
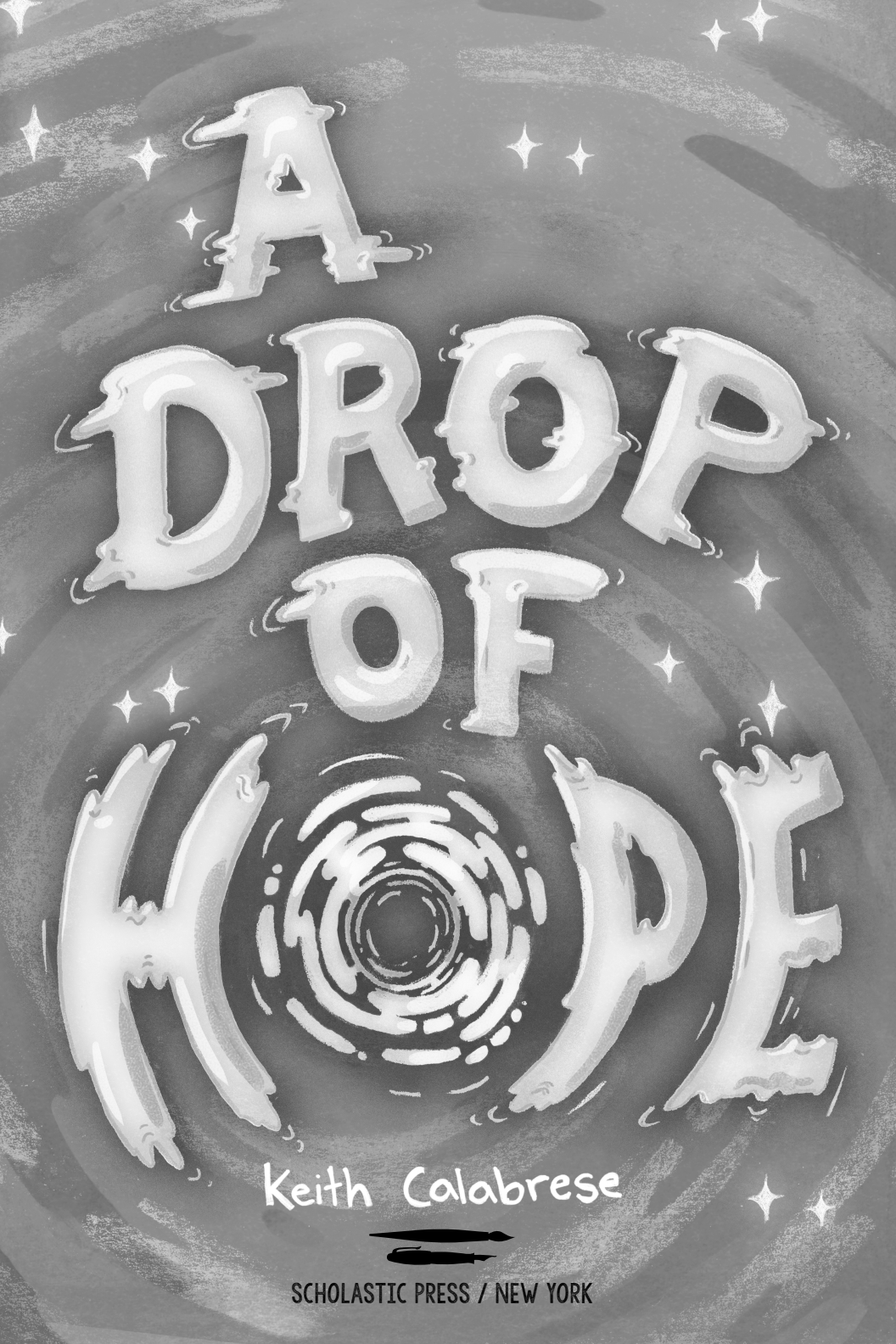


"A book that Reminds us of
the Kindness we are
ALL CAPABLE of"
- GARY D. SCHMIDT, Newbery
Honor Winner and
Author of OKAY FOR NOW

A DROP OF HOPE



Keith Calabrese



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This story starts with a wish and ends in a crime.
The wish isn't granted, and the crime is never punished.
Life is like that sometimes.
But that isn't always a bad thing . . .

1

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.

It wasn't a hard lawn to take care of, and most days cutting it for free made Ryan feel pretty good.

But today it didn't. Today it made him feel like a chump who was wasting his Sunday.

Ryan looked up from the overturned lawn mower and noticed an expensive, foreign sedan easing down the street. A North Side car.

Ernest Wilmette. He should have guessed. The Wilmettes were rich. They lived in the most expensive house in town. It was one of those modern designs, all glass and hard lines and sharp edges. The kind of house that belonged perched on top of a mountain. But there aren't any mountains in Ohio, so the Wilmettes had to settle for the biggest hill on the North Side.

Mrs. Wilmette was driving and Ernest was sitting in the back seat. He spotted Ryan and waved; obliged, Ryan waved back. He was obliged because his dad was the foreman at the factory that Ernest's dad owned. Obligated because he didn't like Ernest, and didn't want to wave at him.

Ryan had spent all of yesterday afternoon cutting the other Wilmette lawn, the one across the street. He'd been doing that yard since the spring, when Eddie Wilmette, Ernest's grandfather, got sick and then died. Ryan didn't really know Eddie Wilmette very well, but he liked the old man because he let you call him Eddie even if you were a kid. Though rolling in dough, Eddie never moved out of the South Side and had mowed his

own lawn until he got too sick to do it anymore. That was when Ernest's dad had hired Ryan to keep up the yard while the family figured out what to do with the now empty house.

Deep down, Ryan knew Ernest wasn't that bad. For a rich kid, he didn't act stuck-up or better than anyone. But the kid was just so clueless and carefree. He was always smiling, always friendly, always in a good mood. One of those "look on the bright side" types, because that's all he'd ever known, the bright side. Nothing ever seemed to bother Ernest.

And that was what bothered Ryan.

BACK SEAT BOY

Ernest's mom was sitting on the porch when he came downstairs.

"Get what you need?" she asked as they headed back to the car.

"I think so," Ernest said.

As they drove down Grandpa Eddie's street, Ernest spied a boy mowing a lawn. It was Ryan Hardy, from Ernest's class.

Ernest didn't want Ryan to see him in the back seat, which meant that Ryan inevitably would. Ernest tried to look away, but it was too late. Ryan spotted him and Ernest knew he had to wave, however lamely, as he sat in the back seat like a baby. Ryan probably never sat in the back seat in his life, not even

when he really was a baby. And he'd been mowing lawns since he was seven. Seven! Ernest's mom wouldn't let Ernest mow their lawn because he still had to reach up for the bar.

His mom didn't talk much as they drove across town. If she even noticed the art set on the seat next to him, she didn't say. Ernest knew she had a lot on her mind. His dad had been working all the time lately, even when he was home. His parents were both worried. He wasn't sure about what, exactly, but he could tell.

They never said as much, of course. Like with Grandpa Eddie's illness, they didn't talk about serious things around Ernest, and it bothered him. It was like riding in the back seat in the car, but worse.

It was like he was riding in the back seat of his own family.

MRS. HAEMMERLE

The car passed, and Ryan returned his attention to the mower. He got down on his knees, pulled back the discharge guard, and started to clean the clogged-up trimmings from the mower deck.

"Ryan, dear. Be careful!" The screen door slammed as Mrs. Haemmerle scurried outside, a glass of lemonade in her shaky little hand.

“I’m okay, Mrs. Haemmerle. The engine’s off.”

“Oh, still,” she said anxiously. “I don’t know.”

Ryan removed his hand from the mower deck and stepped back from the machine.

Mrs. Haemmerle visibly relaxed. “Would you like some lemonade?”

She was a tiny woman. She weighed maybe ninety pounds, wet. After a five-course steak dinner. As she held the glass of lemonade out to Ryan, she looked like she might tip forward from the shift in balance.

“Yes, thank you,” Ryan said, taking the glass. Her lemonade was freshly made, no powder, and he knew it must be hard work for her to squeeze all those lemons. The ends of her fingers were visibly bent with arthritis. It probably really hurt, not that she’d complain. Mrs. Haemmerle was the sweetest person Ryan had ever met.

After she went back inside, Ryan readjusted the setting on the mower to do the yard twice, the right way. But he also promised himself that in four years, when he got his driver’s license, he’d drive that piece-of-junk lawn mower out to the county reservoir. And throw it in.

2

A WEIRD ENCOUNTER

After raising the blade height on the mower, Ryan finished Mrs. Haemmerle's yard without further frustration. In fact, the second pass—at the regular height—seemed to breeze by.

Mrs. Haemmerle came out the back door, a couple of neatly folded bills in her hand.

"It's covered, Mrs. Haemmerle," he said, waving away the money.

She looked at him, confused as usual. "It is?"

"Yep. We're square. You paid me at the beginning of the month. Remember?"

Mrs. Haemmerle shook her head doubtfully. “Well, if you say so, Ryan.”

She put the money in the pocket of her apron as if sensing it didn’t really belong there.

“I just have to take the trash out. Unless you need anything else today?”

“No, sweetie,” Mrs. Haemmerle said. “Go on. Go play while there’s still some daylight left.”

Ordinarily, Ryan would not like someone suggesting he “go play,” but he knew Mrs. Haemmerle well enough to take her meaning, which was more like “go live, have fun, be young.”

“Okay,” Ryan said. “I’ll come around on Thursday.” Thursday was grocery day.

Mrs. Haemmerle thanked Ryan one more time and then, patting the money in her apron pocket as if trying to recall unfinished business, made her way back inside.

Ryan was wheeling the yard bins out to the curb when Lizzy MacComber came out of her house. She was in Ryan’s class; he’d known her for about as long as he could remember. They used to play together frequently when they were little, so much so that half the time they would go into each other’s houses without knocking.

Not so much anymore.

“Hey, Ryan,” she said. She had a stack of magazines in her arms.

“Oh,” Ryan said. “Hey.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Lizzy smiled, but in a funny way. She had a look in her eye that Ryan couldn’t place. Kind of like when someone’s setting you up for a joke.

“What?”

Lizzy held up one of the magazines. It was about fashion, the kind his mom would sometimes get. The model on the cover had long blond hair and wore a tight dress with a low neckline.

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

It was what they call a loaded question. Of course Ryan thought the model was pretty. That’s why they put her on the magazine.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged.

“What about her?” Lizzy quickly flipped to a dog-eared page from another magazine. This model had short, dark hair and a high skirt that showed a lot of her leg. Ryan really didn’t get what Lizzy was playing at, but it was making him uncomfortable.

“I said, I don’t know. Why are you asking me?”

“C’mon, Ryan,” Lizzy said in that how-can-you-not-be-getting-this way that girls often use with boys. “It’s not a hard question. Is she pretty?”

“Sure. Yeah. She’s pretty,” he blurted, hoping it would end there. “Okay?”

“Prettier than me?”

Ryan scowled. “Stop being weird,” he snapped, louder than he’d intended, and walked past her down the sidewalk.

Lizzy stood there, holding the magazines to her chest with a hurt look on her face.

“I was just asking!” Lizzy called after him, but he kept walking.

THE DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

Lizzy threw the magazines down on the couch. Then she threw herself down on the couch and buried her face in the cushion. She’d never felt so stupid in her entire life. Ryan had looked at her like she was gross and absurd. Like she was nuts.

The minute she’d asked him about the first model, she knew it was a mistake. Making big, dopey eyes at Ryan and cocking her head to the side when she talked wasn’t going to work on him. And the way she’d talked—all breathy and singsongy—like it wasn’t even her voice!

That’s because it wasn’t her voice, just like those weren’t really her magazines. They both belonged to Lizzy’s cousin Chelsea.

Chelsea was older than Lizzy and liked to treat her younger cousin like something between a pet and an old doll. Not the kind of doll a girl pampers or cherishes, but rather the kind of doll that's expendable, the off-brand doll she can experiment on and not care if she messes it up.

For the last few months, Lizzy had been spending most of her Saturdays at Chelsea's house while Lizzy's mom was working at the hospital. And recently, Chelsea had decided to make Lizzy her *project*. Chelsea and her mom, Lizzy's aunt Patty, had lengthy conversations, right in front of Lizzy, about how to fix her wardrobe and her hair and her skin and essentially make a new, improved young woman out of her.

Lizzy certainly didn't want to be anyone's project, and she realized that the whole idea was really just a thinly veiled way for her aunt and her cousin to openly pick her apart in the guise of constructive criticism. Lizzy knew what they thought about her and her mom. She saw the way Chelsea and Aunt Patty looked down on her mom when she dropped Lizzy off, wearing her hospital scrubs and no makeup. Lizzy knew what Aunt Patty was thinking at the end of the day, when her mom, worn out from her shift, came to pick up Lizzy and bring her home.

It's so sad, but that's what happens when you can't keep your man.

So yesterday, when Chelsea dropped those fashion magazines in Lizzy's arms, she knew what her cousin was really saying.

Here you go. Better do your homework, unless you want to end up like your mom.

The worst part of it, though, was that sometimes Lizzy feared that her aunt and her cousin might be right. Lizzy loved her mom, but she saw how sad she got when her dad didn't come by like he'd said he would. She'd heard her mom crying in her room afterward. Lizzy didn't want to end up like that. She was scared of ending up like that.

Everything had been so much simpler a year ago. A year ago she'd have gone outside to say hey to Ryan, just like she used to. She and Ryan had been friends since they were little, like diapers-little.

But they weren't little anymore, and a year made a big difference. A year ago Lizzy's dad was still around. A year ago she didn't have to go to Aunt Patty's house every Saturday while her mom pulled a weekend shift at the hospital. A year ago she never would have done anything so stupid as try to flirt with Ryan Hardy using fashion magazines.

Try as she might, Lizzy couldn't stop replaying the horrible encounter over in her mind, the attention to detail that served her so well in school now providing achingly perfect recall of every agonizing moment. It was as if once she started, she couldn't stop herself. After she'd shown him the first picture, she just had to show him the second, and would have shown him

more, picture after picture, making a bigger and bigger fool of herself . . .

If Ryan hadn't gotten so annoyed that he'd just turned and walked away from her.

She wanted to be mad at him, but in truth he'd done her a favor. Like the mercy rule in Little League baseball, he'd put her out of her misery.

Lizzy heard her mom stirring in her bedroom and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Hey, Mom," Lizzy said quickly as the door opened.

"Hey there, sweetie." Lizzy's mom rubbed her eyes. They were puffy, and one side of her face was pink from where it had been smushed into the pillow. "My word, I was really out," she said with a little laugh as she ran her fingers through her bedhead.

Wow, does she look like a wreck. No wonder . . .

Lizzy shut her eyes to block the rest of it out. She hated letting that stuff in her head, hated seeing her mom through her aunt's and cousin's eyes.

Lizzy's mom went into the kitchen and checked the fridge. Unsatisfied, she came back out and looked at Lizzy, closely. Lizzy was afraid her mom would see the red crying splotches on her face.

"You know," her mom said, as if coming to a big decision. "I could just murder a cheeseburger tonight. Whatd'ya say?"

Lizzy didn't really want a burger, but her mom was trying to do something special. Bonding time or whatever.

"Sure," she said. "That sounds great."

WELCOME TO CLIFFS DONNELLY

Ryan came in through the kitchen. He could hear the TV in the den. It was one of his dad's shows. He could tell right away by the sound of men arguing.

His dad had been watching shows like this a lot lately. Men in suits, sitting around a table and yelling at each other. Always, they were yelling. Even when they agreed, they still yelled. They were always angry, these men in their suits—angry at all the people who were ruining everything for the rest of us. Ryan wasn't exactly sure who was doing the ruining and less sure about how they were, in fact, doing it; mostly the men in suits seemed to blame people in other countries or people who lived here but looked like people who came from other countries.

They were the kind of men his dad would have once dismissed—stuffed shirts, he used to call them. Men with tough words but soft hands and pudgy, pink faces. Men who weren't worth listening to.

But now his dad was listening, and Ryan didn't understand why. All those shows did was make his dad angry, too. Sometimes Ryan would pass by the den and overhear his dad muttering back at the TV, growling "What a mess" and "Whole country's going down the toilet" in a dark voice that didn't sound like his own.

And Ryan knew his dad wasn't the only one.

About a mile from Ryan's house, on the side of the road at the edge of town, was a simple white sign with black lettering that was supposed to read, in an official yet friendly font:

WELCOME TO CLIFFS DONNELLY
POPULATION: 22,177

Cliffs Donnelly. It was a strange name for a town, if for no other reason than it begged the question, why not just call it Donnelly Cliffs, or even Cliffs *of* Donnelly? According to one of Ryan's teachers, Mr. Earle, the original name of the town (back when it was first incorporated in 1835) was supposed to be Clifton Donnelly, after the two most prominent families in town, the Cliftons and the Donnellys. But then the Donnelly family decided to bribe the town sign maker into cutting out the Cliftons altogether. Unfortunately, the Donnellys, while devious, weren't all that punctual, and by the time they got around to bribing the sign maker, he'd already carved the first

four letters, *Clif*, and thus the town of Cliffs Donnelly was born.

That was what Mr. Earle said, anyway. Though you could never really be sure with him. That man sure knew how to tell a story. Ryan did know one thing for sure, though. There weren't any cliffs in Cliffs Donnelly.

Of course, while Ryan was sure that *Welcome to Cliffs Donnelly* was what it said on the sign at the northern edge of town, here on the South Side someone had taken a can of black spray paint and traced over the *i*, one *f*, the *o*, one *n*, one *l*, and the *y*, so that all you really noticed on the sign was:

if on ly

If only.

It was fast becoming the town's nickname. Because there was always another factory closing down, another business moving away, more people out of work, making the town a bit emptier than it was before.

People on both sides of town were now starting to see Cliffs Donnelly as a place where "if only" had gone from a joke to a lament. People who used to say things like "If only I hadn't blown out my knee in high school I could've gone pro," or "If only I had practiced guitar more I could have been a rock star," were now saying, "If only the factory hadn't shut down I could've kept the

house,” and “If only I didn’t have to choose between health insurance and the gas bill.” Of course these people always knew they’d never go pro or be rock stars. But that had always been okay because they also knew that if they worked hard and lived right, things more or less would work out. Only they weren’t working out, not anymore.

And it was making people like Ryan’s dad angry.

Ryan loved his dad, but lately he didn’t like being around him much. Not so long ago they used to hang out a lot. They used to watch TV together all the time. Old movies, mostly. Ryan and his dad hadn’t watched a movie together in months.

Ryan went upstairs and found his mom in Declan’s room. Declan was asleep in his crib, and his mom was reading one of her books in the rocking chair. She was always reading when she had a spare moment. Or doing a crossword in pen. And she could do the daily Sudoku crazy fast. She was by far the smartest person Ryan knew.

“Too smart for this family,” Ryan’s dad used to joke. Back when he used to joke.

“Hi, honey,” she whispered. “Finished up Mrs. Haemmerle’s lawn?”

Ryan nodded. “Finally,” he sighed, his body sagging against the doorframe.

“Hungry?” She started to rise.

Ryan waved her off. “I’m good, Mom,” he said softly, wanting to leave her to her reading. Soon Declan would be up and then there’d be a whirlwind of dinner, laundry, bath time.

Ryan helped with Declan where he could, but there was no way around it; the kid just didn’t like him. Wouldn’t let Ryan hold him, wouldn’t even let Ryan near him just in case Ryan might try to set him down next to an electrical outlet with a handful of silverware.

Ryan peeked into Declan’s crib. His little brother was lying on his back, his arms spread out and his legs splayed open like an overturned frog.

Declan stirred, crinkling his nose in an irritated baby scowl.

Even asleep he doesn’t like me, Ryan thought.

By the time Ryan had taken a shower and changed, Declan was awake and his mom was downstairs with him, making dinner.

Ryan came down to help set the table. Then his mom sent him into the den to call his dad to eat.

He found his dad asleep in his chair, a frown on his face as if he could still hear the arguing men on the television. Ryan shook him gently on the shoulder. “Dad? Dad?” he said.

Ryan’s dad opened his eyes narrowly.

“Dinner, Dad,” Ryan said.

His dad blinked and took a long breath, nodding that he’d be there directly.

It was quiet during dinner, except for Declan, who was still too young to be affected by uncomfortable silence. Ryan's parents filled the spaces with some small talk about the meal, and how Ryan's dad would probably be working late all this week.

That wasn't news, as Ryan's dad had been working late most nights. Though he didn't talk about it much, Wilmette Stamping, Tool & Die was in trouble. For as long as Ryan could remember, factories had been closing down all over the area and relocating to Mexico and Asia. Ryan knew there was talk that the Wilmettes' factory might be the next to go.

"Did you take care of the Wilmette lawn this weekend?" Ryan's dad asked him.

Ryan nodded. "Saturday."

Ryan's dad took a business envelope out of his back pocket and handed it to Ryan. His dad claimed to have no idea how much Ryan had charged his boss, having made Ryan negotiate his fee directly with Mr. Wilmette. "That's between you and Mr. Wilmette," his dad had said. "It's your business."

Ryan's dad was still looking at him after Ryan put the money away. "Did Haemmerle's today, then?"

"Yeah," said Ryan.

"She still not paying you?" he said, asking in that way adults do when they already know the answer.

"It's okay, Dad."

“Doesn’t sound okay to me,” his dad said, spearing a baby potato with his fork.

“Doug . . .” his mom said softly.

“He can answer, Karen.”

Ryan looked directly at his dad, but not too directly. “As you say, it’s my business.”

Ryan saw the muscles tense in his dad’s neck. Parents always tell their kids to stand up for themselves, but they never mean for their kids to do it with *them*. And Ryan was pushing it double by using his dad’s words back on him.

Doug Hardy stared at his son for a long moment. Then he slid back his chair. “All right,” he said with a dismissive growl as he got up and went back into the den.

WILMETTE STAMPING, TOOL & DIE

Quiet is louder in a big house. And Ernest’s house was a big house. Ernest’s mom came from a big family and had wanted a big family, too. Both his parents had. So they built a huge house, with a huge yard, the kind meant to be overrun with lots of kids—kids who would yell and play and dirty up the rug.

But there had only been Ernest. Just Ernest. Small Ernest.

After dinner Ernest brought his dad some coffee, like he did most nights. His dad thanked him in a distracted way, absorbed so deeply in his work that Ernest was surprised his father even realized he'd entered the room.

Ernest's dad ran the family business, Wilmette Stamping, Tool & Die. It made, well, pieces.

Every machine, whether it's a toaster or a tractor, an alarm clock or a jumbo jet, a dishwasher or a pacemaker, is made up of a bunch of little parts, little pieces that have to fit and move together perfectly for the machine in question to work. Individually the parts themselves never look like much. Just funny shapes with holes and wedges, curves and angles, nothing to take note of, really.

As long as the machine in question works.

Wilmette Stamping, Tool & Die was established in 1945 by Edgar Wilmette, Ernest's great-grandfather, who had been a machinist and engineer with the Air Force. He was good at making these little pieces. And so was his son, Grandpa Eddie. And so was Ernest's dad, Eric.

So good that Wilmette Stamping, Tool & Die now boasted over two hundred employees on a sprawling industrial center spanning two and a half acres, complete with its own dedicated traffic light for that easy-to-miss turnoff for State Route 41.

After Ernest gave his dad his coffee, he went up to his room. He read some, then got ready for bed and packed his bag for

school tomorrow. The art set was sitting on his desk, right where he'd left it after coming home from Grandpa Eddie's, kind of like it was waiting for him. He had a feeling that it was more than just an old, forgotten toy. That maybe it, too, was a piece of something, and that it just needed to be matched with other pieces. New pieces.

And then things would start working again.

With special thanks to

Amla Sanghvi

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