
A Girl Could Stand Up

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Chapter 1

Elray

Elray was under the house, the part of it that had no basement, lying on her belly in the cramped and musty crawlspace with her face pressed against the dirt. It had been three days since her as yet uncelebrated sixth birthday. Three days since the accident. Two hours since the still, almost airless moment when her parents, Barkley and Jack, had disappeared forever into the quiet and unremarkable ground of Washington's Montrose Cemetery.

Overhead people were moving, clacking their shoes across the floors in dotted lines like the paths that chart explorers' routes on maps. Elray took a deep breath of the stale crawlspace air. It was good air, old air. The same air that had been there when Elray and Barkley and Jack had looped their own footsteps through the open spaces of the house, garlanding the rooms with the private patterns of their family dance. The same hard earth had been there too. Elray shifted her weight and opened her mouth slightly so that the bitterness of that earth could creep at the edges of her taste. Then she tried to whisper to them: "Mama, Daddy. Barkley, Jack." No sound came, of course. She had forgotten-she kept forgetting-about her dead voice. Elray slid her tongue forward for a quick rude scoop of dirt and mimed the names one last time as the bitterness blossomed. "Barkley. Jack."

Soon someone would miss her, and come looking. Elray knew that. But she would hear them calling first, and she would have time to scuttle out of the crawlspace back into the sunlight, and act like she had just stepped outside to throw a peach pit into the hedge where it belonged. These people upstairs were pretty slow. They didn't notice much, didn't remember much. Not one of them had remembered her sixth birthday party, or noticed the bright ziggurat of presents stashed in the hall closet. Elray had discovered the presents, of course, and she'd seen the colorful paper plates with matching cups and napkins that were still sitting in the pantry in their plastic wrapping. She had been painfully aware of the big chocolate cake on top of the refrigerator, getting stale in its white box. Last night when no one was near she had even climbed up on the counter to peer in at the cake. She had admired the little miniature merry-go-round and tiny Ferris wheel and toy clowns pressed into its chocolate top, and the way her own name, ELRAY, had been scripted in big letters that erupted into clusters of pink roses with the beginning E and the ending Y.

Barkley and Jack had had everything ready. They had remembered her birthday. But now they were gone and only all the other people, the ones who didn't remember or notice, were upstairs. It was not a handsome crowd. Grown people turned into monsters when they cried; their faces went rubbery, and their eyes bulged as if they were eggs about to hatch more little sad rubbery monsters. Nearly everyone had been a cry-monster at some point today. Even Elray's Auntie Ajax, usually so full of energy and jokes, had looked at her from across the room with shimmery eyes, and then had let loose a long sad hiccup.

Elray wiped her tongue on her sleeve. The dirt had lost its good bitter flavor and was just bad grit in her mouth. Some ginger ale might be nice. Perhaps she should go upstairs and get a little drink in one of those pretty party cups, and walk around and try to make one of the dumb grown people take the hint. She could hold the cup up and wave it, as if to say: "Do I have to save all of these cups for my BIRTHDAY PARTY, or can I have some ginger ale in one now?" She would find her Uncle Harwood. She hadn't seen him crying. He wasn't his normal silly self, he hadn't walked on his hands and said the alphabet backward for her yet. But at least he wasn't weepy. He was wearing the camera, taking pictures, the way he always did. If Barkley had been there, Elray knew what she would have done. She would have laughed at Harwood and said, "Oh cut it out, you old shutterbug."

This vision, the picture of Barkley and the sound of her voice scolding Harwood, came to Elray so clearly she decided to rewind it and run it again. It was nice to have Barkley around, even in a mind movie. "Oh cut it out Harwood, you old shutterbug," Barkley said, and then she tilted her head back and gave her brookwater laugh. Uncle Harwood's camera flashed right back at her and then, for just a second, there were magic blue pinwheels of light twirling on Barkley's teeth and in her eyes.

Elray had been going full tilt on the mind movies lately. All sorts of things had been coming and going on screen, but the story that kept coming back and starting itself over and over was the story of Thursday morning, her birthday morning, just three days ago. It was a good movie. It always began the same way, inside her head, with the sunlight melting on her face and making patterns like tree branches on the insides of her eyelids. Then the lids lifted, slid upward the way shades on airplane windows do, and the day with all its special birthday potential came slowly, deliciously into focus. The October air was apple-clean, and carried the promise of breakfast bacon. The sunlight was brassy and loud, and danced around Elray's bedroom as if impatient for her to rise.

In the movie Elray thawed from sleep into consciousness of all this and hit the ground running, her bare feet slapping across the cold wood floors with loud

thwacks, her child's voice rising from a tickle in her chest and sailing forth with the hearty acquisitive flush of one who is ready to receive.

"Mama! Daddy!" She called for them. It was her birthday. She had called her parents and there they both were, in the kitchen and hard at work. Barkley was pouring hot water over the coffee grounds, moving carefully around the edges of the inverted pyramid, washing the coffee down the slopes. Jack was turning the bacon, intently. They both looked up and grinned.

"It's a Birthday Thing!" said Barkley.

"It's a Birthday Thing with no slippers!" said Jack.

"Happy birthday, Birthday Thing!" They said it together, and then they swooped down in a whirl of arms and faces and squeals that left Elray breathless, seated at the breakfast table before a large pink package with a gray ribbon. Elray stared at the package, and the package, it seemed, began to grow. The longer she stared, the larger the package grew and the pinker it turned, until it was shaking and rattling before her, straining at its restrictive gray ribbon with the groaning song of a big boat under sail. Then BOOM-the package exploded in a cloud of pink dust. When the storm of cardboard and paper settled, there sat a pair of black high-top sneakers. Brand new, in Elray's size.

The sneakers were a perfect fit and made an auspicious birthday beginning. Elray had wanted them badly and now, as she lay stretched across the backseat of the car, riding to her surprise birthday outing with Barkley and Jack, she propped her feet on the window ledge so that she could admire the way the shoes punctuated the ends of her legs. The little white crescent moons across their toes made the sneakers look happy to be there too.

In the front seat, Barkley and Jack were dropping hints, trying to make Elray guess where they might be headed.

"Is it the beer factory again?" Elray asked, remembering her birthday outing the year before. The three of them had walked in the cool shadow of big vats that stood on top of tall pipes like metal trees, surrounded by a pungent thick smell that made Elray want to grab the air and squeeze it into shapes. Her favorite part had been when the bottles filed past like soldiers to get their cap hats.

Barkley looked across at Jack with narrow eyes. "No," she said. "Last year was your daddy's pick. This year is my turn. Keep guessing, Kumquat. This is something really exciting." Barkley slid Jack another slit-eyed look. "Something really exciting for CHILDREN."

"The zoo?" Elray tried to hide the sadness that lives in that word, but it came out pretty flat anyway. So she tried it again. "The zoooooo?" This time it came out like a crazy train whistle. Still not a happy sound, but luckily Barkley was already shaking her head and wrinkling her nose and saying, "No, no, no. Keep guessing."