

DANDI DALEY MACKALL

LARGER- THAN-LIFE LARA



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Larger-Than-Life Lara

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Character

THIS ISN'T ABOUT ME. This story, I mean. So already you got a reason to hang it up. At least that's what Mrs. Smith, my teacher, says. She teaches fourth graders in Paris, Missouri, how to write stories. But I think she'd about a hundred million times rather be in Paris, France, writing her own stories.

So anyways, she says you got to start with a character when you start your story. And since I'm the first "character" you hear from in my story, that should mean it's about me. Laney Grafton, age ten,

or nearly so, small for her age, but tough as a horse-shoe, thanks to three big brothers and one bathroom. Stringy, brownish hair and brown eyes. Not much to look at, but couldn't make a living scaring crows neither.

But it's not. About me. Because once you get yourself a character for your story, Mrs. Smith says you give the character a problem. And the whole rest of the story's about that problem getting bigger and bigger, and the character getting to be a better and better person, and then the character solves the problem. And that's it. The end.

Only it's not me what's got the problem. And I'm not a better person than I was three months ago when all this stuff happened—just ask my daddy or any of my three stupid brothers, if you don't believe me. So, like I said, this story's not about me. And Mrs. Smith, if you're out there reading it, well, I'm just sorry about that. But that's the way it is. Sometimes stories don't work out like they're supposed to.

The Beginning

THE FIRST THING THAT HAPPENED was that everybody in the whole fourth-grade class, and that includes Mrs. Smith, stopped talking. She was right in the middle of telling us about William Shakespeare, who invented plays in England. Plus, she was telling us about a play our whole class was going to put on and how some of us could be in it and others of us would be really important, but not on stage, and that shouldn't make us feel bad. And we were all looking at Mrs. Smith because she gets real mad at us when we don't. I was watching the way her

eyes changed size when she finished each sentence, getting bigger, like periods stretching into exclamation points.

So anyways, that was the first thing. I heard quiet.

The second thing was the air changed. Now this is where Mrs. Smith and Amanda Catron and Tommy Otto would argue with me. But this is my story, and I say that the air in our classroom changed. It was hot, lemon-drop-sweating hot, so as even Maddie Simpson looked like she'd tiptoed through a water sprinkler. And I'm not saying that the air turned to ice or nothing. But I stopped sweating. So there you have it.

There must have been footsteps because nobody, especially a kid who looked like this one, big as a sofa, could just sneak into a room without them. But I didn't hear any footsteps. And my daddy says I can hear a cat whisper. (When he's been drinking, he says the cats in China can hear *me*, which is his way of saying shut up, and he has other ways of saying shut up, but you can't write them into a story. Mrs. Smith would call this part a digression. I'm thinking I can get away with it because it's all inside these parentheses.)

Before I saw who had come into our room and

changed the air, I saw Joey Gilbert see her. Joey looked like he'd just spotted a ghost, or maybe his mother coming to get him after the principal's kicked him out of school for a week for punching a littler kid. Then I saw Marissa see her. Marissa is so shy, you almost never see her face. But at that minute, her face was in full view, and it was nearly all eyes and mouth dropped open.

Then *I* saw her. I've seen her so much since that very first time that it's honest-to-Pete hard to say what I thought she looked like. And this is something I never thought about as a writer of real things you haven't made up. It's not easy to write the truth, even when that's all you set out to do.

I guess I remember thinking that this was the biggest girl I'd ever seen. Right away I wondered if she was stuck in the doorway, because she was still standing there, filling up the whole space, it seemed to me, with no light from the hallway showing behind her. I figured she was about the most mountain-like human being I'd ever seen, or maybe hill-like, with ridges and rolling fields. And maybe I thought that because she was wearing a green dress, so it looked even more like hills, how the green swelled around her middle and arms. And I'm sure

about the green dress because it's what she always wore to school.

"Whoa!" Eric Radabaugh was the first one to start up talking, of course. And Wayne Wilson wasn't far behind.

"Man, is the circus in town?" Wayne whispered. Only his whisper is about a hundred times louder than a normal person's regular voice.

I risked looking at the stranger's face to see how she took it. Her round cheeks twitched a bit, but those pale blue eyes stayed twinkling, like they were smiling, even though her mouth wasn't. So I figured she hadn't heard Eric and Wayne, because when they call me "freak girl" or "toughie" (and I guarantee they don't mean it in a good way) or "hillbilly," there's no way I can pretend I didn't hear.

"Can I help you?" Mrs. Smith asked, clearing her throat, like being hoarse was why she didn't say something before Eric and Wayne got to.

"I'm Lara." The girl's mouth joined her eyes in that smile. She glanced around the room, like she was giving each of us a little piece of her smile.

I looked down at my fingernails when I could tell the smile was getting to my row. Dirt was packed under the nails that weren't bit down to the finger. So

I tried picking the dirt out. I don't go around dirty. Really I don't. But nails and ears, those are parts you forget about. At least I do. There's this picture of my mama in the bottom drawer of my daddy's dresser, underneath the magazines he doesn't want my brothers to look at. And it doesn't take but one look at that picture to know my mama never ever forgot about dirt under her fingernails.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Smith said. "Laura . . . ?"

"Lara," the girl said, but not like she was mad or anything. "L-A-R-A."

"I see." But you could tell our teacher did not see. "Were you looking for someone?"

L-A-R-A's smile got big enough to show us her tiny, white teeth. One of the front ones was missing, and that made her look stranger than fiction. She stayed there, standing in the exact center of the doorway.

Sometimes Mrs. Smith makes us do these exercises on describing characters when we write stories in class. Characterization, she calls it. She passes out papers that look like this:

_____ *is the kind of person who* _____.

Then we fill in the blanks for all the characters in our stories. Well, my mind was filling in all the blanks like this:

Lara is the kind of person who changes the air in a classroom.

Lara is the kind of person who would be the only one left in Kansas if a tornado blew everybody else to Oz. (Mrs. Smith wouldn't like this one, though, because it's too long.)

Lara is the kind of person who nobody ever sees, even though she's the biggest thing in the room.

Lara is the kind of person who makes you feel almost normal.

Lara is the kind of person who you never forget.