

# The Magic Paintbrush

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## ONE

“Grandmas are supposed to bake cookies,” said Henry. His voice was so matter-of-fact, like he knew he was one hundred thousand percent absolutely, positively correct about the role of grandmas in the universe. Then again, Henry Hanks thinks he’s one hundred thousand percent absolutely, positively correct about everything. Just ask him.

We were sitting on top of the monkey bars during recess. Henry was working his way through a ginormous sugar cookie in the shape of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. His grandma had baked him the T-Rex, along with five other T-Rexes. Henry said she’d also baked him half a dozen each of brontosaurus and triceratops cookies. She’d decorated all the cookies with yellow frosting and red sprinkles.

My grandma doesn’t bake T-Rex cookies, with or without yellow frosting and red sprinkles. Come to think of it, I’d never seen Grandma bake anything.

I licked the filling from between the two halves of a store-bought Oreo wannabe, the kind that crumbles more often than not when you twist the cookie apart to get to the good stuff. Today was my lucky day. No cookie crumble.

Henry took a huge chomp and talked around a mouthful of T-Rex tail. His tongue and lips had turned orange from the yellow frosting and red sprinkles. “Doesn’t your grandma ever bake you cookies?”

I plopped the top half of the Oreo wannabe into my mouth and shook my head. Unlike Henry, I knew it wasn’t polite to talk with my mouth full of food.

“Then what does she do?”

I swallowed, then ran my tongue around my lips to catch any leftover chocolate crumbs. Henry had sugar cookie crumbs all over his mouth and covering much of his shirt and jeans. “She paints,” I said.

“Walls?”

“Pictures.”

Henry shook his head and gave me a look like I’d just told him I’d broken my arm and could never play baseball again. Ever. “Poor you. That is so not right. It’s practically un-American. Everyone knows grandmas are supposed to bake cookies and do other grandma stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like knitting sweaters. And scarves. It’s practically their job. Cookie baking and knitting.” Henry thought for a moment, scrunching up his face as he forced his brain into overdrive. Then he added, “And cooking turkey with stuffing for Thanksgiving and roast beef with mashed potatoes and gravy for Sunday dinners. Except in winter. Grandmas go to Florida in the winter.”

“Why Florida?”

“Cause that’s what grandmas do. It’s in the Grandma Rules.” Henry attempted that eye roll thing I’ve seen adults sometimes do. Except he wound up cross-eyed, staring at the freckles on his nose. It didn’t seem to bother him. “Jeez, Jack, don’t you know anything?”

I guess not. I didn't know there were Grandma Rules. I don't think Grandma knows about these rules, either. I hope she won't get in trouble for breaking them. I wondered if there are Grandma Rules police that make sure all the grandmas get on airplanes for Florida by a certain date each year. And if so, what would happen if they found out Grandma's been breaking those Grandma Rules?

My grandma doesn't bake cookies. She doesn't knit sweaters, either. And as far as I know, she's never been to Florida.

The end of recess bell rang. Henry stuffed the remainder of T-Rex in his mouth and hopped off the monkey bars. As we lined up to go back to class, he turned to me and opened his mouth wide. The remains of T-Rex sat in a red-sprinkled glob on his orange tongue. "I'm glad I don't have a grandma like yours, Jack. She's weird."

Little did Henry know just how weird. But Grandma is weird in the best way possible. I just can't tell Henry or anyone else. It's our secret. Grandma's and Zoe's and mine.

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"Anyone can bake cookies," said Grandma when I climbed up to her artist's garret after school and told her what Henry said. Grandma says all serious artists need a garret. That's a fancy name for her special painting room.

"Henry's a dumb know-it-all," said Zoe. She sat on her pink and purple Zoe Throne, her pink glittery heart scepter in her hand, her Princess Zoe crown perched on her long strawberry-blonde curly hair. As usual, she wore one of her princess gowns.

Zoe absolutely, positively refuses to wear shorts or jeans or any other kind of play clothes except for swimsuits when we go to the pool or down the shore in the summer. And even then the swimsuits have to have ruffles or hearts or glitter or ribbons. Zoe only wears girly stuff. She decided to become a princess when she was two years old. She's now eight and still a princess.

Mom and Dad say Zoe will always be their little princess. Boy, would they be surprised to find out Zoe really is a princess. But even though Zoe is my little sister by two years, I'm not a prince. I'm a swashbuckling pirate. Pirate Jack.

I even have a real sword, but I have to keep it in a special place in Grandma's garret, hidden from my little brother Chase. Chase loves having sword fights, but he's only three. He'd hurt himself with my real sword.

"Henry can't be a dumb know-it-all," I said. "It's a...a..." I looked over at Grandma for help. She was always teaching us big words, and I knew this one. It meant when two words are opposites and can't be combined because they wouldn't make sense, like a smart idiot. Or a dumb know-it-all.

You can't be dumb and a know-it-all because if you're a know-it-all, you're not dumb. You're smart. I just couldn't think of the word.

I closed my eyes and jumped up and down, trying to shake the word out from wherever it was stuck in my head. Sometimes that works. This time it only half-worked. "Moron something!" I shouted.

"Oxymoron," said Grandma.

"Right," said Zoe. "He's a moron."

"Not a moron, an oxymoron."

"That's what I said," said Zoe. "He's a moron."

Grandma chuckled as she turned back to her painting. She dipped her brush into a

puddle of muddy water, then swished the brush back and forth in the air like she was conducting an orchestra. A stream of glittery silver and gold stars leaped from her brush and fell in an arc across the top half of the paper tacked to her easel.

Zoe clapped her hands and made some oohing and aahing sounds.

Henry's grandma might bake dinosaur cookies with yellow frosting and red sprinkles, but our grandma makes magic. Only, instead of a magic wand, Grandma has a magic paintbrush.

Grandma nodded at the stars, then turned to me. "Besides, that's what bakeries are for. If I baked cookies, what would poor Mrs. Pepperidge do? Or all those cute elves? You wouldn't want me to put them out of work, would you?"

Sometimes I'm not sure whether Grandma is joking with us because of the way her eyes twinkle and the corners of her mouth kind of twitch in a half smile, half laugh. But she always makes sense in a Grandma sort of way, and she makes you believe that there really are cookie-baking elves.

How could there not be, given all the other magic Zoe and I have seen?

Grandma is so way cooler than Henry's grandma, but don't tell anyone. If you ask her, Grandma will laugh and say there's no such thing as magic or magic paintbrushes. Zoe and I know she only says that because she has to. So it's really not fibbing. That's part of the secret. And the magic.