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## Not Everyone is Special

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**NOT EVERYONE IS SPECIAL**

Last night, Billy Ray discovered he could control birds with his mind. He squeezed his eyes closed, his doughy cheeks rising over his narrow eyes, and Dr. Benta's parakeet pranced out of its cage and enthusiastically waved at me. Without thinking, I waved back.

I wish I gave it the finger.

I'm smarter than Billy Ray. I work harder. And I'm desperate. Don't I deserve a break after what I've been through the last couple of years? It's what my oldest daughter would call a non-funny joke that he discovered his Power before me.

I've been at the Awakening Institute for two sessions (already saving for a third) and Billy Ray finished in one while barely trying. He lives alone and never launders his shirts. He's loud and meandering and a geyser of unwanted advice. I used to think he meant well even when he was at his most offensive, but now he just bugs me.

When I finally discover my Power, I hope it blows his away.

For Billy Ray's last night at the Institute, Dr. Benta brings one of those chocolate chip cookies the size of a manhole cover and a tub of vanilla ice cream that froths over the side the moment he opens it.

"Congratulations, Billy Ray," Dr. Benta says in his monochromatic voice. His moustache lays over his upper lip like a scarf. He's probably sad that he won't get Billy Ray's five hundred dollars a week anymore. It's expensive to study with Dr. Benta, but he's the best in the business. Out of his forty-two online reviews, there's only one negative. And that was only because the woman didn't like the Power she discovered. As if Dr. Benta has anything to do with that.

• • •

"I feel blessed," Billy Ray says. "I just know it's going to happen for Cameron next." So condescending. Of course I'm going to discover my Power next. I'm the only other one here.

"Cameron can gain strength from you," Dr. Benta says, and I bet Billy Ray's heart quivers.

Billy Ray rubs his hands across his sagging stomach. "I feel like I can do anything. Like I'm the most powerful man in the world." He swivels his bulk toward me. "It's going to turn your life around, man." Dr. Benta nods as he carves a huge piece of the cookie with a plastic knife.

If my Power was the ability to choke someone from across the room, it would be happening right now. Instead, Billy Ray rips off a chunk of the cookie with his stubby hands.

I don't know why he's so happy. He controls birds. It's not like he can fly or walk through walls or read minds or has super-human strength. If I find out after all this time (and money) that I have something as ridiculous as Billy Ray's bird Power, I'm going to use it to kill myself so I can die ironically. Or I'll pay someone to make me forget so I can return to the 5% minority of the population that hasn't discovered their Power.

The only problem is then Monica will never take me back.

"Do you still love Mom?" Candace asks on Saturday morning. Camille is still asleep, wrapped in a blue blanket on the couch, her brown hair covering her face.

"Absolutely not."

Candace shakes her head. At thirteen, she's smarter than I'll ever be. She wants me to get over Monica and move on. Like Monica did. She asks the same question every time she and her sister are over for the weekend, waiting for the day when my answer will be true.

The thing with Candace is you can't lie to her. Using only

her olfactory sense, she knows if someone is telling the truth. She says the truth smells like apple pie. Lies smell like egg salad. It's as simple as that.

Candace is going to be tall like her mother. But unfortunately, she's been saddled with my looks. Which means that her forehead is a little too small, her eyes placed a little too high. Her ears a little too low. She's interesting to look at, but not necessarily beautiful.

"I worry about you, Dad," she says.

"You're not old enough to worry about anything," I say.

She crosses her arms and juts out her chin.

"How's Camille?" I ask.

Candace glances at her sister on the couch. "She's fine. She likes to disappear and then sneak up on Frankie. He pees a little on the floor every time. It's partly funny." Frankie is our Dalmatian. Monica said he could come with me when I moved out, but my apartment doesn't allow dogs.

"She understands that being able to disappear is not a joke?"

"Yes, Dad."

When Camille turns eleven next month, she'll sign the Goodwill Accord pledging that she will not use her Power to break the law. In fact, she'll become a role model, expected to do charitable works. Only people with premium Powers have to sign it. (Billy Ray and his birds shouldn't hold their breath.) If you're caught breaking the Accord, they have a guy for that. His Power is that he can take yours away forever.

"You don't tell your mom I still love her, do you?"

"No. I say you're over her. I even told her you went out on a date."

"Thanks."

"I said the lady was really pretty."

"Don't get carried away."

It's not like Monica will ever know. Her Power is that she

can get the wrinkles out of clothes by patting them lightly with her delicate hands.

Monica fell for me because I was the first person who didn't laugh at her ironing skills or ask if she was a maid. But then again, I know a guy who can turn pepperoni into sausage. He envies my ignorance.

"Your Power doesn't define who you are," she said the night we met at the Happy Flamingo, a straw floating on its side in her daiquiri.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"Yet it seems like it's all anyone talks about."

"If you go on a date with me, I won't bring it up once."

She smiled at me, and I caught my first glimpse of her front tooth, endearingly twisted at a forty-five-degree angle and revealing a small hint of her perfectly pink tongue.

"Deal," she said. We were married six weeks later.

My first night alone with Dr. Benta he pulls out the list I made at the beginning of session one. He spreads it on the table but it's so crumpled I can barely read it. If Monica were here, she could smooth every wrinkle, make it pristine. I wish she'd been able to do that with me.

"I thought you might like to see this again," Dr. Benta says.

"I don't know. It's sort of like a failure list, don't you think?"

"I think of it as a progress report."

The girls had helped me create it on one of our weekends.

"I need to make a list of Powers I'd like to have," I said to them and they stared at me with their glistening eyes. "Help me brainstorm."

"Being invisible," Camille said, her blue blanket draped over her shoulders as she leaned on the kitchen table. To illustrate, she blinked from sight leaving her blanket floating in mid-air. It was made of rabbit fur; the only material we found that she couldn't take

with her when she disappeared. Monica and I made her keep that blanket around her so we always knew where she was. Once Camille had fallen asleep while she was invisible and we thought she'd been

kidnapped. Well, Monica did. She always expected the worst.

"You should pick ones that you want," Candace said. "Ones that would make you happy."

With their help, I wrote such gems as: Turning green beans into hundred dollar bills (Candace hates green beans), understanding dogs (Camille wanted to know if Frankie liked her better than Candace), and being able to talk with the two of them telepathically (they both specified that it work over great distances).

After I dropped the girls off with Monica, I added: Going back in time, erasing mistakes, and increasing likability. Then I read through the whole thing again. There was nothing that said what I truly wanted.

So I added one at the very top: Protecting my girls at all times.

Dr. Benta bends over the table, his face hovering above my list. "I remember many of these." I can't tell if he's laughing. "We crossed most of these off in our first session. Though I think we've been successful with one of them."

He lifts his neck up to me, still bent at the waist like a crane about to take flight. "I think you're much more likable," he says.

"Is that a compliment?"

"You can check it off the list. It helps to have a goal." He sinks down in his chair and gestures to me. "Sit, sit."

I sit on the hard plastic chair and cross my ankles in front of me.

"I'm struck again by how many of these items are traits. Personality issues. It's important for you to discover your Power, but

it's not going to fill in your rough spots. It won't make you a better person. Do you understand?"

"Yes." But I need it to change my life.

Dr. Benta tugs gently on the right side of his moustache.

"What would you like to do?" he says.

"It's all there on the list."

"I don't think so."

Maybe he's right, but I won't admit it. "Look again."

"The one I keep coming back to is right at the top," he says.

"Protecting your daughters. It's too abstract to be a Power. It would need to be much more specific. But that's the closest you came."

"I would do anything for those girls."

Dr. Benta narrows his eyes. "There's been research that suggests we subconsciously control our Powers. Essentially, we get what we want. That's why I have every new student make this list. More than half the time, their Power is on there or in a slight variation."

I think about my friend with the sausage/pepperoni thing. Monica's ironing. Dr. Benta's ability to grow and retract his own hair. This is bullshit. Nobody wants those.

Dr. Benta pulls his moustache again and wraps it around his chin. "Possibly, you weren't meant to discover your Power. Why not concentrate on what you do know? Your family."

"Everyone discovers their Power," I say.

"Take this list home with you and think about."

I get to my feet and brush the list to the floor. "Are you giving up on me?"

"Of course not."

"Then do your job."

• • •

The last person I want to see at this point is Billy Ray. But

he's standing outside with a bluebird on his shoulder. Like the song. In fact, he's whistling that damn song.

The bird wags its tiny wing at me and my hand jumps to return the wave. Why do I keep doing that? Billy Ray smiles, his lips wet from whistling.

"We just wanted to check on you."

"You and the bird are a we now?"

"Me and all birds." I wish I could make that bird peck him in his smug face.

"I need to get home."

"There's only a few more classes left in this session," he says.

"Don't you want to discover your Power before another group joins you?" The bird leaps from his left shoulder and glides over to his right shoulder. He's showing off now.

"I don't need your concern."

"I can help you."

"I don't think so."

"Let's get a drink," he says and the bird nods vigorously.

There's no way that is happening. That's how all of this started in the first place.

Billy Ray and four others joined at the beginning of my second session. To celebrate a fresh start after a disappointing first session, I went out for drinks with the group immediately following class.

If I'd known we were going to the Happy Flamingo, I would've skipped. I made sure not to sit in the same booth where I met Monica. In fact, I kept my back to it the whole time. For the first few years of our marriage, we would return to that booth on our anniversary, and those were some of my happiest memories.

That might be why I drank four and a half daiquiris with my classmates and then told Billy Ray everything.

Kirk, who discovered he could breathe underwater the



second week of class, was the first one to leave the Happy Flamingo. Then Chandra left, who a month into the session was pleased to find she could change her eye color. Rick and Tammy left the bar together and I'm pretty sure they got married not long after Rick began shrinking to the size of the blue mailbox in front of the Institute and Tammy discovered something so embarrassing that she never told any of us. From what I heard of her Power though, Rick was a lucky guy.

Billy Ray and I were the last ones in the booth.

"Tell me everything," he said.

I experienced every cliché of the inebriated: Walls crumbled, words crashed, barriers were broken.

And I cried.

Candace and Camille stand at the front of the classroom. Dr. Benta has already grown his moustache down to his ankles and then up into a handlebar in an attempt to set them at ease. He's also put away all the guns, flame throwers and toxic chemicals.

"I know this is a little unorthodox," Dr. Benta says, "but Shield Powers are the hardest to discover."

My girls duck their heads shyly.

"Let's begin." Dr. Benta crosses to them. "Do you like candy?"

They both nod.

"If you get in my car I have a whole bag of candy."

They look to me to see if it's okay. "Just pretend like I'm not here," I say.

Dr. Benta gently grabs Candace's arm. "I mean you harm," he says like the unemotional voice in my car's navigation system.

Candace plugs her nose.

"This isn't going to work, Dr. Benta," I interject. "Candace knows if you're telling the truth."

"All that matters is that you pretend it is true, Cameron. Find the emotional place you would go if I was really trying to kidnap your daughters."

Camille drops her blanket to the floor and disappears.

I smile. He has no idea what he's gotten himself into with my girls.

Dr. Benta kneels in front of Candace. "Do you like animals?"

"Yes."

"Which ones are you scared of?"

"Snakes."

"I can do that." Dr. Benta exits the room at his clipped pace.

"Camille?" I say.

"I'm still here." Her voice leaps from the back of the room. "He's weird."

Dr. Benta returns and just as I expected, he has an aquarium with a snake in it. What I didn't expect is that it's a cobra curled on a small pile of wood chips.

He places the aquarium in front of Candace and unrolls a thread attached to small latch on top. He steps back about ten steps until the thread is taut. Candace looks to me, her eyes swallowing her face.

"Are you going to let that out?" she asks.

Dr. Benta doesn't answer. Instead, the cobra rears up and spreads its hood, ready to attack.

I get to my feet. "That thing stays in its cage."

Dr. Benta lightly pulls the thread and the top yawns open and shut like a mouth. I can almost hear it heckling me. Even the aquarium thinks I'm a failure.

"Dad? Is he going to let it out?" Candace presses her shoulder blades against the chalkboard.

I focus on the cobra, my body shaking with effort. I've

somehow got it in my head that I can make it fall asleep.

"Dad?"

Dr. Benta wraps the thread around his finger and pulls again. The lid opens another inch and then he lets it fall loudly. I force myself to discover the Power that will make this stop.

"Ow!" Dr. Benta yells and grabs his shin. While I'm sitting here doing nothing, Camille has taken action. She kicked Dr. Benta as hard as she could in the shin, and without being able to see her, I know that her nose is wrinkled and her teeth are clenched in concentration. Unfortunately, Dr. Benta forgets about the thread tied around his finger and when he jumps back, the lid flies off of the aquarium and crashes to the floor.

I leap the table and run, my blood pounding in unison with my feet against the floor. I trip on the leg of a chair and I'm suddenly airborne. For one glorious moment I think I may fly, and then I hit the ground like a belly flop into a shallow pool and all of the air rushes from my chest.

My head is inches from the cobra. The snake snaps and hisses, venom sliding down the side of the aquarium. A thick piece of glass runs along the top, trapping it inside.

The lid was a fake.

A large black bird glides from streetlight to streetlight behind us, its eyes boring into me. "You need to stop kicking people in the shins," I say to Camille.

"I was trying to help Candace."

"It's her signature move, Dad," Candace says.

"Why was he attacking her with the snake?" Camille says and wraps her blanket around her shoulders.

"He wasn't," I say.

"I couldn't smell anything," Candace says. "I didn't know."

"He never answered you. So there was no lie. Dr. Benta

is a smart guy.” As we approach the house, I look behind us but the bird is gone. Maybe I’m paranoid.

Monica steps onto the porch and makes that pouty face that she’s been doing lately. As if she turned all of her love into pity. “How’d it go?” she asks.

She is and will always be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She’s wearing a dark pair of jeans and the t-shirt we got at a burger place when we drove across country together before Candace was born. I wish I could still make her smile.

I should add that to the list.

“Not how we hoped,” I say.

“Candace got attacked by a snake,” Camille says and spins in a circle with her blanket extended above her head.

Monica lowers her eyebrows.

“Not exactly,” I say.

I hug the girls and they run up the four cement stairs to my old one-story home. It looks so warm in there.

“Why don’t we all get dinner tomorrow night?” I say.

“Oh, Cameron.”

“Why did that deserve an ‘Oh, Cameron?’”

The girls slip inside while Frankie barks with glee.

“We have plans tomorrow night,” Monica says.

Either she’s lying or she has a date. Both options suck.

One morning in the middle of my perfect life, Monica told me she’d met someone else.

“He has a Power, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. “But that has nothing to do with it. You don’t fight for anything.”

“What?”

She sighed as if she’d told me this a million times. “You let someone else get that promotion at work. You didn’t barter for a

better price on our car. You didn't send back your dinner last week when they prepared it incorrectly. You didn't ask to see the manager when that cashier was rude to me."

"Wait. You're leaving me because I'm not a jerk?"

Her eyes blurred with tears. "There's no way to break this down into simple terms. You're always trying to do that."

"What's his Power?"

"I told you. It doesn't matter."

A week later, I was in an apartment and my daughters were on a first name basis with Monica's boyfriend, who I later found out could walk on water. How could I ever compete with something so biblical?

I told all of this to Billy Ray the night we got drunk at the Happy Flamingo. "I'm doing it for her," I said. "I moved up at work. I enrolled at the Institute. I bought new clothes. When I discover my Power, I'm going to pursue her like we're in high school and we've never known love before."

It wasn't until that night that I realized what a fool I'd been. I hadn't fought for Monica either.

I see my story on Billy Ray's face when I walk up to my apartment. He's sitting on the steps, his gut sagging over his pants. Two pitch black birds the size of roosters stand next to him cooing gently and nuzzling his hands. The three of them look up at the same time which completely unnerves me.

"You've been following me," I say.

"Checking in on you," Billy Ray says. "I don't understand why Monica wouldn't have dinner with you. Doesn't she see how hard you're trying?"

"It's none of your business."

"You made it my business. I'm emotionally invested."

"Get uninvested."

Billy heaves himself to his feet and the two birds flank him, their wings extended defensively. "I'm your friend," he says.

I pause and take a deep breath. "I know you're concerned about me. But this is something I have to do on my own. I don't have time for friends right now."

He rubs his cheek as if I slapped him. "Sure. I understand. I just feel like we really hit it off that night in the bar."

"We did, okay. We did. I didn't mean to say so much, though. I tend to suffer alone."

"You think it's hard for you? What about me? I was a fat guy in his forties with no Power and no friends. You had a wife and kids. Something to look forward to." The birds open their beaks and sway from foot to foot like boxers ready to enter the ring. "That night in the bar. You helped me. You made me feel important. I discovered my Power for you. So I could help you."

"That's really nice, man. But I don't see how you can help me."

"You haven't even given me a chance. You probably don't give anyone a chance."

"I've heard enough." I brush past him as the birds caw and swipe at my pants.

The birds screech loudly as I open the front door, their wings beating frantically. My neighbors' lights snap on above me.

I turn to him and the birds fall silent. "You know you're not doing this for her," he says. "You never were."

• • •

On the last class of my second session, Dr. Benta brings the massive cookie and ice cream, just as he did for everyone who left before me. "I'm proud of the progress we've made," he says. "That's why I brought the cookie."

"Do you have stock in this company?"

He laughs and begins cutting a slice with a plastic knife. Even though we are the ones finding ourselves, he always takes the first piece.

"Remember. I don't want you to try to discover your Power. Find a hobby. Watch a lot of TV. Go to the movies. Anything to distract you."

"Doctor's orders?"

"Indeed. And then we'll start again in two more sessions."

"And you say you've had to do this before?"

"Yes. Some people get obsessed and their Power burrows even deeper. You can't always be looking for it. Sometimes, you have to let it look for you."

I shake my head. "Whatever you say." I'm already enrolled at the Better Self Institute across town.

"Do you not like chocolate chip cookies?" Dr. Benta's moustache retracts to a small strip above his lip, like Hitler.

"I do."

"You never have any." He grins and takes a huge bite of the cookie.

I look around the room at the rickety desks and the empty animal cages and the sheets of metal and the three refrigerators full of food. I was so sure when I started that this would be the place for me.

"Oh, what the hell," I say. I reach into the box and rip off a chunk of dry cookie. Might as well get something for my time here.

The girls are restless on Saturday. Camille runs through the apartment a few times, her blanket billowing behind her, until my neighbor comes up and asks us to keep it down. Candace keeps opening a book and then sighing and closing it.

My new teacher at the Better Self Institute has asked me

to make a list of the Powers of everyone I know. For the last ten minutes, I've been trying to decide if I should include Billy Ray. Not that it matters.

"Dad," Candace says from the couch. "Will you tell Camille to stop sneaking up on me?"

"I'm not!"

Candace pinches her nostrils closed and turns toward me. "She lies because she knows I hate that smell."

Camille laughs and reappears across the table from me.

"Put your blanket on, honey," I say.

"It's really nice outside," Candace says.

"I'm almost done here and then we'll go get milkshakes."

"Yes!" Camille says and jumps onto the couch next to Candace.

I stare at the paper in front of me. This shouldn't be so hard. I add Billy Ray and his birds. But I put them at the very bottom.

With milkshakes in hand we decide to walk into town. Camille wants to look at the dogs in the pet store, and Candace wants to go to the library.

The air is crisp but I'm sweating by the time we go the ten blocks. A few guys fly overhead and we're passed by someone who runs so fast we only see a blur of light. A kid jumps to the second story of a bakery so he can do a trick on his skateboard while another kid stretches up from the ground to tell him something. I try to block them all out.

"Thanks, Dad," Candace says and then something dark and feathery yanks her into the sky. Her milkshake thumps to the ground and oozes from the top.

Before I can even process what's happening, Camille is whooshed away as well and her blanket slips to the ground beside me.

I look up to find both of my girls suspended from the claws



of over a dozen hawks each. Camille disappears but the birds struggle under her weight. The birds raise them higher and higher until they are five or six stories above me.

“Help!” Candace screams.

Adrenaline courses through my body and my hands shake. My left hand goes numb and I realize I’ve crushed my milkshake in my fist and I’m covered with strawberry ice cream. I wipe my sleeve across my eyes.

“Hey. Cameron.”

Billy Ray leans from the building on the corner. “Now what are you going to do?”

“Don’t you hurt them,” I say as lights pop and explode in my peripheral vision.

Billy Ray smiles and the birds rise a little higher. “Bet you wish you went for that drink with me the other night.”

“Are you going to drop them?”

“What do you think?” he asks. Candace convulses above me. She won’t be able to smell anything with that answer.

I quickly scan the street. If I shimmy that drainage pipe I can reach the ledge under the window and pull down the fire escape. I’ll race up two stories and then jump to the streetlight. From there, I can slide along the banner stretched across the street that is advertising the farmer’s market on Wednesdays. That will take me to the clock on the bank and from there I just need to scale two more stories to the window washer’s portable ladder. I will pull it to the roof and extend it out to the birds.

Or I could stand here and try to figure out my Power.

“Daddy. Please help us!”

Billy Ray stares at me expectantly.

I grab the drainage pipe and start climbing.