

LIKE A DUCK

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How It Started

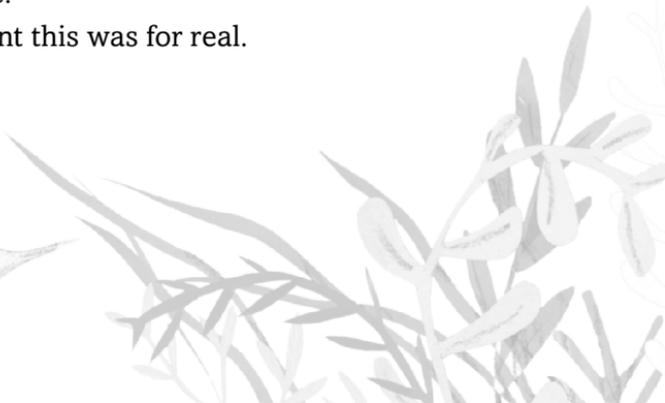
The first crack in my busted-up summer showed up on the night of my twelfth birthday. Inevitably. Because no matter how much you might think you deserve just one single, perfect, cake-filled, problem-free day a year, something bad always has to come along and mess it up. Amirite?

I was scraping up the last smudges of icing from my plate when Mombo broke the news.

“That’s a joke, right?” I said, pausing with my fork in mid-air. I glanced quickly at Webster to see if he knew anything about this. But his raspberry-stained face seemed just as surprised as mine.

“I know you’re disappointed,” my mother replied, her thin eyebrows doing that twitchy, jerky thing they do when she gets upset. “But we’ll still have our evenings together. And it’s just for one short week.” Her words came out slow and steady — kind of like how you’d talk to a growling dog. Definitely not a funny-ha-ha kind of voice.

Which meant this was for real.



My fork dropped to my plate with a clatter. Mombo flinched. These were her best dishes — dug out from the depths of the china cupboard just for special occasions.

“But this is my birthday week,” I said. “Our *one* ‘You and Me’ week of the year. You know that.” The last week of summer has always been reserved for the Lasagna girls. Mombo books holiday time off work and it’s movies, manicures, breakfast in bed, take-away dinners, and monster marshmallow smoothies for seven whole days. We’ve never had money for a proper vacation, so we’ve been doing this ever since I can remember. And it’s always just the two of us and sometimes Gran joins us for a movie or two (even though she’s a Cameron, not a Lasagna). And Webster is included, of course. He’s the only male allowed.

“I know, I know . . .” Mombo replied, putting down her teacup with a sigh. “But Helen fell and broke her ankle this morning, and Doug and Shayna are off on vacation — not together of course — and Jill really needs me to cover for her—”

“I won’t go to French cooking camp!” I crossed my arms tightly in front of me.

“—and there’s nobody else to ask because we’ve been short-staffed after our last intern quit in June . . .”

“Not. Happening.”

“. . . and it’s not like this was my choice . . .”

I shook my head so hard my neck hurt. “Uh-unh.”

“But, darling . . .”

“Don’t even try to make me!”

“Oh, crumb,” Mombo said, slumping in her chair and letting out a long sigh. She looked like a tiny blond balloon slowly leaking air. Unfortunately, my heart was too busy imploding to sympathize.

I should have known something terrible was going to spoil this day. Because it had been going so great up until this point — I guess too great. This morning I’d somehow managed to convince Mombo to let me get neon green elastics on my braces at my next orthodontist appointment, even though she said they would look “vulgar” and everyone will probably think I have lettuce stuck in my teeth. And then this afternoon, she drove us down the coast to an actual beach so Webster and I could go body surfing, and the ocean was warm and the sun was shining and the waves were just the right height. And then tonight before dinner, I finally got the phone I’ve been begging for all year. I didn’t even care that it was Mombo’s hand-me-down, and that she got the shiny, straight-from-the-box new one. All I cared about was that it worked. And that I

had my own number and enough memory to download the FindYourPeeps app I'd seen advertised on the back page of the travel section of Grandad's newspaper. It had been a perfect day up until this moment. And now, with my birthday candle smoke still fresh in the air, she decides to drop this cooking camp bomb on my head?

I could feel tears starting to pile up in my eyes. Losing something you love stings. Mombo knew this just as well as I did.

"I . . . I don't even speak French!"

She laughed wearily and lifted her hair off her neck. Two delicate trickles of sweat ran down the sides of her face. "Don't be silly," she said, fanning herself with her spare hand. Two days ago, the A/C in our apartment broke down for the third time this summer. It was literally like a sauna in there. And I'm not saying *literally* just to be dramatic. I mean, if Webster was capable of perspiring, he'd probably be dripping right along with us. "You don't have to speak it. Just cook the recipes."

Please, let this be a nightmare. "I. Don't. Cook. You know that!"

"Well then, this would be a perfect time to learn, wouldn't it? You're twelve now, darling. Not a baby anymore."

"Then why are you treating me like one?" I shoved

my plate away so hard, it flew across the wooden table and very nearly dropped off the other side. Webster let out a squeak and shrunk back in his seat, his dark eyes round with concern.

I shot up, pushing my chair back with a floor-ripping screech. “You don’t understand,” I said, struggling so hard to keep my voice from breaking. I knew if I cried, it would be game over. I had to stay strong if I wanted to hold on to any chance of changing her mind. “I want to spend the last week of summer with *you*. Like we *always* do. Not rolling dough in a stupid kitchen with a bunch of pre-teens sharing sob stories about our life-ruining parents.”

Mombo straightened back up slowly and let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, darling, but you don’t have much of a choice.”

“Webster and I could stay with—”

“I already asked,” she said, standing up to clear the table. As usual, her lace-trimmed apron had not a wrinkle, stain or crumb on it. And as usual, my T-shirt had all of the above. “Gran says she’s sorry but she can’t have you there. Grandad will be recovering from his hernia operation and needs peace and quiet.”

Was it my imagination or was she clattering the dishes a little louder than normal?

“We could be quiet.”

“She said it’s doctor’s orders.”

“So, let us come with you to work.”

“That’s an option, but you’d have to come alone. You know how Jill feels about having Webster in the shop.”

Jill is the owner of the gourmet catering business Mombo manages. She has strict rules about hygiene.

I slumped against the wall, searching my brain for a way out of this mess. Normally, I would ask to stay at London Bruin’s, two floors below. London is in my grade at school. She has four sisters, and their apartment is so crowded and loud, her parents never seem to notice (or care) when I come to visit. Plus London is super nice to Webster, which makes her okay in my book. But the Bruin family was leaving on holidays to PEI tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn. I really wish there was room in their van for two more! But I’m not that lucky. I never am.

“Couldn’t it at least be an *interesting* camp? What about arts and crafts? Or lacrosse? Or . . . anything else?”

Mombo ripped off a sheet of aluminum foil and scrunched it down around the leftover cake. “Believe me, I checked everything else.”

“What about that gymnastics camp I went to last

month? I liked it there. I think I know some kids who might be going back . . .”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I tried. But this was the only camp with any space available at such short notice.”

“I bet.”

“Come on,” she said, rinsing out my favourite I♥NY mug. “They said you could bring Webster. It’ll be fun.”

“No, it *won’t*.” I closed my eyes to keep the tears from showing, all too aware that I was on the verge of losing this battle. “Anyway, I’m twelve now. Isn’t that old enough to stay home on my own?”

“For short lengths of time, yes. But not all day for a full week. Especially when we’re without a working air conditioner. It would be utterly irresponsible.”

“Ugh *hic* why do you have to *hic* be so overprotective?”

Great. Stress hiccups. I seem to come down with a honking case of them whenever I get upset. It’s like my body’s own ridiculous allergic reaction to anxiety. I opened my eyes and noticed Webster was watching me closely.

“Because I love you.”

“You don’t understand . . . You’re *hic*—”

“Ruining your life. I know.” Mombo placed the dishes in the sink and turned around, hands on her hips and

dimpled chin tilted defiantly in the air. “Forgive me if I don’t like the idea of leaving my only child alone all day in a two-bedroom oven.”

“But I wouldn’t be alone,” I said, nodding my head toward Webster, still patiently sitting in the chair beside mine, propped up on a thick pillow so he could see me. My memories from that time are fuzzy, but I’m pretty sure it was the chair Papa used to sit in. *None of this would be happening if he was still around*, I thought grimly.

“Yes, of course you have Webster, darling. You know I love him with all my heart. But let’s be honest, he’s not exactly a reliable caregiver.”

Well, that was uncalled for. Webster let out a sigh and hopped down from the table. I marched over and gathered him into my arms, quickly covering the spots where I was pretty sure his ears were located. “How can you *hic* say that?” I hissed. “You know how sensitive he is.”

A hint of a smile tugged at her lips. “But darling, he’s, you know . . . a duck.”

“So?”

“So? Really? I can’t believe we’re actually having this conversation. Ducks can’t watch over children. I mean, what if there was an emergency?”

“Okay *hic*, maybe he wouldn’t be much help in a

fire. Or if a burglar was making off with our TV. But Webster's the one you *hic* want with me in case of a flood. He's the best swimmer I know."

Webster, having successfully wriggled his ears free from my hands, quacked softly at the sound of his name. He craned his neck and nuzzled his beak into my throat — his way of giving kisses when he knew I was upset. Webster has always had extrasensory perception when it comes to human emotions. Somehow, he seems to know exactly when I (and even Mombo) need him the most. Don't ask me how, but he *always* knows. I pressed my cheek to his and wiped the bits of raspberry juice from his beak.

My mother came over and put a hand on my shoulder. Even though I was only twelve, I was already taller than her by several inches. Which isn't as strange as it probably sounds because she's pretty short for a grown-up. Gran's short too. "You must get it from your father's side," she told me back when I was eight and we had to start buying my sneakers from the adult section of the shoe store. I don't know if it was on purpose, but she managed to make *your father's side* sound like a bad thing.

"We live on the fourth floor," Mombo pointed out. "I'm not worried about a flood."