

THOMAS TOSI

illustrated by Meaghan Tosi

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY



THE CURSE OF THE **CRUMMY** **MUMMY**



Keep human in the humanities.

The author of this book wrote it on a 1956 Remington Quiet Riter typewriter and a 1951 Smith-Corona Silent. The artist drew all the illustrations by hand.

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This one is for Catty and Lincoln Tosi. A mummy who was anything but crummy and a father who was there for us.

TUNE IN AS WE UNWRAP ANOTHER EPISODE!

SATURDAYS

8PM
EST



THE
CRUMMY
MUMMY
SHOW

WATCH ON **VIDARONI** LIVE STREAM

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

THOMAS TOSI

illustrated by Meaghan Tosi



Dooney Press

GOFFSTOWN, NEW HAMPSHIRE

THE KERFUFFLE



September 28

➤ **DIRECT MESSAGE: TO: @CRUMMYMUMMY | FROM: @BERNARD_G**

Dear Crummy... or is it Dear Ms. Mummy? Please tell me it's not something awful like The Crumster or CrumDude. I always worry about the proper way to start these direct messages to you. I mean, you *are* the host of my favorite TV program. I suppose what I call you doesn't matter since I never have the courage to hit SEND on the messages anyway. I guess you could say they're just for me, my version of a diary.

The point is, Crum, it's Saturday night again, and I'm streaming your show on a tablet up in my room... alone.

THE KERFUFFLE

Your movie tonight is *The Slithering Terror*. We're eighty-seven minutes in, and so far, nothing much is slithering. There's not much in the terror department either—unless you count the old-people medicine commercials that warn how you'll get all sorts of side effects like constipation and death (who says you can't take it with you? #haha #rude #poop).

Anyway, as you would have known from my previous DMs (which I never sent), I'm not supposed to stream *The Crummy Mummy Show*.

Mother says watching the old-time monster movies you run every week will rot my brain. Which, by the way, *The Rotted Brain* would make a better B-movie title than *The Slithering Terror* every day of the week and twice on Saturday night. B-movies, you know, the low-budget ones



THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

that are so bad they're good, and everyone loves them.

The way I figure it, I *sort of* have permission to watch you. Well, not exactly permission, but I've got Bluetooth earbuds, and that's kind of the same thing. What Mother doesn't hear, Mother doesn't know. And what Mother doesn't know doesn't hurt her... or me. You could say it's cheating, but so is how I got the earbuds.



Mother got them for me over the summer. She wanted me to win that school contest to see who could read the most books while we were on vacation. Mother always pushes me to win. Winning. I don't think Mother understands that always winning doesn't exactly *win* me a lot of friends.

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

says I can't do it online, either. I've got to use a massive paper dictionary in our living room so I can highlight the words.

Kerfuffle is vocabulary word five hundred sixteen. I have to use each word at least six times in writing or talking to people.

You could say the whole situation between me and my mother is one big kerfuffle. And *that* kerfuffle is far bigger than the one between Mother and Miss Sorenson.

It's been just Mother and me since I can remember. I don't have a father. I like to think that if I did, maybe he wouldn't push me so hard. Maybe he'd let me watch the B-movies.

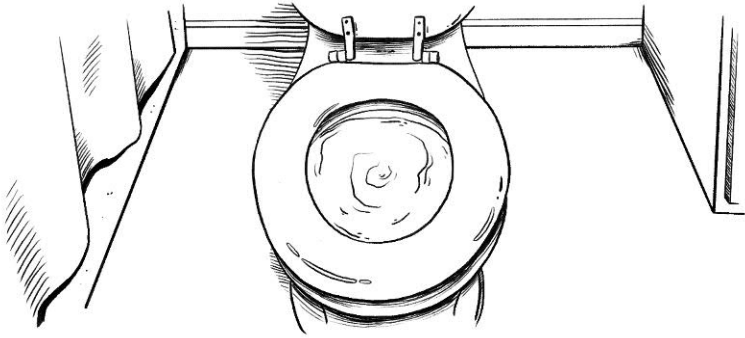
Those old horror movies are why I like your show so much. All the monsters and creatures are just like me. I'm not saying I slither or have a rotted brain, but I do know what it's like to be misunderstood, friendless, and alone.

Wishing things were better.

Your number one fan,

Bernard Gawain

CIRCLING THE DRAIN



DID YOU EVER HAVE the feeling you were drowning? That all hope was gone, and no matter what you did, the water would just keep rising? That soon, you would have to admit it was over, and all that was left was listening to the tank running endlessly, filling the toilet bowl until it eventually spilled out onto the bathroom floor?

“Bernard, are you all right in there?” Mother asked, banging her knuckles rapid fire on the door. “Where is all this water coming from?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” I said.

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

I moved to let her in. But I didn't get the chance. Mother threw the bathroom door open. The lock on *my* bathroom door had been broken forever. Mother said she didn't fix it because you were supposed to be able to get in there in case of a medical emergency. And, besides, we were mature enough to know to knock.

The lock on *her* bathroom door worked.

That was Mother, mature enough to knock but then barging in on me anyway. Lucky thing I had my pants up. But, of course, I hadn't taken them down. I didn't need to for this mission—this mission that was doomed from the start.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. It was so easy. I'd lucked out. Our fifth-grade teacher, Miss Sorenson, stapled together each kid's September graded tests and quizzes to bring home for their parents to sign.

The New Hampshire history quiz on which I'd gotten a grade of C landed in the middle of my stack. Not the top. Not the bottom. Right smack hidden in the middle. No one would notice if it were suddenly gone. The signed papers were due the next day. But Miss Sorenson said she wasn't posting our grades online until next week. Mother hadn't seen them yet, and I needed time to think.

"What the...?" Mother said, seeing the toilet bowl that had now become a mini waterfall. "What are you doing just standing there? Why didn't you close the valve?"

She squatted down so she didn't have to kneel in the water on the floor and reached behind the toilet.

"It's clogged," I said.

"Yeah, ya think?" She turned the valve handle that squeaked and scraped as the flow stopped.

Of course, I knew it was clogged. It was easy tearing that one sheet out of the quiz packet cleanly, so there was no trace of it left. Even with a tight staple, I worked it out. And I'm not an especially artsy-crafty type person, good at working with paper like that. My skills were more in the academic area—*extremely* in the academic area.

That's why I couldn't have a C—even if it was only a pop quiz on material we didn't cover at all this year. In the Granite State, every school studies New Hampshire history in the *fourth* grade. That was at least *five months ago*.

But it was just a *few days* ago, Miss Sorenson said in class, "I want to see what you have all retained from last year."

Retained.

Retained was precisely my problem. My brain is hyper-efficient. I achieve this efficiency by purging stuff I no longer need—like New Hampshire studies stuff—stuff like the Pine Tree Riot, purple finch, purple lilac, invention of the alarm clock, and the only president from New Hampshire, Franklin Pierce.

Needless stuff.

Okay, I admit purple finches are pretty cool looking for

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

around here, and lilacs smell awesome, probably way better than Franklin Pierce. He died in 1869.

Ha! I *retained* that.

“Hand me the plunger,” Mother said. “It’s in the closet.”

I opened the closet door and reached way back under the bottom shelf that held the bath towels. I grabbed one of the plastic handles and offered it to Mother.

“That’s the bowl brush,” Mother said. “What’s the matter with you? Aren’t you smarter than that?”

“Sorry,” I said.

I *was* smarter than that. I just didn’t want to give her the plunger.

“Look at this mess. How much toilet paper did you use anyway?”

“Just a little.”

I actually hadn’t used any. I only went in there to flush a paper—the crumpled C New Hampshire history quiz.

I handed Mother the plunger.

“Okay,” she said. “Keep your fingers crossed.”

I kept them crossed all right, crossed, hoping that the quiz wouldn’t get sucked back up.

The crazy thing is, there were twelve papers in that packet that got sent home to be signed. I’d cruised through eleven of them with a ninety-four average. But when you added in the seventy-three from the New Hampshire history quiz, that brought the

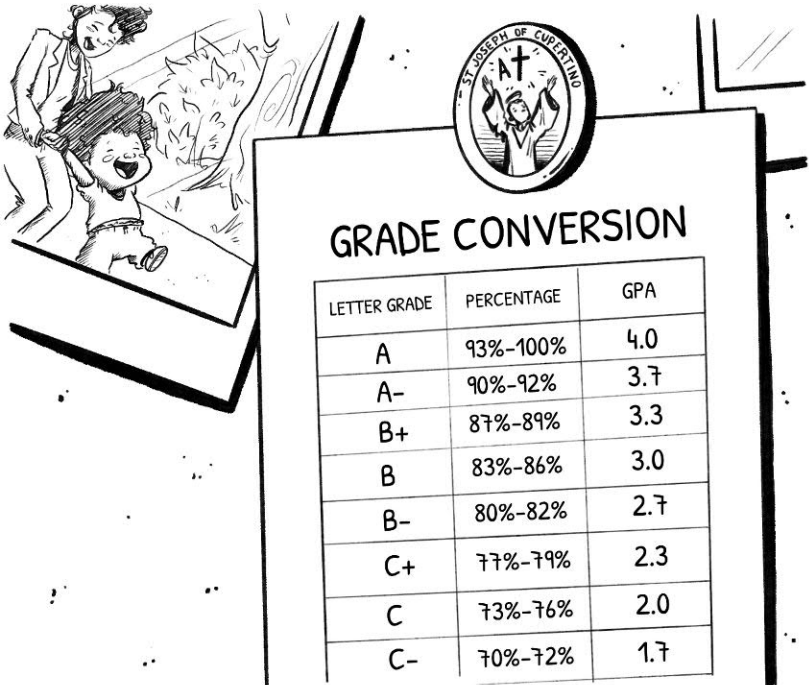
CIRCLING THE DRAIN



THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

whole packet down to a ninety-two average. I bet for most kids in my class, their parents would've taken them out for ice cream if they got a ninety-two average. Those kids didn't know that to get a 4.0 GPA—that's grade point average—you had to get at least a ninety-THREE average. A ninety-TWO average was just a 3.7 GPA.

At my school, Green Hill Academy, we still used the old letter grades like A through F. We didn't do GPAs. But Mother did. Mother knew that GPAs were what they used in high school and college. And I knew it, too. I couldn't *not* know it. A grade conversion chart was stuck to our refrigerator with a magnetic



CIRCLING THE DRAIN

plastic statue of Saint Joseph of Cupertino. He's the patron saint of exams. That grade chart stared me in the face whenever I opened the door to get a squeeze yogurt.

"I think it's clear," Mother said, giving one last good slosh and shove down on the plunger. The water seemed to be draining from the bowl.

I took a deep breath and thanked the universe that my C quiz wooshed away and Franklin Pierce hadn't come to the surface with some backwash.

Mother held out the plunger to me. It was a little wet on the handle. I took it. I didn't complain. I knew that Saint Joseph of Cupertino had been kind to me.

"Okay, put this back in the closet," Mother said. "I'll get the mop and turn the water supply back on."

She squatted down to reach behind the toilet again for the valve. "Wait a minute," she said. "I think something's floating back up."

I'm sure you can guess by now that it wasn't a turd rising to the surface of the bowl. I wasn't that lucky. It's a funny thing about Saint Joseph of Cupertino. In addition to being the patron saint of exams, he's also the patron saint of levitation.

THE HISTORY LESSON



YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO come straight into the classroom with the students," I said to Mother the next morning as she led me down the second-floor corridor of Green Hill Academy, crowded with kids. "You're supposed to go to the office first and check in."

She ignored the comment.

"You don't have to do this," I said.

"I'm your mother. I want what's best for you, and I *will* support you," Mother said, neither slowing down nor changing direction.

THE HISTORY LESSON

Bridget Matsumoto, a girl in my class, was hovering near Mother and me. She was probably hovering because, firstly, Bridget was not very subtle, and secondly, Bridget and I had a history—from two weeks before. It started out on the playground...



“What do you want?” Bridget asked me.

We were standing over by the big rock. That is to say, Bridget was standing. I was down on one knee.

“I have something I have to tell you,” I said.

Bridget was in the middle of a half-circle of girls. They all had their feet shoulder-width apart and their hands on their hips. I was at the center of that circle. I was being judged by a jury of Bridget’s peers—even though, to me, Bridget had no peers.

I wanted to talk to Bridget alone, but the fifth-grade girls at Green Hill Academy were like a swarm of krill. If I were ever going to say anything to her, I knew it wouldn’t be just her and me. I needed a new strategy. And that new strategy would become my life—or at least my middle-school—philosophy.

Wait, and you’re lost.

Wait, and you’re lost meant that if you had something to say, you’d better say it before the moment passed. Playground full of people, krill or no krill, it was time.

“Uh-huh,” Bridget said.

“It’s something from my heart,” I said.

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

Maybe it was because the big rock was out in the glaring sun instead of shaded by the pine trees around the playground, but Bridget blinked, and her hands came off her hips.

She looked confused, like she didn't know what she should do. So, she did what girls always did. She turned to her friends around her. They knew exactly what to do. Just as if they'd rehearsed it all day, they sputtered laughter in perfect unison and pointed at me. When the laughter died down, Bridget's hands went back to her hips.

"As if I would care what's in a string bean's heart," she said. "If a string bean even has a heart."



THE HISTORY LESSON

String bean.

That hurt. I didn't need to be told I was thin. I knew I was. I couldn't help being thin any more than I could help being tall. I eat tons. But I'm nervous, too—so nervous I guess the food doesn't like hanging around. The nervousness affects my metabolism or something. I've seen doctors.

I know now that even though it might have seemed like it, Bridget wasn't really being cruel. She just didn't know how to stand up to her friends. It's not an easy thing to do. Most kids in my grade couldn't do it. I could, but it was easier for me. I didn't have any friends.

My trouble was standing up to my mother, like with flushing the quiz and then lying about it. I wasn't proud of that. Just like I was sure Bridget wasn't proud of calling me a string bean.

How could I be sure?

Because about a week later, last week, I was behind Bridget in the food line in Alumni Hall. She asked the lunch lady for *double* string beans.

She looked back at me after ordering. She actually *turned* and looked back at me.

She called me a string bean, and she ordered *double* string beans.

Yeah, we have a history.



Back in the school hallway, Mother didn't respond to me

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

about checking in at the office before going into Miss Sorenson's room. Bridget was still hovering and must have thought Mother didn't hear me.

I knew Mother heard me, though. I was very familiar with my mother's *ignore look*.

"I can show you how to get to the office, Mrs. Gawain," Bridget said to my mother.

Since Bridget clearly didn't understand the *ignore look*, Mother set her eye phasers to stun and snapped a glare at her.

"You must be the little girl who has a crush on my son." Mother said it loudly enough for everyone entering the classroom to hear.

The eye-phaser stun had worked. Bridget was stone.

Mother knew about the *incident* at the big rock on the playground because I was pretty upset after it happened. Okay, I was more than upset. I had what kids in my class called a psycho meltdown and got sent to the school nurse. She sent me home at the end of the day with a note. But, somehow, Mother got things mixed around about who had a crush on whom.

"Stay away from him," Mother said. "He's too young to be distracted by... puppy love."

Mother strode into Miss Sorenson's room.

Dewey, a boy in my class, heard the puppy love comment and barked out a woof behind Bridget.

THE TOXIC TEST

Bridget, you're a nice person. Please don't think my mother is mad at you. She isn't. She's mad at me. Last night, I did something stupid... childish. I tore one of the quizzes out of the packet we were supposed to get signed, crumpled it, and flushed it. Our toilet clogged.

*Yours faithfully,
—Bernard*

BERNARD TELLS ME YOU gave a quiz on material you didn't even cover in class," I heard my mother say. *Everybody* else in class heard her, too. All the kids sat at their desks quietly, wondering what special occasion brought a parent into our room. They probably thought they were all going to get cupcakes or something. No, Green Hill Academy did not usually allow sugary snacks to be brought in, but kids can still dream.

Miss Sorenson was sitting behind her desk. Mother was standing beside her, towering like Allison Hayes in the monster movie *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*. Instead of standing *in front*

of the desk like the kids do, Mother was invading Miss Sorenson's personal space.

"You're talking about the New Hampshire studies quiz," Miss Sorenson said. "The students covered all that material in fourth grade—just last year."

"But not *this* year?"

"Well, no. It was only a quiz. I was just checking to see how much material the students—"

"Will it count?"

"Why is your mom here?" a kid named Abe Mitchell whispered to me.

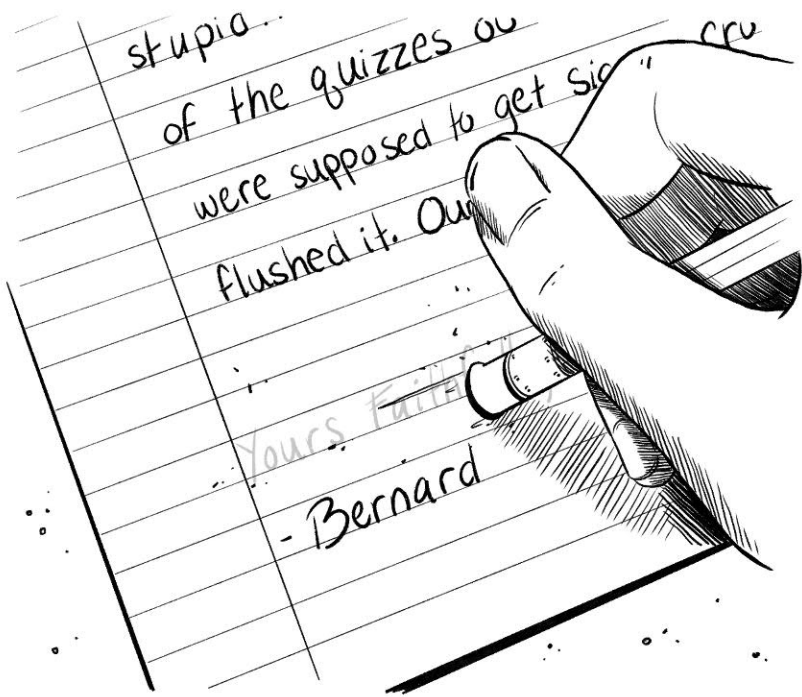
In Miss Sorenson's room, we had the buddy system. Each row was double-wide with two desks side by side. Whoever sat at the desk paired with yours was your *buddy*. Sometimes, you worked together on special projects, and sometimes, you took notes for the other person if they were out. My desk buddy was Abe Mitchell. A girl named Marlene Paczki was sitting in front of me. Beside Marlene and in front of Abe sat Bridget.

"I may have made a mistake last night," I said, finishing up the note I'd just written to Bridget about the toilet. I was erasing *Yours faithfully* but not too hard. Brushing the pink crumbs away, I could still see the ghosted writing. If she looked closely enough, Bridget would see it, too.

Yours faithfully.

"Can you pass this to Bridget?" I asked Abe as I slid the folded

THE TOXIC TEXT



note across our buddy desks.

Abe opened the paper and read the note. "Toilet?" he mouthed the word.

I had just made another mistake.

"Never mind," I said, reaching for the note. But Abe had already closed the folds and tapped Bridget on the shoulder.

"Of course, it will count," Miss Sorenson said.

"The students didn't cover the material in class and weren't advised to study it," Mother said. "And yet, the grade counts. Do you see a problem with that?"

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

“It was only an assessment—”

“An assessment that counts toward their grade.”

Bridget unfolded the note and held it flat on the crack between her buddy desk and Marlene’s. They were both reading it. They looked toward the front of the classroom. It wasn’t hard to make the connection between my note and Mother’s beatdown of Miss Sorenson.

In perfect synchronization, Bridget and Marlene both turned to look at me.

Bridget whispered, “Toilet.”

Marlene mouthed, “Wow.”

Did Bridget even notice the erased and ghosted Yours faithfully? Why had I thought it was a good idea to write that note?

Bridget smiled. It wasn’t a good smile. I started sweating and suddenly felt like I had to urinate. Bridget tossed the paper across the aisle, and it landed on a desk—Dewey’s desk.

Dewey studied the crumpled ball in front of him and turned to Bridget.

“Dude?” he whispered.

Bridget nodded, her head angled toward the front of the classroom at Miss Sorenson and the 50-foot mother. Dewey made the connection and unfurled the note. He read it.

“Duuude,” he whispered again.

Dewey passed the paper. My private apology note made the rounds of the classroom.

“So, do you?” Mother asked.

Miss Sorenson opened and closed her desk drawer and flipped through her grade book. It didn't seem like she was looking for anything in particular. It seemed like she wanted to be doing something else, anywhere else.

“Do I...?” Miss Sorenson asked.

“Do you see a problem?” Mother pulled a clear plastic zip-seal baggie from her purse. In it were the soggy, pulpy remains of the contaminated quiz that I had tried to flush. Mother used to substitute teach, and she liked to make her point with *visual aids*, as she called them.

Miss Sorenson was trying to ignore her, looking straight ahead at the class, so Mother held the bag in her eyeline. “Is it... going to... count?”

Miss Sorenson took the baggie from Mother and set it on her desk. The plastic was a little foggy, probably from the steamy moisture of the toilet-water-soaked paper. Even from where I was sitting, I could see that the ink of my handwriting was running.

Miss Sorenson unzipped the baggie.

“Is that the... is that, you know, *it*?” Abe asked me. “From the toilet?”

Miss Sorenson sighed and picked up the baggie. She used her thumb and index finger to hold open the top of it. I heard kids around me suck in a breath, waiting for her to reach inside.

They'd all read the note and knew what was at stake. They



realized there would be no cupcakes today, but if the gods of middle-school mythology were smiling upon them, there would be something better. A story. A legend. One to be passed from this generation of Green Hill Academy fifth graders to the next. *The day a teacher touched poop.*

It was probably my imagination, but I thought I could see fumes escaping the bag like heat waves coming off a black tar road in the summer sun.

Mother flicked her eyes around the classroom. She must have heard the kids stop breathing, too. But she said... nothing.

THE TOXIC TEXT

For a moment, Miss Sorenson's fingertips broke the invisible plane of the bag opening. They were going in. All the kids leaned forward in their seats, transfixed.

Then, Miss Sorenson stopped and sighed. She set the baggie—that could ensure her a place in Green Hill Academy school history—on her desk.

The kids settled back in their seats. I heard them exhale. I had truly believed in my heart of hearts that Mother would stop Miss Sorenson from reaching inside that baggie. Miss Sorenson was a nice person and my teacher. There was no way Mother would let her make skin contact with the infectious assignment... the caca quiz... the poopoo paper.

"I understand your take on the matter," Miss Sorenson said, finally looking up at Mother and making eye contact.

"So, you *are* capable of seeing sense and logic," Mother said. Sometimes, when Mother was angry, she just couldn't stop herself. She added, "I knew you still had to be smart to become a teacher."

Over the top of her glasses, Miss Sorenson glared at Mother, and her lips got tight. She picked up the baggie again.

"Yes, I *am* capable of seeing sense and logic," Miss Sorenson said. "The quiz... is going... to count. Furthermore, this is not the time nor the place for this discussion. You'll have to wait for the parent-teacher conferences, or you're welcome to make a proper appointment sooner."

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

Mother kept silent as Miss Sorenson reached her hand inside the bag.

“No!” shouted Bridget, Marlene, and several other girls.

The boys said nothing.

Miss Sorenson pulled out the moist and partially disintegrated paper and tried to unfold it on her desk, rubbing her hands across it.

“Why is it wet?” she asked.

Mother’s mouth made a smile so small I doubt any other kids saw it. I slunk down in my chair.

“Awesome sauce,” Dewey said.

BRIDGET MATSUMOTO DOES NOT LIKE STRING BEANS



BERNARD, WHAT ARE YOU doing here?” Miss Sorenson asked. She entered her classroom carrying a metal lunch box, a spray bottle, and a stack of tan paper towels that looked like she stole them from one of the dispensers in the bathroom.

I sat there alone. Everyone else was still in Alumni Hall for lunch. I had grabbed some food—fish sticks, tater tots, and a half-pint of chocolate milk—and snuck back to my desk.

“I guess I just didn’t feel like eating with everyone else staring at me,” I said.

“You mean because of your mother—this morning?”

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

“I’m really sorry about that. I know *I* have to deal with her, but you...”

Miss Sorenson set the lunch box and cleaning supplies on a small table and opened her desk drawer. She pulled out a first aid kit and found a pair of clear vinyl gloves that she stretched over her hands.

“Anyway, it’s not that. It’s Bridget again,” I said.

“Are you still upset about the episode on the playground by the big rock?” Miss Sorenson asked. She was taking stuff off her desk and setting it on her chair—papers, folders, a ceramic apple pen-and-pencil holder.

“She got brussels sprouts at lunch,” I said, tearing open my mini-carton of chocolate milk and staring down into the spout.

“Brussels sprouts?”

“Yeah. For the green vegetables today, they had a choice of brussels sprouts or string beans. When she saw Bridget, the cafeteria lady started to scoop out string beans. Ever since that day near the big rock, she *always* gets string beans. But today, Bridget said, ‘Stop. I want brussels sprouts.’”

“But nobody likes brussels sprouts,” Miss Sorenson said, her desk now clear.

“I know that,” I said, taking a slug of chocolate milk to drown my sorrows. I dribbled some of the drink and dragged my sleeve across my chin to dry it. I rubbed my eyes, too. They were starting to get watery.

BRIDGET MATSUMOTO DOES NOT LIKE STRING BEANS



Miss Sorenson was spritzing her desk with the spray bottle and wiping it with paper towels.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I'm the string bean," I said. "That's what Bridget called me, remember? When I told her I... liked her."

"I'm still not following," she said, not looking up from her cleaning.

"After I told her... what I told her, that's when she called me a string bean. She said that string beans didn't even have a heart."

Miss Sorenson stopped mid-wipe. She winced and glanced

from her lunchbox to the classroom clock.

“Oh, Bernard,” she sighed. “You all have such young hearts. Bridget shouldn’t have said that, okay? That was mean. But her saying that was just her awkward way of telling you that maybe she doesn’t feel the same way.”

“But she *does* feel the same way!”

“I really don’t think...,” Miss Sorenson stopped there and gave another look to the clock. She put her lunchbox up on the newly cleaned desk. Walking around to the front, she sat on the edge facing me and sighed.

“What makes you think—” she started.

“Because a few days later, when I was behind her in the lunch line, she got *double* string beans and then looked straight at me.”

Miss Sorenson squinted as though she were confused.

“*I’m* the string bean!” I said again. “And she ordered extra string beans! How could you not get that?”

“I think perhaps this is a conversation you should have with your mother,” she said, heading back behind her desk.

I started breathing all quick and shallow, and I was fighting to keep my lower lip from trembling. A small chirp escaped my throat like what always happened when I was upset or scared.

That chirp stopped Miss Sorenson.

“Have you said anything to any of your friends?” she asked.

“I don’t have any friends.”

“Oh. Yes. I forgot.”

“Wait. Forgot? What do you mean *forgot*? How did even you know?”

“I didn’t. I...” Miss Sorenson turned back, walked down the aisle, and slid into Dewey’s chair right across from me. She was peeling off her vinyl gloves.

“Okay, I knew,” she said. “I’m the teacher. I see things.”

“Yeah. But... man.”

“The point is you’re an amazing student. I heard it from your previous teachers, I know it from your record, and I’ve seen it myself so far this year. And being an amazing student requires a lot of work—sometimes lonely work. Am I right?”

I knew Miss Sorenson wasn’t really looking for an answer, but I nodded anyway. She crumpled her now contaminated gloves and laid them on Dewey’s desk.

“What are the gloves for?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

In case you didn’t know, it’s not the greatest feeling in the world to sit there and talk about the fact that you don’t have any friends.

“I wanted to clean my desk before I had my lunch.”

“Because of this morning?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s Dewey’s desk,” I said, motioning to where the tainted gloves now sat.

“I know.”

She didn't move the gloves.

"About the New Hampshire studies quiz," Miss Sorenson said, rubbing her hands. "When it went in the... water, there wasn't anything else in there with it?"

"Just my dignity," I said.

"Dignity?"

"It was one of my vocabulary lookup words. Anyway, don't worry. There're more germs on a phone than there are on a toilet seat. I read online that—"

"We're getting off track," Miss Sorenson said. "What I'm trying to say is there are some students in this class who spend so *much* time with friends that they're struggling academically. That is not a good thing. On the other hand, all the hard work necessary to become an amazing student sometimes doesn't leave *any time* for friends. And that's not a good thing either."

Miss Sorenson held her hands out in front of her a couple of feet apart. Her palms were facing each other. While slowly bringing her hands together in the middle, she continued to talk.

"But somewhere between lies a happy medium, maybe? Balance?"

Her hands met. She gave a tilt of her head and smiled.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you about balance?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Anyway, *I'm* not the one who wants me to be amazing. And I don't think I'm the one you have to tell."

“Your mother? She pushes pretty hard, huh?”

“Can you talk to her?” I asked Miss Sorenson, begging her with my eyes to fix everything.

I could hear doors opening, a herd of feet trampling, and lots of kids talking and laughing out in the hallway. Everyone was coming back from Alumni Hall.

“You didn’t get to eat your food,” I said, looking at Miss Sorenson’s lunchbox sitting on her desk.

She shrugged. I got the feeling this wasn’t the first time she’d missed lunch.

“I can help,” Miss Sorenson said. “But it can’t be just me talking to her. It’s not as simple as that.”

The kids started coming back into the room. I couldn’t believe she was going to leave me with that. That was no solution at all. But then Miss Sorenson leaned in close and spoke softly. “I’m your teacher. I want what’s best for you, and I will support you.”

With that, she stood and made her way back to her desk between Abe, Bridget, Marlene, and a few other kids coming down our aisle.

“How?” I asked.

Miss Sorenson half-mouthed the words, “I *will* find a way to support you.”

She left the unclean, crumpled vinyl gloves on Dewey’s desk

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY



FREAKS

October 4

➤ **DIRECT MESSAGE: TO: @CRUMMYMUMMY | FROM: @BERNARD_G**

Dear Crummy, Mother doesn't understand why I like your show so much. Sometimes, I don't understand it myself. I think that Mother thinks I'm defective. Maybe I am. But tons of people watch your show. They can't all be defective, can they?

You remember a few months ago, you ran a movie about a traveling carnival with a sideshow? That's exactly the kind of movie my mother is afraid I'll see on a program like *The Crummy Mummy Show*. Mother thinks watching stuff like that will bother me. And that sideshow movie, it did. But, even though it bothered me, it was also a good thing.

Remember the sideshow in the movie had what they called a freak show? It was pretty cruel and sad. In that freak show, audiences paid money to see people on display with actual physical problems. The carnival gave them names like Hoppy the Frog Boy, the Bearded Woman, the Texas Giant, and the one that bothered me the most, being a

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

string bean myself, the Human Skeleton. That was the name that made me look up more about the sideshows.

I've always written to you about my problems. If I'd had the guts to hit *Send* on these direct messages, you'd have been sick of hearing about me long ago. I know I'm not going through anything remotely close to what the carnival's so-called performers dealt with in that movie, but I can still kind of relate. It's not cool to be left out because you're different—like nobody can see that you're a real person, too.

If you ask me, the people running the sideshows and buying the tickets were the real freaks. That's why seeing that movie on your show was a good thing. It helped me understand that.

Trying to figure it all out.

Your number one fan,

Bernard Gawain

OCTOBER IS FOR MUMMIES



IT WAS THE SATURDAY after the toxic test incident. In New Hampshire, we had the first crisp temperatures of the season. This soon in October, the puddles and birdbaths weren't yet growing thin shells of ice on their surfaces, but it wouldn't be long. If you woke up early enough—and I usually did—you could see the frost covering the grass and etching the windshield of Mother's Prius. It wasn't a hard frost, but the days were definitely cooling down. So was Mother.



Breezy Hills Orchard was mobbed with apple pickers and pumpkin-spice-anything seekers. The regular parking lot was

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

full, so Mother had to park in a lumpy field with a lot of other cars. She winced every time the bottom of the Prius scraped a mound of dirt and grass.

I don't usually like crowds, but I was happy because I got to wear my cardigan wool sweater, which was nice and warm. It was also kind of baggy, making me look less skinny.

Sometimes I got strange looks because of the way I dressed—wearing sweaters like that and dress shoes. I didn't care. It was my style. The people in the old black and white monster movies on *The Crummy Mummy Show* dressed nicely. Well, not the monsters, but the other people. They had good manners, too. They were ladies and gentlemen. I liked that.

I saw a group of kids wearing Green Hill Academy Tigers cross-country hoodies coming down one of the trails from the pick-your-own section of the orchard. I didn't see any adults with them. I wondered how they all got there together. Did they make plans at school to coordinate rides from their parents? Did they text each other? Did each of their families just happen to go to Breezy Hills on the same morning, and they all found each other there? I was never in on things like that. It was a mystery to me.

The kids in the sweatshirts gave each other piggyback rides, laughed, and ate Honeycrisp apples. There was no water or anything to wash the apples, so they polished them inside their hoodies' front pouches before biting into them. Seeing those kids made me wonder if I might find Bridget there. I kept looking but

never saw her.

“Oh my, cider doughnuts. I know you want one,” Mother said, pointing to a sign above a long line of people. She laughed, and I smiled a little. We both knew apple cider doughnuts were *her* favorite.

The picnic tables beside the orchard’s food stand were full, so Mother and I sat on a bale of hay to eat our doughnuts. I had hot chocolate with mine. Mother had coffee.

Later, in the orchard store, she lifted a white paper sack full of Cortland apples and asked, “Should we make an apple pie when we get back home?”

The store also had ornamental corn wreaths. Mother got one for our front door. By the time she let me get a pair of small pumpkins and a box with four maple sugar candies, I knew she was in a good mood and not so mad at Miss Sorenson anymore.

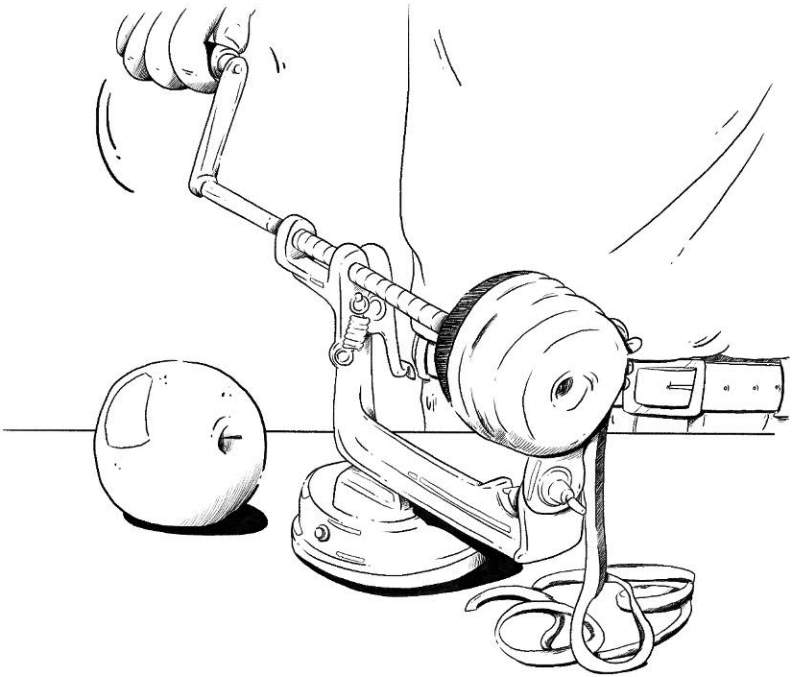


“Can I peel the apples?” I asked when we got home.

“Sure,” Mother said.

I knew I didn’t have to ask. Mother didn’t like peeling apples. I did. It was fun working the old-fashioned hand-crank apple peeler that we clamped to our kitchen table.

Mother got frustrated fighting with the pie crust she was trying to make from scratch. I didn’t want anything to mess up the day she was having—we were having. I talked her into using the store-bought crust she had gotten as a backup.



“You’re feeling pretty good, aren’t you?” I asked her.

“Bernard. Pretty good? Those are the best words you can find?”

I must have looked up and highlighted a thousand words in our living room dictionary. I racked my brain.

“You seem convivial,” I said.

“That’s better.”

Mother never gave an answer to my question about her mood, but I didn’t need one. I knew she was feeling good. How good?

We had apple pie for supper.



After we ate and cleaned up, I went to my room. I had been watching the clock, remembering it was Saturday night and *The Crummy Mummy Show* would start streaming soon.

Plugging in my earbuds and grabbing my tablet, I hopped onto my bed, sitting criss-cross applesauce and bunching some blankets around me for warmth. Mother tried not to turn on the furnace every year until after Halloween. And even when it was on, she set our thermostat to drop to sixty-two degrees at eight o'clock.

“The nice thing about fall and winter in New Hampshire,” she

always said, “was that you could let the house get cool at night. That makes for good sleeping weather.”

It *was* good sleeping weather—as long as you didn’t mind living in a house that went from warm to cool, then back again all the time.

I tapped the bookmark on my tablet for the Vidaroni Live Streaming Channels.

“Welcome all my little monsters to tonight’s episode of *The Crummy Mummy Show*,” said the Crummy Mummy herself as the stream began.

I tapped the icon for full screen.

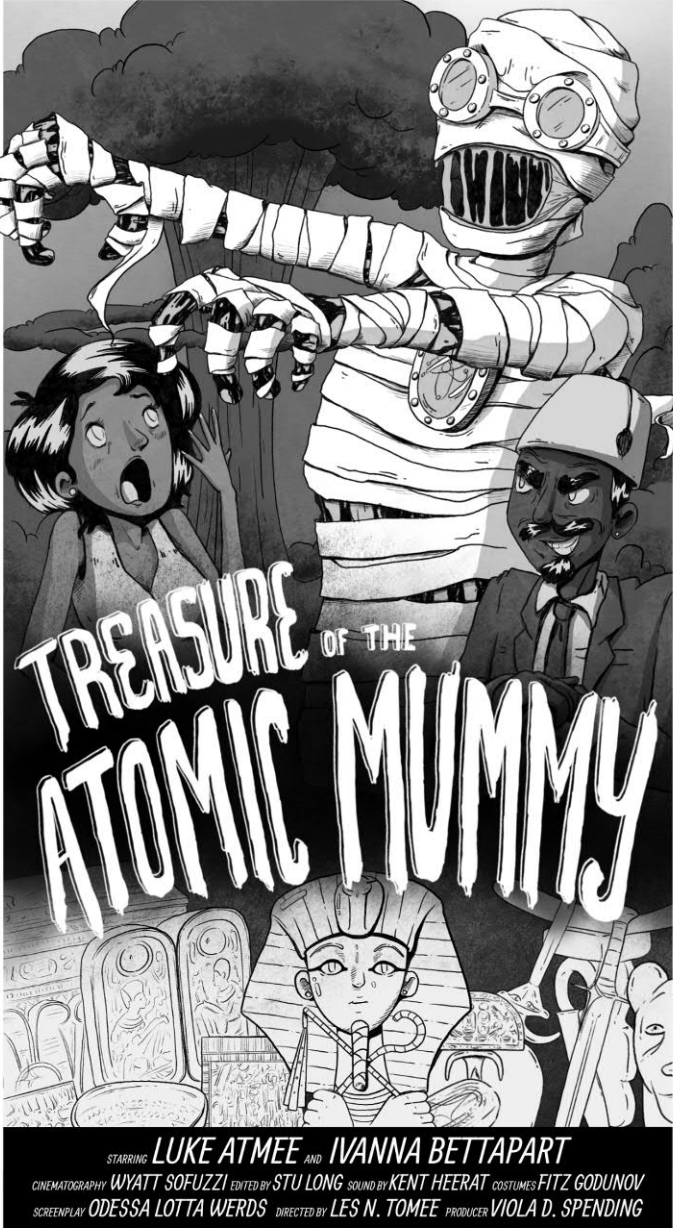
“We have something extraordinary for you. It’s October, and that means it’s *I Want My Mummy Month*. Nothing but mummy movies for the next four weeks. And tonight, we’ll kick things off with the 1956 B-movie classic *Treasure of the Atomic Mummy*.”

“Holy yowza,” I muttered.

I’d never seen *Treasure of the Atomic Mummy*, though I’d always wanted to. The problem was that you couldn’t find it anywhere. It never played on TV, wasn’t on DVD, and couldn’t be found streaming except for a few clips on Vidaroni. Man, leave it to the Crummy Mummy to find a copy. This was going to be good. Or rather, it was going to be so bad it’s good. The ultimate B-movie horror classic.

Mother shouted something, but it was muffled because she was downstairs, and I had the earbuds in. I plucked the bud out

OCTOBER IS FOR MUMMIES



STARRING **LUKE ATMEE** AND **IVANNA BETTAPART**

CINEMATOGRAPHY **WYATT SOFUZZI** EDITED BY **STU LONG** SOUND BY **KENT HEERAT** COSTUMES **FITZ GODUNOV**

SCREENPLAY **ODESSA LOTTA WERDS** DIRECTED BY **LES N. TOMEE** PRODUCER **VIOLA D. SPENDING**

of my right ear.

“What?” I yelled back.

“I asked if you want me to make us some real food for a late supper. I feel like an awful mother.”

“I don’t know...”

“We could watch TV for a little while.”

The truth was that even after two wedges of an apple pie supper, I *was* a little hungry. But Mother had said *make us some real food*, emphasis on *us*. That meant eating and watching television together—probably a movie where nobody spoke English or a documentary. *The Crummy Mummy Show* would be off-limits.

“I’m not very hungry,” I said.

“If you’re sure.”

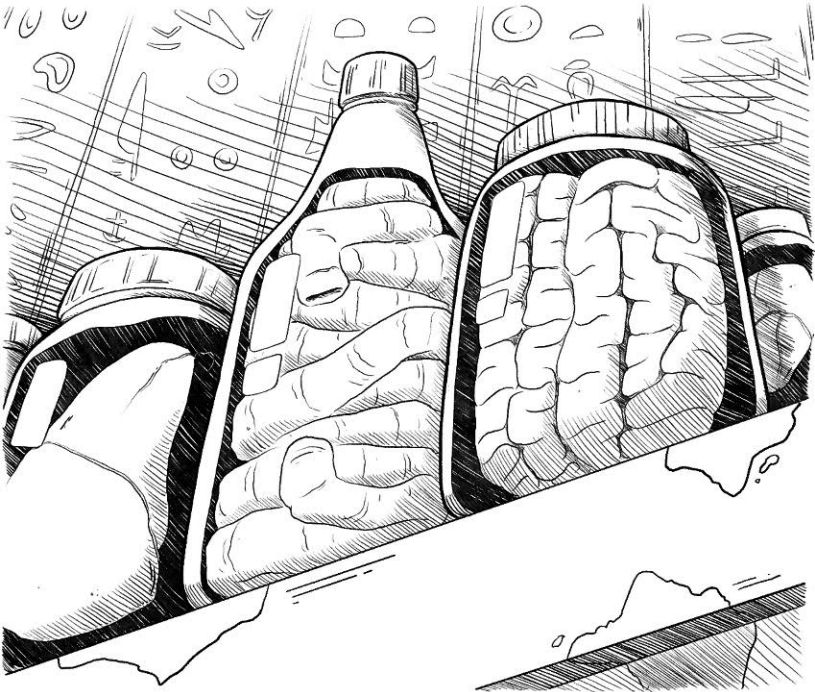
I wasn’t, but I still didn’t answer.

The Crummy Mummy set was supposed to be an ancient Egyptian tomb. The background was Styrofoam spray-painted to look sandy and carved with hieroglyphics. I didn’t know what the writing said. One time, I used a camera-translate app on it, but it didn’t work on hieroglyphics. Some translation apps work on Klingon and even Pirate, but I guess those smartphone people are only so smart.

A sarcophagus stood behind the Crummy Mummy. She zombie-stepped out of it at the beginning of every show and returned to it at the end. The hinges on the door of the sarcophagus

creaked something awful. I knew it was a fake sound effect. Sometimes, it was out of sync with her opening the door. Once, it was so far off she was already on camera introducing the film when the creak came.

Near the Crummy Mummy herself, toward the front of the set, was a small fake stone table with canopic jars. Those jars were to hold her insides that they would have removed from her body when they made her into a mummy. The idea was that if they kept all of her piece parts with her, like her lungs, liver, intestines, and stomach, then when she got to the next world, they could



THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

reassemble her. There wasn't a jar for her heart because they wouldn't have taken that out. You could say this about the Crummy Mummy; somewhere in there, she still had heart.

RAMESSES KA OF GREEN HILL, NEW HAMPSHIRE



BUT BEFORE *TREASURE OF the Atomic Mummy*,” the Crummy Mummy said, her voice all echoey from the electronic sound gizmo they used on the show, “I have a *treasure* of my own to unwrap.”

The Crummy Mummy has a treasure?

“Are you going to bed now?” Mother called up again from downstairs.

“No.”

Beside the canopic jars on the Crummy Mummy set was a

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

Book of the Dead. In ancient Egypt, this was a kind of scroll with spells and stuff that could supposedly bring the dead back to life. But the Crummy Mummy's *Book of the Dead* didn't have spells. It had jokes the Crummy Mummy told during breaks in the movies. And it had more than jokes. In fact, the Crummy Mummy reached for the book just then and began to read from it.

"One hundred years ago this October," the mummy started, "*Nightshade's Traveling Bedlam Circus and Odditorium* came to Green Hill, New Hampshire."

Green Hill, New Hampshire? The Crummy Mummy knows our town!

The Crummy Mummy read on, "Nightshade's circus convinced the town's Green Hill Agricultural Fair to share the fairgrounds. People of the town ran the autumn fair as a showcase for their labor, a friendly competition, and a fundraiser for the community. Nightshade's circus enticed the townspeople who organized the fair with a ruse that the combined attractions would draw a great many more people. And so, the fair's organizers accepted, and the people did come."

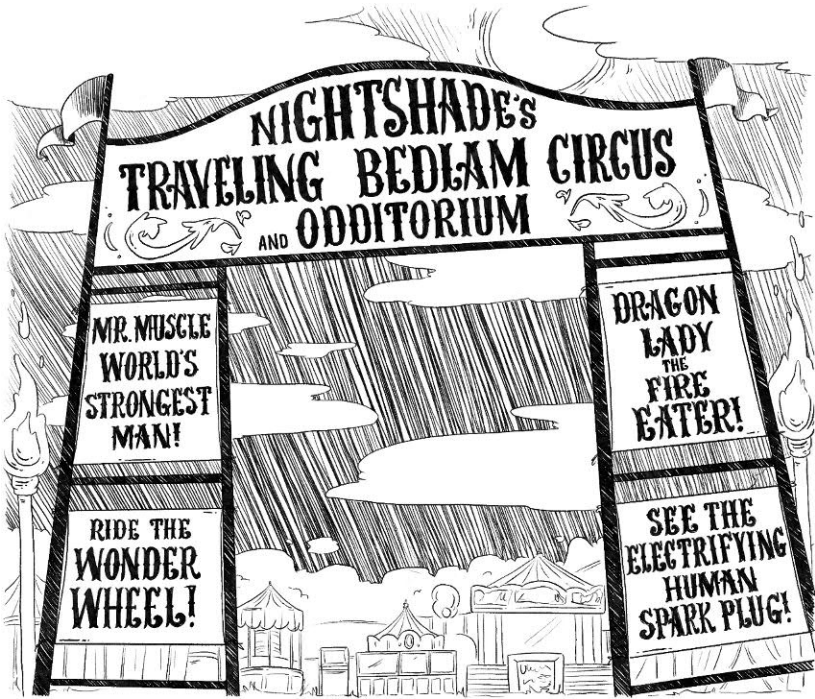
"Well, what are you doing, then?" Mother shouted.

"I'm learning about New Hampshire history," I said.

Well, sort of.

"Are you going to be able to retake that quiz?"

"Not that I know of."



“You’re just learning for the sake of learning?” My mother sounded surprised but happy.

“Sure. Okay,” I said.

Now, be quiet. I’m trying to listen.

“That’s wonderful.”

The Crummy Mummy set the scroll back on the table. The lighting on her set dimmed and got reddish. They tweaked her electronic voice to get deeper. She continued the story from memory.

“The blue-ribbon patchwork quilts, apple pies, prize-winning

THE CURSE OF THE CRUMMY MUMMY

vegetables, and livestock of the town's agricultural fair were no match for Nightshade's bedlam circus. The twisted siren call of the carousel calliope and the midway's games-of-chance with their false promise of easy money drew the townsfolk like ships to the rocks."

The mummy's mouth stretched open in a gross smile to reveal her rotted teeth. She must have found the part about the siren calls, townsfolk, and ships on the rocks delicious.

"Money they could ill afford to lose was sucked from their pockets by Nightshade's wonder wheel, strong man, and fire-eater. Vaguely shameful curiosity gripped the townsfolk by the hand and led them to the ticket booth of the odditorium—the *freak show*—and its main attraction, the *AUTHENTIC EGYPTIAN MUMMY!* Once inside, they clung to each other and the course stanchion ropes. Their feet shuffled along the sawdust-strewn ground and through the musty canvas of the dimly lit tent."

Wow! The Crummy Mummy was in such great voice that night and talking about Green Hill that I didn't even mind waiting for the *Treasure of the Atomic Mummy* to start.

"They crept past disturbing things floating in hazy glass jars," the Crummy Mummy said, "past mysterious animals—alive or dead unknown—cowering in the shadowy corners of makeshift pens."

I drew the blankets tighter around my shoulders. I could almost smell the carnival air—the frying dough, the caramel

RAMESES KA OF GREEN HILL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

sugar scent of cotton candy, and the sweet grassy aroma of horse manure. But there was a faint stench underneath, and it was growing stronger. I shivered involuntarily. The imagined sweat of excited and frightened townspeople wafted to my nose. And it was mixed with the smell of decay—three-thousand-year-old decay like the air escaping through the broken door of a pharaoh's raided tomb.

“Pulled by gravity,” the Crummy Mummy continued. Her face was closer to the camera now and deep red from the studio lighting, “the townsfolk moved ever forward toward it, the reason they'd fumbled in their pockets for those last few coins needed to purchase a ticket—a ticket to see death in the shape of an AUTHENTIC EGYPTIAN MUMMY!”

Now, it wasn't just smells. I heard a sound.

Creaking.

The Crummy Mummy's sarcophagus.

No, it was closer than that. It was in my room. The hinge screeched as my door swung open. I pulled the blanket over my head. My nervous chirp escaped my throat.

“What are you doing up here in the dark?” Mother asked. “What is that you're watching?”

“Ramesses Kaaaaaah,” growled the Crummy Mummy, “had come to Green Hill, New Hampshire.”

End of Preview

“A sprightly tale of self-discovery that’s both affecting and endearing... it’s inspiring to watch the fifth grader uncover his inner fortitude while hiding inside a costume.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A fun tale, which grabs from beginning to end.”

—*Bookworm for Kids*



Miss Sorenson’s fifth-grade class at Green Hill Academy is going to make a movie... a mummy movie! Brilliant but awkward Bernard Gawain is thrilled his crush, Bridget Matsumoto, has been cast as the leading lady, and he will be playing her hero. But this dream come true unravels when his domineering mother becomes the class substitute teacher and the film’s tyrannical director.



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