. She had gotten her hair done at the salon, she was taking pictures with her friends, when Lorie Gilkins ran down the center aisle, spraying everyone in sight with silly string. After she sprayed Audrey, her coiffure was less hair than it was green aerosol goop. Lorie never took anything seriously, never, and, what luck, she had stayed in their hometown to reproduce.

“They did enjoy the bat, so much so that now they each need five shots of the Rabies vaccine out of the school’s pocket.”

Lorie stopped bobbing. “I don’t understand, Gladys wasn’t foaming or anything, I thought we were helping the school. You know, you might not’ve been able to afford a nice bat like that, what with budget cuts.”

She fooled people with her big baby deer eyes, but not Aubrey. “What kind of a parent are you?”

Backus turned on her heel and addressed the room. Something about forms, insurance, needles. Gordy gave his mom’s shoulder a squeeze and sidled in front of her so that the whole seventh grade didn’t see. Lorie’s mom had always said her face looked odd, puffy; those slender cheekbones weren’t structured for swelling.

The two drove home in silence. Gordy turned on the radio, but she didn’t even sing along to “American Pie,” so he shut it off again.

“I got a text from Dad today,” Gordy said as they pulled into the driveway, clipping the trashcan.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Next weekend he’s taking me to a movie, and then he said he’d let me drive the BMW.” He bounced in his seat.

“That’ll be fun, huh?” She cracked a half-smile and poked his side. “Why don’t you go on in and start your homework so you’re not up until the witching hour again. You’ll turn nocturnal if you’re not careful.”

The front door closed. Lorie cried against the steering wheel until she had a red stripe across her forehead.

...

“Welcome back.”

Dammit, why hadn’t he gone in the other line? The same leathery woman prepped a needle. Her nails were a pastel lilac this time, a nice spring color. How festive. She gestured for Gordy to put an appendage within her grasp.

“Only three more rounds of shots to go after this, doll face,

so we won't have to Old Yeller ya."

Epilogue

Cat Damon was quarantined and observed in his home for 45 days, thereafter receiving a clean bill of health.