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De Haven Street Irregulars

When I was a kid I always got into trouble. Nothing rough and tumble like that, nothing violent or anything that would make my mom cry, just regular kid trouble like climbing trees and throwing rocks at mean dogs in the neighborhood and seeing how long it took for them to forget they were chained to the ground as they tried to jump at you. That kind of trouble always got me roughing myself and my sister up. Cindy wasn't like me; she liked the cheap dolls mom bought us and lived for the frilly dresses she forced us into for church every Sunday like clockwork. But she followed me around and did what I did because that's what little sisters do. They do exactly all the things you do until their old enough to do what they like to do. I used to hate it when Cindy followed me because it meant I had a little parakeet on my shoulder telling me what was good and what was bad, the most annoying part was that the things I liked to do were always bad. Her reasoning was always the same too, "because mom will get mad," and it never got any less annoying to hear.

Mom wasn't ever sober enough to be mad. If she found out I'd gotten into trouble nowadays she'd just grumble and go back to her room and shut the door, the door she used to share with dad, but dad had run off with our 2nd grade teacher Ms. Rooker a year ago which meant mom let us run as wild as we wanted. No lip about tree-climbing, no frilly dresses or cheap dolls. To me it was paradise, but to Cindy it was like the world had crumbled down around her little 7-year-old feet, so she'd stuck to me like glue ever since. I mean, yeah it was annoying

as heck, but what else was I supposed to do? Tell her to scram? She'd be eaten by the dogs I threw rocks at before she even made it back to our street.

That's where the two of us were now, ditching church because mom wouldn't get out of bed and left to our own devices once more. We looked like a couple of old English ruffians from dad's old detective books. Mom always tried to throw them away but I always hid them under my mattress before the trucks came. With me in my jumper and scuffed Mary-Janes and Cindy in her white communion dress with the mustard stain over the left side pocket, we looked just like those... what were they again? The kids who ran the back allies of Baker Street? Irregulars! Yeah! Me and Cindy were just some De Haven Street Irregulars.

I was looking along the fences for the perfect rock. Not just any rock would do, the DiAngelo's nasty rottweiler that bit clean through Tommy Slater's ankle last month deserved the best rock, one that would hopefully knock some teeth out. Canines were 1 point, molars were 10, and if it was small enough for him to swallow, it was a wash. I hadn't been with Tommy when it happened, but he'd apparently been hanging with Will and Sheila Goode that day and they got into way more trouble than me. Will had loosened the dog's chain while it was barking and it charged right for Tommy when he hit it between its eyes. Rumor was that Dr. Brown had to break his leg all up just to get his foot to fit back together again. In class we proclaimed Tommy winner for life, but the Goode's had also started calling him Humpty Dumpty, so it all kind of evened out.

I felt a tug on my shorts. "Ziggy?" Cindy asked me, her eyes all big.

I didn't look at her but I slapped her hand away. She just reached out and took the end of my pant-leg again like I hadn't.

“I’m hungry.” She said.

“We’ll get hot dogs later.” I told her, wanting to end the conversation as soon as it started.

“When’s later?” she pouted, letting go of me to rub her stomach.

I leaned down to pick up a discarded fence-post, the wood splintered off and dirty at the end but still heavy enough to do some damage.

“Later, but we’re gonna play a game first, okay?”

She didn’t seem satisfied with that answer but didn’t say so, she just kept following behind me like a little duckling until we made it to the DiAngelo’s house, their dog chained up outside like he always was. They’d replaced the old rope they used to use with a fancy new steel chain anchored deep into the ground after a judge made them because of what happened to Tommy. They were actually supposed to put the dog down but Mr. DiAngelo knew the judge so he just made them tie it up better.

It was barking and yowling like always, but I had the perfect weapon. I’d win the war and avenge Tommy Slater if my name wasn’t Ziggy Berman, and take home one of that dog’s teeth as a trophy.

The dog growled at me as I approached it, brandishing my fencepost, it lunged at me only to be halted and choked by its chain, so I took the opportunity to slap it across the face with the post. The rotten wood broke across the dog’s snout, leaving splinters in its gums, but I didn’t pull my arm back fast enough.

Teeth clamped hard around my arm, digging in deep and splashing blood across the dirt. I screamed as the dog dragged me down by my arm, climbing over me and thrashing its head back

and forth with my arm locked tight in its jaws. Shrill screaming like a police siren rang out over the DiAngelo's yard, Cindy screaming her head off in fear a mere three feet away. My skin felt like it was on fire, a burning itch pulsing in the bones of my arm as the dog's teeth scraped against it.

I wanted my arm back, my throat hoarse from screaming and my ears aching from listening to Cindy scream, so I started kicking the dog in the mouth and eyes. The small heels of my Mary-Janes scraped its eyes hard enough to force them closed and I felt a few of its teeth break under my foot. The dog didn't let go per se, but I ended up breaking enough teeth to rip my arm free. Once I was loose I grabbed Cindy and didn't stop running until we were across the street, the DiAngelo's dog still chained up good behind us.

I noticed finally that tears and snot were smeared all over Cindy's face, my torn up arm clutched in her smaller hands as she blew shakily on it, as if that would magically put it back together.

I guess I was Humpty Dumpty now.

I didn't notice my own burning tears until I saw them leave tiny grey dots on my sister's white dress. Well, more like a mix of white, grey, brown, yellow, and now red. I bit my tongue until I couldn't feel it anymore, stood up, took Cindy's hand, and started walking further down De Haven Street.

The two of us came to a house further down the block with a bell over the door with Brown written over the mailbox. I felt a little bad about dripping blood all over the doctor's steps, but knocked on the door anyway.

“Dr. Brown, I’m in trouble again, help!” I called out, trying to sound urgent but already being weighed down by fatigue and bloodloss.

I didn’t get an answer right away, but once I started ringing the doorbell non-stop for a full 30 seconds, a tall woman with a streak of gray in her dark curls opened the door with a look of annoyance on her puggish face. It was Ruby Lane, one of the nurses that worked for Dr. Brown, and her look of annoyance disappeared as quickly as it had come when she saw my gnarled arm and Cindy’s red-stained dress.

She gave me a onceover and frowned, “Aw... Ziggy, Ziggy, Ziggy... what did we do now?”

Ushering us inside, Nurse Lane set Cindy in a chair with a glass of milk. She wasn’t drinking it, just staring at it, but she wasn’t crying anymore so I didn’t say anything. Dr. Brown must not have been in because Nurse Lane was the only one fluttering around gathering gauze and stitching thread. She came back with a black bottle and a cotton swab.

“I’m going to put some topical anesthetic around the bite okay? It’ll make it stop hurting so I can stitch it up.” She explained. I nodded and she wet the swab before dabbing it gently around my arm.

She was right, numbness tingling around my arm as she set the swab aside and began cleaning the grass blades and dog foam out of my open skin. Nurse lane smiled as she held up the crescent-shaped needle, already threaded.

“You have to give it a kiss for luck.”

It was stupid and definitely untrue, as Dr. Brown never told me such nonsense when he stitched up my foot after I tore it open having fallen from a tree branch, although he did chuckle to himself when he noticed the scar was vaguely flower-shaped. Even still, I pressed my lips to the needle, briefly reminded of the way I blew on my bouncy-ball when Tommy and me played Jacks the way Dad taught me to do.

Also for luck.

I winced when Nurse Lane stuck the needle into my arm, not because it hurt, even though it did pinch a little through the tingling, but because of the anticipation of the prick approaching my skin. The anxiety faded though, as the nurse went back and forth with the needle, the black thread creating braided patterns along my dark skin. I tried looking for any shapes, maybe another flower or something cooler to show off to Tommy or those rotten Goode kids, but I couldn't find anything definitive. Maybe when it healed it would form something cooler, but I didn't have very high hopes, picturing another patch of wrinkled and pale meat stuck to my body.

The thought made me frown, but Nurse Lane gave a surprise poke to my cheek, her hands free as she had finished her stitching while I wasn't paying attention. She kept poking my cheek until I gave her a small smile, then she went back to bandaging my arm and even started humming. I think it was that new Mills Brothers song, about how you always hurt the ones you love.

When she was finished she dug around in her purse until she found a cherry cough-drop, tucking it into my uninjured hand and walking over to Dr. Brown's desk, picking up his phone and twisting the chord as she dialed something. At first I was worried she was calling Mom to

come pick me and Cindy up, but that was impossible as mom was probably already fast asleep from her Jesus-Juice.

It was Sunday after all.

I couldn't eavesdrop like I wanted to, because Cindy scurried over to me and stared at my freshly bandaged arm. I handed her the cough drop and she perked up, unwrapping it with the grace of a pigeon and popping it in her mouth with a smile. Nurse Lane came back with a brown dress with one of the pockets torn off, handing it to Cindy and gently ushering her to the bathroom, probably not wanting to send a 7-year-old home in a bloody white dress. While they were gone, someone else came into the doctor's house, the bell above the door jingling.

A man in dungarees and a white coat slung over his shoulder like a lunch pail shuffled in, Dr. Brown washing his hands in the kitchen before setting his coat on his desk chair and slipping his glasses over his crooked nose. He had to get down on one knee to be at eye-level with me, but like Nurse Lane he gave me a onceover before zeroing in on my arm.

"I thought we talked about not getting into trouble anymore, Christine." He scolded, voice grizzled like he'd drunk too-sour lemonade.

I kicked my feet back and forth, my legs too short to reach the ground even on the short table.

He shook his head, taking my silence as answer enough, tucking his glasses back into his shirt pocket and giving my bandaged arm a soft pat.

Cindy came out of the bathroom in her clean dress, holding onto Nurse Lane's hand like a balloon that could fly away any second. She scurried back to my side, cherry candy still tucked

in her cheek, and Dr. Brown helped me down from the table. He told me he'd call my mom about the medical bill but I wasn't listening, only thinking about how I'd hold my arm up high tomorrow for everyone in the schoolyard to see. Tommy would call me a hero and Will and Sheila would go out of their way to pretend I didn't exist. I'd walk by Ms. Rooker's classroom that now belonged to Mrs. Fier, the haggard old white lady the older kids called a Dyke, whatever that was, and I'd pretend Ms. Rooker was still my second grade teacher and not somewhere in Ohio with my dad. I could pretend he was still at home with Mom and she was still wearing the bright yellow dress that made her look like Cindy's bath duck but made her happy because Dad bought it for her. I could even pretend I still liked Cindy because she was seven and relying on Mom like she should have been instead of relying on me and annoying me all the time.

I could pretend I was still good little Christine Berman instead of Ziggy the De Haven Street Irregular.

The numbness in my arm started to fade, but I wore the pain like a gold medal, looking forward to school for once and the cheers of my name that would surely accompany my already dirty bandages.