

1

THE VERY BEST DAY OF MY LIFE, I threw up four times and had a fever of 103 degrees. I was pretty sure I was going to die, and sometimes by the look on my mom's face every time she took my temperature, I think she was pretty sure, too. It was all because of Random Smith, a boy in school who never had any lunch. I'd given him a bite of my sandwich and all of my crackers, he looked so hungry. Growing up, my mom wasn't the kind of mom who said never drink from the same cup as someone else. That stuff didn't occur to her. So I'd given him a sip of my milk, too.

But in addition to being hungry all the time, Random was also usually sick. People never knew what he had, so they always just said he had “some random thing”—which they all thought was hilarious but I just thought was mean.

That day at home, my mom spent every minute with me. My older sister and brother were at school, and my dad was working at my parents’ restaurant. I was eight and had never been home alone with just my mom before, at least not all day and definitely not with her full attention. The house was so quiet, except for us two. My mom got into bed with me and read *Charlotte’s Web*. It took all day, and at the end, we both cried and shared a tissue.

When we finished sniffing, my mom adjusted herself in the bed so she could look at me. “Fern,” she said softly. “Do you know why I named you Fern?”

I nodded, looking at the drawing of the girl on the cover of the book.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because Fern is one of your favorite characters?”

“And why is that?”

I shrugged.

“Because Fern cares,” she said. “From the moment you were born, I could tell you had a special soul. I knew you’d be a good friend. A hero.”

I looked at my chest and tried to feel my soul buried in there, deep in my heart.

“It’s true,” my mom said. “Not everyone would share a sandwich with Random Smith.”

I smiled, feeling my soul stir a little.

My mom took my hand and kissed it. “I’m proud of you, honey,” she said. “I know you’re miserable now, but you made a little boy feel like he matters. And I hope you think it was worth all this.”

I nodded slowly, thinking about Random and his dirty face and stinky unwashed hair. I wondered if he was home sick, too, and if he had a mom next to him on his bed, reading to him all day and telling him he was special. But then I started to feel like I was going to throw up again. So I turned over on my side and my mother rubbed my back in slow, tiny circles, humming a lullaby I barely remembered, with fingers on my back I hardly knew. She was always so busy cooking and cleaning and working at the restaurant and basically just taking care of everything else.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember that feeling, because somehow, even then, I had a hunch that I might not feel it again.

Two days later, my mom got Random's bug. But instead of getting better, she kept throwing up. Every morning she was sick, sick, sick. And then finally, after what felt like weeks and weeks, she and my dad sat us all down and told us the news. My mom was going to have a baby.

Now Charlie sits in the back of my mom's station wagon between Holden and me. He's three years old and thinks no one's looking when he picks his nose, which is way too often. My mom and sister are in the front, arguing about how many hours my sister has to work at the restaurant to help "contribute" to the family. Since Sara couldn't get into any good colleges, she's doing a gap year by staying at home and working at my parents' restaurant. All her friends went off to college, so on top of everything else, she's lonely and grumpy and not much fun to be around.

"Tell me again why you're dragging us to the restaurant, Mom," Holden says, leaning as far away from

Charlie as he can in case he decides to fling one of his finds in Holden's direction.

"I told you it's a surprise," my mom answers.

"Yay!" Charlie reaches for my ear. He loves playing with people's ears when he's not picking his nose or talking to Doll, the plastic baby he found in the memory trunk in my closet, where I put all my old toys and which was supposed to be private.

"Stop it," I mutter, flicking his sticky hand away.

Doll sits on his lap, facing forward, her naked bottom balanced on his knees.

"You need to put some clothes on her," I tell him.

He giggles and makes her dance naked in the air.

When my parents told us my mom was having a baby, they said we kids could pick a name together. My favorite book at the time was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. We all agreed that if we had to have a new brother, one like Charlie would be OK. We thought he'd be destined to be the kind of kid who'd get picked to ride in the great glass elevator. The sweet kid. The smart kid. The *quiet* kid. So far, it seemed like our Charlie wasn't quite filling the bill.

“Mom?” Holden asks again. “Is this a *Dad* surprise?”

“It better not be,” Sara answers. She fidgets with her dreadlocks and flips down the sun visor so she can look at herself in the mirror. Sara’s trying to be a Dead Head, like my parents were before they had us kids. Only the Grateful Dead doesn’t even exist anymore, so I don’t know what that’s all about.

“I don’t know exactly what your father has planned,” my mom says. “But please, kids, try to humor him, OK?”

Humoring my dad means humiliation for us.

The last time Dad had a surprise, it involved the most embarrassing family/business Christmas card in history. My dad and mom dressed up as Santa and Mrs. Claus, and Holden, Sara, and I were forced to be elves. Charlie was Rudolph, but he kept pulling off his red nose so he could pick at the real one underneath it.

Charlie reaches for my ear again.

“Stop it!” I yell.

“Fern, please. He only does it because he loves you,” my mom says.

“I love you, Ferny,” Charlie says in his extra-baby voice.

“Whatever,” I say, looking out the window.

“Whatevuh,” Charlie repeats.

“Please don’t teach him that, Fern. It’s bad enough coming from you.”

I sigh and stare out the window. I can feel Charlie reaching Doll out to dance at me, but I ignore him.

“Whatevuh,” he makes Doll whisper in my ear. Charlie has trouble pronouncing his *r*’s except when he says my name. My mom says this is the greatest compliment Charlie could possibly give, working so hard to say my name correctly. I guess it’s true, but Charlie is so annoying so often, it’s hard to feel flattered.

“I just want you to know,” Holden says to my mom, “if this has anything to do with the annual Christmas card, I’m telling you right now, there is no way I’m wearing elf ears again.”

Charlie pulls Doll away from me and reaches for Holden’s ear.

“Listen,” my mom says, all serious. “I’m sure whatever your dad has planned will be fine. He loves you. He’s just trying to do what he thinks is best for the business.”

“What about what’s best for us?” Sara asks.

“It’s all the same. If the business does well, then

we do well,” my mom says, quoting one of my dad’s familiar lines.

Sara crosses her arms. “Whatever,” she says.

My mom just sighs, and we continue to drive in silence, except for Charlie’s quiet singing of “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” in Doll’s left ear. I lean my head against the window and watch the neighborhood houses swim by, wondering if all families are as frustrating to live with as mine.

2

WHEN WE GET TO THE RESTAURANT, my dad hurries over to us with a huge grin on his face. “Finally! What took you so long? The photographer will be here any minute. Quick, kids, put these on.”

We’re still in the parking lot as he hands us each a neon-colored T-shirt. I notice that he’s careful not to unfold them so that we can’t see the drawing on the front. I don’t know why, since he’s sporting his own neon-yellow T. As soon as he hands out all the shirts, his chest is in full view and so is the horrible design—

a huge dinosaur sitting on top of a badly drawn image of our restaurant. The dinosaur is eating an ice-cream cone, and drips are slipping down the front window. Little faces peek out the window around the drips. I think they are supposed to be ours.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Sara says. “Seriously, Dad?”

My mom gives her a warning look.

“What?” my dad asks as he helps Charlie pull an electric-blue shirt over his head.

“We *all* have dinosaurs?” I ask.

“What’s wrong with dinosaurs? Kids love ’em. Right, Charlie?”

Charlie nods excitedly and roars.

“What do dinosaurs have to do with Christmas?” I ask. “These are for the annual card, right?”

“Come on, come on, come on. We don’t have time for dillydallying,” my dad says, ignoring my question.

I pull my own bright orange T over my head. It feels bulky over the T-shirt I’m already wearing. Sara puts hers on inside out. My dad is so busy fussing with Charlie, he doesn’t even notice.

“I can’t believe we have to do this,” Holden says, stretching his neon-green T-shirt out in front of

him. “And why did I have to get green? It makes me look pale.”

My mom clears her throat in this way she has that means we’re supposed to look over at her without making it obvious. We all look and watch as her right hand, which is in a fist, slowly unclenches and she stretches out five fingers.

Holden, Sara, and I exchange glances. We wait.

My mom sighs and slowly unclenches her other fist. Five more fingers. That’s ten bucks each if we keep our mouths shut and cooperate.

We’re in.

I don’t know when my mom turned to silent bribery to prevent family conflicts, but it seems to work. It’s not that we want to disappoint my dad. We know he means well. But why do his ideas always have to be so lame and humiliating? And why does the humiliating part always have to include us?

We all follow my dad to the front of the restaurant, where he starts to position us under the window just as a van pulls into the parking lot blasting the Grateful Dead. It’s “Uncle John’s Band,” Charlie’s favorite, and he immediately starts shaking his bum.

“They’re here!” my dad yells.

Sara fidgets with her dreadlocks again. “At least they have good taste in music.”

“Everyone, this is Eric,” my dad says when the photographer walks over to us. “And Sky,” he says, gesturing to a woman wearing a head scarf.

“I love your hair,” Sky says to Sara.

“Uh, that’s not a regular camera,” Holden points out when Eric lifts the camera to his shoulder.

“That’s the surprise!” my dad yells. “Surprise! We’re making a commercial! Isn’t that great?”

“Yay!” Charlie yells, and runs over to hug Eric’s legs.

We all look at my mom. “Um, wow, honey!” she says. “I had no idea!” She makes an apologetic face at us, but she knows very well there is no amount of money that is going to make us be OK with *this* plan.

“That’s why it’s a *surprise!*” my dad says. He’s beaming, as if this is the best idea he has ever had. “OK, OK. Let’s get set up.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and walks me backward so I’m standing under the huge sign in front of the restaurant. “You look terrific, sweetheart!” he says in my ear. His stale coffee breath is particularly pungent.

“Holden? You next. Right here beside Ferny.”

“I want Ferny!” Charlie whines. He grabs hold of my legs so tightly, I almost fall over.

“Watch it!” I yell. “And don’t call me Ferny!” I hate that name.

“Daddy said it first!”

“You’re not Dad!”

“Stop it, Fern,” my mom says. “He’s paying you a compliment.” Any time Charlie bugs me and I complain about it, my mom tells me I should be flattered. Flattered because he’s the only one in this family who ever pays any attention to me? I don’t think she gets how insulting that is.

My dad continues to line us up so that finally Sara, Holden, and I are squeezed in between my mom and dad. My dad picks up Charlie and perches him on his shoulder.

“I’m not doing this,” Sara says, stepping out of line.

“Now, look, honey,” my dad says. “I’m paying these people a lot of money. And with any luck, we’ll get it back tenfold when the business starts booming.”

“I don’t want business to boom. That’s just more work for me.”

“More *money* for you, sweetheart,” my dad says through gritted teeth. “You want your own car to take with you to college next year?”

My sister perks right up. “Seriously?”

My dad nods. “Now try to look happy.”

Sara gets back in line, and we all plaster on our happy faces.

“Just try to act normal,” Eric says, fiddling with the camera lens.

“That’ll be a first,” Holden mumbles.

“That’s us, one big normal family,” I whisper back.

“Hush, you two,” my mom hisses.

“Harry, you ready?”

We all look at my dad. His name is George.

“Ready when you are!” my dad says.

Eric holds up his hand and counts silently on his fingers. Five, four, three, two, one, then points to my dad.

“WELCOME TO HARRY’S!” my dad booms.

Holden’s sweaty arm rubs against mine. My mom is stiff behind me. I hope the camera is zoomed in on my dad because I think I cringed when he started talking. I try to smile as he lists off the most popular flavors of ice cream we sell.

“. . . and our most popular, *Dinosaur Crunch!*”

I hear Charlie chomp like a dinosaur. My dad laughs way too loud, then clears his throat. “IF YOU HAVEN’T BEEN TO HARRY’S, YOU HAVEN’T BEEN TO HEAVEN!” he yells.

Sky motions for all of us to wave. Charlie flaps his arm frantically and shouts, “See you at Hawee’s!” in his worst baby voice yet.

I think my ears are bleeding.

“Aaaaand cut,” Eric says.

My dad tosses Charlie in the air. “Great line, buddy!” he yells. “Should we do another take, Eric? I’m not sure how that came out.”

“Nah, Harry. It was perfect. We’ll cut anything that doesn’t look quite right and pan in on some scenes I’ll take inside. I’d like to film some customers eating cones, sundaes—stuff like that.”

“Sure, sure, sure,” my dad says. “Right this way.” We all follow him into the restaurant, which is half empty. Right away I can tell my dad has planted “customers”—our regular employees and their kids or little sisters and brothers. They all say hi to my dad like he’s a local hero, though I notice none of them call him by his real name.

My dad never corrects people when they call him

Harry. He says it's good for business because people like to think they're talking to the guy the restaurant is named after (who was actually my grandfather). I'm pretty sure this drives my mom a little nuts, but she doesn't say anything. My mom almost never yells or gets upset. Whenever she looks like she might start to lose it, she heads up to my dad's stuffy office and shuts the door so she can meditate. There's a sign on the door that she flips around before she closes and locks it. On one side, it says, *Please knock*. On the other, it says, *Mom is finding her inner peace. Come back later*. I'm not really sure what would happen if we interrupted her during meditation, and I don't really want to find out.

Charlie follows Eric around for the next hour while he films people eating burgers and licking ice-cream cones. Sara, Holden, and I sit at one of the booths.

"I can't believe this," Sara says for like the hundredth time as we watch the film crew. "Thank God I'm out of high school. I would never live this one down."

"Oh, thanks a lot," Holden says. "I'm just *starting!* I have enough stacked against me already. Now this?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

“Just forget it.”

But I think I know.

I lean back in the booth and sigh. “We’re doomed,” I say.

Sara shakes her head. She doesn’t even bother to try to cheer us up because she knows we’re right.

The bell on the front door tinkles, and Random Smith walks in. He’s wearing a T-shirt that says GLOW on it, and I wonder what it’s supposed to mean. Ran is always wearing T-shirts with sayings on them that don’t quite make sense to me. Last year, he gave me one for my birthday that said REAL. I think he was upset that I never wore it. I smile at him as he comes up to the table and waves the way he always does—elbow at his waist, hand swishing back and forth like a windshield wiper. Like a robot.

“Hey, Fern,” he says.

“Hey, Ran.” When I slide over, the back of my thighs stick to the red vinyl seat and make a disgusting sound. Honestly, could my life get any more embarrassing?

A few things about Ran have changed since our days of swapping germs:

1. His mom, who was really sick from cancer back then, won her battle, and she and Ran's dad started an online T-shirt company that makes a ton of money.
2. Ran shaved his head when his mom lost all her hair from chemotherapy, and he just decided he liked being bald. So now his head is shaved really close. I don't think most people could pull this off, but Ran is a very no-nonsense kind of person, and he doesn't really care what other people think. Also, it actually looks pretty good.
3. Despite his weirdness, Ran became my best friend. With his mom all better, he also stopped being so messy and sick all the time, which is a good thing, because being his best friend meant I was sick almost just as much.

Sara winks at me and I blush.

"What's going on?" Ran asks, taking in the scene.

"My dad is ending our lives as we know it," I say.

"TV commercial," Holden explains.

Ran cringes just as Charlie comes racing across the room and hugs him.

“Hey, little man,” Ran says. They do their special handshake, which involves rubbing palms together. I don’t think Ran knows or else cares how risky it is to touch Charlie’s hands. No one knows where they’ve been—but most likely in some pretty disgusting places.

“Wanna sundae?” Charlie asks.

“Yeah!” Ran follows Charlie to the ice-cream counter, and they disappear behind it. A few minutes later, they return with a huge banana-split bowl filled with every topping we sell. They each have a spoon but share the bowl.

“That’s disgusting,” Sara says.

Charlie and Ran ignore her and go to town. Miraculously, they eat the whole thing. When they finish, Charlie’s mouth has an almost-perfect chocolate circle around it that slowly drips down his chin. He looks just like the dinosaur on his T-shirt.

Ran carefully wipes his mouth with a napkin from the dispenser on the table. Then, instead of getting a new one, he just folds it over and wipes Charlie’s mouth for him. Charlie beams.

In the distance, my dad tries to get the line cooks behind the counter to say, “See you at Harry’s,” but they look kind of confused. Instead, Charlie yells it from our table.

I hide my face in my hands.

“What’s wrong?” Ran asks with his familiar bewildered look.

“Can’t you tell how lame this commercial is going to be?” I ask him.

“Well, yes,” he says slowly. “But that’s not *your* fault.”

“Since when does it matter if an embarrassing moment is your fault or not?” I ask him. “Do you not remember the elf cards? It took months for me to live that down.”

“Only because you let it bother you,” he says calmly.

“Whatever,” I say, staring at the orange letters on his T-shirt. GLOW. Yeah. Why is it so easy for Ran to just glow, when I’m the one wearing the neon T-shirt?