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HARRIS TWEED AND THE BEDLAM BREED

BY

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1. SUMMER IS THE WORST TIME OF THE YEAR

Harris stared at nothing at all, and he especially did not stare at the straight blond hair of the talkative girl at the next desk, and he determined to pay no attention to the deep green sweater fuzz that waved like a forest of sea kelp back and forth at the nape of her skinny and freckled neck. Stupid, stupid Olivia was blabbing away again, wagging her prehensile jaw like some skinny pterosaur in tight pants while putting on a fresh coat of shiny, pink lipstick and assuming that everyone within earshot was hanging on every word. “I just love summer. Don’t you just love it? I do. We’re spending the whole vacation at the beach, and it’ll be warm and sunny every day. You just *have* to come and visit, won’t you?”

Harris didn’t respond, but then, Olivia wasn’t speaking to him, and he didn’t feel comfortable around girls much anyway, least of all the ones that gabbed like their tongues were running a freaking marathon. But the other kids weren’t listening either—they were too busy slapping backs, grinning, hollering, and tossing balled-up paper at the ceiling as the final bell rang on the last day of the school year. Harris just eased a bit lower in his chair and hunched his shoulders, picking at a scraggly line someone else had long ago carved into the wooden desk. When most of the shouting had passed into the hallway, he grabbed his backpack and followed the clangorous march out to the yellow and black parade of school buses.

The brutally cold Chicago winter had been followed by a windy spring that blew through and pulled the last few weeks of the school year after it like small paper tornadoes. His middle school classmates thought of little else but the long summer vacation to come. For them, summer was a time for play, for games in the streets, vacations with family, for bicycles and adventure. But for Harrison Cheviot Tweed, summer was the worst time of the year.

Not the first week of summer, mind you: the first week was wonderful, Harris’ favorite week.

Well, not perhaps the whole week. It was the first three days of that first week that Harris really looked forward to, like other children look forward to an entire summer.

The happy hubbub of the first three days of summer was his yearly birthday gift, days in which his parents, Donegal and Gabardine Tweed, set aside their busy lives and focused entirely on their young son. This year they had spent a dizzying, dazzling time at three amusement parks, one following the other. Wonder World, with its twisting, looping coasters, its crooked house, the Rocket and the Wall of Death. Whortleberry Farms, under new management this year (as a very prominent sign attested) and still sporting that renovated new-asphalt smell. And Zloty Kapinsky's Family Fun Park, with the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Spring Coaster (more popularly known as the Vomitron), and the Mirror Maze, where, everyone knows, three children got so turned around they never came out and are still lurking around some reflective corner, aging and bearded and preying on kids that get separated from the herd. The first three days of Harris Tweed's summer featured mountains of candyfloss, Boston Baked Beans, walnut and rhubarb pies and whipped cream-mounded griddlecakes the size of poodles.

The next two days of Harris Tweed's first week of summer weren't quite as deliriously happy, but they followed the strict pattern set by his parents. A trip to the Field Museum to visit Dinosaur Sue, the Underground Adventure and the Strauss collection of Halloween masks. An afternoon at the Museum of Science and Industry walking through the Coal Mine, the Space Center and the Insect Circus. And the collections of corals in the National Museum of Tuvalu—this last museum the choice of Gabardine Tweed, and tolerated by her husband and son.

These first five days of the first week of Harris Tweed's summer vacation were enough to get him through the last two days of that week, the days of frantic packing, in which his parents grew increasingly busy and irritable as they crammed a summer's worth of travel gear into trunks,

valises, and backpacks. Don't get me wrong: Harris looked forward to travel, to see the world with his parents, to partake of the wild adventures each summer that they so eloquently documented in their hugely popular series of travel books.

Or at least he would look forward to it, if they ever took him. But Donegal and Gabardine Tweed were the successful authors of *The Unburdened Traveler*, a series of adventure books that featured the celebrated couple's trips to some of the most beautiful and exciting places in the world—without children. And so, at the close of the first week of the past eleven summers—each year except his first—his parents packed up and left on the same day that Parmelia Tweed, Harris' unmarried aunt, arrived to claim him and take him back to her rickety old house at the end of a dead end street in the dreary suburbs of Egburgh, Illinois.

Day six of the first week of Harris' summer ended with piles of his parents clothing folded in small stacks along the small, wood-floored hallway that stretched from their room to his. The piles ended just before the steep staircase leading down to the first floor of the narrow but elegant brownstone where Harris had grown up. The clothing would be gone by morning, packed away into the travel bags. His mother was a compulsive neatness freak, and the tidy home usually looked staged and ready to sell, as if nobody lived there at all. Apart from the small sanctuary of Harris' room and a revolving exhibit of childhood artwork digitally reproduced and reduced to fit into small magnetic frames arranged neatly on the face of the refrigerator, there was almost no sign that Donegal and Gabardine even had a son.

After a late dinner with his parents, Harris carefully crawled into his tightly tucked bed, like an invitation slipping into an envelope. His father peeked in to give him a wink and a thumb's up. His mother gave him a peck on the cheek and shut the light as she gently clicked the door closed, and he fell asleep to the lullaby of street noise from the cars rumbling by outside and the

sounds of his parents pacing across the wooden floors of the old house, packing and packing.

The ringing telephone bell startled Harris out of a sound sleep, even though the phone was down the hall in his parents' bedroom. He rolled over and opened one eye blearily. It took a few seconds to focus on the clock. Just after midnight. Who would call at such an hour? He climbed out of bed and stumbled to his door, quietly opening it to listen, and softly crept along the darkened hallway toward the light seeping under the crack of his parents' door. He could hear his mother's muffled voice, and drew nearer.

His father's voice was much louder, calling out from the echoing bathroom, "I asked, who the devil is calling so late?" Harris put his eye up to the old keyhole of his parents' bedroom to see what was going on.

"Hush! You'll wake the boy." Gabardine murmured something sympathetic into the phone, and then called back to her husband, "It's your sister."

Harris wondered why his aunt would be up so late at night. She usually went to bed even before Harris did. He heard footsteps and saw his dad enter. Only a small, circular slice of the room was visible through the keyhole: a neatly made bed—apparently they hadn't yet slept—his mother's back as she sat with the phone up to her ear, and his father, hand on hips, standing at the door to the bathroom with a frown on his face and a toothbrush in hand.

"What's wrong with Parmelia?" his father asked.

Gabardine frowned and covered the mouthpiece. "I haven't gotten to that part yet. She says that she's had the most awful week, and now she's calling to tell us she can't take Harris this summer."

"What?!" His father exploded, spitting toothpaste onto his nightshirt.

“Will you hush? It’s midnight!” She turned back to the phone. “What’s the matter, Parmelia? You sound as though you have a cold.”

Donegal tapped his feet in impatience. “A cold? She’ll get over a cold. What do you mean she has a cold?”

Gabardine held up her hand and shushed her husband. She listened at the phone. “Oh. Oh dear, that doesn’t sound at all good.”

Donegal lowered his voice to an exaggerated whisper. “What? What doesn’t sound good?”

She spoke into the phone, “Just a minute, dear.” She put her hand over the mouthpiece. “She does have a cold. But she’s also had another attack. The poor thing can’t stop coughing, and says she’s been so weak she’s hardly gotten out of bed for the past six days.”

Donegal frowned. “She’d stop having asthma if she’d get rid of all those cats. Is she taking her medicine? Has she seen her doctor? Surely the boy can be helpful to her; carry groceries up the stairs and whatnot. Feed the cats.”

Gabardine turned back to the phone. “Have you seen your doctor? What has...” She blanched, and put her free hand up to her mouth. “Oh. Oh, I see. Dear me. You poor thing.”

“What? What else is wrong?”

“She’s seeing the doctor right now. She’s broken her ankle in a fall.” Gabardine uncovered the mouth of the phone. “However did it happen, Parmelia?” She grimaced and looked back up at her husband. “She tripped over one of the cats.”

Harris couldn’t help himself. He put a hand over his mouth and nose but a snort of laughter still escaped. His eyes grew wide and he pulled back quickly from the keyhole. If his father found him listening outside their door... He tiptoed back to his room as quickly and quietly as he could and got back into bed. He knew it wasn’t right to laugh. There wasn’t really anything

funny about his boring old aunt tripping over one of those nasty, fat cats that that seemed to fill every room of her boring old house.

But nonetheless, Harris Tweed grinned in the dark of his room. His parents couldn't leave him now. Maybe he would finally have a good summer after all.

Harris awoke to the bright light of midmorning sun filtering around the edges of his curtains. The clock read 9:07, much later than he usually slept. He wondered why his parents hadn't awakened him. He dressed hurriedly in sweat pants and a bathrobe off the pile of still-wearables he'd shoved down the far side of the bed where his mother wouldn't notice, and peeked into the hallway. His parents' door was closed, but he could hear them talking in the bedroom, and again crept to their door. There was no sign of the neat piles of clothing that had been in the hallway last night. Everything beyond his doorway was clean, tidy and entirely dust-free.

On the other side of the door he heard his mother ask, "What about Linton?"

"Darling, I told you. I couldn't reach Linton. He's away on business. And besides, he's taken up with that girl from the college—quite inappropriate, if you ask me. Linton's out of the picture, and Lovat is taking the family on a cruise in two weeks."

Linton and Lovat Tweed were Harris' uncles. He saw them at occasional holiday gatherings at which the house would be overrun with his father's family of Tweed aunts, uncles and cousins. He put an eye up to the keyhole. His father was pacing again, in and out of view. "I don't see any alternative, Gabardine."

"Oh, for goodness sake. We're already packed! What about a boarding school? What's the name of the one you went to?"

"Slaplea-on-Vermilion. Horrible place."

“Would they take him for a summer session?” Harris felt a cold shiver. His parents weren’t taking him with them. They were trying to get rid of him!

“Doubtful. Slaplea got burned down a year ago by a student. Don’t think it’s reopened yet, if it ever will. I’d have burned the place down myself if I’d had the nerve.” His father sounded cool and detached but his mother sounded distraught, almost hysterical.

“But we’re already packed! We’ve done all of the research, and we’re expected in Bora Bora at the end of the week!”

“I know, darling.”

“We can’t back out now! What about our publishers? Good lord, Donegal, we’re under contract!”

“I know, I know!”

Harris’ mother came into the small circle of view, wringing her hands. “We’ll have to cancel the trip! We can’t very well bring Harris along for *The Unburdened Traveler: Tea for Two in Tuvalu*. They don’t do tea for three! The catamaran cabin barely holds two. We’ve got a convertible reserved in Fiji, and it doesn’t even have a back seat.”

“And the Grand Poo of Wullamaloo eats boys for breakfast. I know, I know, I know! Gabardine, we can’t back out now. We need the money from this next book, and we’ve already burned through the advance.” Harris heard the sound of a drawer opening, and strained to see more. His father handed what looked like a card to his mother, who sat down on the side of the bed and stared unblinkingly at the picture on the front. Harris couldn’t make it out. “We need to call Mack. Look at the card, darling. He’s been sending us the same invitation for years.”

“But Donnie...” Gabardine was fairly whining by this point. “You know his sense of humor. ‘Drop it all and pop in’? He doesn’t really mean for us to take him up on it.”

“I don’t see why not. He hasn’t seen the boy since he was two.”

Gabardine stood up and shoved the card back into her husband’s hands. “Ten years, Donegal. I haven’t seen my brother in ten years, and you know why. I’m not about to call him up now and say—what? ‘Thanks for all of the Saint Budoc’s Day cards? Sorry I haven’t called in a decade. Your nephew will be arriving tomorrow.’ Surely you’re joking!”

“You don’t need to call him.”

“Good. I won’t.” Gabardine folded her arms crossly.

“Because I sent him a telegram an hour ago.”

“You didn’t! Oh, Donegal!” Her shrill voice echoed through the small house.

“Now look who’s going to wake the boy,” his father said. “I’d better go see to him.”

Suddenly the antique rotary phone on his parents’ bedside table rang loudly, startling Harris so that he fell backwards on his rump with a loud thump. “Speaking of Harris, I believe he’s sitting just outside. You’d better get the phone, dear. I suspect it’s your brother.”

As the phone rang again his father suddenly yanked open the bedroom door, spilling morning light out into the narrow hallway and onto the prone figure of his son, who was staring upwards in stunned silence. Donegal looked sternly downward then turned back to his wife. “Are you going to answer it?”

“But what if...” The phone continued its insistent ringing.

“Answer it, woman!”

“Hello?” Harris heard his mother’s voice turn suddenly quiet and high. “Oh. Uh, hello, Mackie. Yes, it’s been a long time, hasn’t it? I’m sure you *were* surprised; I confess I was a bit surprised myself.”

Donegal Tweed nodded his head in satisfaction and closed the door behind him so that his

wife could talk to her brother in private. “Good morning, son. I think you and I had better go for a walk.”