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Cartoon Heroes

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Cartoon Heroes

Briana Lawrence

It's ten in the morning on a Saturday and I can hear my stepmother swish across the hardwood floor in her house shoes. I can smell Folgers through my closed door and I can picture my step-mother holding a coffee mug in one hand, a cigarette in another.

I'm sitting in bed, a bowl of Corn Pops resting between my legs, the perfect position for me to coordinate spoon-to-bowl-to-mouth movement while keeping my eyes on the TV. There's a commercial with three kids playing on a swing set while being questioned by Ronald McDonald: "Do you believe in magic?" My back is pressed against the wall, my hair tickling the chest of the shirtless boy in the poster in the poster above my pillow. Boy bands and actors cover the rest of my pink walls. I've been told that one day I will grow out of this "phase," but until then my head rests against the man I will marry once I graduate high school, college, and become a doctor. I've already done my wifely duties of writing his name all over my social studies notebook.

The commercial ends. Lightning hits a cracked, desert ground. An electric guitar plays, beginning my favorite thing about Saturday morning: cartoons. I have anxiously waited for the battle that will decide Earth's fate; Earth has to be in some kind of trouble every Saturday morning. In front of today's heroes is a man, hands clenched at his sides, and shoulder-length black hair blowing in the wind. He's got muscles that look like rocks dotting his arms and chest. Liu Kang-champion of Mortal Kombat. The rest of the group shouts out the recycled words of encouragement that every hero hears: "You can do it!" "You can beat him!" "You are the champion; you will win!" They walk together toward a fortress that looks like someone threw up black chunks all over it plus bits of skeleton surrounding the front of it like a garden. The sky rumbles like a bowling alley. The group splits up to find the bad guy faster. He is, of course, found by Liu Kang. He's the hero after all.

The phone rings just as Liu Kang throws a punch at the Emperor, Shao Kahn, the ultimate bad guy (until Ninja Turtles comes on at eleven and they fight Shredder). He's twice his size and wears a mask that looks like a skeleton's face. I sit my bowl of cereal down on the ground and snatch the phone out of Mickey

Mouse's arms. I turn just in time to see the evil Shao Kahn punch Liu Kang in his stomach, sending him flying back into the wall.

"Hello?" I hold the phone to my ear with one hand while the other makes a fist in the air. Liu Kang has kicked Shao Kahn into a pillar.

"Good morning."

The villain gets up and wraps his hand around the hero's neck, slamming him down to the ground in a painful choke hold.

"Oh, hey Mom." You're making me miss my cartoons.

"Hi." She pauses, and in that moment Liu kicks the large man off of him and rubs his neck, coughing. Shao Kahn moves after him but he rolls away before his back is stomped on by a booted foot. "Is your dad there?"

"Huh?" My dad? I nearly drop the phone when Liu Kang sends a fireball after his enemy. Cool! "Oh yeah, he's in the basement. As usual." The fireball hits Shao Kahn right in his chest, leaving a black singe over his body. He remains standing. How?!

"Can you tell him to pick up the phone, please?" There's something in her voice. I'm not quite sure what it is. Liu Kang stands before his opponent, surprisingly calm, but his hands are shaking. Forced calmness.

"Oh yeah, sure. Hold on." I put the phone down on my bed and quickly jump out of it, nearly stepping in the leftover milk in my cereal bowl. I run out of the room and pass the kitchen, saying a quick "good morning" to my step-mother before I rush down the stairs. I'm missing something. I know I am. I throw open the basement door. "Daddy! Telephone!"

"Okay!" He shouts back to me. I run back upstairs and into my room. Commercial. Great, I knew I missed something! I grab the phone and lift it to my ear to make sure my dad has picked it up. I hear the end of my mom's sentence, "...something to tell you," but then the commercial ends and the show comes back on. I hang up the phone and lay in bed on my stomach. This time, I won't miss anything.

Liu Kang's friends finally catch up with the Emperor but his minions have come too. Warrior A fights a creature who is half man, half horse, and who has two curved horns poking out of his forehead. Warrior B fights a man whose clothes and skin look like they have been drenched in oil. Warriors C, D, and E have been knocked unconscious by a large woman with four arms. She has on so much lipstick that the red cracks when she smirks at the

three fallen heroes. How did the situation get so hopeless? But there's still time for things to get better; it's a half an hour program and there's fourteen and a half minutes left.

As I'm watching the fight my dad calls my step-mother downstairs. I turn and look back over at the phone. My mom didn't even ask to say bye to me? A scream from the TV has my focus back on the screen; Liu Kang has been hit with a green beam of energy. Something breaks.

My dad calls me downstairs and I sigh. Do I really have to leave my room at a time like this?

"No, we'll go upstairs." I hear my stepmother say to him.

Upstairs for what? I shrug and continue to watch the fight. Warrior A has the upper hand on the half-horse man. Warrior B has stepped on her opponent's chest, keeping him pinned to the ground with her foot. Liu Kang forces himself to stand back up and says what all heroes say in the middle of a crisis. "I won't give up; I will beat you." Nothing can beat the heroes. Why don't the bad guys get it?

I can hear my dad's shoes click against my floor followed by my stepmother's swish. "Good morning," I say to the both of them, but I keep my eyes on the screen.

"Good morning," my dad says. The bed sinks from the extra weight of my dad sitting next to me. He's blocking my view of the TV. My stepmother sits behind me. What? Do they want to watch cartoons too? I tilt my head past my dad to see, but he starts to speak.

"I have something to tell you."

"What?" I look up at him and wonder why his eyes look like they have water in them. Why would he put water in his eyes? It hurts when water gets in your eyes.

"It's about Glenn," he says. My brother? Now if only Glenn could go inside the cartoon. He'd go right into that fortress and take Shao Kahn out with one punch. Though I don't know about that four armed lady, only because my brother doesn't hit girls. Ha! That's when I'd come in and beat her up. Then we'd leave the fortress and order pizza. He always gets the one that looks like a giant pizza puff with the sausage and cheese on the inside of the crust that's folded in half. Then we'd drink Pepsi and watch The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle. He'd make antlers with his fingers on top of his head and say in a voice that sounded like a kid with a stuffy nose, "Hey Rock? Watch me pull a rabbit out of

my hat!"

I should call him later and ask him to go inside the cartoon and beat the bad guy up. He'll do it if I ask him to.

"What about him?" I'm grinning. Just you wait, Shao Kahn. I'm going to call my big brother and he's going to come and punch you in that ugly mask of yours.

"He's in the hospital."

"Hospital? Is he hurt?" Maybe he meant at the hospital. That has to be it. Sometimes parents get their words mixed up.

"No. He's not hurt." My stepmother puts a hand on my shoulder. My dad keeps looking at me. His eyes have started to leak from the water in them. He's not crying. My dad doesn't cry.

"So what is it?" I ask.

"He's..."

Someone screams on the TV and I move to see it. I catch a glimpse of Liu Kang flying back. Did he get hit again? How much did I miss this time?

"He was in a car accident."

Oh.

So... he's in the hospital. Not at the hospital. Which doesn't make sense since my dad just told me that he wasn't hurt.

"Okay..." I say, confused. Maybe we have to go and pick him up? If it's a car accident that would mean that the car is gone. I see now. He's stuck at the hospital and needs a ride. Mom doesn't drive, so we have to go and get him.

"Briana."

Why am I Briana now? What happened to Banana or Pookie-Wookie or Boo-Boo? "He died."

No. What he meant to say was "he could've died." One of those miracle stories where the doctors keep saying how it's amazing that he lived. Wait for it. He's going to fix his sentence any minute now.

"I'm sorry," he says. Then he hugs me. His chin is fuzzy against my face, in desperate need of a shave. The shoulder of my nightgown is getting wet. I'm still waiting for him to change his sentence. I can see the ending credits of Mortal Kombat. For some reason the TV screen looks blurry, like a windshield in a car wash. I can't make out the names of the cast in the cartoon. Liu something. Blank Kahn.

"It's o.k. to cry," my dad says.

But I'm not crying, the screen is just blurry, that's all. Such

and such producers, something something soundtrack. The credits end. The screen turns black.

Dad never changes his sentence.