

Free

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“What was that” my annoying little brother asks. His eyes are hazel, just like mine, and they’re eagerly searching me for an answer.

“What was what Denny? You’re ruining my show go away!”

“Just listen Jamie,” he chides.

“Okay, okay,” I reluctantly mute Gordon Ramsey on MasterChef Junior, and then I hear it. A raccoon or something is knocking over our trash cans!

“See Janie,” he gives the “I told you so “look. Denny’s plump six year-old figure races out the door. Our old, wooden door creaks, protesting as he slams it shut behind him.

“Wait!” I cry, unlocking my wheelchair out of break, I roll after him. Out the door, a blast of hot air greets me and the fresh summer dew wets my wheels as I roll after him.

“I found him!” exclaims my brother triumphantly. As I round the corner of our old, green house I spot them. Great! Denny is wetting his freshly washed, and ironed jeans, and faded Spiderman T-shirt. Even better, lying beside him is a mutt.

“Shoo him away Denny! It probably has fleas!” Unmoved by my warnings, he continues to stretch out, resting his head on its belly. Then the thing licks my brother, causing an eruption of giggles from Denny. Gross!

“No,” he pouts, “Let’s keep him.”

“We already have enough mouths to feed plus what would Dad say?” Now that shuts him up right quick. Our dad works at McDonalds down the road and works 60 hours a week to keep us going and start our college funds like Mom wanted. Mom died when Denny was born, and ever since our life had been a very bumpy roller coaster.

“I’ll wash Snickers,” he pleads.

“Snickers?” I choke out.

“Yeah, that’s his name. My favorite candy bar,” explains my brother, giving me the “duh look.”

“Oh,” I say awkwardly. Now I can’t say no to them, as they both look up to me with puppy eyes.

“Fine, but you’re dealing with Dad,” The dog has short, blackish-brown brindle fur, but I bet most of it is mud! Snickers gets up and cautiously pads toward me. “Ew!” I squeal, and roll away into the

house faster than I have ever before my arms are on fire! Taking a deep breath, I finish watching MasterChef Junior, there's only six minutes left! That stupid dog! Our old tv crackles, sputtering out the show. We can never afford anything new.

Cooking and singing is my life. That's what I used to do with Ma. I gaze out our hazy, yellow windows and watch Denny and Snickers romp around our trashy yard. It's full of knee-high weeds, and North Carolina pine straw from our two trees. They could care less, as they chase each other like baby bunnies.

Half an hour later Denny trumps in, "We're hungry."

"Wash up and give the dog a bath while you're at it."

"But..." I glare at them, with pine needles in their hair, and all covered in mud!

The sun is waving goodbye to us, and Dad won't be home until nine o'clock, in three hours. As always, I'm left with dinner. Putting a rusty pot of boiling water on the stove, I get a stale box of spaghetti out of the pantry.

"Ring, ring ring." Our home phone call, probably Dad. He's the only one who had a cellphone.

Picking it up, "Hello my Amazing Janie," that's his nickname.

"Hi," I reply.

"So, what's for dinner?"

"Just the usual Dad"

"You mean your famous spaghetti! Dun, dun, dun," he sings.

Giggling I play along, "Made in Italy."

"Sure is. How's my Super Duper Denny doing?"

"He's washing up after a rough day of play," I say carefully.

"Sounds good, see you soon!" Then Dad hangs up.

Shoot! The pasta water is foaming and my stupid wheelchair is stuck. In a thousand years, I manage to pull out Denny's Green Lantern action figure out from under it, and I hurriedly pump myself towards the stove. Off the living room carpet, my wheels hit the stained linoleum tiles in our tiny kitchen. Quickly grabbing a wooden stirring spoon, I stir the froth away, and shut off the burner.

"I'm hungry," my brother complains again.

Glancing at the clock I realize it is already seven o' clock! "Just a minute Denny," I say annoyed. Heading to our black mini fridge I take out the half empty jar of marinara sauce. We can't afford a big fridge, plus it is easier for me to reach things in our smaller one anyway.

Snickers trumps in, and wow what a transformation. After a bath, his true black and white patches appear, and his scrawny form shows. Most of his ribs poke through his thin layer of skin, and

his eyes beg for a morsel of food. Padding towards the stove, he stretches his neck out, trying to reach the food on the counter.

“Snickers is hungry too,” Denny reminds me impatiently.

“I see,” I reply as I drain the pasta in the sink. Lastly, I combine the sauce with the pasta, and Denny holds up his plate eagerly, ready for his dinner. After I scoop a heap on his plate, I grab a plastic bowl, and give some to the dog. I realize it is not as good as dog food, but it will have to do.

We sit down on the stingy carpet in the parlor, and watch TV as we gobble up the pasta. “Summer holiday sale! Get your Subaru Legacy for one one-hundred, and ninety-nine dollars a month!” our old TV crackles out. I turn it off. That must be the gazillionth time I’ve heard that over excited announcer present this Subaru Legacy.

“I’m ready for some pasta!” sings Dad as he busts through the door.

“What ..who is this! Get it off of me!!!”

OOPs, we forgot about Snickers. Denny quickly runs to the door, “Can we keep him, can we keep him? Please, pretty, ple...”

“Hold on buddy,” Dad cuts in. “We need to talk.” Now he is serious.

I get Dad a plate of spaghetti which he gobble right up, he ate lunch hours ago. Wiping the red sauce off his fuzzy, dark brown beard he comments, “Well this dog sure likes pasta.” Snickers is eagerly licking the leftover sauce from his plate, with a big happy grin, smeared with marinara red sauce.

“Denny found him knocking over our trash cans,” I explain to our bewildered dad.

“And his name is Snickers!” Denny pipes up.

“Well he sure is cute,” he comments.

“So, can Snickers stay with us?” asks my brother once again.

“We’ll see,” says Dad thoughtfully. Getting up he orders, “To bed my soldier, you too Princess Pea!”

Phew! Dad took the dog pretty well. I rolled into my tiny bedroom. The room’s peachy, gray walls greet me, as I switch on the one little lamp by my bed. Unraveling the covers, I carefully scooch into the twin-sized bed. The navy blue comforter blankets over me, and I drift off to sleep.

*I’m running faster than the wind. My curly brown hair is flying behind me, as the sun highlights my beige-brown skin. My wheelchair is nowhere in sight but who cares. I don’t need it! I look ahead and oh my gosh, there’s mom. As I run towards her, the tall grass blades tickle my bare feet.*

Then I wake up. Groggy from my dream, I slowly open my eyes. I lift my covers, and look down at my legs, they're still in braces. Glancing sideways, my wheelchair is still there. So it was just a dream after all.

"Get up, get up Janie. Today is ice cream day!" Denny screams excitedly in my face. In the summer, we save our money to get ice cream once a week.

"Okay, okay" I oblige as I rub my eyes. Slowly I slide myself into my wheelchair, beside the bed. Today is Sunday, the one only day Dad doesn't work. He works a half-a day on Saturdays.

"First, we need to go to church," I remind Denny.

"But I don't want to. It's boring." He whines.

"Well deal with it." Church is the only thing we get to do together as a family, it's not my problem if he doesn't appreciate it.

"Who wants some pancakes?" Dad calls out from the kitchen.

My brother scampers to the kitchen, with Snickers close on his heels. Still a little tire, I roll to the window. A Blue Heron glides across the sky.

Free, free, free.

I wish I could be free. I wish I could fly, even walking would do.

"You coming or not Janie? I'll eat yours for you," Denny interrupts my thoughts.

"I'm coming," I yell, as I roll down the hall. The cozy smell of hot pancakes, and stale coffee hits me as I enter the kitchen. They are all seated on the picnic blanket we lay on the kitchen floor. Denny, with crumbly pancake hands. Dad with a big jolly smile, and Snickers with begging eyes. I join in on the jolly feast, and bite into the warm pancake, drenched in maple syrup. Now this is what I call breakfast.

All dressed up, and ready to go to church, we pile up in our Mazda MX-3. As we make our way out of the driveway, Snickers is left behind in the house, and gazes at us longingly.

"Sorry Snickers, be a good boy," Denny yells out the window in his cute, little kid voice.

As always, everybody stares at us, especially me, in my wheelchair, as we make our way to the pew. We look pretty shabby, compared to everyone else, but then again not everybody has a dad who has to work at McDonald's and a daughter in a wheelchair.

Finished with church Denny pipes up, "Ice cream now?"

"Lunch first, mister," Dad reminds, gaily.

We arrive back at our house, and Snickers greets us the moment we step into the door. His tail is a boomerang, wagging happier than any puppy's on the planet. I had forgotten how nice it was to have someone greet you when you get back home. Mom used to greet us with freshly baked chocolate chip cookies when we came home from school.

“You ready for lunch Snickers?” asks Denny. Snickers just keeps wagging.

“That reminds me, we need to stop by the store and get some dog food,” says Dad.

After our lunch of cold cut sandwiches, we head out. The Cary ice cream shop is just a few blocks away, so we always walk. Plus, it’s a nice day. Dad holds Snickers, who we made a makeshift leash and collar for, out of old rope. Denny gallops ahead exciting Snickers who is now straining against his leash to follow him. Letting in t the dog’s wishes, Dad takes the leash off Snickers and off they go.

“So what do you think about the dog?” Dad asks.

“I guess he’s alright,” I reply, attempting to hold back my happy grin.

“Me too,” Dad smiles down at me.

As we arrive at the ice cream shop, Denny already holds his place in line. Dad awkwardly doesn’t know what to do with Snickers who is licking up a puddle of strawberry ice cream on the pavement. Gross, well kind of making up his mind Dad attaches the leash to the dog, and hand sit to me. “You mind holding Snickers while I go inside?” says Dad.

“Sure.”

“Okay, thanks. What flavor do you what Janie?”

“Cookies and Cream. Duh.” And he goes in the shop with Denny.

I’m left with Snickers. He gazes worriedly into the shop, wondering if Dad, and Denny are okay. “They’ll be back,” I say to him. Wait, did I just talk to a dog?

Dad and Denny are still in line, everybody wants a scoop on this blazing hot summer day. Luck for us, Snickers and I are not in the air-conditioned shop, but sweltering under a parched tree.

I got into a sort of a day dream, *remembering, remembering, remembering. Snickers is playing with Denny, his agile figure leaping among the leaves* but then it hits me.

Maybe I can’t walk, or run, maybe I can’t be like everyone else, but Snickers can.

To Be Continued

