



RANBY

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A million, maybe a zillion, fuzzy moths swarmed the porch light, stepping all over each other to get to the warmth. The boy leaned forward to kiss the girl, and as their lips touched, a voice boomed from the sky. "WILL YOU ALL PLEASE STAND AS JIM NABORS SINGS THE NATIONAL ANTHEM."

The boy and the girl jumped apart. Shrill music began to blare. "Oh say can you see by the donserly light. . . ."

"Raaandee!" the girl shrieked, charging inside the house. Randy stumbled through the slippery grass, "Raandee," he could hear his sister and her boyfriend run through the darkened house, giggling. Randy tripped and lay blissfully dizzy on the cool ground. His sides were sore from laughing.

The boyfriend drove away, and Randy waited in the grass, staring at the moths. Where did they go in the daytime? He'd never seen them before. He tried to look away, but all he saw was a yellow spot where the light bulb had been. After a very long time, he climbed up the roof and took down the loudspeaker. He carefully rolled up the wire he'd hidden along the side of the house; the tape recorder had shut off automatically. Randy unhooked it from the main control panel and listened to the rest of the "Star Spangled Banner." When every scrap of evidence was packed away, he went to bed. He left the porch light turned on so the moths wouldn't get cold.

"Did you kids behave yourselves last night?" his father asked at breakfast. Randy didn't hear him; he was listening to his cereal crackle and pop. It was strangely quiet this morning, and he put his ear very close to the bowl.

"You've got milk on your earlobe, weirdo," his sister said, "and besides, oatmeal doesn't make noises."

Randy heard her, but he kept listening anyway.

"Randy, c'mon. Eat your breakfast," his father shouted to the front page of the newspaper.

"Daddy, Randy did the funniest thing last night. He rigged up a switch on the porch, and when we stepped on the doormat . . . the "Star Spangled Banner" started playing from a speaker on the roof."

"You did?!" his father looked across the table at Randy, grinning. "How'd you do this one, kiddo?"

". . . and Dave nearly died," his sister said, rolling her eyes.

"Who's Dave . . . and what was he doing here?"

"Daaaddyee . . . tell him, Mother," she wailed. They were all ignoring him again. Randy dipped the wrong end of his spoon in the cold oatmeal and tried to write his name. RANDBY. The letters looked sick and crippled in the lumpy oatmeal.

"Randy, you wore that shirt yesterday," his mother looked at him for the first time that morning. "Go put on the shirt that mommy laid out for you. After all, it's the first day of school."

He shuffled out of the kitchen, stopping on the stairs to pretend he was a famous mountain climber. Only ten more feet, boys, and Mount North Pole is all yours. He tugged at the bannister, pulling his body closer to the top by slow, painful inches. Gusts of icy wind were blowing in his face, and he closed his eyes, listening to the bark of the wild seals.

"He ALWAYS wears that shirt, Mother, ALWAYS . . . I don't think he'll wear the others because he's too klutzy to button them."

Randy scaled the top of the mountain and fell to the ground on his belly. Snakes were everywhere in the North Pole, long white snakes that looked like icicles. He crawled to his room, stopping every few seconds to shake his feet and make rattling noises.

"Randy, hurry up!" The seals were restless. They might bite him if he missed the bus.

A little while later, the bus screeched to a halt in front of the school. Randy hunched in his seat after the other children had swarmed from the folding doors. He slid further and further down on the slippery vinyl seat, until his bottom nearly touched the floor and his back began to hurt. The bus driver saw Randy on the floor and made him leave the bus.

"Who's your teacher, Randy?" a girl called from the steps of the school. He pretended to be looking for cracks in the sidewalk.

"Randy flunked," another girl giggled. "He's gotta repeat the whole second grade." They whispered and walked away.

Randy waited outside until almost all the children had left the playground, and then he staggered inside the school. He was a war hero, limping home from Russia. His left leg was in shreds, and boy, would they be sorry they shot him. He limped past his teacher, Mrs. Rectangle and collapsed in the nearest seat in the front row. Mrs. Rectangle had made him sit in the front row last year, after he rolled snowballs of white paste and threw them at a girl's hair.

"Hello, class. I'm Miss Ratanga," she said, passing around pencils and paper with big blue lines. "I want everyone to write their names . . . big . . . on the upper left hand corner. Then . . . let's all write a paragraph about our summer vacations."

After a lot of noisy chair-scraping, twenty pencils began to scratch across paper. Randy scrunched his eyes together and tried to remember which side was left. He was left . . . no, maybe right-handed. His father said he was "ambodexters;" this meant he could write equally sloppy with either hand. By now, Randy couldn't even remember where she'd said to write his name, so he gripped the pencil and wrote R-a-n-b-y in the middle.

Ranby. No. Randby. R andy. The paper was smudged and dirty. He pressed the pencil hard and wrote "Ranby." Maybe that was right. He closed one eye and wrote "Dobson." Randy Dodson . . . that was his name.

"Almost done, class? Mrs. Rectangle came and stood behind him like a big, black tree trunk. He smiled at her proudly.

"Rand-dee," she said, pointing to his name. "Raaandee Doddson." She looked very big, and much uglier than he had remembered. "Turn the 'D' around, Raaandee."

She sounded like a goat. Randy was staring at his name, making up a story.

"My name's Ranby, Ranby Dobson. Nice to meet you," he said respectfully.

Mrs. Rectangle's mouth made a tight little "O," and Randy wasn't sure whether she was going to laugh or cry. Instead, she looked at her watch and said, "Class, line up alphabetically for recess."

Randy wandered from his seat, making tiny bubbles with his saliva. Ranby Dobson would stand in front of Randy Dodson because "B" came before "D". He pretended Randy was absent, sent away to a prison for people who couldn't read.

"Aren't you s'pose to be in third grade?" the girl in front of Randy asked.

"Nope. I'm Ranby Dobson. I'm new 'cause my parents just moved here from Mars."

"Ranby . . . that's not a name." She giggled and turned away.



"Kickball!" Mrs. Rectangle yelled when they got outside. "Well count off in one's and two's."

Randy stood in the long line of boys and girls, making up a story. He was Ranby Dobson, from Washington, Mars. His turn came, and he called out "two."

"Yuck. Not you, weirdo." The nearest number two made a face at Randy. "You can't even kick the ball."

Randy shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned. He would tell the class he was from Mars, where they shot wild robots during recess. He would tell the teacher that his mother was short and green and never taught him how to read. Maybe then they'd understand why Randy was different. It was a good lie, a lie that Randy had thought of before. Last year, a girl came to the school from California; she'd even been on television. Everyone liked her.

When the two's went out to field, Randy hid behind the corner of the building. He almost hoped he'd be missed, but he knew no one would see he was gone. He could hear them laughing on the field, and even Mrs. Rectangle was yelling "Go Stevie." Randy slipped inside the door of the junior high building and ran down the stairs to the dim basement. There, in the school workshop, the big machines slept during recess. He skidded on the cement floor and stumbled through the doorway.

"Well . . . Randy! How was your summer?" The shop teacher, Mr. Anderson, grinned at the disheveled boy.

"Great. I fixed five televisions and put a CB radio in my neighbor's car." Randy leaned forward and whispered, "He paid me twenty dollars and my mother let me keep it."

"You ought to go into business, young man," Mr. Anderson said, getting down from the tall, metal stool. "Come over here. I want to show you what I'm working on."

Randy bent down, staring at the guts of the radio set. Wires spilled across the metal back in shiny blues, reds, and greens. It was a mess.

"Do you see what I'm doing?" Mr. Anderson asked, squatting beside Randy. He nodded solemnly. He understood electronics better than anything, better than anyone, even in the junior high. No one else even knew what the word "electronics" meant, but worse than that, no

one really cared. Once, he'd brought a home-made radio to Show and Tell, but he got embarrassed and couldn't explain it very well. The class started laughing and he just sat down.

"Does your teacher know where you are?" Mr. Anderson said.

"Yes, n-no." He didn't want to lie to Mr. Anderson. "But I didn't want to play kickball. I wanted to come out here and help you."

"Scoot back outside, Randy. Kickball will be good for you."

Good for you. They said that about broccoli and booster shots. Last summer, his dad locked him out of his workshop in the garage for a whole week because it would be good for him to make friends and play football. Randy spent the week talking to his dog in the bushes.

He walked back outside, taking one step backward for every three steps forward. As soon as he reached the playground, it was time to go inside.

"Reading groups," Mrs. Rectangle trilled. "We have three . . . the Eagles, the Lions, and the Sloths. As you become a better reader, you can worm your way up to the Eagles."

Randy stopped listening. He knew he would be a Sloth. He was a Sloth all last year, and by June there was only one other Sloth left, a boy named Harold who wet his pants in class. Harold didn't have a left eye, and Randy hated sitting in the circle next to him.

Mrs. Rectangle's voice droned on like a lawnmower in the afternoon. Randy thought about his lie. He really might be from another planet, because he didn't remember how he was born. Probably everyone else in the whole world could remember their birth; after all, they were there, but Randy couldn't recall a thing. Maybe this meant he wasn't born. He could've been dropped from a flying saucer, and given to Earth as a present because he understood electronics. He liked that idea. His planet was so modern that they didn't need to read, write, or button their clothes. No one ever played kickball.

Randy went home and thought about Mars. He wanted to believe it. He sat on the front porch for the next three nights, underneath the moths, and watched for flying saucers.

"Randy, how come you write your name like that?" A girl pointed to the smudged "Ranby" on the corner of his paper. "It's not spelled right, silly." He didn't say anything. It was October, and Randy knew by now he wasn't a mere Earthling. He didn't tell the girl, though. He'd stopped telling people he was Ranby Dobson from Washington, Mars, because they said it was a stupid lie. It didn't matter what people thought, anyway. He knew he was different than the other children because he was a martian, and that was most important. He was almost certain he was a martian; sometimes, his skin almost looked green. He stopped doing homework. He thought about wires and radios all of the time. Finally, Mrs. Rectangle noticed, and visited his mother.

"He's sullen, uncooperative, and seems unwilling to learn," Miss Ratanga said, and Mrs. Dodson just nodded. She'd heard those terms before. "But I've been reading, and I think he might have a learning disability that makes him that way. Have you ever heard of dyslexia?"

Mrs. Dodson shook her head.

"Children with dyslexia transpose their letters, so d's look like b's or even q's or p's. This makes reading next to impossible. They can't organize their thoughts and movements . . . that's why Randy can't run very well. He can't remember where his feet are supposed to be."

"But he's so bright with his electronics!" Randy's mother said.

"That's what is so sad. A lot of exceptionally bright children have learning disabilities, but because they fail in school, they begin to believe they're stupid. Pretty soon a pattern of failure develops, and . . . well, it's tragic, really."

Miss Ratanga gave Mrs. Dobson the name of a clinic where they could test Randy for dyslexia. Randy hated the tests; he knew he was flunking, even though the man said there were no right or wrong answers. Later that night, his mother told him he had a learning disability, and his father said he was sick.

Randy sat outside on the front porch, thinking. He didn't believe he was sick, or crazy, and he didn't like those doctors. He knew he was special because he was from Mars. He hoped he was from Mars. He sat outside for a very long time, looking for a spaceship to fly home.

If I had a pen, what *wouldn't* I write!  
I'd tell of the pen's unconquerable might!  
I'd banish evils and set them aright!  
But I haven't a pen, so I give you good-night.