

Whitestone



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one

So there I lay, belly up on the Whitestone Elementary gym floor. My first day back at school.

Getting back to school, they told me, would be the start of getting back to normal. The obvious question is *why?*

School has made me feel many things, but normal isn't one of them. It's more of a showcase of the bizarre. Example: the game my brain likes to play in class, revealing answers to me with all the dazzle of a sequined game show hostess—until Mrs. Ingram calls my name. Then whisk, answers gone into the great unknown. The contestant is sent home without a parting gift. How is that normal?

School is also the place I go to feel like a klutz. I'm 'in a growth spurt'. This is grandma language. Translation: giant klutz. Grandma Judy likes to ask if 'they're putting manure in my shoes'—let me add that this has to do with the fertilizer factor, not the odor factor. In P.E., Coach Readdie can't see past the tall and accept the klutz half of the equation. She expects me to be some kind of Olympic hopeful on the basketball court. This sounds fantastic to me. I can run. I can dribble. I just can't run and dribble simultaneously. Run, dribble, and shoot a lay-up? Sure, and I'll jump up and take a bite out of the moon while I'm at it.

So, a dumb giant klutz. But where does a girl go when she wants to feel like a total outcast? Oh, if you can't guess by now you're just not paying attention.

Have you ever had that dream when you walk into class, take off your coat—no, not *that* dream—the one where you're still in your pajamas? And they're My Pretty Pony pajamas or something? Well, imagine that feeling minus the dream. Boys can make you feel like that when you're wide awake and you haven't even done anything embarrassing. Sometimes it's just embarrassing being you.

So imagine how amazing you feel when you, say, wet your pants in front of the class (that wasn't me), or your own dad calls you a loser at school right in front of your friends (not me, either). Or you have a fall-down, drooling seizure in front of the entire school.

That one's mine. Which brings us back to the gymnasium floor.

"I think she's dead!" I recognized Tiffany Klipfel's raspy voice. Why did Tiffany always have a raspy voice? More importantly, who was she talking about?

"Look—Rory's dead!"

So. It was me. I wondered if they were right. Until recently, I hadn't thought much about what would happen to me after I died, but I never imagined Tiffany Klipfel would be involved.

“Step back. Everyone back, now.” I wasn’t sure about that voice, a woman’s. There was a kind of hollow, rushing sound, lots of voices, feet pounding. The smell was familiar. The smell of failure... The school gym. I must’ve opened my eyes then, because I remember feet all around me. Someone had a sweet pair of high tops, the kind I can’t wear because if I did, even clowns would point and stare. Above the feet, bent down, a cluster of faces peered at me. I was on my back on a beige, rubbery floor. Miss Diakos, the school nurse, kneeled next to me.

There could only be one explanation. I had fallen down the bleachers, tripped up by my size 9-½ longfellows. Cause of death: abnormally large feet. These things never happen in the privacy of your own home. It has to be during an all-school assembly. One of those unwritten rules.

“Can you hear me, Rory? You’re going to be okay,” Miss Diakos said. My fellow 7th graders stood around, some pointing, others whispering or trying to hide laughter and doing a poor job of it. Someone else leaned over me, a kid who looked awfully familiar for someone I didn’t know.

He couldn’t have been more than a fourth-grader, so what business he had hanging around me was a mystery. But whereas the others were staring at me, his big, dark eyes stared right into me. And he did something strange. He touched my forehead with his pudgy fourth-grader fingers. Then he saw me looking at him, and his eyes got wide. He backed away until I couldn’t see him anymore.

Soon the paramedics came, and before you knew it, I was back in the hospital—the same room even, 316. My second home for the past few weeks.

Turns out Mom was right. Things were back to normal. The new normal.

The new normal turned out to be nothing like the old normal. If I’d known just how un-normal it would be, I might’ve closed my eyes right then and refused to open them ever again. Because it was the things I started seeing that changed everything.

That unforgettable first day back at school was the day I starting seeing Them. Well, kind of. It's the day I started remembering them. That chubby fourth-grader looked familiar for a reason. He'd been there when IT happened.

'It' is what my family calls the accident—when we talk about It at all, which is hardly ever. I had my seatbelt on, but when you're skinny you can slip right out of those things. If you've ever been warned about slipping down the shower drain, you might need to watch out for this. (Okay, if you must know, I hated the shoulder strap and wasn't wearing it right. Plus, as my sister would surely point out, I'm not so skinny anymore.) Result: banged-up head for Rory. Doctors have much fancier words for this, which they call their diagnosis. Diagnosis is a fancy word for 'what we think is wrong with you'.

Being back in room 316 brought the memories right up to the surface again. This time I could see things a little more plainly, though. I'd spent most of my last visit to 316 in a coma. When I came out of it, the nurses told me it had been almost ten days—told me like I'd be shocked, like I would've thought I'd just taken a quick nap. No, it surprised me that only ten days had gone by. It felt like I'd been floating for ten years.

Sometimes in my coma I heard voices. Usually they didn't make sense, like they spoke English but with the words all out of order. But I knew my Mom's voice, and I heard my Grandma Judy's a lot. I don't remember hearing my sister, Sheelan. And I never heard my Dad.

I never told anyone, but a few times I could actually see. With my eyes closed. I know they were closed because I could see my closed-eye self lying in the bed, my head all bandaged up, machines blinking and humming around me. That's when I really got that floating feeling.

I felt it when I couldn't feel anything else. I read once that if you swim in the Dead Sea, you float easily because there's a lot of salt or minerals or something in the water. It kind of felt like that sounds. Not like I couldn't sink. Like I could start sinking any

second, like maybe I should sink but didn't. My coma was my own private Dead Sea. I also read that nothing can live in the Dead Sea, which explains the name.

Maybe it would have been the real thing—the Dead part—if that kid hadn't kept bugging me. The dark and quiet weren't so bad. It was the perfect place to hide. See, I knew something waited for me when I did wake up. I don't know how I knew, but I sensed this thing very close to me, waiting to rip out my insides and eat me alive. I didn't know what it was exactly, but I wasn't about to go find out. The dark quiet was fine.

But other things kept disturbing the quiet. Like that kid. The first time I saw him wasn't in the school gym after all. Suddenly I could picture him beside my hospital bed one of those times when I was doing my coma zero-gravity thing.

Now, lying in the same bed, I could remember. I'd seen him there, just him. A nurse had come in and checked on me, but she just ignored him. Or so I thought.

Up there in my floating place I'd thought, "So, some strange kid wanders into my hospital room to stare at me, and no one has a problem with this?" Maybe he was the patient from Bed Two. Nope, the other bed was empty, the sheets clean and tucked. This was just some kid I didn't know, watching me.

And touching my head. Had anyone cared that this kid was messing with my bandages? Of course not. Okay, he hadn't done any damage, but he put his hand right on top of them. I remember my irritation, pretty useless since I was just this invisible floating thing. Or so I thought.

I could still remember his brown eyes, sort of sad. They had lifted up and looked right at me. Not the unconscious me in the bed—the me floating overhead. He looked up and saw me.

Then my Mom had come in, and I'd watched her sink into an orange vinyl chair. She looked like she'd aged ten years that day, wearing a black dress I'd never seen before,

kind of old-ladyish, not the type of thing she ever wore. She didn't even notice the boy. When I looked back, he was gone.

All that had happened weeks ago. Now here in room 316 again, I kept thinking about this kid who popped up where he didn't seem to belong and only I seemed to mind.

Mom and Dr. Flynn came back in, and I had to come back to the present moment. Having one of those penlight things shone into your eyes will do that.

"It's logical to attribute a seizure to the head trauma, at least as a starting point," he told my mom. His breath always smelled like wintergreen, though I never saw him chewing gum or mints. Dr. Flynn was okay, pretty young for a doctor, I guess— younger than the other doctors I'd seen striding in and out of the room with their eyes on their metal clipboards. Striding, clipboarding, their brains whizzing along at top speed. Speaking 'medicalese', as my grandma called it.

"We'll run a few tests to see if we can't determine the cause," the doc said.

"More tests?" I asked. You might say I whined.

"Will she have to stay overnight?" Mom twisted the strap of her purse. She wore the gray skirt and white blouse, which meant she'd had to come straight from her office assistant job. "The insurance only covers..."

"Let's look at the preliminary results and then decide. Right, Irish?"

That was me—Irish. I hardly heard him. The kid was back.

There in the room with us. When I stared at him, his brown eyes got really big again. "Who are you?" I demanded.

"Well, a fellow Irish American, Miss Joyce," Dr. Flynn said. He smiled, but I saw him exchange a quick look with my mom.

"No, I mean him." I pointed to the kid, who gestured like I should keep quiet, as if somehow they wouldn't observe him, standing three feet away in a place he had no business being.

By now Mom's and Doc Flynn's eyes were bouncing around the room, at me, at each other, but never at the kid.

"Did you see someone peek in the room, Rory?" Mom asked.

"I'm talking about that kid, right there." The kid shrugged as if to say, *told you so*.

They couldn't see him.

Now, the question: How soon would they move me to the psych ward?

That time they shrugged it off. After all, I'd just had a seizure. Why not also see imaginary people? I must be tired, overwhelmed, they figured. They didn't think to ask me. I felt okay. My mom looked tired and overwhelmed. But she and the doc had me pretty well convinced. *Lie down, Rory. Just close your eyes and rest. You've been through a lot today.*

So I did, and the doc went to order the tests and Mom went to get coffee and I was alone. I peeked out the crack of one eyelid. No, I wasn't.

"You're still here," I said, not looking at him.

"I've been here a lot, Rory."

"It's starting to get a little annoying."

"Well, you don't usually see me."

Now I had to look at him. "Do you not want to be seen? 'Cause there's this thing you might try called hiding. Or leaving." But I knew what he meant, because no one else could see him. Why couldn't I be so lucky?

"I'm not leaving." He came and sat in the orange chair. It creaked.

"Who are you?"

He seemed to give it a lot of thought, as if there could be a hundred answers to that question and he had to pick one. "I'm Rafie." The way he said it sounded more like 'toffee' than 'taffy'. Which is too bad, because I like taffy better than toffee.

"Rafie?"

"That's good," he said, as if I'd come up with the name. "Call me that."

“Are you some kind of hologram or something, that only I can see?” Give me a break—what else could I come up with? I’d recently had my brains shaken loose. Then I swiped my hand at him, like it might pass through his holographic self. But his hand came up and caught mine, and even though he didn’t squeeze, I had this feeling that he was unusually strong. I had another feeling, too. Like he’d held my hand before, at a horrible time. I remembered an awful pain in my head and a scorched, hot metal smell and a voice moaning...the feel and smell and sound of It.

And him. Rafie. He’d been there, too. I pulled my hand away. “You.” My voice sounded weird and warbly in my own ears. “What are you?”

His brown eyes drifted up to the ceiling. He was going to give that question a lot of thought, too.

“Just tell me, *Rafie*.”

“I’m a friend. A friend of a Friend.”

“Wait, I get it. Are you supposed to be some kind of... Like that show Grandma Judy watches, *Saved by the Angels*?” I would’ve laughed in different circumstances. There he sat in his striped shirt—like he’d been to Sesame Street and raided Ernie’s closet—with his round light brown face and round dark brown eyes, scratching his nose with the back of his hand and shrugging at my question. Some angel.

“Something like that,” he said.

I gawked. “Like *Saved by the Angels*? You’re kidding.”

“I don’t know about any show, but that’s the closest word you’ve got.”

I was still gawking, but without the laughing. “An angel?”

He smiled. “It’s not important what we’re called, but Whom we serve.”

“Did you say ‘we’?”

He nodded—not a ‘yes’ nod but a ‘look behind you’ nod. I looked to the other side of my bed, the corner that no one could have reached without walking right past us.

There was another boy there, an older boy. No, more of a young man, with black hair and eyes like blue lightning, arms crossed over his chest, his eyebrows pulled together and mouth slightly frowning.

I put my head back on the pillow and closed my eyes. But it was too late for that. Once you see something, you can't unsee it.

To find out what else Rory sees and if Something Big is happening in her life (or if she's just losing it), check out Whitestone, available on Amazon.com.

[http://www.amazon.com/Whitestone-1-Kristin-](http://www.amazon.com/Whitestone-1-Kristin-Connolly/dp/146795442X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1322974681&sr=8-1z)

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