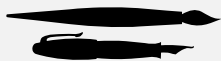


PAUL ACAMPORA

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GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

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CHAPTER 1: GLOCKENSPIELS AND HAND GRENADES

It's Friday night football, late in the fourth quarter, and St. Francis of Assisi's Howling Wolves are on the verge of a perfect season. By perfect, I mean that our team has not won a single game. There's no way we're going to win this one either.

"Let's go, Wolf Pack!" hollers my best friend, Daniel Field.

"You might not have noticed," I say, "but we're down by forty with less than five minutes to go."

"Ellie," says Daniel, "they may be losers, but they're our losers."

Daniel stands in the Howling Wolf flute section on a metal bleacher behind me. We both play in the St. Francis Marching Band. Daniel's got a piccolo. I bang on a glockenspiel. Daniel would rather be the Howling Wolf mascot, but he's too short for the costume. I honestly don't know what I'd rather be doing right now because just before the game, my father informed me that my mother is dead.

“She can’t be dead,” I said when Dad shared the news.

My father stood near our kitchen sink, preparing ingredients for pumpkin soup. He barely looked up from his work. “Your mother doesn’t need permission to be dead, Ellie.”

“But I never even met her.”

Dad slid a pile of potato peels onto an old copy of the *Rockhill Free Press* that would end up in his compost pile later. “Her loss. Not yours.”

Wilma “Korky” Korkenderfer—aka my mom—left Dad and me just a few months after I was born and never came back again. That was fourteen years ago. Dad never forgave her. I never really missed her. That’s probably because I never really knew her. Still, it’s not like the woman who gave me life, big feet, and frizzy hair didn’t exist. In my mind, she was something between a pope and a platypus. Definitely real but not something I expected to see in the yard any time soon. Still, meeting my mom in person was definitely on my list of things to do. At least one day.

“You don’t think this is a big deal?” I asked my father.

Dad cut stalks off a bunch of carrots. He placed the greens atop his potato peels and then faced me. “Ellie,” he said, “it was a big deal when she left. It would have been a big deal if she came back. But dying is something anybody can do.”

“I think being dead is a pretty big deal.”

Dad returned to his cutting board. “It would have been good if your mother felt the same way.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Dad grabbed a chop knife and split a skull-size pumpkin in half with one sharp blow. “It means there’s nothing anybody can do about it now.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I said it as if I had some plan to call on my mother’s ghost and invite her to a cookout or something. But there’s no plan. I just didn’t appreciate the fact that Dad shut me down by murdering a gourd.

Back in the stands, the clock is winding down and the Wolves are trying to avoid a shutout. A few rows below me, Mr. DeGroot, our band director, is waving his arms like one of those inflatable flailing tube guys you see in front of used car lots and furniture stores. He’s leading us in a marching band version of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” It’s an odd choice to cheer on a football team, but then Mr. DeGroot, who’s only been teaching at St. Francis for about a year, is an odd man. Still, the piece is fun to play, and we sound pretty good. Also, it gives me an opportunity to take out some frustration on the glockenspiel, which is sort of like whacking

on a set of butter knives attached to a metal frame that hangs over your shoulders. My real instrument is piano, but there's no such thing as a marching piano.

On the field, our quarterback takes a snap, steps back, and heaves a deep pass into the end zone. The ball tumbles over a defender's hands, bounces off at least one St. Francis helmet, and somehow drops into the arms of a very surprised Howling Wolf receiver for the score. There's still no way we're going to win this game, but it's our first touchdown in weeks. From the reaction in the stands, you'd think we just won the Super Bowl. Daniel tilts his head back and howls. "*Arooooooo!*"

The entire St. Francis band responds to Daniel's Wolf Pack call. "*Arooooooo!*"

Encouraged by our classmates' enthusiasm, Daniel shouts, "*JUMP ON IT!*"

"Jump on It" is an old hip-hop tune with an awesome marching band arrangement. It's one of our favorite things to play, and the thought of it makes me smile even though I'm still mad at my father and sad about my mother and honestly sort of confused about everything.

"*JUMP ON IT!*" Daniel yells again.

Our drum major, Hannah Shupe, glances toward Mr. DeGroot. Hannah started the school year with long red hair, but now she's got a short-cropped pixie cut. Mr. DeGroot just rolls his eyes, so Hannah takes the lead and counts off. "ONE! TWO! THREE! JUMP!"

Our brass section roars to life, the drum line goes crazy, and I start hammering the glockenspiel as if I'm trying to beat it into submission. Meanwhile, the whole band is hopping and waving and dancing because that's what we do for "Jump on It." According to Daniel, St. Francis himself is up in heaven leading a conga line when we play the song. It's really that good.

Approaching the finale, Daniel bounces up and down like a short, skinny pogo stick in a blue-and-gold polyester marching band uniform. On the last note, he takes a big breath, blows into his instrument, and leaps into the air. He hits the high note but turns his ankle on the landing. He gasps, coughs, and spits the piccolo out of his mouth. It flies like an airborne torpedo and ricochets off the side of my head.

"Hey!" I cry.

"Sorry!" Daniel says.

I grab for the piccolo, but it falls to the bleachers, and then drops into the dark space beneath the stands.

“Uh-oh,” says Daniel.

He and I stare into the gloom below. “It can’t have gone very far,” I tell him.

“I hope not.”

“Do you want me to help you?”

“It’s my fault,” Daniel says. “I’ll get it.” He adjusts his plumed shako, which is tipped so far back it looks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa on his head. Once the feathered hat is straight, he starts limping down the bleachers.

Even without a twisted ankle, Daniel limps everywhere he goes. If you ask, he will explain that he’s got “a mild form of monoplegia due to nonspastic dyskinetic cerebral palsy acquired during the prenatal period.” In other words, Daniel was born with one foot turned at an angle that makes him walk with a noticeably uneven gait. According to Daniel, the foot issue dashed his Olympic pole-vaulting dreams before they even began. Sometimes he worries that his parents’ divorce, which happened before Daniel was a year old, might be a result of the foot issue too. My father promises that it’s not. Dad also points out that both Mr. and Mrs. Field were

a few fries short of a Happy Meal long before Daniel arrived. Fortunately, Daniel knows that my father never lies. At least not to other people's children.

With the football game almost over, the band begins prepping instruments for our march off the field. Daniel tries to hurry down the small set of bleachers, but before he gets to the bottom, Mr. DeGroot steps into his path. "Where do you think you're going?" the teacher asks.

"I dropped my piccolo," Daniel explains.

"How exactly did that happen?" A sharp-trimmed beard plus shaggy black hair make Mr. DeGroot look like a cross between a comic book villain and an ungroomed poodle.

Daniel glances at his feet. "I just, um, I . . ."

"Spit it out, Mr. Field."

"Actually," says Daniel, "that's how I dropped it."

"Excuse me?"

Daniel grins. "I spit it out."

Mr. DeGroot folds his arms across his chest. "Everything's a joke to you, isn't it?"

Daniel shakes his head. "I never joke about hamsters. Actually, the entire rodent family is off-limits. Mice, rats, gerbils, capybaras, they're all a little shifty if you ask me."

Mr. DeGroot stares at Daniel without speaking.

“Do you know anybody who likes capybaras?” Daniel asks him.

“Go find your piccolo!” Mr. DeGroot is clearly not amused.

“Yes, sir!” Daniel offers a mock salute, then tries to continue down the steps, but he stumbles over his own feet and falls straight into the music teacher’s arms. “Oops!” Daniel cries.

Mr. DeGroot struggles to untangle himself from Daniel. “Get off me!”

“Oops!” Daniel says again.

“Is that all you can say?”

“Oopsy-daisy?”

Mr. DeGroot puts Daniel back on his feet with a shove that’s more like a punch.

“Hey!” Daniel cries, and nearly falls once more.

Mr. DeGroot reaches out and gives Daniel a second thump on the shoulder.

Daniel regains his feet. “You can’t do that!”

“Really?” Mr. DeGroot gives Daniel another tap.

“What if I do the same thing to you?” Daniel suggests.

Mr. DeGroot straightens his jacket and turns to face Daniel. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Daniel is a full head shorter than our teacher, but for as long as I've known him—which is forever—I've never seen Daniel back down from anything. In fact, Daniel is the sort of person who looks for opportunities to not back down. According to him, stubbornness and belligerence are side effects of growing up in an ableist society. Ableism, Daniel explained to me, is what happens when people assume that you're weak, or stupid, or unimportant just because you walk with a limp. Personally, I think the obstinacy, assertiveness, and occasional aggressive tendencies might also be related to being an only child raised by a single parent who can't say the name of their ex-spouse without wanting to commit murder.

Right now, rather than retreat, I'm pretty sure Daniel is going to haul off and punch Mr. DeGroot in the face. Personally, I've always wanted to punch somebody in the face who actually deserves it, and Mr. DeGroot might be the perfect candidate. But I don't know if a dropped piccolo is really worth it. On the other hand, it's always a good day to stick up for a friend.

I glance toward the scoreboard, which shows forty-three seconds left to play. Inscribed above the game clock, the St. Francis of Assisi school motto says: LORD, MAKE ME AN

INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE. I wonder if that's a message from God or just irony.

Either way, I lift the glockenspiel harness over my shoulder, put two hands beneath the instrument, and hurl it forward. The glockenspiel flies about as well as a bag of hammers. It drops quickly, tumbles onto the bleachers, and stops just short of Mr. DeGroot's feet. He hops back, and now it's our teacher's turn to trip, fall, and land atop a few alto saxophones. Meanwhile, the pieces of glock continue cartwheeling down the metal grandstand, jingling and jangling like an ice-cream truck tumbling over a cliff. They come to a stop on the sidelines, where fans and even a few football players gather around the broken remains. A moment later, a final horn announces that the game is over.

I jog down the steps toward Mr. DeGroot, who is tangled in the brass. Daniel stares at me in shock. The rest of the band looks as if I just tossed a hand grenade rather than a musical instrument.

"At least I wasn't playing the piano," I say to nobody in particular.