



THE LONELIEST CREATURE ON EARTH

by Jen Michalski

THANK you for humoring our son; he's a very inquisitive boy and knows a lot for his age. Other boys will astonish (or perhaps bore) you with their encyclopedic knowledge of Minecraft or Tyrannosaurus Rex but our son will tell you about Frank Hayes, the jockey who died of a heart attack mid-race at Belmont Park, but still won because his body stayed in the saddle until man and horse crossed the finish line. I know you are about to visit your mother, but our son is not finished telling you about the whale who has been without a mate for over twenty years because his mating call is so different from other whales that no one responds to him. "I bet he's the loneliest creature on earth."

Our son widens his eyes as he speaks to you, and yes, your mother is waiting on the fifth floor, so thank you for lingering, telling him he's a smart boy, smiling just as widely as he is staring even though you feel sorry for him and maybe hug your own kids a little tighter or order the bloomin' onion loaf that they always whine for at the restaurant but that you never get, because of triglycerides and all, but now that you've seen our son you think hell, they'll only live once.

He's no idiot savant or anything like that; there's really quite a banal explanation for his repository of trivia. Last year at his annual checkup one of us forgot to bring the tablet, the one with all the games on it, and, panicked, we went to the gift shop looking for a children's book and returned with a copy of *Weird and Amazing Facts*. It seemed harmless, with the blue monkey and red eyes on the cover. Our son became so engrossed he read it through his checkup, everything, didn't even notice.

We've since bought the full set—did you know there are eight? Our son has read them cover to cover, and while awaiting the publication of volume nine (yes, we checked the publisher's website), has memorized 287 weird facts. Like the reindeer that spent six weeks on the British submarine HMS Trident during World War II. Or Giethoorn, the village in the Netherlands with no roads, only canals and footbridges. Now

when we are waiting for the doctor, he will entertain the other patients. At first, it made them less anxious of their own ailments, but after a while, they all began to sit on the other side of the waiting room. Not because of our son's retelling of the Fulgates of Troublesome Creek, a family in Kentucky who had blue skin from a rare genetic condition known as methemoglobinemia they had inbred into their family tree, but because they were worried about contagion.

We've been assured that this is not an issue. Anyway, we touch him all the time and are none the worse for wear. It's actually more dangerous for him than us. Right after the checkup, we knew something wasn't right. We'd only grabbed his earlobe between our fingers and tugged at it playfully. They didn't believe us in the emergency department, called in child protective services, even accused us of devil worship. Why the hell would we cut it off, we explained over and over—we're telling you IT JUST CAME OFF. And when the tip of his pinky fell off, right there, in front of the child protective services woman and the nurse, only then did they believe us.

It sounds like one of those things in those books of his, you say to each other. Never to us, although we know you're thinking it. Maybe you go home and Google search "body parts fall off" or "flipper for hand" or

“purple-blue-green skin” and you finally learn that no, leprosy doesn’t cause body parts to fall off but maybe our boy does have that methemoglobinemia thing. But that doesn’t explain the red pupils and the sloughing, whole sheets of it, left behind on the examination table or in the pool (back when we went to places like that, back before the home schooling). And what a trooper he is, you add, to whoever it is you’re talking to, your husband, your wife, your therapist, although we agree. He’s an inspiration to us all.

That’s not quite true. We’re not inspired by what’s happening; we’re terrified. And when we’re not terrified, we’re angry. Especially when our little boy caught us crying in the bedroom a few months ago—we were holding his baby picture, when he was still himself—and he proceeded to tell us that icebergs make a distinctive fizzing sound when they melt, called the *berg seltzer*. Will you just be *quiet—quiet—quiet*—for once we shook him, didn’t he have any idea how hard this was on all of us, and we felt our fingers sink into his skin, right to the bone, like we were squeezing gelatin. That scared us pretty bad. The holes absorbed after a few hours, and the fingerprints, which were—we kid you not, gold—faded after a few days.

The people from the government—one of those alphabet organizations—came. Of course they were careful, mindful of our stresses, talked about finding a cure, but we knew they just wanted to take him to some laboratory in some nondescript sandstone building in the DC suburbs and take blood samples, run tests. Try to culture something, but what—the rest of him? He's already lost, since the pinky, his whole left arm and his right foot. His skin, at one point a beautiful aquamarine blue (no filter) is now covered with scales and what appear to be short porcupine-like quills. At least there's no worry about sinking our hands into his skin anymore.

He doesn't seem fazed by these phases. He talks excitedly about the ninth volume of *Weird and Amazing Facts*, which should arrive any day now. Until then, he's fond of recounting the laughing epidemic, which is what he tells you when we run into you again, outside the elevators—how is your mother, by the way? Who knows why we come here now, merely to document changes without any hope of answers. We're a little worried about the right kneecap—it was as wobbly as a tire with loose lug nuts when we pulled on his sweatpants this morning. As you linger, smiling, trying not to stare at our son's bulbous knuckles as he waves his hands, he tells you that the laughing epidemic happened in Tanzania in 1962 and

lasted a year. Thousands of people, in addition to laughing, couldn't stop crying, or fainting. They broke out in rashes and had severe pain.

“What was the cause of the epidemic?” You ask him. You hold your breath, not because you can't wait for the answer, but because of the smell. Like burned flesh but also, strangely, licorice, that comes off our son in wafts.

“I don't know,” he answers, and frowns, what passes as a frown, now that his lips have begun to curdle. “They never tell you that part.”

You see, there are only facts in those eight volumes. Sometimes it's better to repeat what's known. Later, we will explain to you at your mother's wake, that the final month was the worst for our son. Not because of his incapacitation or the anti-contamination chamber, but because there simply weren't enough kind people like you to come and visit him. No one for him to tell, for instance, that the man who found the 5000-year-old corpse named the Iceman in 1991 was also found frozen dead in ice in 1994. And goodness knows, we stopped listening to him months ago. We've had our own set of facts to try and get straight. What to tell our friends, our coworkers, our insurance agent, about what happened. How one day we woke up and got ready to feed him (such a strange process, really, at the end—we had to put the nutrient drink in a spray bottle and

mist it onto his skin) and when we opened the chamber, he was gone. In his place only what looked like a snakeskin skeleton. It was the day the ninth volume of *Weird and Amazing Facts* came in the mail. We were so heartbroken he never got to read it.

Now, this is the weird thing. We tried to keep all of this under wraps—and unless somebody at the hospital said something—but where would they have gotten that picture? It was only stored on our phone. We never shared it on Facebook and save nothing to the Cloud. And yet there it was, on the cover of volume nine—that picture of him, his beautiful little boy face. Right before the checkup, the waiting room, the forgotten tablet, the book. Under the picture reads simply his name, Jeremy, what we know for sure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Michalski is the author of the novels *The Summer She Was Under Water* and *The Tide King* (both Black Lawrence Press), a couplet of novellas, *Could You Be With Her Now* (Dzanc Books), and two collections of fiction (*From Here*; and *Close Encounters*). Her work has appeared in more than 100 publications, including *Poets & Writers*. In 2013, she was named as “One of 50 Women to Watch” by *The Baltimore Sun* and “Best Writer” by *Baltimore Magazine*. She is the host of a fiction reading series in Baltimore, called *Starts Here!* and is editor-in-chief of the literary journal *jmww*.

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