

A Patchwork Pudding

-1-

"Hey! You missed a fantastic party at Steve Rowan's place!"

Having fallen asleep in the corner armchair while reading a dictionary, thirteen-year-old Byanka Blackwell awoke with a start at the breathless midnight announcement.



"The games were wild, and the food was incredible, especially the pudding," a thirteen-year-old brunette continued, her flushed face and sparkling eyes retaining the excitement of the last three hours.

"Glad you liked it, Morena," Byanka murmured. "The pudding, that is."

The girl unravelled her scarf, pulled off her gloves, and tossed them onto the sofa. "You should have given it a try—the party, that is."

"Aw, you know I don't go for all that stuff. Besides, you have oodles of friends."

"Actually, 'all that stuff' was *fun*, Byanka. Besides, you are my best friend, and without you, it's ... well ... anyway, I don't know how you can just curl up in this pokey dark corner all the time, burying your nose in books and studies. Boring! And like I keep telling you, you ought to read in better light, or you'll ruin your eyes."

"I can see fine. Besides, I don't sit here '*all* the time.' But end-of-term exams are coming up."

"Oh, *now* you remind me!" groaned Morena. "Anyway, I never see you outside. You hardly ever come to parties, watch movies, or even just hang out. Don't you ever have any fun?"

"Reading and studying *is* fun."

"Hmmp. To each his own. Well, I'll get on up to bed. I'm pooped. Nightie-night."

"Goodnight, Morena. I'll be up in a few..." Byanka caught her breath, clutched her chest, and broke into a coughing spasm.

"My gosh," Morena said, rushing over to her.

Byanka waved her arms in protest. "I'm f-fine," she gasped. "Really."

"But this cough has been going on for a while now, and it doesn't sound good."

"I said I'll be *fine*."

Morena sighed sadly and went upstairs. Byanka was about to get up and follow her when her eyes fell upon a word in the open page of her dictionary—"patchwork family." Its definition: *A new family made up from the remnants of divorced families....*

She decided to remain in her armchair, and as she reflected on her own circumstances, she drifted off to sleep.

Byanka's divorced mother, Carolyn, was recently remarried to Adrian Blackwell, a Welsh schoolteacher and widower with a daughter, Morena, whose deceased mother had been Spanish. Byanka was pale, studious, and reticent, and Morena was vivacious, athletic, and outgoing. Nevertheless, despite these contrasting characteristics, the two stepsisters got along surprisingly well, and the parents attributed this fortune to *misfortune's* seemingly inopportune intrusion of divorce and bereavement into the girls' lives.

A man wearing a white coat put down his pen and peered over his spectacles at the concerned couple sitting in front of his desk.

“Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell, I regret to inform you that the x-ray and test results received from the laboratory in Sussex seem to indicate early stages of EPS—Eschelman Pulmonary Syndrome, a respiratory disease.”

Carolyn gasped. “Byanka ... a respiratory disease?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What can we do?” Adrian asked.

“Unfortunately, as of now, there is no known cure. I can only prescribe some medication for relief. The disease is baffling experts.

“But to my mind, it’s simply a form of TB,” he added in a confidential tone.

“I see,” said Carolyn. “But my daughter is terribly allergic to medication, Dr. Ladbroke.”

“My wife prefers natural ways to cure diseases,” said Adrian.

“Along with prayer,” said Carolyn.

The doctor smirked. “You do your praying; I’ll do my prescribing. But it’s true—medication could only counter the symptoms, not the actual disease.”

“But surely there are natural ways to combat this?” Adrian asked.

“Possibly. I notice Byanka’s not sports-oriented.”

“She’s not. Is that a problem?”

“That’s not wrong in itself, Mr. Blackwell,” the doctor responded. “However, she is pale and rather listless. It seems your daughter needs fresh air.”

“That’s true,” Carolyn said. “I have tried to encourage her about getting more exercise, but she’s not always...”

“I’m sure if we explain the situation to her, she’ll see the need for making a change,” said Adrian. “She does spend most of her time indoors.”

“If you want the truth, Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell, the door to your daughter’s recovery may hinge on her having a significant turnaround in her daily habits.”

Doctor Ladbroke stood up, indicating that the half-hour consultation was over. “Bottom line

is that Byanka would benefit from a vigorous regimen of daily respiratory strengthening exercise, along with bags of sunshine and fresh air, which granted, living down here in the centre of Mudborough leaves a lot to be desired.”

“We are planning on moving soon,” Carolyn said, and the doctor smiled.

“Well, there you have it, Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell,” he added as he shook their hands. “I’ve prescribed a natural remedy—and you keep up your praying!”

Sitting at the dining room table after dinner that evening, Morena silently watched her father perusing the sheet of paper in his hand. Carolyn and Byanka had excused themselves to wash the dishes, having sensed the need for Adrian to talk to Morena alone. He said nothing as his brow furrowed and he slowly shook his head. Finally, he laid the document down on the table. His dark eyes were sad.

“You know it’s difficult for me to have to chide you, but these exam results...”

Morena burst into tears.

“Need I say more?”

Morena shook her head.

“What are we going to do about it?”

Morena shrugged.

“Look, sweetheart, I’m concerned about you applying yourself,” Adrian went on. “I’ve tried suggesting, prodding—even needling and nagging.” He broke into a smile. “What do you want me to do? Beat you on the noggin with your schoolbooks?”

Morena grinned through her tears and shook her head.

“I mean, considering some of the other students’ grades in your class...”

“If you mean Byanka, Daddy, I’ll never be a super-brain like her. Besides, all she does is sit around studying. Surely, that’s not right.”

“Yes, Morena, but neither is life made up of just partying, sports, and friends. Believe it or not, I am having to deal with issues along the line of moderation also.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. Being a busy man, I feel I should let others share my off-duty workload on

the school faculty so you and I can do more things together.”

Adrian took a few seconds to enjoy Morena’s beam of delight and continued. “Anyway, about the other students’ grades, I wasn’t referring to Byanka; I was referring to a boy like your friend, Jimbo Jenkins. He’s not that clever, but he gets down to it and does the best he can.”

“He has the time, Daddy. I don’t.”

“He *makes* the time, sweetheart. For example, if after dinner some evenings, you would cut online chatting and lean in on your homework, it would result in major improvement. Will you at least promise to try?”

Morena nodded and wiped her eyes.

“And by the way,” her father said, taking her hand. “Carolyn and I are very concerned about Byanka’s health and her weakening eyesight. Her new prescription had to go up quite a bit since her last check-up six months ago...”

“Oh my,” said Morena. “She already has to wear such thick glasses.”

“Well, the optician has suggested that the problem could be due to prolonged reading in poor light.”

“I know. She’s often up into the early morning hours with a pokey flashlight and a book or on her e-book reader. I have warned her about it.”

“Yes, but worse than that, we found out today that she also has an apparently rare and supposedly incurable respiratory disease called EPS. She is most distressed about it.”

Morena’s mouth fell open and tears returned to her eyes. “Does that mean...?”

“Not necessarily, because miracles can still happen. But Doctor Ladbroke said that lots of fresh air and a vigorous exercise regimen could thwart her affliction.”

-4-

With all the determination she could muster, Morena Blackwell arose from her chair, switched off a TV sports program, and washed her dinner plate. She was making her way upstairs when she noticed Byanka in her usual corner of the living room, only she was not reading—just staring forlornly into space.

“You’ve got a new reading lamp,” Morena said. “Nice and bright.”

“Yes. I should have taken your advice *months* ago, because now...”

Byanka burst into tears. Morena knelt beside her. “Yah,” she said. “That must be a total let-down, knowing how much you like to study.”

“But that’s not the worst of it. You probably heard about my ... er, you know...”

“Your respiratory thingy?”

Byanka nodded. Morena did too. “Dad told me yesterday after he’d looked over my exam results,” she said. “I didn’t know if you wanted to talk about it right now. So sorry. But I’m certainly praying for you.”

“Thank you. How are they, by the way?”

“My exam results? Embarrassingly lousy. I’m going to have to lean in double duty big-time to make up. So pray for me too, okay?”

“I will, Morena. Hey, why don’t you bring me your study books?”

“What?”

“I’ll help you. What’s your subject today?”

“Er ... biology. Look, Byanka, you know I’m a total dumbbell. Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’ll be fun for me, and I think I can make it fun for you.”

As the two stepsisters stood in their home’s vestibule the next morning, Morena grinned and handed Byanka a long, slim black nylon zippered bag.

“Here you go. From me to you in appreciation for the fascinating study last night.”

Byanka pulled open the zipper and puzzlement wrinkled her pallid features. “A tennis racquet?”

“Close. It’s actually a badminton racquet. Had it stuck in my closet for months.”

“So what am I going to do with it?”

Morena shrugged and giggled. “Oh, I don’t know. Swat flies? Practise guitar moves? Play badminton, of course!”

“Me?”

“Yes, *you*. I thought about hockey, netball, and tennis, but I wondered if badminton would be your thing—lighter. So, you and I are going to take advantage of the free use of the court at the sports centre every afternoon, starting today!”

“Are you serious?”

At the sound of a vehicle’s honk outside, Morena picked up her backpack. “As serious as you are about giving me private tutoring. After lunch break, we go with Dad to pick up some tennie togs and shoes for you at Sportive’s closeout sale, and boom, we go for it.”

“But...”

“No ‘butts’ but ours on that court at four o’clock this afternoon, Byanka! See you later. And be sure to Google badminton rules!”

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Morena tossed the shuttlecock into the air and with a confident underhand swing of her racquet, sent it into Byanka’s side of the court. Byanka ran for it and attempted a parry, but the shuttlecock floated almost mockingly to the ground. She picked it up, and, after a few attempts, lobbed it to Morena, who sent it sailing back. Byanka lunged and took a swipe with her racquet. Again, the shuttlecock fell nonchalantly at her feet.

“Slow it down!” Morena shouted. “You’re giving it a panic swipe before it’s even close to you. Keep your eyes on our fine feathered friend and *wait*. But not too long. And remember, a lot of skill is in the wrist.”

Bearing her friend's advice in mind, Byanka was soon accurately returning the shuttlecock to Morena who, after a few minutes, stopped and snatched it with her hand.

"It's windy today," she said, looking at the clouds. "Makes it a bit difficult. But enough of this boring batting back and forth—now we play by the rules, okay? Keeps us hopping!"

After roughly fifteen minutes of springing and sidestepping, training her bespectacled eyes on the winging shuttlecock, Byanka was soon

deftly sending it into unpredictable spots on her opponent's side, keeping Morena darting from side to side and back and forth in amazement at her stepsister's strategy.

"How did you swing that?" Morena asked after turning to see that the shuttlecock had landed well inside her square. "I wasn't even going to bother, I was positive it was going to be *way* out."

"Wind velocity," Byanka said, mopping her brow. "It helps to work with it. Like, if I send the shuttlecock hard at a certain angle against the current, it goes in a curve and lands precisely where I want it. Takes some figuring out, but I think I'm getting the knack."

"Obviously. Can you show me that?"

"Of course..."

Suddenly, seized by a coughing spasm, Byanka doubled up and staggered over to steady her convulsing frame against the court's wire fence.

"Oh, no!" Morena exclaimed. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

Byanka shook her head as she expectorated thick, dark phlegm into a trashbin.

"Don't worry," she gasped. "It actually feels good to get rid of it."

"We should go home," said Morena.

Byanka shook her head again. "How long have we been playing?"

"Umm. I don't know ... forty minutes?"

"Let's keep going, Morena. I'll be fine. Now, about that wind velocity..."

- 6 -

"I was getting a little concerned these last few weeks about you hanging around until so late at night with Byanka," Adrian said as he laid a document down on his desk.

"I wasn't just hanging around, Daddy. I was studying."

"That's obvious. The proof of the pudding is right here in these exam results. Remarkable, Morena. I not only have a daughter with brawn and bluster, but brains to boot."

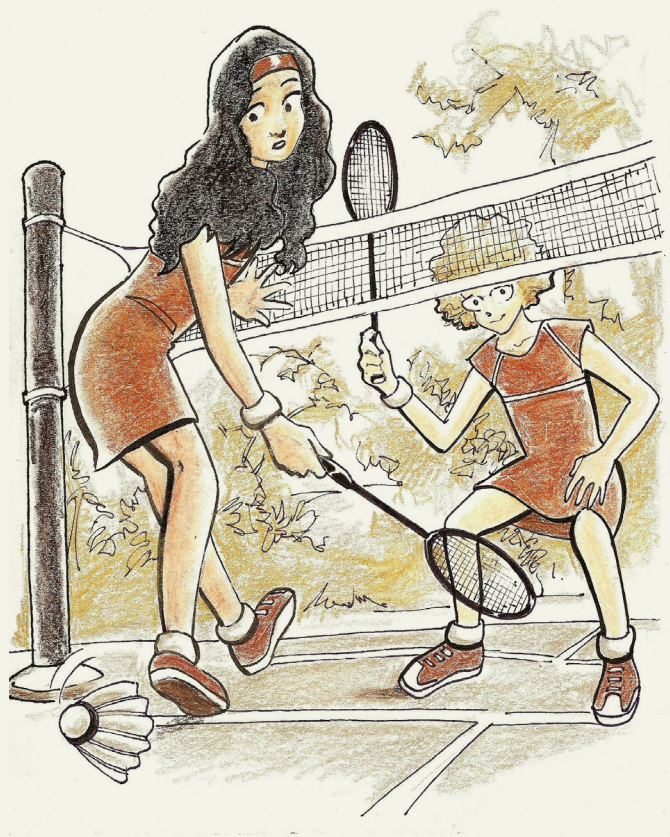
Morena beamed. "Thanks, Daddy, and thanks to Byanka. She taught me."

"And apparently you taught *her*, right?"

"Too well, I think. She beat me three to one at badminton yesterday!"

"And you taught her to dance the salsa, and she loved it."

"Yah, but that doesn't exactly take brains—I still don't match her on that score! Although



I did beat her on a speed dictionary quiz. You know, someone asks you to look up a word and you have to see how fast you can get there! I figured out where to crack the dictionary at certain letters.”

“And you beat her at a spelling bee,” said Adrian.

“A one-timer! We based it on a fantastic classic novel she recommended to me. Anyway, Byanka makes learning a fun competition. Like a ‘brain’ sport!”

-7-

It had been a couple of months since Adrian and Carolyn had last consulted Dr. Ladbroke regarding Byanka’s progress, and they were now apprehensively waiting in his office while he stroked his chin and shook his head as he studied his computer screen.

“Bad news, Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell,” he finally said.

“Oh, no!”

The doctor broke into a smile. “*Very* bad news for your daughter’s EPS! Judging by these tests and x-rays ... no sign of that dear departed devil!”

“You mean Byanka is—?”

“Yes. Amazing, actually. Badminton, did you say?”

Carolyn nodded through joyful tears and clasped her husband’s hand.

“Seems like it,” said Adrian. “I was getting worried, wondering if Byanka was overdoing it—two whole *hours* yesterday. Of course, it was their day off.”

“Well, the proof of the pudding is in the ‘eating’ of these tests, Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell. If it were ethical to do so, I would even venture to call it a miracle. But between you and me, it is. Your daughter is *healed*.”

“That’s wonderful!” Carolyn said. “And you can only imagine how grateful we are. Yet I feel we can’t give *all* credit for the miracle to badminton.”

“Of course not. Your daughter’s *determination* played a vital part in it.”

“Along with Morena’s instruction and support,” said Adrian. “And your invaluable counsel, of course, Dr. Ladbroke.”

The doctor grinned bashfully, and rummaged through some papers. “Er ... thank you.”

“But most of all, credit goes to prayer,” said Carolyn. “It helped you give a proper diagnosis, and helped Byanka take up those new healthy habits. After all, the proof of the pudding of prayer is...”

“In the eating,” Dr. Ladbroke said with a smile. “Maybe I should try it.”

The End

