

The Broom Dog

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A school bus is many things. A school bus is a substitute for a limousine. A school bus is the students' version of a teachers' lounge. A school bus is the principal's desk. A school bus is the nurse's cot. A school bus is an office with all the phones ringing.

A school bus is a safe zone. A school bus is a war zone. A school bus is a concert hall. A school bus is a food court. A school bus is a court of law, all judges, all jury. A school bus is a magic show full of disappearing acts. A school bus is a bumblebee, buzzing around with a bunch of stingers on the inside of it.

A school bus is a book of stamps. Passing mail through windows. Notes in the form of candy wrappers telling the street something sweet came by. Notes in the form of fingers pointing at the world zooming by.

A school bus is a ketchup packet with a tiny hole in it. Left on a seat. A paper tube around a straw. That straw will puncture the lid on things, make the world drink something with some fizz and fight. Something delightful and uncomfortable. Something that will stain. And cause gas.

A school bus is a talent show. A school bus is a microphone. A beat machine. A recording booth. **A school bus is a horn section.** A rhythm section. An orchestra pit.

A school bus is a basketball court. A football stadium. A soccer field. A school bus is a movie set. Actors, directors, producers, script. Scenes. Settings. Motivations. Action! Cut. *Your fake tears look real. These are real tears. But I thought we were making a comedy.* **A school bus is a misunderstanding.**

To Canton, a school bus is also a cannon-ball. A thing that almost destroyed him. Almost made him motherless.

Canton's mother is the crossing guard at Latimer Middle School and has been the crossing guard there since before he was born. He grew up running around the house wearing her neon vest, blowing her whistle. He learned to say "stop" before he learned to say "potty." Hand up to halt. Then hand out for the wave-through.

To Canton, crossing guards, especially his mother, seemed to have special powers. They were able to stop moving things. Able to slow traffic. Able to make a safe way for people to cross from one side to another. Their vests were capes, and their whistles blew some kind of magic tone that forced drivers to hit brakes.

That's what Canton always thought, until a year ago when a little blue ball went bouncing off the sidewalk into the street and a boy named Kenzi Thompson went running after it. Canton's mom had turned her back just for a moment, a split second, and by the time she realized what was happening, Kenzi was charging across the crosswalk, a school bus headed right toward him.

There wasn't enough time to blow the whistle, so Canton's mother, Ms. Post, went chasing after Kenzi, who, once he realized the bus was coming, froze in the middle of Portal Avenue. The bus hit the brakes. The scream of metal and smoke kicking up from the burning rubber filled the air as Ms. Post threw her entire body into Kenzi, knocking him forward, the bus turning just enough to avoid hitting Kenzi but not enough to avoid slightly bumping her.

But a slight bump from a bus ain't so slight. But a broken shoulder and bruised hip is much better than a burial. But the whole thing was devastating to Canton.

Canton always waited for his mother after school, killing time by helping Mr. Munch, the custodian, do custodial things. Actually, mostly Canton just sat around listening to Mr. Munch complain about things like the bathrooms. But on the day Canton's mother was hit by a bus, the conversation about why kids throw pennies on the floor like pennies don't spend was cut short by Jasmine Jordan and Terrence Jumper, who came running back into the school screaming about it.

"Ms. Post got hit by a school bus!" A sentence Canton never expected to hear. **And hearing it was like hearing the world's longest whistle blow, shrill, shredding his eardrums. His skin was crawling, felt like it was changing color, from brown to yellow. School bus yellow.** By the time Canton and Mr. Munch got outside, sirens were already blaring down Portal Avenue.

Ms. Post was back to work in a week. Whistle in mouth, vest strapped on, altered only by the sling holding her shoulder in place. She went back to normal. She had to. Said it was just part of the job.

But not Canton. He didn't go back to normal.

The afternoon his mother returned to the corner to guide students across the street, Mr. Munch found Canton in the bathroom after school, sitting on the nasty tile floor in the corner, his head pressed against his knees.

"Canton, what you doing in here?" Mr. Munch asked. When Canton lifted his head up, Mr. Munch could see he'd been crying. He could also see that Canton's chest was pumping, heaving like it was hard for him to breathe. Like it would break open. Mr. Munch got down on the floor with him. Squatted beside him and talked him through some breathing exercises.

"Come on, Canton. Count to 10 with me. One, two, three . . ." And then, "Now let's go back to one. Ten, nine, eight . . ." Eventually Canton could breathe. Could talk. Could stand. Mr. Munch walked him outside. When they made it to the corner, where Ms. Post was working, Canton wrapped his arms around his mother and squeezed. Held her so tight she winced, her shoulder still a sack of broken bone.

"Okay. I'm okay. You're okay. We're okay," she chanted in his ear, trying to figure out how to get him to let go so she could do her job, but not wanting to let go because he was also her job.

Mr. Munch patted Canton on his shoulder, but realizing there was no way this boy would let go of his mother, Mr. Munch decided he would step into the street, stick his fingers in his mouth and whistle. He put his hand up and yelled at the cars, "I'm tellin' y'all right now, you hit me and I'm hitting you back!" Once the traffic stopped, he yelled for all the waiting students to "get on 'cross the street." Then he turned back toward the stopped cars and puffed his chest, almost bucking, daring them to move.

The next day, Mr. Munch met Canton outside his last class of the day, Mr. Davanzo's social studies class.

"How you feeling?"

"I'm okay."

"Still got the jitters?"

Canton nodded, just slightly, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"Wanna take a walk with me? I wanna give you something."

Canton and Mr. Munch sauntered the halls of the school, pushing dust, and hair that looked like dust, and coins and candy wrappers and a random sock and drawstrings and loose braids and who knows what else, as the other students bustled around, eventually funneling through the doors into the outside world.

"When my daughter, Winnie, went off to college, my wife got so nervous that she'd call Winnie multiple times a day. And whenever Winnie wouldn't answer, Zena would just . . . lose it," Mr. Munch started.

"Zena's your wife?"

"Yeah." Mr. Munch grinned. "Best person I ever known. But she's been through a lot. Seen a lot of the world when she was young, and it made her terrified for our daughter. Made her anxious about every step Winnie took away from us. What if something happens to her? What if she needs us? What if she's in danger? Zena would go on and on with these questions, up all night, sick with fear all day."

"And what you say?"

"Nothing. But what I *did* was buy her a dog."

"A dog?"

"Yep."

They stopped at the custodian closet. The old man pushed the pile of middle school debris into the corner, then pulled out a million keys, flipping through them like pages of a book. "Not because she needed something else to care for—no dog can take the place of our baby girl—but I read this thing about emotional support animals."

"What's that?"

"Basically it's like having a dog to make you feel better."

Finally, he picked the right key and opened the closet door. "I mean, what's better than a dog, right?"

They went into the closet, which was big enough to be an office. Pictures on the wall of Mr. Munch's wife and daughter. And the dog. A small, curly-haired thing with an underbite so ugly it was cute. At least Canton thought so.

But besides its cuteness, Canton kept thinking about all the things *better* than dogs. Like ice cream. And skateboards. And maybe a girlfriend one day. Or even a girl that's a friend. And a good joke. Oh, and video games. Then, after all that . . . dogs were cool.

"Mr. Munch, why you telling me this?" Canton asked. He was thinking maybe Mr. Munch was trying to be *his* emotional support dog, **except not a dog.**

His emotional support human, and all this was just a way to keep his mind off his mother and the fear of a school bus swiping her again.

"Why am I telling you this?" He repeated Canton's question. "Because I made you one."

"You . . . you made me a *dog*?"

"Well . . . I couldn't just buy you a dog. Your mom might not be okay with that. But I thought maybe this could help." Mr. Munch reached into a locker and pulled out the head of a broom—the sweeping part—which he'd detached from the broomstick. The straw was curled and mangled as if Mr. Munch had been cleaning the sidewalk for, like, 20 years with it. He had drawn big

black circles on one side like eyes. And an oval with a tic-tac-toe board in the middle of it, which Canton assumed was the mouth. At the top, two pieces of cloth, cut into ears and glued in place.

"It's . . . a broom."

"I cleaned it. Promise. And yeah, it's a broom, until you do this." He petted the wiry twine as if it were fur, as if he were scratching behind the ear of a Yorkie in need of grooming.

"Why is the mouth like that? Is the . . . broom . . . dog angry?"

"No." Mr. Munch turned the broom head toward him, shrugged. "He's smiling."

"Oh." Canton squished up his befuddled face. "So, you really think this gonna help me?"

"Can't hurt to try?" A slick smirk crept onto Mr. Munch's face. "I mean, the worst that could happen is you decide to clean up the street. So either way . . . everybody wins."

The next day, after school, Canton, with the broom dog tucked under his arm, slowly walked up to the corner to watch his mother, to guard the crossing guard. He leaned against the stop sign at the corner. And whenever Ms. Post had to step into the street, blow her whistle, raise her hand to stop traffic, whenever Canton's chest would become an inflated balloon, he would run his fingers through the broom dog's hair. Eventually, he named it Dusty. It's strange, **the things that work.**

It's been a year since Mr. Munch gave Canton the broom dog. A year since the first panic attack, a year and a week since the accident, and things have gotten better.

The bell rings, and everyone gets up to leave Mr. Davanzo's class. Simeon stands at the door, giving everyone high fives like he always does. "Up high," he says to Canton as he approaches. Canton slaps his hand.

"Don't forget tonight's homework. Write about place. About people. Human environmental interaction!" Mr. Davanzo shouted over the end-of-day clamor.

Canton stops at his locker, reaches in to grab Dusty, then heads for the door. He passes Ms. Wockley in the hallway scolding Simeon and Kenzi, the blue ball in his hand. Outside he walks past Candace Greene, who he never had the courage to talk to because she was always with her friends, Stinky Greg and Cool Remy. He passed Mr. Johnson moving the carpool line along. Had to get to the corner before the first cross. That was his thing. For a year and a week. And when Canton finally made it up to the crosswalk at Portal Avenue, there was his mother, Ms. Post, strapping on her vest and pulling the whistle attached to a black lanyard over her head like it was some kind of prestigious medal.

"There's my sweet boy,' she said, greeting him, arm winged. They hugged. "How was school?"

"It was okay."

"Homework?"

"Mr. Davanzo wants us to record human environmental interaction."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Which is what I'm gonna work on." Canton made a funny face at his mom, and she made one back.

"I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I feel like I'm probably an expert at it."

Canton chuckled. "I'll let you know if I need your assistance."

“Deal. Well, get to it.” Ms. Post winked. Canton pulled a notebook from his backpack, along with Dusty the broom dog, then set the bag down against the stop sign so he could sit and have a little cushion. The broom dog rested on his lap as he scribbled words and phrases.

Latimer Middle School.

Corner.

Portal Avenue.

Cars.

Classmates.

Mom.

Whistle.

People stop.

People go.

People talk.

People hug.

People frown.

People laugh.

People go off.

People go on.

Canton glanced up as everyone congregated at the corner, like water building against a dam, allowed to flow every few minutes. People turning and crossing, waiting and talking. The web of conversations. Gregory Pitts liked Sandra White. Satchmo Jenkins feared he might be eaten by a dog on his way home. Cynthia Sower was putting on a show at 3:33 p.m. Some banter on boogers, and everyone wanted to know what secret things Fatima Moss was always writing.

He watched his classmates tap-dance with tongues, challenging one another, slipping and sliding from story to story. Watched his mother perform a kind of ballet. How she spun, stepped into the street like she was made of more. Blew her whistle. Put a hand up for a bus to stop. Put a hand out to wave the walkers through.

When all the Latimer students had walked off, headed home or wherever they went after school, Ms. Post removed her vest. She slung it over her shoulder. Pulled the whistle over her head. Another day, job done.

“Ready to walk?” she asked Canton, **who had been working nonstop on his assignment.**

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Canton stood, the broom dog falling from his lap like he had forgotten it was there. Ms. Post picked it up.

“Sheesh. This thing has seen better days.” She examined it. The mangled straw. The pieces of felt that were meant to be ears long gone. “I know it’s supposed to be a dog, but now it kinda looks like a bus.” She handed it to Canton. “The eyes are like the headlights, and the mean mouth—”

"It's a smile," Canton corrected.

"Oh, right. The smile . . . is the grille. Funny."

Canton had never noticed that. The broom dog had just become a thing he had, a thing he knew was there if he needed it, but it had been a long time, he realized, since he'd actually needed it.

"It's all faded now anyway," Canton said, grabbing his backpack. They stood on the corner, looked both ways before crossing.

"Still want it?" his mother asked. **Canton shrugged, tossed it up in the air.** Caught it. Tossed it again. Caught it. Again, and loose straw separated from the bunch. Again. And more loose straw, falling down on them. And more. Ms. Post laughed.

"Look at that. A school bus falling from the sky."

Canton smiled, knowing a school bus is many things.

So is a walk home.