

Big Brave Rita

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Rita woke to a bright light coming through her curtains. She sat up and looked out her window. Mama and Papa and Oma were standing outside with the people from town. The town truck rumbled, its lights on an inky object in the road.

She hugged her blankie around her shoulders and got out of bed. The smell of lavender spilled over her when she opened the front door. Mama said it hadn't always smelled like that at night. Just since the Blobbies came.

She walked over to the group, squeezed through until she was just behind Oma. She could barely see the thing through everyone's legs, but she was pretty sure it was a Blobbie. She had seen Blobbies through the pain-fence. It had that black rubbery skin and the long twitching snout. Except this one's snout was not twitching. It looked dead, like the antelope she had seen once at the side of the road, big and solid and not moving.

"Someone turn off that damn engine," Jody said. "It's wasting gas."

"What are you doing here?" That was Papa's voice.

Everyone turned to look at Rita.

"Where are your shoes?" Mama said.

Oma took Rita's hand and led her back to the house.

"Is it dead?" Rita said.

"We can't tell," Oma said.

"How come?"

"Blobbies are very different from us. We don't even know if they breathe like us."

Rita thought about that for a moment. Everyone talked about the Blobbies all the time, but no one seemed to know anything about them. "How else would it breathe?"

Oma helped Rita into bed and tucked the blankie under her chin. "Well, maybe it breathes through gills, like a fish. Or maybe it doesn't need to breathe at all. How about a story?"

Oma took out the book of Big Brave Rita. Rita loved the lumpy pages. Opa had made the book for her before he went to heaven, made the paper and the colors all himself from the plants and rocks. She tried not to open it too often because Oma said the colors would fade a little bit each time the sun touched the paper.

Oma read the story out loud, even though Rita knew the story by heart. When the Blobbies first came, Big Brave Rita led an army of people and animals across the land. But the Blobbies fought back and built the pain-fence. They put all the people behind the pain-fence and took over the cities and stunk up the world with their lavender smell. Papa said Rita would be like Big Brave Rita when she grew up, and that's why they named her Rita. She and her friends would figure out how to take down the pain-fence and everyone would be free again like in the stories of the time before when everyone could get whatever they wanted from the stores, like bananas and antibiotics, and everyone could go wherever they wanted all the time, even to the far away land of Ohio.

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In the morning, Rita heard cries coming from the cellar.

"Who is crying?" Rita said.

Mama put a bowl of oatmeal in front of Rita. "Hush," she said. "No one is crying."

"But I can hear it."

It was a strange sort of crying. A whining, snuffling sort of crying, like the sound the dogs made sometimes when they were excited about dinnertime. But it was definitely crying.

Papa came upstairs with two other men. His shirt was spotted with black ink. He washed his hands in the water bucket by the sink. In the sunlight the ink looked colorful, like the oil spots on the road from the town truck.

"Bastard won't talk," he said.

"Watch your language," Mama said with a glance at Rita.

"Go to your room, Rita," Papa said. "We have to discuss something."

"But I want to see the Blobbie," she said.

Papa looked at her, and his eyes were very wide and a little sad. "Maybe later," he said. Rita was familiar with 'maybe'. Maybe meant never.

Rita got up and went to her room, where she could hear everything perfectly well.

"It's been hurt," Mama said. "And it could be young. Maybe it hasn't learned to talk yet."

"It can talk. It just doesn't want to."

"What do you think it was doing inside the compound?"

"Who the hell cares? It's ours now."

Dishes clinked together. Mama always saved them up until she got a fresh bucket of water.

"The others are going to come looking for it," Mama said. When Papa's voice got louder, Mama's always got softer.

"Think about this, Kailee. This is the opportunity we've been waiting for. We get it to tell us how the fence works, then we disable that damn fence, get across to the other compounds. We organize. We fight back. We have to do this now. This may be the only chance we ever have to get out of here!"

Rita looked out her window at the cracked road and the way the air shimmered in hazy waves above the shiny spots. Oma said all the roads used to be super smooth, not cracked and lumpy like they were now, and they used to run everywhere, to places with green grass all year round or deep blue lakes. Oma said there used to be a town called Vegas not far away that had high, high buildings and giant lights even at night and water fountains everywhere even though it was the middle of the desert. Now the road only went into town in one direction and ended at the pain-fence in the other direction. Everywhere inside the fence was just reddish-brown dirt and rocks and low bushes with thorns that only the goats could eat. Rita's family lived on the edge of town, next to the gardens and the goats and chicken pens. The pain-fence was a silver web going half way up the sky, just past the chickens.

Rita wondered if the Blobbie went under the fence or just through it. Oma said the Blobbies didn't feel pain when they went through the fence. She wondered if the Blobbie had come to tell them how to take down the pain-fence, like Papa thought. Or maybe it had just come to visit and say hello.

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"Maybe the Blobbie is sad," Rita said when Oma came to read her a story that night.

"Maybe it is." Oma looked sad, too.

"Papa said it is evil and all Blobbies go to hell."

"Rita, you remember when Joshua from town got in trouble because he had a big fight with his wife?"

"Yes." Papa said Joshua was a bad man. Joshua's wife had a big bruise on her cheek for two weeks.

"But remember how he saved that puppy from the fence?" Oma said.

Rita nodded. Joshua had stood next to the pain-fence and pulled the puppy out, even though it made him hurt all over and have nightmares for a long time after.

"Well, maybe the Blobbies are like Joshua. Maybe they can do both bad and good things."

Rita thought about the Blobbie in the cellar, and wondered if it had ever saved a puppy from the pain-fence. No one had ever seen dogs on the other side of the fence. Just big shiny metal houses and Blobbies racing around in their floating cars and sometimes the big machines that dug into the ground and burped lavender-smelling gas.

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The Blobbies came looking the next morning. They came in their floating cars that looked like rocks that sparkled in places. Hematite, Oma called it. She had studied rocks in college. A college was a place where a bunch of people sat and listened to one person talk and explain about rocks.

Everyone went to meet the Blobbies because they said "Gather!" in their big booming fake-voice.

Rita stood on the edge of the crowd, but she couldn't understand what the Blobbies were saying. Everyone said they were so smart, but they didn't speak English very well. Maybe they were both smart and not-smart, like they were good and not-good at the same time.

Rita snuck away and ran back to the house. First she went to her room and got her checkers board, then she went down to the cellar. The door wasn't locked. There was a heavy cross beam, but Papa always said she was strong for her size. She lifted it and pushed the door open.

It smelled like flowers that had been on the kitchen table too long and needed to have their water changed. And a little like the outhouse.

There was just enough light from the cracks in the walls.

The Blobbie was really big. A big, quivering black blob.

"Hello," Rita said.

Its long snout poked out from the rubbery skin. Its snout had red and black blotches on it. Oma had said that's where it smelled and saw and spoke, that it was very sensitive. All its little arms and legs were wrapped in rope, even its tiny little front pincher arms, and its body

was tied to the main pillar under the house.

The snout sniffed the air just like a mouse nose, twitching this way and that.

Rita took the checkers board from under her arm and set it in front of the Blobbie.

"My Oma made this for me," she said. "She does wood working."

She explained the rules, just like Oma had taught her.

"Jump, jump, jump." She said, showing the Blobbie with the black checker jumping over the red checker.

She set up the board again.

The Blobbie hesitated, then its snout nudged a red checker on the board.

"Good move," Rita said.

She won the first game, but then she felt sorry for the Blobbie, with all its limbs tied up like that, and she let it win the second game. It won the third all on its own.

"You're a fast learner," she said. She wished she could untie it, but she knew that would make Papa mad.

She heard shouts from outside. The Blobbie started to quiver. "Don't cry," Rita said. "I'll come back." She quickly put all the pieces back in the drawstring bag and tucked the board under her arm. She put the crossbeam back across the door and ran up the stairs just in time.

Papa and a crowd were standing in front of the house.

"They don't mean it," Jody from town said. She held a rifle across her shoulders. With the sun setting all red and orange behind her and her hat making a black shadow across her face, she looked like Big Brave Rita from the book. But Big Brave Rita helped the animals, and Jody never even noticed the animals.

"They mean it," her Papa said. "We have to make a decision."

"We have to fight," Jody said. "Once we get the information we need."

The other people were talking about how they would make spears and bows and arrows and long knives from scrap metal, and how once they overthrew the Blobbies they would be able to travel again and start factories and fix the roads and have bathtubs filled with hot water.

"The first thing I'll do is find some seeds and grow a coffee plant," someone said. Everyone sighed. Whenever anyone said anything about coffee, everyone else sighed.

"Don't be an idiot," Jody said. "Coffee wouldn't grow here. Now quiet down. We need to make a decision."

"Not here," Papa said. "They're probably watching us right now."

Everyone left for Jody's house.

Rita ran into the house and got her Big Brave Rita book. She ran back down to the cellar.

"We can read this here because there we're not in the direct sun," Rita said. "The sun makes the colors go away."

She opened it for the Blobbie, who snuffled its trunk over the pages, but was careful not to get any black ink on the pages.

The Blobbie started huffing and snuffling.

"Don't cry," Rita said. "It's not a sad story. See how Big Brave Rita saves all the animals? I'm named after her."

But the Blobbie wouldn't stop snuffling. Ink oozed from its skin.

Rita ran upstairs and got the gauze from the bathroom.

She tried to put the gauze over the place where the black oil came out of the Blobbie, but it squirmed and squirmed and the gauze just turned black and soggy.

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It was nighttime and Rita was asleep, but Papa came into her room and made her wake up.

The moon made enough light that she could see he was holding a soggy piece of gauze and he was very mad.

"Rita, did you do this?"

Rita tried not to squirm. "It was hurt," she said.

"I told you not to go down there."

No, he hadn't. Not really. She held her head up defiantly. "We played checkers."

Papa squeezed the gauze inside his hand. She could see black ink leaking between his knuckles. "Did it talk to you?"

She shook her head. "It was crying."

Papa picked up her checkers game and tucked it under his arm. He took her by the hand and led her out of the room. Mama and Oma were in the kitchen. They both stood up when Papa led Rita out the back door.

"What are you doing, George?" Oma said.

Papa didn't listen. He led Rita outside and downstairs to the cellar.

They stood inside the door until their eyes adjusted.

Papa dragged Rita over to the Blobbie. The Blobbie quivered and shrank back.

"Talk," Papa said. Rita wasn't sure if he was talking to the Blobbie or to her. Or maybe both. The Blobbie quivered and quivered.

Papa held the checker board over his head. Then he hit the Blobbie. The Blobbie's skin cracked and black ink came out. Its snout tried to disappear, but Papa's hand snaked out and grabbed the snout.

He held up the board again.

"No, Papa!" Rita said. She tried to catch Papa's hand. Then she saw Oma was there, too, and Oma was holding Papa's other arm and keeping him from hitting the Blobbie.

"What the hell!" Papa said. Rita had never heard him so loud before.

There was a loud crash from outside, then lots of voices. Mama shouted into the cellar.

"George, the Blobbies are here! Come quick!"

But Papa never had a chance to come quick. The Blobbies were suddenly there in the cellar, a lot of them, and they barely fit. They held a really bright light and Rita couldn't see anything. She was pushed back into the corner by all the rubbery bodies.

Then the Blobbies moved a little and Rita could see Papa held between two Blobbies with a silvery net. Her Blobbie, the bleeding Blobbie, was free and he was waving all his little arms and snuffling some more.

The biggest Blobbie said, "Child for child," in that funny fake-voice, like the truck wheels on gravel.

"No!" Papa said. He squirmed against the silvery net.

"No!" Oma squeezed through the Blobbies and knelt next to Rita and held her very tight.

"No," another voice said. It was the bleeding Blobbie. Its voice was gravelly, too.

"Child for child," the big Blobbie said again, and reached out its trunk for Rita.

Then there was a loud bang. Rita covered her ears, and one of the Blobbies screamed in a high-pitched gurgly scream. Suddenly everyone was moving all at once and Papa was squirming on the floor in the net and Rita was being pulled away from Oma. Her Blobbie friend was trying to stand between Big Blobbie and Rita, and then there was another loud bang and Big Blobbie turned and snorted through its trunk and another silver net flew through the air. Big Blobbie pulled on a silver string and Jody bounced down the cellar stairs in the net. Her rifle clanked on the stone steps next to her.

Big Blobbie picked up the rifle and broke it in half with three of its pincher-limbs.

Then for a moment everyone was still and all Rita could hear was ringing in her ears. Everyone was looking down and covering their ears, so Rita looked down too and saw Oma lying on the cellar floor taking a nap.

Rita knelt next to her. "Wake up, Oma," she said. She tugged on Oma's hand. "The Blobbies broke Jody's rifle." Oma would be glad. She always said that rifle would lead to no good.

But Oma did not move.

Rita's ears hurt, and maybe that's why the tears were coming out of her eyes. She put her head on Oma's shoulder. "Wake up, Oma," she said. "Please wake up."

"God, no. No!" That was Papa, still squirming in the net. "You goddamn bastards!"

Little Blobbie started snorting through its trunk again and again and tugging on Big Blobbie's long arms. The other Blobbies were still.

Finally, Big Blobbie wrapped one of its long arms around Little Blobbie. Rita saw that they were going to take Little Blobbie away. Its snout twitched at Rita, and then the whole group of Blobbies squeezed up the cellar stairs and got into their hematite cars and flew up into the air. Rita could see up the cellar stairs that the dirt and pebbles flew up and swirled around and around and all the people from town were staring up and not even noticing the dust landing in their hair and on their faces.

After the Blobbies left it was dark again. Rita heard someone crying and realized it was Papa. She had never heard Papa cry before. He sounded like the Blobbie, snuffling and snorting and making strange squeaking noises.

Mama knelt by him and cut the silvery net with a kitchen knife. He sat up and put his head in his hands. Then Mama came to Rita and hugged her tight and rocked back and forth a little.

Rita looked over Mama's shoulder at Oma, still lying on the floor.

"Will Oma wake up?" Rita asked.

"Shush," Mama said.

The people from town came down the stairs and set Jody free from her silvery net. Soon Jody left with the broken pieces of her rifle, but lots of people were still in the cellar and they were talking in whispers and milling around like after church. Some were trying to talk to Papa but he didn't notice.

"It's time for bed," Mama said.

"Wait," Rita said. She picked up the checkerboard and collected the checkers that were all over the floor and put them back in their drawstring bag. No one said anything while she picked them up. She put them in Oma's hands.

"She doesn't understand," someone said.

But Rita did understand. She knew that Oma would want to play checkers in Heaven with Opa.

And she knew that Oma would never read her bedtime stories again.

Right then and there Rita decided she never wanted to hear the story of Big Brave Rita ever again. And not just because Oma couldn't read it to her anymore. She didn't want to be like Big Brave Rita, no matter what Papa said.

When she got older, she would make up her own story, and it wouldn't have Big Brave Rita in it, or Jody, or any rifles either. And it wouldn't have coffee, because she didn't know what that was, or bananas or hot running water. But it would have the pain-fence and her Blobbie friend, and the smell of lavender, because those were the things she knew. And it would have the goats and chickens and the green bean patch and Oma, because those were the things she loved.

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