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The
FURIOUS ADVENTURE
of
ZOO M. SLICKY

by Ee Zimmer



THURSDAY EVENING: TEMPER TANTRUM

ZOSIMO SLICKY'S GUT has twisted itself into a pretzel, like one of those knots that are impossible to untie. Grandfather has been missing for months and nobody else seems to care.

A manila envelope slides under Zoo's bedroom door.

"A package came for you," his sister Ruthie calls out.

"Really?" Zoo says. He rips it open and a brass key drops into his hand. "Hey, where'd you get this?" The key is old and tarnished. His fingertip outlines the toothy end. Fishing in the envelope, he pulls out a letter. The smell of Grandfather's tobacco fills the air. "Grandfather!"

Inhaling, Zoo skims through the familiar handwriting:



Zosimo,

Keep this safe. Something strange is going on and I believe someone may be trying to do away with me. I cannot lay it out now, but here's a riddle only you can solve:

Follow your nose 'til it stares back at you like a big black elephant's.

Summon your brass.

Start from the north side, move right to left 6 steps, nudge twice.

*From the south side, move left to right 3 steps, poke thrice.
Look beneath.*

When you find it, you'll know what to do. It's in your blood. Some might call it magic. I call it destiny.

My dear boy, I am leaving you this just in case... Not to worry, I suspect the answer lies somewhere on Mount Gallicus.

Stay alert,

Grandfather. . .

He reads it again slowly, his heartbeat thumping. "You knew something wasn't right."

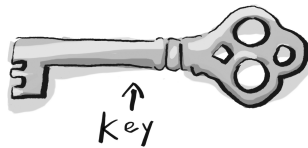
"SOUP'S ON," Zoo's mom shouts up the stairs. Grandmother is over again for dinner. She's been here a lot since Grandfather disappeared.

Zoo races downstairs, *I'm gonna get some answers*. He hurtles into the dining room and lands in the chair across from his sister.

"Okay, Grandmother. Who are Grandfather's enemies?"

Grandmother snorts.

"Look at this letter that just came for me! Listen." Zoo reads through the note. "And he sent this." He dangles the key. "Where do you think it goes?"



"Nowhere," says Grandmother. "Your grandfather is off on another wild escapade, without thought or care for any of us. Don't believe his games, Zoo. He is just trying to cover his tracks."

"What's with the crazy riddle," Ruthie asks, grabbing the letter from Zoo's hand. "Give it back." Zoo plucks it from her fingers. "It's gonna lead me to what happened."

"The only thing that's happened is he's run off again," Zoo's mom says as she pours a glass of wine for Grandmother. "So selfish," she shakes her head.

"He's never been gone this long. Seriously. Someone has it out for him. I mean, they cut the brake lines on his car," Zoo snips his fingers in the air. "We were almost killed, remember?"

"Ridiculous," Dad says. "That old car is falling apart. No one cut anything."

"Your Grandfather has never taken care of anything," Grandmother huffs, "more to the point."

"I'm telling you." Zoo looks wild-eyed around the dinner table. "Something really weird is goin' on."

They've stopped paying attention. Except for maybe Winnie-the-Dog, tail wagging nervously. "Come on guys, Grandfather didn't disappear by accident.

Someone was trying to kill him. This is proof." Zoo waves the letter.

Grandmother inhales sharply.

"Here we go," his sister groans. "Zoo here thinks he's on some special mission."

"Gibberish," Grandmother says.

"Zoo Slicky, the only thing that silly note proves is that he can't be trusted." Dad says. "We're just getting back to normal around here. Don't go upsetting your grandmother again."



"Dad, we have to save him," Zoo pleads. A fierce look from Grandmother cuts him off. He grits his teeth. Mom serves him a plate of trout. "Fish? Seriously? What about PIZZA? You know fishing was our thing, and now he's gone. This trout has a freakin' eyeball!" His ears burn. "I think I'm gonna puke. Why don't you ever LISTEN to me?"

"Maybe," his sister says, "'cuz you're like a three-year-old on steroids. I bet you'll get held back this year. Stuck in sixth." She waves a forkful of fish at him. "Middle school for-ev-er."

"Ruth, that is not helpful. Zoo, go to your room. NOW."

"But Mom, Grandfather wrote that message for ME. I gotta—"

"You better watch it, buddy," Mom says. "You're tearing this family apart with your misbehavior. No wonder he left, with a grandson who acts like this—"

"Auugh!" Zoo grabs his plate and hurls it.

Dad fails to intercept the Frisbee fish and it smashes into the wall. Mom shrieks. The dog barks. Globbs of trout stick fast before dropping to the floor.

SPLAT.

Grandmother breaks the silence. "Quite an impressive display," she says, peering over the rim of her eyeglasses. "Even your grandfather's outbursts were never quite this dramatic."

Mom is pale. "This is abuse."

"Well, I know *just* the boarding school for you, young man—very strict and highly disciplined."

Grandmother pats the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "It will put an end to this behavior once and for all."

"Yeah right," Ruthie snickers.

"Maybe," glares Mom. "Since nothing *I* do gets through to you."

Zoo hangs his head. "Grandfather always gets through to me," he mutters.

"Zoo, your grandfather...had to leave," Dad says.

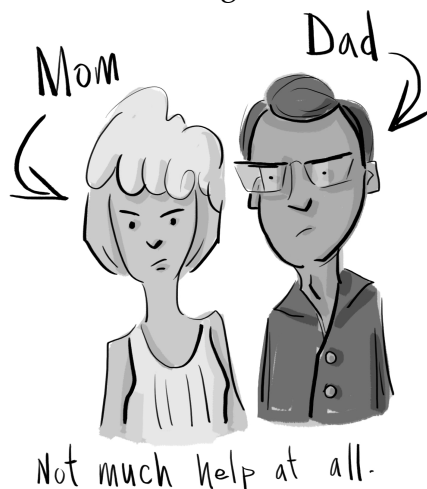
"We'll talk about it later. Now do as your mother says."

"You always say that, but you never actually TALK," Zoo yells.

"Out." Dad tilts his head toward the doorway.

Ruthie waves, "Adios, Fit-Slicky."

Stomping past the splatter of trout, Zoo grumbles up the stairs to his room. He definitely doesn't want to go to boarding school. He already has to go to a therapist, *twice* a week now, since Grandfather disappeared. Ruthie calls him "The Guru" and he's



supposedly helping Zoo with “anger management.” *What a joke.* And how does being sent to your room a gazillion times help with anger anyways?

“You might as well install a revolving door!” Zoo yells, slamming it shut. He doesn’t mean to be a jerk. Something just explodes. Half the time he doesn’t even know what hit him, and he feels terrible afterward—like a slimy scrap of a popped balloon.

“No one ever listens!” He bangs his head against the bedroom door. “Nobody...nobody...nobody.” *THUD.* “Ow. Nobody but Grandfather.”

Zoo snatches his stuffed cat Theodore off the bed and walks over to a small door next to the closet. He scurries into an attic space beneath the eaves. The ceiling slopes and there’s barely enough headroom to stand. Just right for Zoo. It feels like the entrance to another world.

Dropping into his comfy chair, he examines the torn envelope. Across the front is Zoo’s name and address. The handwriting doesn’t match Grandfather’s. There’s no return address. In the upper left corner it reads, *sent from M. Hughes*, in the same shaky script.

“Who the heck is M. Hughes?” Zoo murmurs to Theodore. “Hmmm...” Grandfather has always been quirky. “This takes the cake,” Zoo sighs.

He’s the only one who really gets Zoo. And Zoo’s probably the only one who really gets Grandfather. Maybe that makes Zoo a little quirky and mysterious in his own right. The two are always finishing each other’s sentences, after which the old man winks. And it was Grandfather who coined the nickname “Zoo.” Zoo’s parents named him after a distant Greek relative, Zosimo, who was apparently a bit of a wildcat. Zosimo means “lively” and little Zosimo lived up to his name. Grandfather has called him Zoo since before he could remember, which was just as well since Zoo couldn’t pronounce his own name for the longest time.

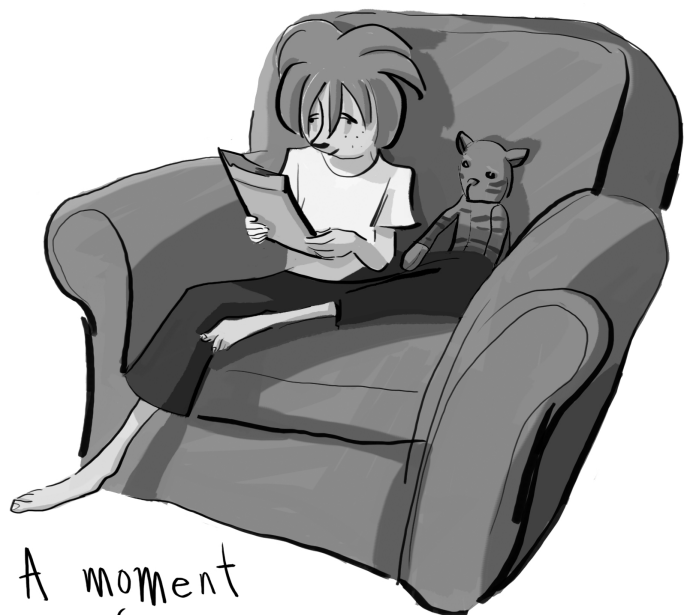
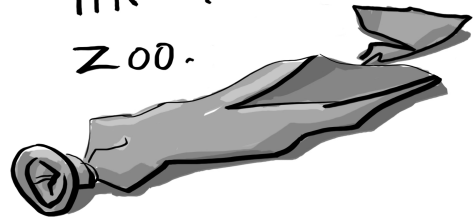
“Grandfather, where are you?” Zoo whispers.

“Who are you talking to now?” Ruthie pokes her head through the door. She’s only a year older but thinks she’s a grown-up. “Mom says come down and clean up your mess. And Grandmother’s waiting for an apology.”

“Don’t you ever knock?”

“Still pretending that Grandfather’s being hunted by some

What it feels
like to be
Zoo.



A moment
of peace.

sinister villain?" She pauses to get comfortable in the small doorframe, inspecting her nails.

"Go away Rezi," Zoo growls.

"Shut up. Only Grandfather gets to call me that."

There's an uncomfortable silence between them.

"Why are you pretending like he doesn't even exist?"

"Why are you hiding away up in here?" She sniffs, "Yuck. Have you told The Guru about this? It's totally depressing."

"Then you should stay out, shouldn't you?"

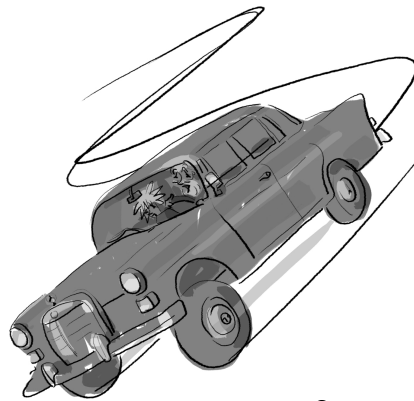
"Wait. Are you still talking to that stuffed cat?" Ruthie holds the door open with her foot. "You freaky-deak. Does he talk back? Meeeeeow."

"OUT."

"You'd better hurry up and get that fish off the floor." She turns on her heels. "Mom's really mad."

"Tell her I'm coming already." He sighs and burrows into the chair.

Grandfather's gravelly voice rings in his head. *Stay alert, my boy.* Zoo stares at the letter. "I'll start with the mountain."



2

AUTUMN 1977: FIVE MONTHS EARLIER

ZOSIMO SLICKY HAD a bad habit of hanging out the window of speeding cars. "This is what it feels like to be a bird!" he yelled. The clunky old Mercedes flew down the mountain road, growling through a rusted-out tail pipe. He reached into the wind—his hand, cupped like a wing, playing in the current of air. Usually Grandfather put up with it.

"Get in here Zoo," Grandfather barked.

"Why?" Zoo asked. The look on Grandfather's face stopped him dead in his tracks.

Rounding a corner, the car skidded sideways, slamming Zoo into the passenger door.

"Yow, slow down!"

"I can't, my boy."





"Why not?"

"No brakes."

"Very funny." Zoo glanced at Grandfather.

"Not. Being. funny." Grandfather struggled to down-shift. Swerving wildly, they careened toward a steep drop-off at the edge of the road.

"Ahhh!" Zoo screamed.

"Hold on." Grandfather jerked the steering wheel, spinning the car back across the dirt road. It leapt a small embankment, crushing a bush before coming to a deadening halt against the hillside.

"Wha...what the..." stuttered Zoo, dazed. His

ruddy hair stuck out every which way.

"Don't know." Grandfather looked bewildered, rubbing his head as dust settled all around them. "The brakes just went out. Are you okay? You look like you just got electrocuted."

"Hilarious. Nothing's broken at least. You okay?"

"Just a little dizzy." Grandfather gave his head a shake. "My brain's not been quite right these days."

"What are you talking about?" Zoo looked at his grandfather, alarmed.

"C'mon," Grandfather said, getting out of the car. "Let's check it out."

The two inspected the damage, kicking tires, peering under wheel-wells.

"Doesn't look like anything's *too* messed up," Zoo said, eyeing his grandfather.

Grandfather opened the hood and started poking around. He pulled loose a handful of wires. "This doesn't look right. Someone cut the brake lines."

"Grandfather, those aren't brake lines. I'm pretty sure they're *underneath* the car. Besides, who the heck would cut them?"

"Things are going on...strange things." He slammed the hood shut. "If anything should happen to me—"

"Wait, what's going on?" Zoo's face is flushing, "Are you sick?"

"No, yes, I mean—that's not what I'm saying." He rubbed his head.

"Something's suspicious..."

"Are you sure you didn't whack your head?"

"Yes, of course, stay calm—"

"I *was* calm," squeaked Zoo, "until you started talking crazy-like."

"We're going to need a tow-truck." He stuck a tobacco pipe between his teeth.

"Take a deep breath, Zoo."

The worried boy stared at the old man. He was wiry like Zoo, and strong, but the usual twinkle in his eye had clouded over. Zoo watched as he stroked his grizzled



beard. He looked more wrinkled than ever. "Grandfather, you gotta promise to stay healthy. Eat vegetables and stuff, and maybe not smoke."

"Rubbish," Grandfather said, striking a match.

Zoo and his grandfather were returning from a fly-fishing trip on Thorn Creek. It was one of Grandfather's favorite spots on Mount Gallicus. Zoo loved these trips with Grandfather despite the fact he'd never caught a fish. Truth be told, Zoo wasn't so great at fishing. Not like Grandfather, effortless with rod and reel. He could dance the fly on the end of his line in looping arcs before landing it gently on the water's surface.



Winnie-the-Dog wasn't allowed anymore after the time she got a fishhook in her paw. Zoo usually ended up in a massive tangle of fishing line. It was all part of the challenge, and Zoo was determined to someday be as good as his grandfather. The two were inseparable, kindred spirits, peas-in-a-pod kind of thing. They told each other everything. There wasn't a secret they wouldn't share.

Until now.

"It was a good day, Zoo. Aside from crashing," Grandfather smiled. "Fly-fishing is an art."

"You're changing the subject." Zoo said, studying his grandfather warily. "Cleaning fish guts isn't very *artsy*."



"We'll make an angler of you yet." Grandfather winked. "It's in your blood."

"You keep saying that," Zoo sighs. "But how the heck are we gonna get a tow truck? We're in the middle of nowhere. We're gonna starve out here! We're—"

"Relax, Zoo. We've got plenty of food—"

"You mean raw trout?"

"And someone will come along soon."

Grandfather made himself comfortable at the base of a tree. "Have a seat," he said, patting the ground beside him.

Zoo tried to get more information out of him, but Grandfather just told stories about his travels.

"Someday you'll accompany me." He ruffled the boy's messy hair.

"Really?" Zoo brightened.

"Sure. Sky's the limit...or not."

"Hunh?"

"About time I showed you a few tricks."

"Yeah. Can we go to Greece first, and fish off of Great Uncle Max's boat?"



"So, you remember the boat? Well, Great Uncle Maximum has passed away, but his son Morpheus is a fine...navigator. I'm sure he'd be happy to take us on an adventure." Grandfather puffed on his pipe.

"I wish I could just fly around the world with you instead of being locked up in school day after day after day. It's horrible, Grandfather."

"Mmmmm..." The old man had dozed off.

Snowflakes fluttered about their heads. The bright autumn afternoon was turning dark and cold. Zoo leaned into his grandfather, imagining far-away places.



IT WAS AN hour before a car came down the road. Grandfather flagged it down and asked the driver to send up a tow-truck.

"Bit of a snarl, eh?" the man commented.

"Indeed," Grandfather replied, frowning.

"Might take a while. We're pretty far up the Gallicus road. Quite a few miles," the man mused. "As the crow flies," he added, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Zoo.

Grandfather stiffened, and put his arm around Zosimo. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

"No, no. I don't think so, just trying to help," said the man.

"Ahem, yes, well, we've got time." Grandfather nodded curtly. "Thank you for your...assistance."

Zoo groaned, as the man slowly pulled away. "Couldn't we have just hitched a ride with him?"

"I didn't like the way he was looking at you, Zoo. Suspicious."

"Everything's suspicious to you today, Grandfather," Zoo said. "What gives?"

"Something's giving me a weird feeling is all. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Right," Zoo sighed. "Strange things, weird feelings, something might be happening. Oh yeah," his eyes rolled back into his head, "nothing to worry about AT ALL."

"You're funny, Zoo-Slick-o-logical," Grandfather laughed. "I'm fine, everything's going be fine."

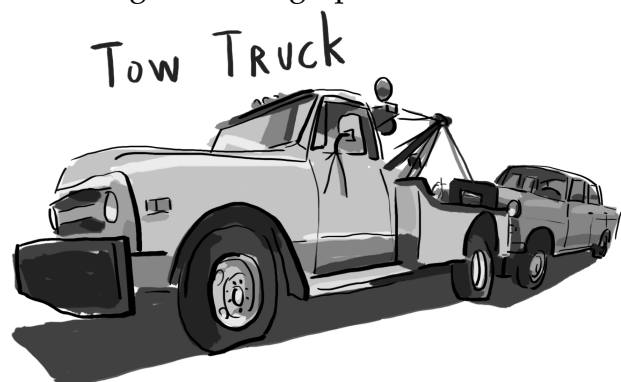
The tow-truck finally arrived and the driver began hooking up the car.

"The brakes just stopped working," Grandfather said. "That's unusual, isn't it?"

"Cuz Grandfather thinks someone cut the lines," Zoo added, shivering.

Grandfather gave Zoo a look while the driver checked under the car.

"The lines are broken alright. Everything's pretty rusted under here. More likely snapped on their own."



"See, Grandfather?" Zoo nodded. "I told you that was crazy."
Grandfather didn't look so sure. He rubbed his beard as the Mercedes slowly lifted behind the tow-truck.

"We'll have to see about that," he said.



3

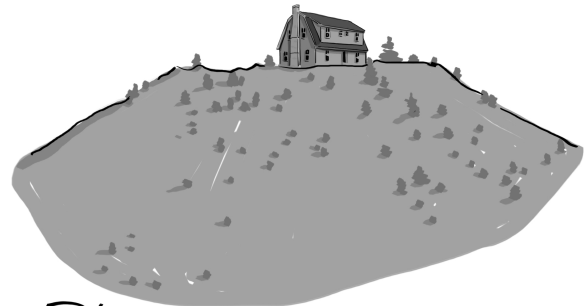
FRIDAY: STARDUST

ZOO TOSSES AND turns all night long, the letter with the key buried under his pillow. He dreams deep and darkly about his mysterious grandfather.

"Time to get up." Ruthie pounds on his door.

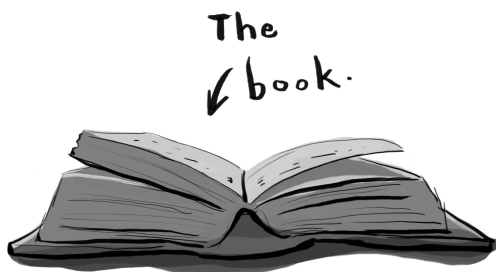
"Mgrrmph," groans Zoo. Bleary eyed, he stares out his window. The sun is just rising.

Zoo has always lived out west, where the wide flat plains collide with the great, big Rocky Mountains. His house is atop Stardust Mesa with a view of the mountains to the west and great plains to the east. From his bedroom window he can see the cone-shaped peak of Mount Gallicus.



Stardust Mesa.

"That's one big mountain," Zoo mutters. He runs down to Dad's study and scans the bookshelf behind the desk. Standing on a chair, he plucks a book from the top shelf: *Mountains of the Forepart Range*. Thumbing through the pages, his eyes land on the familiar mountain. "The rugged and majestic peak of Mount Gallicus—" it reads "—is one of the more difficult climbs of the Forepart Mountain Range..."



Hiding the book under his pajama shirt, Zoo dashes back to bed. He pores over the fold-out map—*What's hidden up there?* He reads the letter again. "'From the north side move right to left.' ...what could that mean? Go west? Then south...east?" He scratches his head. "'Look beneath.' What the heck..."

"Zoo M. Slicky," Mom yells up the stairs. "You're going to be late for school. And you're in enough trouble already."

Zoo tucks the letter in the book, the book under his pillow, and drags himself out of bed. *At least it's Friday.*



WHEN ZOO GETS to school, he can't wait to tell his friend Orvitch about the key and Mount Gallicus. Orvitch's actual name is Edward P. Orkovitch, and he goes by Eddie. Zoo started calling him Orvitch early on. Giving friends and family nicknames is a Slicky habit. Grandfather started it, so it comes naturally to Zoo.

He finds Orvitch at his locker. "We gotta climb Gallicus, PRONTO."

"Chill out, Zoo. What's the hurry?" Orvitch replies.

"C'mon, you've been wanting to climb Gallicus for years, and I have something that links my Grandfather to the mountain—"

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Orvitch asks.

"I'll show you later, trust me."

"Yeah, right."

Orvitch promises to come over after school. He's a sturdy boy with cheery green eyes and wavy hair. Zoo looks like a scrappy imp beside him, slight in build, yet with a wild streak as brazen as his mop of reddish hair. Hidden in Zoo's brown eyes are flecks of gold, which seem to flash whenever his temper flares. Orvitch has a way of diffusing Zoo's fits, a good quality in a best friend.

