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the old man and the orange bicycle

I was grouchy, gloomy, and totally depressed right from the start, but when we drove down the exit ramp in the blowing snow and I saw the town itself, I felt fifty-nine bazillion times worse.

“Mom, tell me this isn’t it,” I said.

“This is it, honey,” she said cheerfully. “Our new home.” She kept a tight grip on the steering wheel, trying to control the rental trailer we were towing. “Isn’t this simply beautiful country?” She nodded toward a snow-blurred swamp.

I just shook my head. My mom is the kind of person who could drive through the entrance to that hot and fiery you-know-where place and say, “Wow, look at the wonderful scrollwork on those gates!”

At the bottom of the exit ramp, a huge billboard loomed out of the snow. It showed a bunch of gnome-like people who had pumpkins for heads. The sign read *GRINDSVILLE, MICHIGAN—HOME OF THE OCTOBER PUMPKIN FESTIVAL. COME BE A PUMPKIN-HEAD!*

I knew right then I was headed for something weird.

“Boy, I can’t wait to look like one of them,” I said, pointing at the sign.

“Honey, honey, attitude please,” said Mom in that little singsong way, but there was just the tiniest edge to her voice.

When we pulled off the exit ramp we were right on the small main street of Grindsville, but I couldn’t see much because of the blowing snow. Then the wind let up and I saw the old storefronts emerge like a row of grumpy faces.

“Mom, this is so awful. Look at this place.”

“Come on, I kind of like it,” she said. “It’s got a certain charm.”

“Charm?” I said. This was one of her favorite words and I groaned and slumped back. Right then, when I did the slumping, I saw the weirdest thing. Or thought I did. Snow was drifting heavily across the mouth of an alley, but I saw what appeared to be an old bearded guy sitting on a bicycle, just watching the traffic go by. He was covered with snow and looked frozen. I opened my mouth to say something, but then we were past the alley and I let it go. The truth was, I wasn’t sure what I’d seen. Anyway, Mom took up the slack.

“Honey, there’s your new school. Oh my gosh, it’s such a neat, older building, so traditional looking, so— ”

“So pathetic,” I said, catching a glimpse of a typical two-story brick school. I knew I sounded whiny, but I didn’t really care. I mean, how would you feel if you were thirteen and moving to a new school in December? How about panic, nausea, and downright hysteria?

“Listen, Mr. Billy,” Mom began, using my nickname for the first time that day.

“I think it’s time to stop whining and realize this is a wonderful opportunity.”

My real name is Eugene Ithaca Wise, and whenever Mom starts up with “Mr. Billy,” it means she’s getting a tad impatient with my attitude. If she calls me “Mr. Billy Bumpus,” it means I’ve gone too far and I’d better shape up. *Fast.*

“Wonderful opportunity?” I whined on. “We could have thrown a dart at the map and done better. Why did we have to end up in such a weird place?”

“Honey, first of all it’s not a weird place,” said Mom in that determined-to-be-patient voice, “and second, I’ve explained why a hundred times. We ended up here because my old high school friend, Doris Avery, lives here and she offered to give me a job in her hair salon. It’s

really quite simple.”

“Right, simple.” I rolled my eyes. This was another of Mom’s favorite words. In reality the whole move had been a gigantic mess, and there was nothing simple about it. The truth was, we were homeless, on the road in winter, and it was all my fault.

I won’t bore you with all the gruesome details, but basically this is what happened. At my last school, Harris Junior High, I was expelled for pushing the principal off the gym stage. Duh, of course I didn’t do it. See, we were at this pep rally in the gym and I was in a crowd of kids on the stage and standing next to the principal, Mr. Brigvoort. (The kids called him “Big Wart.”) Just as he was called to the microphone, he sort of lost his balance, and stupid me, thinking I was going to be the school hero, I reached out to save him. But being the primo klutz I am, I only fumbled at his sleeve. When he went over splat, right onto the gym floor, it looked like I’d shoved him.

It didn’t help that a couple of hot-shot ninth graders started yelling, “He pushed him! The little butt-brain pushed him!” Before I knew what was happening, I was hauled to the office by several outraged teachers and two days later the school board met to discuss my situation. Which wasn’t good.

I guess I still could have saved myself at the meeting. The board told me all I had to do was “tell the truth” and admit I had pushed Mr. Brigvoort off the stage, and they would “take that into consideration.” But I couldn’t admit to a lie, and I was so mad I froze up and stood there crying like a fool. I remember Brigvoort saying in a puffed-up way, “Some people like to cause trouble, don’t they. But boy, when the old lightning strikes, it’s funny how they turn into cowards.”

Boy, it’s more funny how adults can’t seem to get it right. The truth was, I was a coward from the start, scared of practically everything. I mean, I had spent my entire thirteen years trying to avoid trouble, but still that “old lightning” seemed to come out of nowhere to nail me in the tail feathers.

I even began to recognize the warning signs that led up to one of those bolts. I made up a word, “pingeroo,” which means, “Uh-oh, I feel something weird in the air.” If I said “big fat pingeroo” that meant the bolt was building up. If I simply said “roo,” it was probably too late to get out of the way.

Mom made a last-minute appeal to the board, and it might have helped, but then a “concerned neighbor” came in and testified that I had been playing “demon music” in my basement. Oh, right. As if playing some cool Spanish tunes on my trumpet was a crime. When I tried to explain what kind of music I liked, one of the board members said, “Why don’t you like rock and roll or that stuff they call hippety-hop? That’s what normal kids listen to.”

Hippety hop? That’s when I lost my temper and said, “Yeah, well, maybe I’m not normal.”

Mom said later that snippy remark was the deciding moment. Even though she had passed out free samples of Herbal Gold Emulsion (the fiber that promotes regularity) to the board, they voted 7 to 0 to expel me. So here we were, just a week before Christmas on a blizzard day, pulling up to the only stoplight in Grindsville, Michigan, the most depressing town in the entire universe.

“Mom, look at that,” I said. “All the heads are missing from the parking meters. You’ve got to admit that’s wacky.”

“Not necessarily,” countered Mom. “It could be a simple sign of hospitality.”

I looked over at her. I thought maybe, just maybe, there was a hint of humor there. But no such luck. She was serious.

“Oh darn, what’s the name of Doris’s salon?” Mom was eyeing the buildings.

“I don’t know,” I said. “‘Curl ‘Em Tight,’ or something like that.”

“Don’t be silly. It was something serious. Shoot, she told me it was on the main street and easy to find, but I don’t see it. I’m going to have to stop and ask.”

“Mom,” I said, “let’s just cruise around. We can find the place on our own.” I had the desperate hope that if we couldn’t find it, maybe we wouldn’t stay.

But she was already pulling into a parking lot next to a row of old, mostly vacant, stores. “That laundry’s open,” she said. “I’ll just pop in and ask.”

Frankly, I don’t know how she could tell it was open. It was barely lit and I couldn’t see anybody moving around. Mom got out and went inside and I saw a lady stand up and start talking to her. I sighed and started to go through my music CDs.

I had just popped in my favorite, *Spanish Knights*, and was really getting into “Malagueña,” my all-time favorite song, when a man appeared at the entrance to the alley across from me. First there was nothing but blowing snow, then suddenly he was there and staring right at me. I sat bolt upright. It was the old guy I’d seen sitting on the bike. I was sure of it.

He had a gray beard and wore some beat-up pants, a green stocking cap, and a faded Navy pea coat. Now he seemed to see something off to his right and he jumped back into the alley. I waited tensely and a few seconds later he popped into view and began gesturing frantically at me. I think I made a big facial “Whaaat?” All at once he gave up in frustration. He disappeared momentarily into the alley and then came out and headed quickly down the street pushing...yup, *the bicycle*. It was a pukey orange-colored thing and there was a large brown suitcase riding in the front basket.

This is where it got totally bizarre. He stopped and looked back at me one last time. That’s when I saw the thing hanging from his belt. I shook my head in disbelief. Even with the snow swirling around him like a ghostly cape, I knew what it was. It was a sword.

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the girl with the mysterious eyes

In the next instant, the old guy turned and was swallowed up in the storm.

For a moment I sat there like a turnip. “Okay, what in the heck is going on?” I murmured. I jumped nervously when Mom opened the door and got in.

“Mom, Mom,” I started, “I just saw the most totally, absolutely weird—”

She stopped me quickly. “Honey, please. No more weird things.” She expelled her breath in a weary, irritated way. “Look, I talked to the nicest lady in there and we’re only a block away from Doris’s shop. Let’s just get there without any more critical remarks, okay?”

She released the brake and we pulled ahead. I wanted in the worst way to tell her what I had just seen, but I could tell by the jerky way she let out the clutch that now wasn’t a good time. I was way too close to the edge.

We bumped across some railroad tracks and I glanced behind us. The old guy was up on the bike and riding it now. He seemed to be following us for a few seconds, then he shot off down another street. I couldn’t help but think he was taking a short cut so he could catch up with us.

I shivered uneasily and felt a familiar chill run along my lower back. I didn't want to think it was true, but I could feel it as clear as anything. Something was in the air in Grindsville, and it wasn't just snow.

"Pingeroo," I muttered.

"Eugene, please don't whisper things under your breath," said Mom. "You know how that irritates me." She began humming "Make the World Go Away" in that flat way she has, and my eyes crossed.

I started whistling "Bring in the Clowns," a song Mom hates, but she didn't even notice, and we went on for several seconds doing a crazy little round. Suddenly she slapped the steering wheel. "Oh, there's Doris's shop—the Hair Temple! Why couldn't I remember that name? It's so obvious."

"So goofy," I said. "Sounds like a church for hippies." Actually I thought that was kind of funny. Big wrong.

Mom zapped me with a look. "Listen, *Mr. Billy Bumpus*, I think you'd better stop the wisecracks and take this place more seriously. Because, like it or not, this is where we're going to live."

I sighed. Exist maybe, but I could hardly imagine having a real life in Grindsville. We pulled into a parking lot and there was the Hair Temple, a sad little shop wedged between a bakery and a closed shoe store.

"I want you to come inside with me," Mom said, and by the tone of her voice I knew it was useless to argue. She began rummaging in her purse looking for her comb. "And remember how to look in case I say you use Gold Herbal."

I moaned in protest. "Mom, don't start with all that dumb constipation talk."

She waved this off. "There's not a thing wrong with the vitamins and minerals in Gold Herbal. And if we get into a bind money-wise, I might have to start selling it again." She found the comb and began running it through her hair, which is prematurely white and curly and always gives her a ton of trouble. "Just don't fight me on this, and if it does come up, try to look healthy."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled. We'd been through this routine before. Whenever Mom was trying to sell her Gold Herbal products, she always had her customers take a look at me. Why she called attention to me, I'll never know.

The truth is I'm short, and I have a funny round face and hair that looks like it was put on backwards. By that I mean my hair comes down quite far over my forehead but starts high up on the back of my head. Once, at a family picnic, I heard my Aunt Frieda say I looked like "a little old man wearing a cheap wig."

Mom finished with her hair and turned to me. "How do I look?"

"You look great," I said. "Just don't put your baseball cap back on."

She shook her head stubbornly. "No. I'm wearing it, Eugene. I want people to know us as we truly are—just plain folks."

She put the cap back on, and I have to admit she looked good in it, even with her purple bowling jacket that said "Freddie's Lanes" on the back.

"Okay, here we go." Mom opened her door. "It's survival time." She had been using this phrase all the way to Grindsville and it wasn't a new one. I had heard it for years, ever since my dad was killed in a car accident when I was eight.

We got out and started toward the Hair Temple, our heads bent in the driving snow. Right away I began looking around for the old guy with the sword, but I could barely see a thing. Maybe I was getting all excited for nothing. Maybe they were making a movie in town. Yeah, right, starring some old geezer who rode around in blizzards wearing a stupid sword. I don't think so.

"Maybe we should unload the trailer first, before it gets dark," I said nervously. Mom had already made arrangements for a rental house just outside town.

She shook her head. "No, we're on thin ice, honey. Before we do a thing, we've got to check in with Doris to make sure I've still got a job."

Several times lately I had felt the panic of our situation, but as Mom said those words, I truly understood her desperation. Because of me, we *were* on thin ice.

We went into the Hair Temple, and some pathetic door chimes made a tinny racket. The waiting room was small and contained a few chairs, a coffee table piled with worn magazines, and what seemed like a jungle of potted plants. They could have shot a Tarzan movie in there. Topping it off, a country-western singer was belting out "Jingle Bell Rock" on some hidden radio speakers.

Those were my first blurry impressions. Then I saw the girl. She stood next to the cash register, a broom poised in her hands. She was tall and thin with curly brown hair that was cut short, and she was staring right at me.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

I stood there like a lamppost with pants on, but Mom stepped forward, gave her name, and said she was there to see Doris Avery.

The girl nodded. “Doris said to send you right on in.” She pointed at some half-doors. Mom smiled at her and went on through. I hovered awkwardly, probably looking like the newest pumpkin-head. The girl hesitated, then leaned toward me.

Her eyes were golden brown, and it was then I realized how pretty she was.

“Wow, this is so cool,” she whispered. “You finally got here.” I saw a trace of fear flicker across her face. “We have to talk right away.”

“About dwhut?” I said. “I mean what?”

She shook her head. “Can’t talk here; it might be dangerous. Later.”

She raised her eyebrows as if to ask if I understood, and I guess I nodded. I’m always nervous around girls and I know I wasn’t registering much, but the word “dangerous” was ringing like a four-alarm fire in my brain.

She gave me a last intense look and went into the salon. Luckily, no one was there to see what I did next. I was so jumpy after that bizarre conversation with a complete stranger that I started to sit down on what I thought was a chair but was really a large rubber plant or whatever. I flailed about and managed to back into a potted cactus on the counter. Yelping like a madman, I lunged and caught the pot just before it nose-dived onto the floor. Some of the dirt spilled out, and I was frantically scooping it up when Mom, her friend Doris (I recognized her plump face and springy blonde curls from Mom’s photographs) and what seemed like an army of women, came through the doors. Of course, the girl with the golden-brown eyes came with them.

“Here he is,” said Mom, “hiding out here.” It was obvious she had been talking about me and everyone had come up front to see me for themselves. I must have looked like some kind of freaky kid who likes to hug cactus plants.

“My goodness,” cried Doris, “look at him. He’s all grown up.” That

was depressing. It sounded like I was all done in life—a six-footer with a pot-belly and a bank account. Then it seemed like they all started asking me questions, and like the village oaf, I froze up. One of the ladies asked me what grade I was in and I remember mumbling, “I’m an eighth grubber, I mean grader.”

“That’s so wonderful,” said Doris. “My son Walter is in the eighth grade too. He’s going to help you guys unload. And oh, Harriet here is also in the eighth grade.” She nodded at the girl.

I glanced over, expecting to find her grinning at my dumbo remarks, but instead she was watching me with a tense expression.

“Harriet’s also going to lend you a hand,” Doris went on. “She usually works for me after school, but since it was closed today because of the weather, she came in early just to help you out. Oh, and I nearly forgot. Mrs. Peterson,” she gestured at one of the women, “asked her son Alvin to plow out your drive.”

“He’s over there now,” said Mrs. Peterson, “and he’ll help with the heavy stuff.”

“Oh my goodness,” said Mom. “Thank you so much. All of you.”

“Listen, don’t worry about a thing,” said Doris. “You just go on over to the house and get unloaded. If I could scoot out of here, I’d give you a hand myself.”

There was a flurry of hugs, and while Mom exchanged some last words with the women, Harriet and I headed out into the blowing snow. My brain whirled wildly. ‘What had Harriet meant by “dangerous?” Was she trying to warn me about the old guy with the sword?’

When we reached the car I turned to her quickly. “So this dangerous thing—?”

But she stopped me swiftly with a finger to her lips. She glanced over my shoulder, and I could tell by her expression that Mom had come out of the building. Harriet looked back at me, and I thought she wasn’t going to say anything. Then a big cloud of snow enveloped us and she leaned toward me, whispering, her warm breath batting softly at my ear, “Things are really bad, but I think you got here just in time. And you can still turn everything around. If you’ve got enough nerve.”

I stared at her, totally dumbfounded. I opened my mouth to say something, but I never got a word out because Mom was suddenly there.

“Look out!” she cried. “Here comes Rudolph with a big red nose!”

I knew this was Mom’s pathetic attempt at humor and I glanced over at Harriet, giving her a pained look. She was still staring at me, her eyes deepening to a darker gold. And even though I didn’t know the language of eyes, especially when it came to girls, I could tell there was some kind of strange and maybe even frightening story hovering in those golden-brown depths.

An icy gust of wind snaked up my pant legs and I shivered violently. *Enough nerve for what?*