

Angie's voice rose at the end of each sentence. "Something different about the way the gate opened in the dark, Hannah, but I couldn't see clearly enough to tell what it was? I think it was something about the sound of the latch? I noticed it, but didn't pay attention, know what I mean? I was planning how I'd use the time before six thirty to set up the room for the kids."

It was six in the morning in the four-year-olds' building at the Pasadena Child Development Center, and the center's director, Hannah Cooper, had arrived early for some quiet work time, but Angie called to her and she'd come right over. Sitting low on a child's chair, she looked up at Angie now, listening deeply, understanding her employee's need to release her agitation. A grandmother in her mid-fifties, Hannah had worked with young children and their families all her adult life. Lines ran from the corners of her mouth like backward quotation marks, etched by sadness as well as laughter. Beneath her short gray curls her alert, deep-set blue eyes looked out at her world.

She took in the sight of Angie leaning against the children's cubbies, her hands bracing her limp body, all her usual vibrancy drained by her need to talk. Though at fifty-five Angie was a few years older than Hannah, her hair was still a deep brown, and she wore it long and straggly. It emphasized her customary pallor, and today the pallor verged on green.

"Besides my set-up jobs like taking the kids' chairs off the tables and opening the shades—I open them first thing I come in, even when it's dark?—I had something else in mind. Like I said, I was planning something fresh for the kids—that's why I came in a little before six. That way I have a little more than half an hour."

Hannah opened her mouth to respond, but Angie continued without pause, her chatter streaming like a freeway with no on-ramps. Her voice was shrill and wobbly, and her words came so fast Hannah had to strain to pick them out.

"Some of the teachers think just a few crayons and some paper's enough? Of course when the kids first arrive, it's true they're usually still sleepy, they don't want much stimulation. They won't eat breakfast at *home* half the time. Heck, a lot of *parents* don't eat breakfast either! The kids aren't combed, sometimes they're still in their pj's—not ready for some huge super-activity—like, say, making pretzels from scratch—"

Angie laughed at the very idea, then bowed her head and closed her eyes, and Hannah knew she wished she could stay with this part of the story.

"Go on, Angie," she urged gently.

"Well, I guess I'm getting away from telling you what happened. I was trying to say that just the same old box of crayons and the same old recycled eight- and-a-half-by-eleven paper that parents bring from their offices—well, that's not enough. The kids deserve a little variety, a little imagination, and it helps them ease into their day too. Anyone should be able to see that.

"Not to badmouth anybody, but some of the teachers here just don't seem to get it? Maybe it's because I have kids of my own, I remember what it felt like to coax my own sleepy boys to wake up. Oh God, I wish I could have afforded to send them here instead of leaving them with my grandma ..., but that's off the subject." She set her mouth into a resolute line.

Outside, rain was falling, muffling the sound of traffic on Del Monte Boulevard half a block away and creating a protected cave-like feeling around the two women talking in the dim, otherwise empty classroom.

"So I was focusing on something different for this early part of the morning, maybe those large leaves we collected on our walk yesterday?—I could put those out and the kids could draw around them, even cut out the shapes they made." Her voice continued to rise at the end of her sentences, as if pleading for Hannah to understand.

"I tell you Hannah, I get carried away with this kind of stuff! I can't believe you pay me to do it. It's so much *fun*. Oh, this was going to be so much better than just a few crayons and some old paper—"

"Please Angie," Hannah broke in at last, "tell me about the emergency. I want to help."

Angie took a breath. “Well...I went out to the play yard to get the leaves from one of the outdoor cupboards where we stored them yesterday. It was a little lighter, the sky overcast?—and a wind came up, maybe the start of a Santa Ana. The kids love windy days, but they always make me feel anxious. My feelings come up, know what I mean?”

“Please go on, dear. I want to know.”

“I stepped around some puddles to get to the storage cupboard. My sneakers are old, so getting them muddy didn’t matter, but I *had* hoped to keep them as dry as possible and not have to scrape them off before I went back in the building.” She looked straight down into her director’s eyes. Tears threatened, and her chest rose with a deep inhalation.

“Oh God, Hannah, my foot squished against something soft, and I felt so weird, like I had stepped on a big slug with bumps in it? When I looked down I saw footprints all around and this muddy, bloody, furry shape. Such a shock! It was Henry—you know Henry—one of our pet rabbits here in the four-year-olds’ yard? The cage torn open, the door dangled on one hinge. Whoever did it didn’t need to yank it like that—you know we don’t padlock those cages. Mabel, the other rabbit, miserable in the back of the cage, shivering.” Angie snuffled, rummaged in her pocket for a tissue, and blew her nose.

Then she raised her chin, looked straight at Hannah again, and said in a firmer tone, “I don’t mind telling you, Hannah, I wanted to run. My whole world spun. In just one second, everything changed.”

Hannah rose and held Angie close. “I’m so sorry this happened to you,” she murmured in a shaky voice, close to tears herself. She remembered another child care center where almost the same thing had happened—rabbits and guinea pigs killed during the night. *What was it about innocent places that seemed to attract violence?*

“People can be twisted and do ugly things.” She clicked her tongue. Then she released Angie and went outside to inspect the limp body next to the animal cages along the side of the children’s play yard.

Angie joined her, handing her a box. They laid Henry in it on his side and adjusted his twisted little body so it appeared straight and relaxed. Pets died of natural causes at the center from time to time, and the staff response had been worked out years earlier. The children would be told that the animal had died and allowed to see and even stroke their pet’s body—with supervised hand washing immediately afterward, of course. The regular group meetings of staff and children during this day would touch on Henry’s death, and the children would be encouraged to say what they felt. At the end of the day, Hannah or one of the staff would take the body to the local Humane Society for disposal. For the next several days, even weeks, the children would mention Henry and staff would respond sympathetically and creatively.

Now Angie was standing taller. Her eyes shone as she mapped out for Hannah the new Henry-centered curriculum for the day. “Farai was especially fond of Henry,” she told Hannah. “I’ll need to keep an eye out for him. This will be hard for him. But with Farai ...I think I know something that will help.” And she busied herself with pulling out supplies for a discussion and drawing session about Henry, and about all rabbits, later that morning.

“You know, Angie,” Hannah said, “I was wondering if you were up to being with the kids this morning, but it looks as if you’re together again—and thinking of their needs as usual. You are one strong lady!” She hugged Angie again, feeling her own tears welling. “But watch yourself, my dear. If you feel wobbly, I want you to go home for a hot bath, and we’ll get a substitute for your group. Agreed?”

“I’ll be okay, Hannah. I know I will.”

Hannah herself experienced a renewed surge of strength. This work could break her heart and make her feel such joy and hope for the human race, all in the same moment sometimes.

But Angie had been right earlier. Everything *had* changed. When a pet rabbit is slain in the night outside its own cage, it’s the opposite of sharing, the opposite of taking turns, the opposite of talking things through. Their little world of trust-building had been violated. It felt like a terrible intrusion into what should be the safest of all worlds.

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Eleven hours later, the parents had picked up the last of their children. As Hannah tidied the children's cubbies, she could clearly hear Angie's voice on the phone across the room. Angie gave her a wave and continued talking. "So that's what happened, Mom. Awful, but we got through it. The kids wanted me to get a padlock for Mabel's cage, so after my shift I went and got one. I came back and...

"Yes it *was* on my own time, but sometimes you just have to do what you have to do, Ma, you know that. We'll all sleep better tonight with that padlock on Mabel's cage...

"It'll be hard to go into the yard tomorrow, though, I'll tell you. Kathy said she'd come early so I wouldn't be by myself ... What?

"I *know* you don't understand why I chose this work, and I *know* you think I have a problem here, that I'm addicted to children or something ... Aw, Mom, I know it's a worry to you, no retirement benefits and all, but I'll be okay when I reach sixty-five, honest I will. I'll figure it out. I just love my work—it's that simple. That's worth something, now, isn't it? ...

"Ma, you're the best. I always feel better when I talk to you."