

A
DROP
OF
HOPE

Keith Calabrese

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With special thanks to

Amla Sanghvi

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A SURPRISE IN THE ATTIC

Ernest Wilmette was alone in his dead grandfather's house, and he really wished he wasn't.

He stood in front of the attic door. It was thinner than a usual door, and shorter, too. Probably by about six to eight inches. Not that it would make any difference to Ernest. Ernest was eleven, twelve in four months. He'd started sixth grade—middle school—a month ago, but you wouldn't guess it to look at him. He still had to sit in the back seat of the car because he wasn't tall or heavy enough for the air bag.

Small or not, Ernest had made a promise. Not only that, he'd

made it to a dying man. Ernest suspected those were the kinds of promises you really had to keep.

It had been late last spring. They were in Grandpa Eddie's kitchen, just the two of them, making sandwiches.

"Ernest, can you do something for me?" Grandpa Eddie had said.

"Sure," Ernest said, expecting his grandfather to send him to the fridge to fetch some mustard.

"After I'm gone, promise me that you'll clean out my attic. Okay?"

It was a strangely serious request. Stranger still for Ernest, who didn't know how sick his grandfather really was. No one ever talked about it around Ernest. Small Ernest. Too small for the truth.

He was scared to ask the obvious question, but too curious not to at the same time. "What's up in the attic?"

Grandpa Eddie gazed down at Ernest, a knowing, weary look in his eyes. "Oh, just some things I should have parted with a long time ago," he said in a distant, almost spooky voice that Ernest hoped was just the medication. His parents had told him that much, at least. That the pills Grandpa Eddie was taking might make him a little woozy and confused. Even still, Ernest couldn't help but notice how his grandfather had been looking at him these past few weeks, as if he knew some secret about Ernest but wouldn't say what it was.

“Okay,” Ernest said, uncertainly.

“Good,” the frail old man said, just as suddenly back to himself again. He patted Ernest on the top of the head. “Now that’s sorted, let’s have some lunch.”

Ernest didn’t know how to explain what happened. There was a brief moment of quiet, and then Grandpa Eddie simply walked over to the fridge to get them a drink. But something about that brief moment seemed significant, the way some moments just weigh more than others. And something about the way they then quietly, almost reverently, ate their turkey sandwiches at the kitchen table suggested to Ernest that he and his grandfather had just sealed a fateful pact, like the blood oaths the Greek gods were always making in the books Ernest loved to read.

Shortly after that, Grandpa Eddie took a bad turn. He grew feverish and weak. He coughed up blood and had to move into the hospital. The doctors put a tube in his arm that pumped medicine into his veins. It made him drowsy and confused.

The last time Ernest saw him, Grandpa Eddie was really thin, and his skin was gray and loose on his bones. The dying man was awake, and pleading in a panicked, rasping voice.

“Tell Ernest! Tell him he can’t forget the attic!” Grandpa Eddie sat up in his bed, something he hadn’t done for weeks. He looked right at Ernest, but with no recognition in his eyes.

“It’s just the drugs, honey,” Ernest’s mom said soothingly as

his dad tried to calm Grandpa Eddie down. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

Grandpa Eddie collapsed back onto his bed. He was whimpering now, and when he spoke next he sounded like a child. “I kept them,” his grandfather said, his voice sounding faint and far away. “I kept them all.” Grandpa Eddie, looking both scared and relieved, reached up to the ceiling.

“Rollo,” the old man said. “I kept them.”

And then he died.

That was eight weeks ago.

Ernest really wanted to leave, to go back down the steps, out the front door, and forget about the whole thing. That dark and dusty attic had been creepy enough even when his grandfather was alive. But he couldn’t back out now; he just couldn’t. He’d promised.

He closed his eyes, took a breath, and opened the door.

The attic was a mess. There was junk everywhere, and it took Ernest a good twenty minutes to clear a path down the center of the room.

He moved a tower of boxes from the far wall, revealing one of the eyebrow dormer windows. Unblocking the window gave the attic a much-needed infusion of sunlight.

In the corner of the room, Ernest saw an old rocking chair with

a plastic-wrapped patchwork quilt draped over the back. On the seat of the rocking chair sat a carefully arranged pile of boxes.

Stepping closer, he could see that the boxes contained toys—old toys, but new at the same time. They were old in that they'd been there for a long while, but new in that they were still in their original packaging and had never been opened.

Ernest's first thought was that he'd stumbled upon some early presents that Grandpa Eddie had bought for him before he died. But these boxes were old, antiques even. All of them perfectly preserved: mint, a collector would say. Ernest wasn't sure what or who these toys were for, but they were way too old to have been meant for him.

He was about to move on from the rocking chair to another corner of the room when it happened. A sliver of light from the window broke through and beamed unmistakably, like a spotlight, on the rocking chair full of toys, shining on one box in particular: an art set.

He picked up the box. It was heavier than he'd expected. The case was wood—real, solid wood. Inside were a series of sketch pencils, tubes of paint, brushes, chalk, charcoals, and some drawing tablets. Though a set for beginners, it was serious business nonetheless. Unlike modern disposable art sets, which expect to be trashed and the pieces lost the minute they're opened, this was a set to treasure.

The light from the window made the set glow in a way that

Ernest felt was strangely, irresistibly beckoning. Though it could have simply been a trick of the light, some odd angle of refraction against the dirty glass, Ernest couldn't help but get that heavy-moment feeling again, like when his grandfather had first asked him to clean the attic.

As he held the wooden box delicately in his hands, Ernest remembered the knowing look Grandpa Eddie had given him that day. "Just some things I should have parted with a long time ago," he had said. Now, as Ernest looked down at the art set, it was like fate was giving him an elbow in the ribs and saying, "Go on, take it. You might be needing that."

He stared at the box a little longer, but fate apparently refused to be more specific on the matter.

RYAN HARDY VERSUS THE MACHINE

Piece-of-junk lawn mower.

Ryan Hardy crouched down and stared at the overturned machine. Overturned by him after it had started coughing up freshly cut grass. Again.

It was his own fault. He'd let Mrs. Haemmerle's lawn go for too long, let the grass get too thick. He'd only done about a quarter of the yard so far, and the mower had already backed up on

him three times. Because he'd tried to rush it, keeping the mower on the usual, lowest setting even though the grass had grown too heavy for it.

Ryan glared down at the mower, lying belly-up in the grass like it was perfectly content to recline there all afternoon. If it were capable, Ryan was confident the machine would be making a rude gesture at him right about now.

Good deeds may or may not go unpunished, but Ryan Hardy knew one thing for sure: They definitely snowball. Ever since Mr. Haemmerle had died, going on two years now, Ryan had been mowing the old widow's lawn. And shoveling her walk and driveway when it snowed. Then there were the leaves in the fall, rain gutters in the spring, garbage bins out to the curb and back to the side of the house every week. Basically, Ryan did any odd job around that house that might lead to a broken hip or a heart attack if the old lady tried to do it herself. And he did it all for free.

Ryan knew Mrs. Haemmerle was on what adults call a "fixed income," which was a polite way of saying someone didn't have any money. He was no stranger to the little signs of people trying to cut costs. Her house was clean and well kept, but there was never that much food in the kitchen, and all the appliances were really old. She didn't have a computer or a cell phone, and Ryan knew plenty of people who had those things even when they didn't have much else.