

Sam Adler and the Hidden Trouble

by Dwayne Carr

“Someone broke my beautiful vase!” Miss Winkler had tears in her eyes when she looked at the class. There was a pile of blue and yellow glass on the desk in front of her.

I tried not to look at her when she looked around the room. Miss Winkler is pretty cool for a fifth-grade teacher and I hate to see her upset. Besides, I was the one who broke the vase. If I looked at her she might guess the truth.

Miss Winkler spotted something else on the floor near her desk and my heart jumped. It was a wad of yellow paper. The same wad that Miss Winkler had seen me throwing earlier that day and had told me not to play with indoors because I might break something. The wad I was playing with when I was all alone in the classroom during lunch and when I had knocked the vase over.

The teacher picked up the paper wad but she didn't say anything until I was leaving the room at the end of the day.

“Sam,” she said. She held up the paper. “Did you break my vase?”

I looked her straight in the eye. “No, ma'am,” I said. Lying to her was easier than I had expected.

Miss Winkler smiled. “Good,” she said. “I didn't think you would do that.”

I left the room, but that smile seemed to burn straight through me. I played PlayStation games with my best friend, Toby, until dinnertime, and Mom made my favorite meal (spaghetti and meatballs) but all I could think about was that broken vase and the way Miss Winkler smiled at me. When I pushed my plate away without finishing my spaghetti, Mom took my temperature and told me to get in bed.

When I got to my bedroom Ambassador Prill was waiting for me.

Prill is from a planet called Thrae, a place I visit a lot. He's a very serious man. He was wearing a blue jacket with brass buttons and a white captain's cap. When I walked into the room Prill bowed at the waist. (I'm very important on Thrae.)

"Mr. Adler, sir," he said. "King Bern has asked whether you might travel to Thron to solve a problem?"

"Thron?" I asked.

"Thron is the land along Thrae's northern coast, sir," said Prill. "The people are very fond of boating, but I fear they are not very bright people. They have a boating problem, sir."

"Let's go," I said. I don't know anything about boats, but I didn't want to go to bed because I wasn't really sick. And I wanted to do something to get my mind off of Miss Winkler's blue and yellow vase. My stomach hurt and all I could think of was the way Miss Winkler had smiled at me. She trusted me.

The people who lived in Thron might have taken my mind off almost anything. They were all short, hairy people. Even the women and kids were short and hairy! They never talked without hopping up and down—and they talked all the time.

"We are so honored to have the king's advisor visit us, sir," said the short, hairy chief of the Throns while all the other short, hairy Throns hopped and jabbered behind him. "It is a deep honor," he repeated.

"What seems to be the problem?" I asked.

The chief (whose name was Thor) pointed out toward the harbor where dozens of little red boats bobbed on the deep blue water. All the other Throns hopped up and down and pointed their hairy fingers, too. "Do you see the large rock at the entrance to the harbor, sir?" asked Thor.

I squinted. I could see the blue water and red boats, but that was all. I squinted harder. "Well...no," I said. "I don't see a rock."

All the Throns murmured and hopped up and down.

“Precisely, sir,” said Thor.

“He’s a smart one!” called one of the people from the crowd. All the others hopped and repeated, “He’s a smart one!” while pointing at me.

My cheeks turned red.

Thor spoke gravely. “Every morning, sir, there is a rock at the entrance to the harbor. Clear as day, it is.”

All the other Throns hopped and said “Clear as day” until Thor quieted them down.

“But every evening,…” said Thor. He snapped his hairy fingers. “Poof! It’s gone. Just like that!” He pointed back to the harbor. “That’s why all those boats are in the harbor. No one can go out because the rock is still there, but it’s *invisible!*”

“Invisible!” cried all the hopping Throns.

I looked at Ambassador Prill and expected him to roll his eyes, but he kept his arms very stiffly at his side and looked over the heads of all the people of Thron.

“Ummm,” I said. “Maybe it’s the tide.”

“Beg your pardon, sir?” said Thor.

“Tides,” I said again. “Every morning, when it’s low tide, the water is out, so the rock is visible. In the evening the water comes back in at high tide and the rock is covered by water. The rock is still there, it’s just below the surface where no one can see it.”

The Throns hopped and cheered as though I was a genius or something.

When I finally got them to quit cheering I told them how to put a buoy on top of the rock. “That way you’ll always know where it is and you won’t run into it.”

I could still hear the Throns cheering when Prill and I returned to my bedroom.

“It was very clever of you, sir,” said Prill, “to realize that something can be where no one can see it, but still cause a lot of problems. Very clever, indeed, sir.”

“Thank you, Prill,” I said.

“Good night, sir. Sleep well,” said Prill.

“I will,” I said.” But I didn’t. I kept thinking about what Prill had said.

The next morning I made it to Miss Winkler’s room before any of the other kids.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I broke your vase, and then I lied about it.”

Miss Winkler’s eyes got teary. “Oh, Sam. I forgive you. Thank you for telling me.”

She dried her eyes. “I really didn’t know if it was you. No one saw you, so no one knew.”

“*I* knew,” I said. “It may have been out of sight, but it was still there—and, believe me, I kept crashing up against it.”

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