

NOTORIOUS

GORDON KORMAN

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For Jesse and Tamara Toro

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Keenan

You've probably seen the video—it's been viewed over eighteen million times.

A kitten has just slipped and fallen into a pond. All these geese are going nuts—flapping, honking, and making the poor little cat's panic fifty times worse than it already is. Suddenly, a big dog—maybe a chocolate Lab?—jumps into the water and paddles over, trying to grab the kitten by the scruff of the

neck. It's a matter of life and death. The kitten is struggling—about to go under.

“Grab him!” I'm yelling encouragement like a doofus. “You can do it!”

Just as the dog gets close, one of the geese flaps in his face, driving him back. But the Lab doesn't give up. The exhausted kitten drops below the surface. The dog lunges forward, sticking his snout underwater in a desperate attempt to—

The screen flickers once and goes dark.

“*No-o-o!*” I howl.

Desperately, I press the power button, and the dead battery icon appears on the screen. Ouch.

I'm not really worried about the cat, although it's hard not to get caught up in the heat of the moment. The title of the video was “Hero Dog Saves Drowning Kitten,” so I'm pretty sure everything came out okay. The problem is my phone. It's at zero already and it's barely afternoon. Yesterday it lasted until almost two thirty. Now my only source of entertainment is the strap on the lawn chair that's cutting into my butt.

If I wasn't so tired, I'd move. But what would be the point? A different strap would cut into a different part of my body, and then I'd definitely be too tired to move again.

Dr. Sobel says I'll get my energy back as I continue to recover, but it's going to take a long time. That's how tuberculosis works. I don't even know where I picked it up. It could have been in any of the countries where my mom and my stepdad, Klaus, worked—China, because that's where we've lived for the past year. But it could also have been Montenegro, where we went on vacation, or even Lesotho, where we were before Shanghai. According to the doctor, the germs can live in your body for years before you get sick. But when you finally do, watch out. It feels like someone parked a locomotive on your chest. You can't stop coughing, which isn't fun because you ache all over. And lifting a paper clip takes all the energy you've got.

Forget staying in Shanghai, where Mom and Klaus teach at an international school. My dad made a huge stink that I had to come back to the States for my treatment. So here I am, shivering with a low-grade fever under a blanket in his backyard, staring at Canada.

That's right, I said Canada. Dad lives on Centerlight Island, Michigan, in the middle of the St. Clair River. In this area, the river is the dividing line between the United States and Canada. The border cuts right

down the middle of the island in a zigzag. So I'm lying here recovering in Michigan, but the cloud I'm staring up at—the one that looks like a giraffe with no legs—is actually over the province of Ontario. The Quayle sisters—these two old ladies three houses down in that direction—they're in Canada too.

If that seems complicated, downtown is even worse. The border goes right through it, dividing the post office building in half. One side sells American stamps and the other sells Canadian ones. If you fill up with gas and you want to get your car washed afterward, you have to cross an international line. Dad says the bowling alley is the only place on earth where you can throw a strike in another country.

There are no fences, no checkpoints, no guys asking to look at your passport. I've been all over the world, and I'm positive that there's no place quite like this. People cross the border maybe ten times a day just living their normal lives. If GameStop is in Canada, that's where you go to buy an extra controller for your Xbox. There are barely enough customers around here to fill one town, let alone two.

No offence, but coming from the big cities I've lived in, Centerlight is pretty one-horse. Not that I've got the strength to do anything fun even if

there was something fun to do. There isn't. That chair strap digging into my butt? It's the highlight of my day. In Shanghai, I'd visit friends on a train that levitates above the track thanks to a system of futuristic magnets. The closest we have to that here is refrigerator magnets.

My job? Lie here and get better . . . slowly. Agonizingly slowly. I can't even watch TV, because Dr. Sobel wants me outside in the fresh air. I stream videos and play games on my phone until the battery dies. I've got the summer reading list for my grade, but I can't find the motivation to pick up a book. School starts in three weeks, and there's no way Dad and Dr. Sobel will give me a clean bill of health to fly back by then. And it's not like any of my teachers from eleven thousand kilometres away are going to randomly show up here of all places and catch me goofing off.

I know that sounds lazy. I *am* lazy. It's not my fault. Tuberculosis makes you lazy. Besides, even if I wanted to do something, I probably wouldn't be allowed to—I might cough on someone. Although I'm coughing a lot less than before. That's a good sign. If I can start school in September, and it doesn't kill me, and every kid on the island doesn't immediately come down with TB, then maybe Dad will give the okay for me

to go back to my life in Shanghai. That's what I'm hoping for, anyway.

I guess the word I'm working toward is *boring*. I'm so bored. I didn't know it was possible to be this bored and still be alive. I've been staring at the same bushes for so long that I swear they're staring back at me.

And then the bushes *blink*.

At first, I'm not even surprised. I could be dreaming. Sometimes I doze off just because there's nothing worth staying awake for. But no—this is real. There's a pair of eyes on the other side of the hedge, staring at me.

I sit bolt upright. It's kind of impressive. I haven't moved that fast since I got TB. It gives me a bit of a head rush.

"Who's there?" I croak.

"Oh, hi!" comes a voice. There's a rustling and this girl squeezes right through the bushes, her hands protecting her face from the scratching branches. She's about my age, blond, skinny, with a heart-shaped face and huge inquiring blue eyes. Her T-shirt features a red maple leaf curled into a fist, with the message: *Yeah, I'm Canadian. You want to make something out of it?*

A moment later, the bushes stir again, and a dog

passes through, scrabbling on its belly. A cocker spaniel—blond as the girl—hurries to keep pace with her.

I perk up immediately at the sight of the dog. Then I remember.

“Don’t come too close!” I order the girl. “I could still be contagious.”

She halts her progress, but doesn’t look worried. “You know, if you’re sick, you should really stay inside.”

“It’s tuberculosis,” I tell her. “I’m supposed to get as much fresh air as I can.”

“Yeah, right,” she says sarcastically. “And I’ve got bubonic plague, so we should get along fine.”

“I’m serious! I have tuberculosis. I got it in Asia. Or Africa. Maybe Europe.”

She grins. “Why not Australia?”

“I’ve never lived in Australia. I’ve lived in all those other places. My mom teaches at international schools.” I see her glancing toward the house, a frown on her face. “This is my *dad’s* house. He works at GM in Detroit.”

She rolls her eyes. “Americans are so lucky. You’ve got a bridge to the mainland.”

I'm mystified. "The bridge has a no-Canadians rule?"

"Of course not. But it goes to the wrong side. If you want to get to Canada, you have to take the ferry. Let me tell you, that's not exactly fun when I'm crossing the river to school in January with snow blowing into my face."

"You don't go to the school right here in town?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "That's a *Michigan* school. I have to graduate in *Ontario*, and we don't have a school on Centerlight. Most of the Canadians on the island are retirees—not a lot of kids. The nearest school for us is in Corunna, and that means a boat ride." She stretches out her hand. "I'm ZeeBee."

I pull away from it. "I told you, I might be contagious." I add, "I'm Keenan."

"My real name is Zarabeth," she explains, "but who wants to be that? My parents got it from this classic *Star Trek* episode. They're a couple of old nerds."

ZeeBee doesn't interest me all that much. But her dog is another story. The spaniel—whose eyes are even bigger than ZeeBee's—is doing everything but jump through hoops trying to get her to notice him.

"Who's your friend?"

She frowns. “Friend?”

I point. “The one licking your ankle.”

“Oh, this is just Barney Two,” she replies, shaking the spaniel off her leg. The little dog lands flat on his face on the grass, then bounces right up, eager to spar another round. He’s a total ball of energy. Yet at the same time, he’s really well behaved. Despite his high spirits, he never barks beyond the occasional yip. His gaze rarely strays from his owner, seeking attention.

“Barney Two?” I echo. “Is there a Barney One?”

“There used to be. He was murdered.”

I choke, which sets off a little of the TB cough. “Murdered?”

Her face is grim. “Not everybody thinks so. He was fifteen—that’s pretty old for a big dog. But it was murder. I’d bet my life on it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Everybody hated Barney,” she explains. “Canadians. Americans. It was the only thing everyone agreed on around here. It didn’t matter what side of the border you were from.”

She looks so sad that I’m moved to say, “Come on, it can’t be that bad.”

“You never met Barney,” she insists mournfully. “We couldn’t keep him tied up. He always got away.”

We had a two-metre-high fence. He jumped it. And once he was loose, he roamed all over the island, digging, barking, and pooping wherever he pleased. He growled at people and even bit them if they didn't back off. He broke into the supermarket and ransacked the food. He howled so loud you could hear it on the mainland in both countries. He was part mastiff, so he was gigantic. He was part rottweiler, so nothing scared him. And he was part Newfoundland, so if the cops came after him, he just jumped in the river and paddled away with his webbed feet. He hated other dogs—he didn't have a single friend. Except me. I didn't hate Barney. I loved him. Someone had to.”

For the first time, I almost relate to her. I love dogs. We used to have one—Fluffy. But when my folks split, Dad didn't want to keep her, and Mom and I were heading overseas for her first international school gig. I don't remember much about Fluffy, except that she would follow me around all day and curl up with me at night. I was only five. I hope Dad wasn't lying when he told me she went to a good family with lots of kids to play with. How I hated those kids. I used to lie in bed in Mumbai and picture a bunch of random strangers having fun with *my* dog.

At least Dad didn't say Fluffy went to live on a farm.

That would have been a dead giveaway.

“We move to a different country practically every year,” I volunteer. “My mom and Klaus don’t think it would be practical to get a pet.”

ZeeBee nods sympathetically. “How clueless are parents? They never understand. My folks thought getting Barney Two would make me feel better.” She scowls at the spaniel at her feet. “Like this jumped-up chipmunk could ever replace my Barney.”

It sounds to me as if nothing less than a rampaging T. Rex could replace her Barney. Aloud, I say, “He’s a cute little guy. And he’s definitely nuts about you.”

“Exactly.” She’s triumphant. “Barney would never grovel at somebody’s sneakers. Knock over their garden shed, maybe. Or push their snowmobile into the river.”

I reach down to pat Barney Two, but he shies away. He only has eyes for ZeeBee—not that she gives him a nanosecond’s notice. Poor little guy. I pat my leg a couple of times and he finally trots over. I scratch his neck and roll him onto his back and rub his belly. He squirms with pleasure. Even so, every few seconds, he gazes up at his owner to make sure she’s okay with it. She never even glances his way.

“It’s safe,” I tell ZeeBee. “TB never travels from humans to animals.”

She has no idea what I'm talking about. "Anyway," she forges on. "That's why I haven't figured out who the murderer is yet. Because everybody on Centerlight is basically a suspect."

"Or nobody is," I remind her, releasing the spaniel with a pat on his silky haunches. "You know, if Barney died of natural causes. That makes a lot more sense than a phantom dog killer on the loose on a sleepy island like this."

She stares at me. "You're kidding, right? Centerlight—sleepy? This place is the gangster capital of North America."

I actually sit up and look around. I have no idea what I expect to see. Criminals standing six deep around my dad's yard?

"Well, not so much *now*," she explains. "But back in the twenties and thirties this was the number-one smuggling route for rum-runners sneaking liquor from Canada into the U.S. During Prohibition, half the houses on the Canadian side used to be owned by mobsters who were staying out of the reach of the FBI. Guess who lived in my house—Tommy-Gun Ferguson! Can you believe that?"

"Who's Tommy-Gun Ferguson?"

She shakes her head in amazement. “You really aren’t from around here. Thomas ‘Tommy-Gun’ Ferguson was Al Capone’s main connection in the liquor business. They made millions together—and that was back in the days when a chocolate bar cost a nickel and you could go to a movie for twenty-five cents. The feds got him eventually and he died in prison. But no one ever found what he did with his money.”

I cock an eyebrow at her. “Are you saying it’s hidden in your house?”

“Nah, Barney would have sniffed it out. He might have been part bloodhound too. But a lot of people say Tommy-Gun Ferguson converted his fortune into gold and stashed it somewhere on the island. And if that’s true, whoever finds it is going to be filthy rich.”

It’s around this point that a little switch flips in my head. The dog murder I can sort of believe since Barney One sounds like a total winner. I can even swallow some of the gangster stuff, because Prohibition was a real thing back in the twenties and thirties. But I call baloney at Tommy-Gun Ferguson and his secret stash of gold. I may be a newbie here, and I admit I was pretty sick when my father brought me home to start treatment. But this isn’t my first trip to Centerlight.

Dad moved here three years after the divorce, and I visit at least once a summer. If the whole island was swarming with shovel-wielding treasure hunters searching for buried treasure, I'm pretty sure I would have noticed.

"It isn't just Tommy-Gun Ferguson," ZeeBee goes on. "This place used to be crawling with gangsters. Al Capone himself brought his family here every summer. He said it was vacation, but a lot of 'unlucky' people always happened to get killed when he was around. Eliot Ness came here too—the famous lawman. Where else could you keep an eye on gangsters from New York, Atlantic City, Miami, Chicago, and Detroit all in one place? They even ate at the same restaurant—Fanelli's on Main Street. It's a Taco Bell now, but out by the drive-thru there's still the original wall with seven bullet holes from a machine gun. There's a stain on the pavement. They say it's salsa, but don't you believe it. Salsa washes away. Blood never does. I'll take you there."

"Can't," I put in quickly. "I'm not supposed to leave the yard." Dr. Sobel didn't actually warn me not to run around the island looking at gangster blood, but I'm sure he would have if he'd thought of it.

"I mean when your trichinosis goes away," she says.

“Tuberculosis!” I snap back.

“Whatever. I can also show you the lighthouse—the gangsters used to shoot out the beacon so the cops couldn’t see when a shipment was coming ashore. I think they tried to burn it down a couple of times too. It’s not in the greatest shape. And you’ve got to see Snitch’s Rock—that was Tommy-Gun’s favourite place to get rid of witnesses before they could testify against him.”

She goes on and on. Who got shot here; who got arrested there; which truckload of booze went out of control and crashed into Our Lady of Temperance. By this time I’m not doubting what she tells me anymore; I’m 100 percent convinced that ZeeBee—Zarabeth, whatever—is a certified nutcase. Barney Two trots in slow circles around her, wagging his cropped tail. The faster her mouth goes, the faster the tail wags, and that’s pretty fast. I feel sorry for him. He’s such a cute little guy. Fluffy was like that. Not physically—I think Fluffy was part schnauzer. I mean that *lovable*.

A distant foghorn sounds, a long mournful honk.

“Well, that’s me,” she says suddenly.

I’m bug-eyed. “That’s *you*?”

“My dad. He’s a Canadian border officer. When he heads in on the boat, he always gives us a toot to let

us know he's on the way. Don't worry, I'll be back tomorrow."

My first instinct is to say, *I won't be here tomorrow*. But who am I kidding? Where else am I going to be? And anyway, ZeeBee is already gone, scrunched through the bushes, her unappreciated dog at her heels.