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FOR GOKONG



I am twelve years old when it happens. Raja is in a tree outside my window, staring in. He's soaked through with rain, hair dark as ketchup, lips trembling as he watches me doze. My parents would say he looks afraid, but I know he's confused. Ever since he came to our house, he's been at my side, but now he isn't allowed.

Raja putters his lips every time he breathes out, like a little kid baffled by a jigsaw puzzle. He can't figure out what he's done wrong. He can't understand that it's because I'm sick.

I can't bear the look on his face.

I'm lying in bed, drunk on antibiotics and cough syrup. Even though I'm supposed to be on strict bed rest, I kick off my covers and creep to my window so I can be as near to him as possible. As soon as I'm on my feet, my sweat-slick legs turn cold and the useless, honking coughs come, fogging the windowpane. When the glass clears, Raja blinks his golden eyes at me, gives me one of his own quiet, hooting coughs, and places five fingertips against the window. His nose is wet and glistening; he's sick, too.

I put my fingertips over his, touch glass.

"Raja," I say as loudly as I dare, "you have to go back to your hammock. We can play as soon as we get better."

Does he understand that I love him?

I think so. We still get each other. It's my parents neither of us understands these days.

I put a finger to my lips, our sign for *be quiet*. Pleased, Raja puts a finger to his own lips, even as he coughs.

I know Raja doesn't mind being outside, even at night. He loves rain, and will stare up into it and sway — his rain dance, Mom calls it. He isn't getting too wet, anyway, because the tree outside my window has a nice sturdy branch for him to hold on to. He prefers being up high to being on the ground. That's how it's always worked when we play in the dense woods behind my house: Whenever I stop to rest he's right above, staring at me. Only at lunchtime will he climb down and make his awkward wrist-walk to sit beside me.

Now he settles into his spot in the tree and raises a bag of chips he's been clutching in his toes. Rainwater must be pooling inside the bag, because he isn't bringing out chips, just yellow potato paste. He's loving the cold, salty goopiness, though, and scrutinizes each glob before delicately licking it from his fingers. Once he finishes eating, he moves the bag close to the glass, its opening toward me. By our code, this means I'm free to take some. But there's a new barrier between us.

"We'll both be better soon," I tell him. "Then I'll have a chip. Save some for me."

Of course he doesn't. No junk food ever survives unfinished around Raja Solomon. Once the bag is empty, he releases it and watches it flutter to the ground. Mom spends half her day picking up the trash Raja's dropped. Orangutans have many great qualities, but they are the worst litterbugs ever.

Raja eases farther out so the branch bends under his weight. Then he grasps the next tree over so he's spread-eagled between the two. It would be impossible for me to hold this pose for even a second, but he can grip branches for hours.

As Raja sways and stares, I press my forehead against the window and stare back. The glass is too thick for me to hear anything, but I can imagine the sounds he's making: like raspberries with

extra lip-puttering. It's been over a week since I've been outside with him.

As the rain falls harder, Raja grasps a branch with only his feet and clamps his arms tight around his narrow torso. He has the whole run of the outside; if he wanted, he could be dry in the hammock on the porch, where my parents have set out fruit and milk. But then he wouldn't have a view of me. I wouldn't have a view of him.

It's a gift he's giving me, that he's always given me. He is making me the most important person in his world.

I cross my arms over my chest, then point at him. Sulkily, starting off to one side, he grips the branch with his feet so he can cross his arms over his chest, then points in my direction. He yawns, which is how I know he's nervous. It's as though he's worried what he'll find in my face.

I sign *I love you* again, slowly and emphatically. Then: *Sorry*.

He points at me then pats his butt. *You poop*.

Sorry, I sign again. Neither of us actually knows sign language, but over the years we've come up with a dozen gestures. Some of them were my invention: Video games are *little + Raja + thank you*. Nap time is *little + sleep*. Raja's combinations usually involve poop. Well, maybe the gesture doesn't exactly mean *poop* to him, but his meaning is clear: He is not happy with me, not one bit. And though I can sign *I'm not poop*, I don't have a combination of signs that says *It's not my fault*. Raja has never been much interested in blame, anyway.

He blows out a long gust, crosses an arm in front of him, and leans his chin on it. That's how I know that he's not mad at me. He's depressed.

I can't leave him like this, wet and sick and alone. I fish a bag of chips from the stash under my bed, unlock the window, slide it

up a few inches, and toss the bag to Raja. He catches it with one foot while I quickly shut and lock the window. He wolfs through the bag, and this time doesn't hold the opening toward me. Tilting his head back, he offers his mouth to the rain to wash it all down, giving me a terrific view of his yellow teeth. Once he's finished, he carefully maneuvers the bag so it's hidden behind his back before he drops it.

"Really?" I ask. "Now you're shy about littering?"

Raja grouchyly refuses to face me, instead giving me a view of his skinny orangutan butt.

Someone knocks on my door — Mom probably heard me open the window. Frantically, I motion for Raja to go away. He stares back defiantly. I get into bed and pull the covers up. If I look asleep, I figure, Mom might leave before she notices Raja on the other side of the window.

Cracking my eyelids, I can just see the door ease open. I turn my head and watch Raja's expression go flat. When my parents are around, I stop being able to read him.

Mom stands over my bed, Raja on the outside of my window. I am between them, blinded under my comforter. Then my mother gasps, my door slams closed, and I hear her pound down the stairs. It can only mean one thing: She's seen Raja.

I hurtle out of bed, reeling from fever, and stagger down the hallway after her, yelling for her to stop.

Wavering at the bottom of the stairs, Mom wrings her hands and calls for my father. Worry washes her face gray.

"John," she says when she sees me, "go back to bed. Now. You're supposed to be resting."

"What are you going to do?" I ask, clutching the bannister. I shiver, even though my pajamas are thick. I have pneumonia, the doctor said, and that word has changed everything. For the last year Raja and I have been trading the same germ, like a game of

mucus tag. It isn't his fault any more than mine that we keep getting each other sick.

"I said back to bed!" she orders.

"He got lonely, that's all!"

My father comes out of his study, looking as confused by my behavior as Raja's.

Mom whirls on him. "Your orangutan was outside John's window. Eating chips John must have given him. Breathing the same air."

Father notices me shivering at the top of the stairs and his expression gets serious.

"Please," I say. "Raja doesn't know he's doing anything wrong."

It's hard to detect over the rain patter, but I think I hear fronds snapping. Our only palm tree is by the front door, which means . . . My eye darts to the door, and the stained-glass panel beside it. Two glass-wavered golden eyes are peering in.

Raja raps a one-two pattern against the window. It's the same rhythm he taps against my forehead to wake me up from a nap.

Let's go play.

My parents haven't noticed him yet. *If I go back to my room, I think, everyone will calm down. Raja will stop making noise.*

Hands on the wall for support, I lurch back upstairs. The carpet is wavering, colorful mud. Then the world goes white, and I nearly get lost in it while I listen to my parents argue below me.

"It's too much," Mom says. "We can't let Raja wander free anymore."

"What do you want me to do about it?" my father says.

"Why are you acting like *I'm* putting *you* out? *You're* the one who brought him here. *You're* the one who needs to fix this."

This line isn't unfamiliar to any of us.

I crawl into my bedroom and close the door. I press my mouth into my hands and let the pent-up coughs out. When I look up,

clammy and woozy, Raja is back at my window. He's fully water-logged now, his eyes desperate.

I love you, I sign, then point toward his hammock on the porch.

He doesn't sign anything back, and I don't blame him. What does *I love you* mean, when I'm letting us be torn apart? When, for all Raja knows, I've sided with my parents?

Raja tugs hard at the window frame. Even though he's half my size, he's stronger than any of us. A corner starts to scrape free from the wall.

"Stop!" I shout. "Raja, please stop!"

I start rummaging under my bed for more chips, a toy, anything to distract him, but a loud scraping stops me. He's getting more and more frantic, and the glass is wobbling in its frame.

I'm worried Raja will cut himself. I try to pry his fingers away, the glass dancing between us. His fingertips are small, rough, wet, *his*. The whole window frame comes free at a corner, and we're suddenly holding hands, warm rain streaming into my room. Raja stops and stares at me, delight and surprise on his face even as the frame cuts him. He's happy just to be touching me.

I know my parents will be here any second.

I know the only way to stop this.

I know I need to let go.

So I do. I release his hand.

Raja cries out, betrayed.

Once he's recovered from his surprise, he leaps into motion, frantically pushing at the window, his slashed fingers leaving bloody streaks. When I push back, the whole frame bends and comes free from the wall. Raja holds it in his hands for a moment, then pitches it to the ground.

I don't move. He has his feet against the gap in the wall, his hands wrapped around mine. Raja's orange hair is so familiar, as much a part of me as my own hair.

But my parents: If they see us together, they'll send him away for good.

I pry Raja's fingers up so I can cast him out and get him back on his branch. But he has his other hand inside now, is crying loudly and making the kiss-squeaking that means he's really upset — a sound I haven't heard since my father first pulled him out of a barrel two years ago, frail and terrified.

Raja's eyes go even wider, and I whirl to see my door open, my parents bursting in from the hallway. When he sees them, Raja opens his mouth and starts biting, battling to get as deep as possible into my arms.

At the sight of his sharp flashing canines, I fall back.

But it's too late. Raja shrieks —

My mother screams —

His jaw snaps —

I can't see the teeth anymore —

His mouth closes on my hand —

He is holding my hand in his mouth.

My mother is still yelling from the doorway, and underneath that distant noise I feel something too intense and too bright to be pain. Raja's face tightens in fear and confusion. He releases me and I fall back onto my bed. My hand is pumping blood onto my white sheets.

I watch it.

Something is impossible.

Raja shrieks. My parents yell. I am silent.

My finger is gone.