

2 :: david

October 27, 2004

Standing guard –

Twenty-one steps from the window to the door, but only nineteen from the door to the window . . . this craziness occupied Emma's mind as she paced back and forth across her son's bedroom.

Another lap.

This time she closed the bedroom window. Earlier, David complained he was hot, but October nights tend to be cool, even in Atlanta.

He did seem to have a slight fever. All the more reason to shut out this cold air.

Again.

The floorboards moaned softly beneath her feet with each stride, a less than subtle rebuke. *Guess I'd better leave that last slice of pound cake for someone else.*

Again.

One, two

Creaking bedsprings added their harmony to the melody of the floorboards. David again – tossing, turning and muttering in his sleep. Earlier, he sang in some strange, foreign language. Now he mumbled into his pillow.

Emma chewed on her lower lip while her cold fingers found their way into tight fists.

Preparing to run or fight, Emma?

Her tentative steps toward the bed answered her question. She waited, but no monster revealed itself. Her fists relaxed and she tried to laugh it off, but mirth refused to grant solace.

What am I looking for? What am I afraid of?

“Always the same questions.”

She didn't know the answer, but Emma knew that didn't invalidate her fear.

Oh, David. One day I won't be here. Who'll watch you through your sleep then, my son?

He spoke; louder and clearer this time, more of those odd words.

“Mche Mungu upate rehema zake milele . . .”

Another strange thing among so many.

Emma leaned against the old wardrobe near the bed. The mirror, cool on her back, complained at the disturbance. This piece had belonged to her mother, Sara; and somewhere in the mirror's grumbling, Emma thought she heard Sara's voice.

“Let the boy be, Emma. He's just different.”

Yeah, David has always been different.

"I've never seen a child fight so hard not to make an appearance," her doctor had said after David's delivery. Emma called him her "dark child" because David entered the world as the moon went dark during a full lunar eclipse.

"That boy wasn't going to stick his head out in the light," her mother used to say. Emma missed her so much – especially at times like these. Sara always had a way of making David's odd behavior seem normal. "Just let him be who he's going to be. The boy's special, Emma. You'll see."

Emma peered down into the face of her son.

If special means handsome, he is.

She pushed his long black hair away from David's face. It stood out about his head like an ebony halo, framing a face so like his father's, his skin a perfect blend of her warm honey color and his father's dark chocolate.

Hmmm, he's still a little warm.

David kicked off the wool blanket. Emma pulled the covers back up over his shoulders, noticing as she did that his feet were now exposed.

He's tall like his father, too; and I think he's still growing. The boy eats twice his weight in food a week. He'd better be growing, or he's going to weigh 400 pounds.

Once again she pushed a wayward lock away from his face, smoothing the strands with her hand.

I never saw his father with hair . . .

Emma moved to the foot of the bed, tossed David's jeans onto the bedside chair, and then pulled the covers over his feet. As she tucked the blanket, she once again scolded herself for being over-protective.

"But he's my only son," she said aloud to whatever might be judging her.

David rolled over again, kicked off the blanket, and went into a quiet snore.

Sometimes he sounds like those elephants he loves so much. Now that's another something. The elephants gave my son back to me.

For the first two years of his life, no one could have wished for a sweeter child. Active, cheerful, loving and intelligent – David charmed all who met him. He engaged everyone and reached out to the world as if all belonged to him.

But then, everything changed.

After David turned two, he became quiet, withdrawn, and began to cry seemingly without provocation. As if someone somewhere had flipped a switch, the months following his second birthday found David's crying escalating to wailing, sometimes hysterically. No matter what she did, Emma failed to console him. Hugging, rocking, singing – nothing quieted him for long. A thorough examination by his pediatrician revealed no health issues.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Pauls,” Doctor Tafford said as he placed the crying child into her arms. “He’s fine. He’s growing normally, his weight is good, and he reacts to external stimuli. Right now, for whatever reason, David’s just an unhappy little boy. I’m sure he’ll come out of it soon.”

But Emma did worry, and despite her doctor’s reassurances, she took a leave of absence from work to spend some time with her son. The time, however, bought her no answers.

“Mama, it’s been three weeks and I still don’t know what’s wrong with him. If I try to talk to him, I just make it worse.” As she spoke, she rocked him on her lap, stopping occasionally to hug him tighter and wipe the tears from his face.

“My baby can’t tell me what’s wrong with him. God, his eyes – his eyes break my heart. His eyes are begging me to fix this, to make him better, to take the pain away . . .”

“Emma, honey, you have to stop this. You’re exhausted. We’ll figure this out, I promise. Please, just get some rest.” Sara went to Emma and took David from her lap. He put his small arms about her neck, lay his head on her shoulder, but continued to cry.

“How can I rest? We’re all tired. Those walks – they seemed to help a little for a while, but they’re not making him well. You walked with him over two hours yesterday, and he still only rested ten minutes when you got home. Ten minutes! You’re as tired as I am. Face it, Mama. David’s getting worse. He’s not eating, and he can’t sleep for crying. None of us are going to survive this if we don’t figure it out soon.”

“So, we’ll take him to the doctor – another doctor; someone that can help him,” Sara said, tears welling up in her eyes. She walked up and down the room in front of the window with David’s tears soaking through the back of her blouse. “Someone’s got to help him.”

“Don’t worry. We won’t give up,” Emma said. “We’ll figure this out. I know we will.”

On her last Monday morning before returning to work, Emma thought she'd lose her mind if David didn't stop crying.

"We need a break from all this," she said to her son over his sobbing. Emma wriggled him into a warm jacket and put him into his stroller. "I have to take a break, baby; if only for a little while. So we'll walk, sweetheart. We'll both feel better."

And off they went.

Emma walked. David cried.

And she walked. And he cried.

And she walked some more.

Yet David continued to cry.

Emma lost track of time and distance, and before she knew it, she had walked all the way downtown. She found herself, tired and perspiring, in front of the zoo.

"Wow. This place is over fifteen miles from the apartment."

Awareness of her surroundings also made her conscious of the pain in her legs and feet. Hot coals smoldered in her shoes, blistering her soles and sending hot spikes up into her legs. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, but got no relief.

David had gone from wailing to whimpering, so she thought she might rest here before starting back home. The only seats around were inside the zoo; well worth the price of admission in her mind. Emma bought a ticket and found a bench not too far from the main gate.

"Break time, sweetheart. A few minutes here will do wonders for Mommy!"

Her behind halfway to the bench, the words scarcely out of her mouth, and David started to scream with a vengeance. For several seconds Emma stared at him.

I don't understand.

David, his little face contorted and wet with tears, shrieked and moaned as if in excruciating pain. Emma realized people were starting to cast concerned looks in her direction.

I am not abusing my baby – at least not yet!

Emma picked him up and tried to soothe him; but despite her hugs and assurances, David showed no sign of calming down. She strapped him back into his stroller and, wincing with every step, limped off into the zoo.

Stress and fatigue took over her brain. She put one foot ahead of the other with no regard to direction or destination. Emma stumbled along until, of its own accord, her body stopped moving.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry. Mommy can’t go on. Please don’t cry.”

Her son stopped crying.

Emma shook her head a couple of times.

David isn’t crying?

Not even a whimper. In fact, he was . . .

Laughing! I haven’t heard that sound in months. Look at him!

David pushed himself up and out of his seat, trying his best to touch . . .

What?

Emma followed the direction of his gaze up, and up, and . . .

“Oh!”

She stared into the faces of four huge elephants. They came as close to the fence as the safety glass would permit, as interested in her son as he was in them. And no wonder. An alien child occupied her baby’s stroller. This wide-eyed, giggling creature had chubby little cheeks aglow with pleasure. David struggled against his stroller to reach the animals before him.

“Unbelievable.”

They stayed at the zoo until dusk with Emma sitting on the ground watching her son as he enjoyed the elephants. David ran back and forth, from one elephant to the next, pointing and jabbering, then returning to her for a hug. These were the happiest hours she'd spent with her child in months. If it meant sitting on the cold ground and sharing the moment with a small herd of elephants, then so be it.

As darkness approached, the elephants moved away, back down into their compound.

"Can we go home now?" Emma asked David. He gave her a wide grin and climbed back into his stroller.

"Well, OK. Let's go home, kid."

When she got to her feet, she was reminded of why she sat on the ground in the first place. Her leg muscles bunched themselves into tight knots, and her feet staged an open revolt as pain raged in them. She shuffled to diminish their outrage.

"Sweetheart, we're taking the bus home."

So it began.

Emma brought David to the zoo every day through the rest of the week and marveled at the difference in her son. David continued crying, but not in the near hysterical fashion of before. He ate more and slept better, too. Her mother pointed out the change in both of them.

"The change in me is called rest," Emma said.

Somehow, Emma had found the antidote her son needed. The zoo, however bizarre, helped David be a "real" child instead of the sick, wailing creature who could find no peace. The reason meant nothing to her. If the zoo was what David needed to be well, the zoo was what he was going to get.

To that end, Emma and her mother established a routine with one of them taking David to the zoo at least once per day. Sara handled the weekly trips and Emma took him on the weekend. She and David would take the train to the zoo, make a quick trip around the quad to visit the other animals, and then go to the elephants. One of the elephants – she thought it might be the same one – would always come to join David, and he would perk up and talk to it.

A visit on the weekend often lasted the entire day. Emma would stand until her feet began to ache, then return David to the stroller and make a break to a bench. They played this game on every visit, and she never made it to the bench before David started to cry. During one visit, a zookeeper brought her a folding seat.

"Keep it," he said when she asked where she should return it. "I have a feeling you'll be using it again."

For the rest of the year, Emma took David to visit the elephants at every opportunity. After the first five months, a good long visit would last him a couple of days. As David approached his third birthday, he'd tell Emma when he needed to visit his friends.

Emma had also made a few friends at the zoo; in particular the nice (and very handsome) zookeeper who gave her the folding seat. The man would always appear at some point during their visit, bring David a small treat, and stay for an enjoyable chat. He never stayed long, but he always brought a warm smile and word of encouragement to get her through the long afternoon. Emma and Mr. Daniel Lockley became very good friends.

Although David was once again calm, he wasn't the same child as before. He was much quieter. In fact, he seldom spoke at all except to the elephants. Emma worried he might have suffered some sort of brain trauma; but again, there was no medical evidence of a physical problem.

“Emma, I can’t rule out a mental condition,” David’s pediatrician said. “He can be tested to find out if he’s . . .”

She was defiant.

“My son does not have a mental disability. Mama’s right. He’s just different.”

When he reached school age, Daniel Lockley somehow convinced the school board to put David in a special program that allowed him to spend part of his week at the zoo in an off-site learning environment. It worked. David thrived, and though he was still "different", he removed any doubts concerning his ability to learn with above average test scores. He read well above his grade level, too; contradicting a report indicating poor verbal skills. David, apparently, just didn’t like to talk.

He would, however, talk long and enthusiastically about his best friend. The elephant's name, according to Daniel and the other keepers, was "Sudie". David, however, had other ideas. "That’s not her name! Her name is Chanrille and she’s a princess of her herd."

Very different from the blank stare he usually gave people.

As the years went by, David showed no sign of outgrowing his love of the zoo and its animals. When he turned ten, Daniel, now David’s dad, got him a part-time job doing errands, cleaning cages, and "keeping the elephants". David emerged as the human of choice in the pens, and the other keepers soon realized the ten-year-old was the resident expert on all things elephant.

Emma still worried about her son, but not as much. Between Daniel and her mother, David was safe in his world and those two were the sentinels at the gate, determined to let him be his own man. She had the family she’d dreamed of. For ten years, all was right in her world as her son grew into a young man – bright, strong and happy - with a father who loved them both. Emma could not wish for more.

But the strange wouldn’t stay away.

The night before he graduated from high school, David woke up screaming.

"Mom! Mom! Grams is gone!"

Emma opened one eye and looked at the clock. "Honey, it's four o'clock in the morning, you dreamed it."

"No, Mom. Dad, wake up!"

Daniel sat up in bed. "Huh? What? What's happening?"

"Dad, Chanrille said Grams went into the light."

"What?" Daniel threw back the sheets and reached for his shirt. "Who did what? The elephant?"

"I have to go," David said.

Before she could stop him, David went racing barefoot from the apartment, down the block to his grandmother's brownstone. When she and Daniel reached her mother's apartment, they found David on the sofa in the living room, sobbing; his grandmother in his arms.

The room seemed to close in on her as Emma's eyes locked on her mother and son. The air thinned, stood still, and the light from the table lamps dimmed. Deep shadows formed around the perimeter of the room.

"I can't breathe."

Daniel took her into his arms and Emma wept into his shoulder.

"Uh, Emma . . ."

She looked up into Daniel's face, and then followed his gaze back to where her eyes didn't want to go. David was gripping his grandmother's body to his chest, a vacant expression on his face.

Emma struggled to make words exit her throat. "David . . . sweetheart . . ."

He didn't answer. Instead, he threw his head back, staring at the ceiling. When he lowered his head, only the whites of his eyes were visible and he spoke in an eerie reproduction of his grandmother's voice.

"Emma, don't cry. No need. I'm home now, warm and well. My next journey will be less bothersome. I'll see you again; all of you. Daniel, you take care of my girl. Take care of my boy, too. I love you all."

And with that, David fell forward, shaking, soaked in sweat and tears. Daniel's arm tightened around Emma's shoulder, but he said nothing. Emma gripped Daniel's arm, unable to force words from her lips. Neither of them uttered a word – then or later, but Emma never looked at her son the same way again.

After high school, David, as expected, showed no interest in college. He had read almost every book written concerning animal-kind, and often did consults for the zookeepers on some of the more exotic creatures. He had a way with all of the animals no one could understand. He often let the vets know which animal had a health issue long before the creature exhibited symptoms. David was never wrong, and Emma often wondered if those "conversations" with the animals went more than one way.

I guess tonight's conversation is over. Time to say goodnight.

Emma pulled up the covers and placed a kiss on David's forehead.

"Ouch!"

Emma placed her palm on David's forehead only to snatch it away.

Oh my God, he's burning up. I've never felt anyone so hot!

"David. David, wake up. Wake up David!"

Emma shook him, but she couldn't rouse him.

"Got to get him to the hospital!"

She ran into the hallway, but stopped as she passed the bathroom.

“I should do something about his temperature first. He could die on the way to the hospital with a fever like that. What a night for Daniel to be working late!”

A second in the bathroom produced two wet towels. She ran back into David’s room and stopped . . . short . . . still . . . paralyzed . . . right in the middle of the floor.

There was fire on David’s blanket. Small white flames danced up and down the length of him, but the blanket wasn’t burning.

Nothing burned.

Emma tried to scream, but no sound came from her throat. She tried to move, but her body remained still. She could only watch as the flames danced, sizzled, whispered. They spoke to her, but she refused to hear the words.

This can’t be happening!

The flames bloomed, sang, and finally, Emma listened.

Emma scrunched her toes into the soles of her slippers to warm them. Her feet ached with cold right up to the ankles. When she looked down, a small puddle of water lay at her feet from the dripping towels in her hands.

“What in the world am I doing with these?”

She held the wet towels up for inspection, searching for an explanation, but could not remember what she intended to do with them.

Going nuts.

She returned the wet towels to the bathroom and took a quick glance at her face in the mirror. Little rivers of red traversed her eyes.

I need to sleep!

One last check on David – he slept, under the covers with a smile on his face – whatever battle – won. Emma’s bloodshot eyes sought and found the small clock on the

bedside table. Her vision, blurred by lack of sleep, somehow relayed the information and her weary brain did the math.

I've been in here over four hours!

Standing guard.

With a long yawn, Emma decided to return to her bed. She had banished “weird” for another night. Dragging tired legs, her damp slippers flip-flopping against the hardwood floor, Emma left David’s room – but she didn’t close the door.

Just in case.