

## Black and Orange

Kindergarten ended yesterday. He was finally done with ABC songs and dumb counting games. No more noodle art projects. No one could make him sit Indian-style. Today was summer. Now Reed sat alone on the edge of his sandbox. His legs were not twisted like a pretzel. His feet were naked and tucked under the sand. He wore shorts with his knees poking out and sometimes touching each other. His fingernails were deep in the moist sand and the mound in the middle of the box was going to be a fort for his army men.

Mom sat in her chair on the patio, sipping iced tea and talking on the phone. There was a pile of receipts on the table and one of her books with a pen inside. Behind her Emma sat with Toby and a bucket of chalk.

A spider scuttled up the side of the sandbox and then crept along the board a few feet away. The spider was brown and darker than the wood it crept across. Reed did not notice. He watched the sand slowly cascading between his fingers. Out of the corner of his eye it looked like any old blotch of stain. But stains don't twitch.

Reed's body shook. Toby barked from somewhere on the patio. He did not take his eyes off the creature as his hand reached blindly behind him. Spiders liked to scurry beneath the boards of the sandbox or hide in corners. He needed to keep the monster in site, but he also wanted to maintain distance. At any moment it could pounce onto his legs, burrow under his skin, and lay its little spider eggs. He didn't dare blink as his fingers curled around a stick. Weeks later he could wake up in the middle of the night to baby spiders crawling out of his kneecap. He swatted at the spider until it became a blotch on the wood.

Reed stared at the dead spider for a bit and then scraped the guts away with the stick. It fell over the edge and onto the gravel under the swing. That was Emma's swing. He poked the stick into the corners of the sandbox to scare out any other monsters. There was bound to be more. Spiders had to have families.

While he was searching Emma snuck across the yard and sat opposite him in the box.

"Go away," he said.

"Why can't I play?"

It was his sandbox. It was not Emma's. This was his sand. These were his men. That was her chalk. There was her swing.

"Mom, Emma's annoying me."

Mom said something into her phone and then pressed it to her shirt.

"You can share."

He got up and walked across the backyard towards the house. Toby was lying in the shadow of Mom's chair. A few feet away were Emma's drawings. There was a flower that took up a whole cement square. It looked just like the ones in Mom's garden. Why did she have to copy everyone? He dragged his heel through the middle of the flower and then side-to-side. The bunny was next. It was yellow.

Emma screamed. Then she began to cry. Mom scraped her chair across the cement and slammed her phone on the table.

Rain fell in buckets that night. Reed's bed was flush with the window and he sat up listening to the rain pelt the roof and slosh in the gutter. He pressed his finger to the cold pane and followed the raindrops that slipped down the glass. Big drops

started at the top, fell down, and absorbed smaller drops until they disappeared at the bottom of the window. Tomorrow the sand would be moist and perfect for building.

It was always hard to fall asleep. Reed would move around in bed for a long time while Toby lay curled in a ball under his Christmas blanket at the end of the bed. Tonight he was shaking because of the storm. Reed patted the little lump of blanket a few times to calm him. Then he closed his eyes and put his face into the cold part of the pillow. Sometime later he heard Emma dragging her blanket into his room.

“Can I sleep with you?”

Reed pretended to be asleep and hoped she would just leave. But she climbed under the covers with him and Toby. She pulled her yellow blanket up to her mouth and thumb. It was right in between the both of them. Reed opened his eyes and looked at her mop of brown hair falling over the blanket and onto his pillow. Thunder clapped and Toby shook. Emma crawled over to him and Reed left the bed. He took his pillow with and climbed to the top bunk. Emma tried to follow him.

He never slept up there. Sometimes he pretended the bunk bed was a pirate ship. The blankets were sails and the bed posts helped to steer the ship through stormy seas. The green carpet was the ocean.

The day after Emma got her cast Mom took him to the Doctor’s. Dad met them there after work. Reed liked when adults asked him questions but he didn’t want to be asked about Emma’s arm anymore. It was all he heard Mom talk about on the phone.

Reed examined the Doctor's fish tank while the adults talked quietly. There was a man in a black diving suit at the bottom of the tank next to one of those sunken treasure ships. He looked at the diver and thought of one of his army men.

"Do you like the water, Reed," the Doctor asked.

He didn't. The water always got in his nose and made it sting. But he dreamed of swimming under the water at the pool. There was no snorkel. He didn't have a kick board or life jacket. The sun sparkled on the surface of the water and he was under it, like a fish traveling in the ocean.

He saw the diver sitting at the bottom of the deep end. Reed swam there easily, effortlessly. He could see something orange in the diver's hand. Treasure? He reached out his hand to the diver. They were only a few feet apart.

But he couldn't get any closer. His legs stopped moving- refused to move. Then his arms locked up. He tried to call for help but only bubbles came out of his mouth. Please. Please. The diver.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye. The pool cleaner scuttled along the wall of the pool. Reed was trapped. The tentacles wiggled like spider legs. There were eight of them.

Please. Please. The diver.

Mom woke him the next morning by putting Toby in the bed and letting him lick Reed's face.

"Time for your medicine," she said.

She told Emma that it was so he could play nice and then placed an orange and black capsule in Reed's palm. Then she put a cup of juice in his other hand. The

doctor told him not to chew the pill. It was tasteless anyway. He swallowed it and then opened his mouth for Mom to inspect.

“The doctor said he needs a routine.”

Emma stood and watched.

The sun was closer to the backyard than any time of the year but Reed spent most of the summer inside. Emma chased Toby through the sprinkler and slip-and-slide while Reed played with his Legos in the basement. It was colder and quieter down there. He could build more things with the bricks than with the sand and buckets. All the pieces were in a big plastic bin and not in the boxes he'd unwrapped during Christmas and his birthday; he threw all those away and just built what ever he wanted. But now he could not think of anything to build. He needed help. He needed ideas.

Luckily Mom kept the instructions in a zip-bag under his bed. He carefully inspected the picture instructions before acting on each step. First he made the T-Rex and space station like the ones in the movies. Dad bought him a set called “Tie-Fighter,” and Reed kept the box this time. There were clear plastic bags with many pieces that he would not open until he reached those parts in the instructions. When he finished he arranged it like the action picture on the box and put it on top of his dresser with the dinosaur.

He did not want to play with them like Emma did with her dolls.

“I like to just look at them,” he told her.

“Can I play with them,” she asked.

“No. They're only for show.”

“That’s boring. You’re boring with your medicine.”

He had never worn glasses. His Mom was the only person he knew who did. Still, the medicine always helped him to see well. The basement walls were not just gray. They were concrete and cement. The carpet was made of tiny little threads crisscrossed thousands of times. Everything came into focus. Colors jumped out at Reed as if from a kaleidoscope.

September had not come yet but Reed was already busy with a Christmas list. He sat, legs crossed on his bed, eagerly flipping the many pages of a toy magazine. The wind rustled through the trees outside his window and a crack of thunder made Toby jump off the bed but Reed hardly noticed. He was circling a toy or Lego set on nearly every page.

The rain began to fall and Toby whined at the door.

“Toby, stop it,” Reed said just as his Mom opened the door.

“Reed, bed.”

He circled more things while dad picked clothes off the floor and put them into drawers.

“Up or down,” Mom asked with her hand on the string of the blinds. The rattling of the gutter outside the window was loud; the rain was falling hard now. Reed crawled under his covers and turned his lamp off. He looked at the rain softly hitting his window.

“Down.”

Like most nights he spent hours kicking his legs and tossing in his bed. Sleep came in bursts and when his eyes were not closed they were fixed on the wooden

slats of the bunk bed. Mom had taken the blankets and mattress down but left the frame because there was no room for it in the crawl space. No one was allowed on the top bunk. He didn't want to go up there anyway. He kept picturing Emma falling. Falling like a traitor on a pirate ship. Falling from the plank into the green waves. She had fallen at least a hundred times since that first night. He wanted a time machine so he could go back and save her. Maybe he could build one with his Legos. That was all he wanted right now.

A toy car racetrack wove under and over chairs and tables in the basement. He was trying to replicate the one from the back of the car box. It started at the top of the stairs and looped three times before running under the couch. When he heard the crash he knew it was from his room. He knew it was something on his dresser. He thought it was Emma. Footsteps and the pitter-patter of Toby's paws could be heard from upstairs. Reed dropped the piece of track in his hand.

Usually his door was open for Toby to go in and out. Reed found it closed. He opened it and looked at the floor in front of the dresser. The T-Rex was in pieces.

Emma was playing with three dolls under the big tree in the back yard. None of them had clothes, but two were in a little pink car that Emma pushed in the mulch. Reed lowered his hand down into the car and plucked out the doll from the passenger seat. He held it up above Emma and ripped the left leg out of the socket. Emma started to cry. Then she started to scream.

The sliding glass door opened with a slam. Soon Mom's arm was tight under Reed's and dragging him into the house. Emma sat crying. She couldn't fix the doll.

Saturday was one of the last times Dad would need to cut the grass that year. Reed, Emma, and Dad had just finished cereal. Mom was at work but left a note, which Dad read aloud.

“We’re out of juice but Reed still needs to take his medicine.”

Dad placed the black and orange capsule on the table.

“I need my juice.”

“Just swallow it like a big boy. Swallow.”

He tried but the pill kept sticking to his tongue. He wanted to chew it but remembered that his Mom had told him not to. Reed could feel the pill collapsing and the beads spilling out. The capsule was melting. The beads tasted like chalk.

“Just spit it out then.”

He scraped the pill off his tongue and rinsed his fingers under the faucet. The rushing water pushed the beads down the drain. Gone.

“One day won’t kill you.”

He looked out the backyard. It had been along time since he had played in the sandbox.

Much of the sand was wet, perfect for building mountains for Reed’s army men. He carved bunkers with his fingers and placed sticks in the sand to mark the perimeter of the base. Then he positioned his men according to their skills. The ones with bazookas were his favorite. He hummed softly as he pushed the jeep over the sand hills. Dad’s lawn mower was close to the patio where Emma sat with her chalk.

Reed looked down at his sand mountain. Something on top of it twitched. His body shook. He reached for a stick behind him and then swatted at the insect. It was



a Monarch Butterfly. Reed recognized it from the pictures at kindergarten. He had crumpled one of the spotted wings; the stick lay abandoned at the edge of the sand box.

Reed's hand shook. He tried to straighten the collapsed wing but it was thin and stuck to his fingers. The wing was melting and when he tried to scoop up the butterfly the spotted orange wing tore from the black body. There was no going back. He looked up. Emma was sitting opposite him, watching. He reached across the sand and hugged her. Tomorrow he would start first grade.