

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY[®]



THE **RISKY
REUNION**

by Marshal Younger

from Adventures in Odyssey[®]



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The Risky Reunion

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*For Kristyn,
my third-born.
I can still make you laugh
at any given moment,
even though I haven't come up with
any new jokes since 2003.
I wish more people were like you.*





A REALLY BAD PARADE

I PRESSED MY LIPS tightly together and tried to force the laughter from my ears. It was worse than when I thought of something funny during church. I glanced over and noticed that Scott Sanchez, my best friend, was about to burst as well. I exchanged covert smiles with Nelson Swanson and Jill Segler. Alice Funderburk, the only member of the Kidsboro city council who was taking this performance seriously, was listening intently.

The Clean Up Kidsboro group continued their presentation, as passionate about the environment as they could be. Mark was the leader of the group of three, and he dramatically pulled a prop out of a garbage bag. It was a picture of a large, ripe, perfect pumpkin. The picture was on a stand, and he propped it up on the table.

“This,” Mark said, “is the human lung.” Scott snickered at the thought. I had no idea what Mark meant. Mark reached back into the bag and pulled out an actual pumpkin, cut in half so we could see the inside. We turned our noses away in unison. It was rotted out and black with fungus. He

placed it on the table next to the picture. "This," Mark continued, "is the human lung after it has been exposed to just two weeks of air pollution. Disgusting, isn't it?" He was right. I'd never be able to eat pumpkin pie again.

Mark went on. "Pollution in Kidsboro is out of control. We are in a crisis situation, and if we do not respond to it right now, we are forfeiting the futures of our children and our children's children."

I could hear Scott chuckling. I dared not look at him. Mark glared in his direction, and Scott buried his head in his hands as if he were crying—mourning the thought of our children's children having lungs like rotten pumpkins. I don't think Mark was fooled, but he continued with his presentation anyway.

It was budget time in Kidsboro, the only town I know of that's completely run by kids. It was May, a year and three months after Kidsboro had first opened its doors, so to speak. Our first budget had been done pretty randomly, so we had decided we needed to be more organized this year and write out a complete budget for the entire year. In Kidsboro, everything was paid for with Kidsboro money—starbills and tokens.

We were meeting to decide what kinds of things the Kidsboro government would pay for with the people's taxes. The first year we'd had only three government employees—Alice, the chief of police, Corey, the garbageman, and me, Ryan Cummings, the mayor. The three of us were paid through taxes. The only other things that were paid for with taxes were city buildings, such as the meeting hall pavilion.

But this year was turning out to be different. People had the idea to try to squeeze as much money as they could out of the government for their own causes. Today we were to hear arguments from groups like Clean Up Kidsboro, trying to convince us to give them money. It was supposed to be a serious time of deciding where our citizens' tax money was going to go, but groups like this made it a circus.

I tried my hardest not to laugh. The people who were representing causes really cared about their issues and expected wise, informed decisions from their government. I cared about the environment too; I just didn't think Kidsboro had a big pollution problem. And that rotten pumpkin was enough to make a dead man giggle.

Despite Scott's stifled laughter, Mark continued straight-faced.

"Listen to this. A poll taken of Kidsboro citizens shows that 85 percent of our population don't want our city to become a scummy pothole of pollution and filth."

Wow. Did that mean 15 percent of our people *did* want our city to become a scummy pothole?

"I think this statistic speaks for itself," he continued. "Kidsboro wants you to do something. Kidsboro *needs* you to do something." He pushed the Stop button on his tape player to put an end to the patriotic background music. He took a deep breath and looked at us like a puppy begging for table scraps.

"What exactly do you want?" I asked him.

Mark picked up some pieces of paper from his notebook and handed them out to each member of the city council.

"On these handouts, I have outlined exactly how much money we'll need for each project that we'll be leading during the upcoming year." We all looked at the paper in front of us. He wanted 30 starbills? That was ridiculous! Very few people made 30 starbills in an entire summer!

"The first project we would like to see approved is the building of an outdoor bathroom. We have noticed some of our citizens—boys—relieving themselves in the creek. This is unacceptable."

An outdoor bathroom was actually not such a bad idea. The nearest building to Kidsboro was Whit's End, the ice cream shop and discovery emporium owned by Mr. Whitaker, or "Whit" as most adults called him. Whit's End was a long way to walk to go to the bathroom in an emergency. But an outdoor bathroom would not cost 30 starbills. And we were all at least nine years old. In my opinion, we could hold it.

"We also need money to increase pollution awareness. Not many people even know there is a problem."

Including me.

Mark continued, "We would also like tougher penalties on littering."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"All right," I said. "We'll discuss it and get back to you, Mark. Thanks."

"Thank you, Mayor Ryan. Thank you, Scott, Nelson, Alice, Jill," he said, nodding his head toward each council member in turn. "The future of Kidsboro depends on you."

Mark, his two assistants, and his pumpkin left. As soon

as they were out of earshot, Scott's cheeks burst open with laughter, as if he'd been holding his breath for 10 minutes. The rest of us laughed with him.

"I thought I was gonna explode when he brought out the pumpkin!" Scott said.

"Has he been saving that thing since Thanksgiving?" Jill asked.

"What kind of poll was that?" Nelson asked. "How unscientific can you get? You might as well ask a hundred people if they'd like to be eaten by a mountain lion."

The next group approached, and we had to stifle our giggling. But it didn't get any better throughout the rest of the day. More groups came, all so passionate about what they believed in that it almost brought tears to our eyes—especially Scott's eyes, which were about to cry from laughter.

The next group was the farmers, led by Kidsboro's only doctor, James. James had probably joined a special-interest group because he had nothing else to do, since no one trusted him to treat even their slightest wound. I supposed he picked farming because it was the closest thing to medical work, as it dealt with health and nutrition.

The farmers had planted a garden the summer before, but they didn't make any money from it because of a very important premise that they forgot and continued to ignore: Kids don't buy vegetables. In fact, kids usually avoid the vegetable aisle when they go to grocery stores. But the Kidsboro farmers were determined to make us all eat vegetables.

They came to the meeting with charts and graphs showing why it's so important for people to eat healthy foods. I

agreed, of course, but I still didn't think kids would *buy* vegetables. The farmers must have had some doubts too, because they wanted the government to subsidize their garden. That meant they wanted the government to buy all of their produce since there was no demand for it from the customers.

Next was Corey, our garbageman, who wanted to be paid as much as Alice and me. We had intended to give him a raise, but he certainly didn't deserve as much as he was asking for. After all, he only worked once a week! And it wasn't as if people were throwing away heavy things like old televisions or charcoal grills. All he had to do was go around collecting candy wrappers, apple cores, soft drink cans, and paper. That was about it. Everything he collected would fit in a small grocery bag.

Next was an animal rights group that wanted dogs and cats to have the same rights in Kidsboro as humans—including citizenship and their own houses. A newer citizen of Kidsboro named Melissa told us a tear-jerking “true” story about a cat that wanted to be an actor in cat food commercials but kept getting thrown off buses. He could never get to Hollywood.

Unless we had some blind citizens or created a fire department, I couldn't fathom what a dog would do for a living in our town. Much less a cat, unless a big hairball suddenly swept the city.

The next group was the Legalize Slingshots group, who wanted to put an end to the law in our city charter forbidding slingshots anywhere within the Kidsboro city limits. I thought this was a common-sense law, but the group did

their best to shoot holes in it. A boy named Ben stood up and said with all sincerity, "We have a right to protect ourselves against nature. Do you have any idea how many bears there are in this part of the country?" He was right—I didn't have any idea. And I was pretty sure Ben didn't either. The group brought out different kinds of slingshots—some large, some small, some built to fling rocks, some made to fling things like rubber balls. They wanted us to consider each type, noting the ones that were perfectly harmless. But what good would harmless slingshots be against a bear?

Finally, the slingshot guys collected their weapons and displays and headed home. Again, the second they were out of earshot, we all had a big laugh about it. I was still laughing when the next group came up from behind me. Suddenly, everyone else stopped laughing. They looked over my shoulder with faces of stone, not cracking a smile. I turned around.

It was Valerie Swanson, Nelson's sister. She was accompanied by two other girls, and the looks on their faces told us they meant business. Suddenly, things were not so jovial in the meeting hall. Valerie always got what she wanted, and I shivered to think about what she could possibly want now. Everyone else had come to us like desperate souls, worried about the status of the world. Valerie came with a demanding look that said, "I have no concern for you or your city. I just want what I want, and I will get it." Her long, brown hair was pulled back in clips, and I was momentarily distracted by her good looks. I quickly shook it off, knowing that I needed to be at the top of my game to deal with her.

The three girls walked in sync as they approached the

front of the meeting hall. They had no charts, no diagrams, no visual aids—just themselves and whatever frightening cause they were about to stand for.

Valerie, of course, was the spokesperson. “Good afternoon, council members. We represent Girls Against Discrimination.” (GAD?) “We have noticed certain inconsistencies with the way our city council, and specifically, our mayor, makes decisions. Our research team has documented evidence that boys are given special privileges in this town. There are more boys than girls in Kidsboro. There are three boys but only two girls on the city council. Boys get better pay. And boys are hired for government jobs before girls. We want these things changed.”

There was a short pause. Apparently, this was all she felt she needed to say. She wanted it. Now we were expected to do it. I wouldn’t let her get away with this, but I had to act reasonable at the same time. “Valerie,” I said calmly, “I’ve never noticed a pattern of special treatment or consideration given to boys over girls.”

“Of course you haven’t. You’re a boy.”

This was her response? I was looking for something more along the lines of this documented evidence she was talking about. “Well . . . Valerie . . .” I continued, sounding a bit too much like I was talking to a three year old, “you’ve got to have more solid evidence than vague accusations. You need to make an argument.”

“Oh, I will. Just not here.”

“Then where?”

Valerie reached into her back pocket and pulled out a

folded sheet of paper. She handed it to me. I unfolded it, and across the top of the page was the word *Subpoena*, which meant she was taking me to court. "I'm suing you," she said.

"For what?"

"Discrimination."

I looked around at the rest of the city council, trying to feel their support. But all I got were looks that said, "You're on your own, buddy."

I stiffened my upper lip. "Is this supposed to scare me into giving you whatever you want?"

"Oh, I'll get what I want."

"And what's that?"

"More government jobs for girls. Another girl on the city council. Equal pay for equal work. And no more new boys will come in as citizens until there are just as many girls here as there are boys."

I chuckled and hoped the rest of the city council would follow my lead and chuckle with me. They didn't. "Valerie . . . you know, I would love to . . . but there's not much I can do about—"

"See you in court," she said, gesturing to the other girls to follow her out. They were gone before I could get another word out.

I looked at the other council members. I started laughing again, just like I had laughed at all the others. "Does she really think that . . . Ha! She's so . . . silly . . ." I scanned their faces, but no one was laughing with me this time.

Jill stared at me with a scrunched up nose. "Why *are* there three boys but only two girls on the city council?"

I gulped hard.

Alice glanced at me with the same look. "How much money do you and Corey make?"



I wasn't paying much attention to what Mr. Whittaker and Nelson were working on, but whatever it was, I knew it would be amazing when it was done. It was things like this that made Whit's End more than just an ice cream place. Mr. Whittaker was a great inventor who taught all the kids who came into his shop about the Bible (and life in general) through his machines. He and Nelson were working on the Imagination Station, which was sort of like a time machine that let you live in other times. At the moment, they were working on a Bible program for the story of Joshua.

"Could you read off those numbers, Nelson?" Mr. Whittaker asked.

"Sure."

"Thanks."

Nelson read off a list of numbers from a sheet of paper. The list made no sense to me, but Mr. Whittaker pounded them all into the keyboard.

I waited for Nelson to finish, and then asked the question that had been dominating my thoughts ever since Valerie and her friends had made their announcement. "Do you think I discriminate against girls?"

Nelson took off his glasses and put one earpiece in his mouth. He looked thoughtful for a few moments, and then

said without a doubt, "No." He looked back at the computer screen, where Mr. Whittaker's program was loading.

"That's it? No explanation?"

"My response doesn't require an explanation. If I had answered 'Yes, I do think you discriminate,' then it would require an explanation. But I said no." He was beginning to sound more and more like Eugene Meltsner, *Odyssey's* resident genius and Nelson's mentor.

"May I ask why you're asking that question, Ryan?" Mr. Whittaker asked. I told him about Valerie's new feminist group.

"I've never known you to make any decisions that discriminated against girls," Mr. Whittaker said.

"Yeah," Nelson said, "you're always suggesting girls when we vote on new citizens."

"And you seem to get along with most of them," Mr. Whittaker added.

"Yeah," I said, my head raised a little higher. "I *do* get along with girls. I don't discriminate. I'm very fair. Right?"

"Right," Nelson said, his attention back on the computer.

"I don't have to just sit here and accept what Valerie says. I've got plenty of evidence on my side. I can beat her in court!"

"Sure you can."

"I need to write some stuff down," I said, but before I could find any paper, Scott walked up.

"Hey, did you meet the guy from the *Odyssey Times*?" he asked excitedly.

“No.”

“He came out to Kidsboro today and asked me a bunch of questions.”

“About what?”

“The town, how it worked . . . he asked a lot of questions about you.”

“Really?”

“Wouldn’t that be cool if there was an article in the paper about Kidsboro?”

“That would be great,” Mr. Whittaker said.

“Hey, he’ll probably want to interview both of you,” Scott said, referring to Mr. Whittaker and me.

“Yeah, that’s right, Mr. Whittaker,” I said. “He’ll want to know how the place started.” Having a town run by kids had been Mr. Whittaker’s idea. He’d founded Kidsboro and had helped us build the town.

I coached Mr. Whittaker on some of the things to talk about when the *Odyssey Times* reporter came to him. Mr. Whittaker chuckled, knowing exactly what to say. He always did.