

Coming in  
2020!

# PENGUIN'S MIDDLE GRADE Book Tasting

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by Jessica Kim

One lie snowballs into a full-blown double life in this irresistible story about an aspiring stand-up comedian.

*Birdie and Me* ..... page 31  
by J. M. M. Nuñez

An emotional and uplifting debut about a girl named Jack and her gender-creative little brother, Birdie, searching for the place where they can be their true and best selves.

*The Blackbird Girls* ..... page 59  
by Anne Blankman

A poignant and timeless story of friendship that twines together moments in underexplored history.

*Get a Grip, Vivvy Cohen!* ..... page 91  
by Sarah Kapit

In this perfectly pitched novel-in-letters, autistic eleven-year-old Vivvy Cohen won't let anything stop her from playing baseball—not when she has a major-league star as her pen pal.

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by Cat Patrick

In this heartfelt and powerfully affecting coming-of-age story, a neuroatypical seventh grader is determined to find her missing best friend before it's too late.



# Welcome

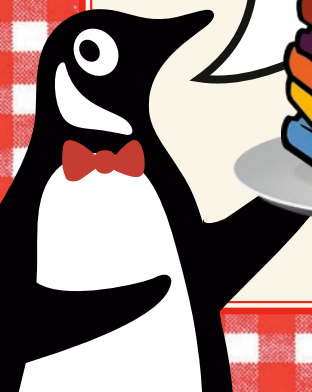
to Penguin's Book Tasting!

Today we have a special sample of five of our upcoming middle grade titles that will publish in 2020! Please see our menu for a sense of what to expect and be sure to fill out the Book Tasting form when you're done tasting each book!


If the mood strikes, we'd love to hear from you. Share your thoughts on social using **#PenguinBookTasting**.


Bon appétit!


*Penguin Young Readers*



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## Book Tasting

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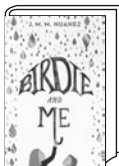
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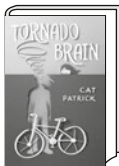
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Realistic/Contemporary Fiction | Grades 4 - 7 | 9780525554974

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# *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!*

by Jessica Kim

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On the outside, Yumi Chung suffers from #shygirlproblems, a perm-gone-wrong, and kids calling her “Yu-MEAT” because she smells like her family’s Korean barbecue restaurant. On the inside, Yumi is ready for her Netflix stand-up special. Her notebook is filled with mortifying memories that she’s reworked into comedy gold. All she needs is a stage and courage.

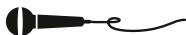
Instead of spending the summer studying her favorite YouTube comedians, Yumi is enrolled in test-prep tutoring to qualify for a private school scholarship, which will help in a time of hardship at the restaurant. One day after class, Yumi stumbles on an opportunity that will change her life: a comedy camp for kids taught by one of her favorite YouTube stars. The only problem is that the instructor and all the students think she’s a girl named Kay Nakamura—and Yumi doesn’t correct them.

As this case of mistaken identity unravels, Yumi must decide to stand up and reveal the truth or risk losing her dreams and disappointing everyone she cares about.

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# CHAPTER 1



I should have known better than to think anyone would listen to me at the Korean beauty salon.

“You want the perm?” asks the stylist in leather pants, running her fingers through my limp hair.

“Uh, I—I was thinking,” I sputter, showing her my phone, “maybe you could give me something like this instead?”

After scrolling through Pinterest for “hairstyle makeover” all week, I’ve settled on this sleek pixie cut. It’s definitely shorter than anything I’ve ever had before, but maybe that’s exactly what I need before seventh grade starts next month. A change. Something bold for the New Me.

Mom emerges from the dressing room in a shiny black robe and plucks the phone from my hands in one swift motion.

“Yumi, no.” She raises a generously penciled-in eyebrow. “Too short. You will look like a boy from BTS!”

“Mom!” I grab my phone back, ignoring the three robed aunties (who aren’t really my aunties) laughing in the chairs next to me. “This is a really popular hairstyle these days.”

“Let me see.” My stylist’s leather pants squeak as she bends over for a closer look. “No good. Your cheeks are too big for this cut.”

I examine the picture again, noticing the model’s sunken cheeks for the first time. I steal a glance at myself in the mirror, subtly sucking in my face.

Leather Pants scrunches my hair in her hands. “You need more volume.” She combs my hair forward, obscuring the sides of my face. “Covers your yeodeureum.”

My Korean isn’t that fluent, but I know she’s talking about my acne.

“She is right,” Mom says.

My stomach twists. “Yeah, but I—I don’t know. That’s not the look I’m—”

Without letting me finish, Leather Pants turns to Mom. “Perm?”

“Yes, much better for her.” She nods her chin to confirm and spins her chair to join the gaggle of gossiping aunties. Before I can object, they’re back to swapping intel.

“Did you hear that Kim moksa-nim from Hosanna Baptist is sending his son to Cornell?”

“How about his other son? Tall lawyer?” Mom gives them a knowing glance. “He’s same age as my older daughter.”

Oh brother, not this again.

Meanwhile, a sharp chemical odor stings my nostrils as strands of my hair are twirled around spools attached to a giant octopus-like machine.

So this is what disappointment smells like. Another perm. So much for the New Me.

When my hair is completely rolled up, the perm machine and I are sent to the ventilated lounge for a half hour to marinate. Good thing I brought my new Super-Secret Comedy Notebook. I take it out from my bag and jot down something I’ve been thinking about.

It's really frustrating that my parents compare me to their friends' kids.

It's always "Why can't you play piano like Grace?" or "Why can't you speak Korean better like Joon?"

The other day they were telling me, "Did you know that Minji got into Harvard?"

I said, "Mom, give me a break. I'm only eleven years old!"

Then she tells me, "Minji is nine!"



Mom approaches, her head covered in enough aluminum foil to transmit radio waves to Mars. I immediately shove my notebook into my bag before she can scold me for “wasting time with that comedy nonsense.”

She scoots the magazines off the chair next to me and sits. “Yumi, I have to tell you something very important.”

I freeze. “About what?”

She picks up her steaming cup of barley tea with both hands. “You know,” she says carefully, “business is not so good at restaurant right now.”

“Uh-huh.” This is not news. It’s pretty much all my parents talk about these days. Ever since the new luxury high-rise condos went up all over Koreatown, foot traffic into our family’s Korean barbecue restaurant has all but stopped. Dad blames the new people for hogging all the parking spots, driving up the rent, not supporting small businesses, and probably even causing global warming.

She blows softly into the celadon teacup, her fingers curled around it. “Yesterday I went to your school to talk to Mr. Beasley.”

I stiffen at the mention of Winston Preparatory Academy's most crotchety administrator. "Why?"

She draws close and whispers, "To tell him we cannot afford to pay tuition next year."

"Wait. I don't have to go to Winston anymore?" A tightness I didn't even know I was holding in my shoulders magically lifts, and a giant grin spreads across my face. I consider the implications: no more starchy uniforms, no more Latin class, no more snotty cliques, and no more disappointed teachers.

FREEDOM!

I get a sudden urge to bust out my robot dance moves all over the salon. Not that I'd actually ever do that. Not while anyone was watching, anyway.

Instead I let out a satisfied sigh.

Going to a new school won't be easy, but at least it'll be a fresh start. A do-over of sorts. Maybe this time my yearbook will be signed by someone other than my teachers.

But then Mom shakes her head, the tin-foiled flaps rattling. "No, you still go to Winston." Instantly, my elaborate visions of the New Me skitter away into thin air.



I tug at a roller on my head that's wound too tightly.  
"But you just said we can't afford—"

She shushes me violently like I let it slip that she sometimes cooks with MSG.

"No, listen. Mr. Beasley says if you score at least ninety-eighth percent on exam, you can get the academic scholarship. Attend Winston. For free," she says, emphasizing the words *for free*.

"Huh? What exam?"

She scoots her chair closer to mine and pulls up an email on her phone. "Test is called SSAT. Secondary School Admission Test. You take the test on August sixteenth."

"WHAT?" My neck swings so fast I nearly unplug the giant perm machine. "Mom, that's in, like, two weeks. I can't—there's no way I can—"

Has the hair dye fried her brains? Does she actually expect me to ace a test I've never heard of like it's no big deal?

She clucks her tongue in disbelief. "You can attend best private school in Los Angeles. For free." She blinks long and hard. "Mommy and Daddy work so hard so

you can have opportunities like this. You must do it.”

This is Mom’s go-to move for guiltng me into doing something I don’t want to do. Whenever she senses even an ounce of resistance, she busts out with, “We came here from Seoul to work seven days a week, sacrificed everything. Why? For you! So you can (insert undesirable thing here).” Play piano, go to Korean school, learn tae kwon do. It’s like baking soda, useful in so many different scenarios. I’m dying to know what nonimmigrant parents say to coerce their kids.

Just then, Leather Pants pops in to check on us. She pokes around my scalp with the pointy end of a comb and readjusts the dials on the machine. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” I tell her, despite my nerves shooting through the roof.

She leads us to the main room of the salon.

Mom straightens her robe. “Yumi, if you study very hard and graduate with good grades from Winston, you can go to top university *like your sister*,” she says, this time loud enough for the aunties to hear.

Ugh.

Leave it to Mom to steer this back to my sister and

her million and one academic achievements. As if they have anything to do with me. Hello, Yuri is literally a genius. An actual card-carrying member of Mensa with an IQ of 155. And I'm . . . just me. But that doesn't stop my parents from holding me to her impossible standard to "inspire me." It's the most unfair thing ever.

"But I can't—I'm not—" My scalp is burning. I can't tell if it's the chemicals or Mom getting under my skin.

Her posture softens, and she pats my knee. "Do not worry. I signed you up for hagwon to help you prepare for test."

I recoil. Not hagwon! The last place I want to be on my summer break is in a classroom. My head feels like when the computer mouse arrow turns into the spinning rainbow wheel. "But—but I don't want to—"

"Studying at hagwon is better than wasting time watching YouTube jokester all day."

"Jokester?" My breath catches in my throat. "Mom, Jasmine Jasper is *not* a jokester."

She's only the creator of the most hilarious kids' comedy tutorials on YouTube. Not to mention my personal hero.

“Too much screen time. Rots brain. You need to study.”  
She pulls down the hair-dryer dome over her head.

The dryer roars to life when she flips the switch, drowning me out completely.

Thanks, Mom, for flushing what’s left of my summer vacation down the toilet.

*Swirling, swirling, swirling. FLUSH.*

The perm machine emits a series of earsplitting beeps, and Leather Pants scuttles back to take out my rollers. When she’s done, she sprays some fruity-smelling product on my hair and gives it another scrunch-scrunch.

“You like?” She twirls my chair around so I’m facing the mirror.

I run my fingers through the still-wet ringlets on my shoulders, vexed. “It’s . . . just like it was before,” I tell her with a forced smile.

My hair looks like Top Ramen noodles, but I don’t say anything.

Why bother? No one listens to me, anyway.

## CHAPTER 2



The moment the restaurant door opens, I'm met with the familiar hum of activity and the aroma of just-grilled meat.

I wave my hand to clear the haze that lingers in the air, but it's no use. Barbecue smoke is no joke. Our restaurant is the only one in town that still uses charcoal grills. Even though everyone else has switched to the cleaner gas or electric ones, Dad refuses to change. He's convinced real charcoal imparts the most "traditional" taste. Which is why my clothes, no matter how many times I wash them, smell like a campfire. It's also earned me the nickname Yu-meat. Yep, because every sixth grader at Winston Academy dreams of being known as the-new-girl-who-smells-like-barbecue. I'll never forgive Tommy Molina for starting that.

"Go help your dad in the kitchen," Mom says, tying

on her apron, the straps bedazzled with rhinestones. “We have a short staff today for lunch rush.”

“Okay, let me check my email first.” That, and Jasmine Jasper’s new vlog is supposed to be up today.

She shoots me a knowing glance. “Don’t spend too much time on the computer.”

“Five minutes, I promise.”

Our restaurant office doubles as our living room away from home. It’s got a couch, coffee table, computer, even a shiatsu foot massager. We probably spend more time here than in our living room at home.

I’m surprised to find my big sister behind the computer.

“Hey, Yooms,” she says to me.

“Yuri!” I wrap my arms around her in a bone-crushing hug.

I haven’t seen her as much since she moved across town for medical school last fall. Before then, I could count on catching her at the restaurant or at home taking care of me. She’s always been like my third “cool” parent. The house and restaurant have felt so empty without her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Dad needed some technical assistance with the computer. He wants me to add an online reservation option to the website.”

“Why? It’s not like it’s hard to get a table here.”

She shrugs. “You know how Dad gets with his big ideas.”

I glance at the wall of indecipherable code on the monitor. “Wow, that’s pretty intense.”

“You’re telling me. All this needs to be updated. I was supposed to leave an hour ago.” She glances at my hair. “Cute perm, by the way.”

I scrunch my nose, remembering the atrocity atop my head. “Don’t lie. I look like a wet poodle.” I run my fingers through my spiral strands, but it only makes it frizz up some more. “Just watch, Tommy Molina is going to have a field day coming up with nasty names for me when school starts.” Between Yu-meat, Wet Poodle, and Top Ramen, he’s got enough material for a Netflix special.

“Don’t let that little punk get under your skin.” She tousles my hair. “Besides, it’ll loosen up before then.”

“It better.” I sit on the edge of the desk. “Actually,

it'd be better if I never have to go back to Winston ever again."

"Aw, Yumi." My sister squeezes my wrist. "Maybe this year will be different. Maybe you'll make some new friends?"

"Mm-hmm." Not likely. Long before I transferred in, everyone at my fancy private school had already settled into impenetrable cliques of friends they've known since kindergarten. Not that I'd be included even if I were around back then. Hearing them talk about the stuff they do together on weekends at the country club makes me feel like we're from different planets. Like the time Alexis and Avery were gushing about an equestrian competition, and I jumped in with *Quest! I love that board game!* I didn't win many popularity points with that one. I've concluded that I'm better off keeping my mouth shut instead of trying to fit in where I don't belong. It's just easier.

Yuri smooths my hair. "You never know. New year. New possibilities."

"New bullies."

She laughs. "Just be yourself, and everything will come together on its own."



If only it could be that simple.

Right then, Dad pops his head into the room. “How’s website? Is it working?”

“Almost done.” Yuri clicks through the screens. “I just have to add one more plug-in.”

“Good,” he says, watching my sister code. “This is what we need to bring in the customers.”

Doubtful. It’s going to take a whole lot more than a dinky online reservation button for that to happen, but I don’t want to burst his bubble.

Dad turns to me. “Yumi, I need your help. Bring the banchan to table three. We are getting the slam.” The slam. That’s Dad’s rendition of the phrase *we’re getting slammed*.

“Sure.” I guess Jasmine’s vlog will have to wait until later.

“Can you help? After you finish with website?” he asks Yuri. “Until end of service?”

“Yes,” Yuri says without looking up, her fingers flying across the keyboard.

When I walk into the kitchen, Manuel, our restaurant’s main cook, greets me with a big smile. “Someone got her hair done! You look great, cipota.”

“Really? I feel like I’m five years old,” I groan, pulling on my apron. “How am I supposed to go to middle school with *this*?” I fluff the sides of the frizzy cloud that is now my hair.

“If anyone gives you trouble about your hair”—he flexes his muscles—“show them your guns. Let them know that they can’t mess with you.”

“Yeah, right.” I snort as I wash my hands in the sink. For the ten years Manuel’s been working here, he’s always said stuff like that. It’s really silly, but if I’m being honest, it’s nice to have someone who encourages you to stand up for yourself. In my case, it’s the Salvadoran head cook from my parents’ restaurant.

I open the lid of one of the pots on the stove and take a big whiff. “Smells great.”

“You know, it’s just a little sundubu, kimchi-jjigae, seoleongtang, and two orders of my famous doenjang-jjigae,” he says, with a better Korean accent than mine.

“Mmmmmm. Mashigeta!” It truly looks delicious. Manuel can cook anything. His pupusas are just as legendary as the Korean dishes Mom taught him.

“You know it.” He tosses soft tofu into the bubbly red

stew and gives it a sprinkle of fresh green onion for garnish before sending it out to the pass.

“How did your granddaughter’s birthday party go the other day?” I ask him.

“Good. Sofia wanted something low-key, so we ended up having some people over for Pollo Campero and cake. A Little Mermaid one. It was chill.”

Something pops into my head. “Oooh! That reminds me of a joke.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“How are parents like broken refrigerators?”

“I give up. How?”

“They’re loud, inconsistent, and have no chill!” I say, barely containing my giggles.

Manuel lets loose the best kind of whole-body laugh. “No chill!” He throws his head back and holds his belly with both hands. “Burn!”

“Thanks.” He’s one of the few people I feel comfortable telling my jokes to, because he’s always honest with his feedback.

“Don’t be too hard on your mom and pops, though. They’re coming from a good place.” He’s still laughing

as he piles the tiny side dishes of cubed radish, sesame bean sprouts, black beans, and marinated spinach onto a giant platter. “Listen, you better get this banchan out there before the customers start complaining.”

“Right.” I haul the platter up onto my shoulder and balance it the best I can. “I got this.” I flex my biceps, which is about as thick as a chopstick.

“Atta girl!” He chuckles, flexing his arm right back at me.

“Keep working on those jokes, Yumi!” he shouts before going back to tend to the five pots of soup boiling on the stove.

I’m heading out to the dining area when Yuri pops out from behind the faded embroidered folding screen carrying two water pitchers.

Mom is already at table three greeting the bespectacled middle-aged man sitting with his family.

“How are you, Mr. Lee?” She collects the clunky leather-bound menus from the table. “Mrs. Lee, did you change your hair? This color looks so stylish on you! Samuel, I hear that you got first chair in your orchestra! Congratulations!”

After being in business at the same location for fifteen years, Mom knows all the regulars by name. Somehow she also remembers their favorite entrees, preferred spice levels, tipping patterns, and if they happen to have any eligible bachelors in the family. These days, the Lee family and a small handful of other loyal diners are the only people I ever see at our restaurant.

“You remember our daughters.” Mom rests her hands on Yuri’s shoulders. “Girls, insa to our guests.”

“Annyeonghaseyo.” We greet them with our heads bowed.

Mr. Lee sets his spoon down. “They are more beautiful each time we see them.”

“Beauty is not everything.” Mom clucks her tongue and loud-whispers to Mrs. Lee, “I’m afraid Yuri will never get married.” She tosses her head with disdain. “She still has no boyfriend.”

Yuri’s porcelain skin flushes bright pink. You’d think we’d have grown immune to this stuff by now, but nope, it’s still mortifying each time.

Mrs. Lee chuckles. “Mrs. Chung, your daughter is still a student. Why are you worried already?”

A faux-concerned expression cloaks Mom's face. "She cannot meet any nice boys because she always studying, studying, studying." Mom sighs dramatically, clutching the pendant hanging from her necklace. "So difficult to be youngest student at the UCLA medical school."

Mrs. Lee's spoon clinks, hitting the side of the *dolsot* bowl.

"Medical school already? I thought she was in high school," she says, like Yuri isn't standing right there.

Mr. Lee grunts. "Looks like teenager!"

Dad dashes over, nearly knocking the traditional wooden masks from the wall. He must have sensed there was a brag session going on.

"Mr. Lee, Yuri is not teenager anymore!" He pauses. "She is twenty years old. Skipped two grades and graduated from the university early," he adds, injecting himself into the conversation. I swear, my sister is like his own living, breathing trophy.

Mr. Lee indulges Dad. "Wah! So smart! She finished her studies two years early."

Dad swats at the air, feigning modesty, like they're talking about him.

"Did you hear that, son?" Mrs. Lee elbows her teenage son.

Yuri's face is now redder than the raw meat on the grill.

The boy looks up through his long bangs. "What?"

Wait for it.

"If you study hard like her, you can be a success, too," Mr. Lee says.

Ha! If I had a dollar for every time my parents told me that, I'd be able to buy our family a second restaurant.

Then Mom gestures to me. "And you remember our second daughter, Yumi."

Ack, they're all looking at me! I grab the pitcher and top off the already-full water cups on the table, trying hard to ignore Mrs. Lee's eyes roaming up and down, evaluating my every molecule. She squints, probably struggling to come up with a compliment.

"Your younger daughter is so . . . tall."

Sad. That's the best thing she can come up with. I'm not even that tall. I grab the metal tongs and flip

the meat on the grill, avoiding all eye contact, hoping they'll change the subject.

"You know, our Yumi is so shy and quiet. We don't know what to do with her. She did not even tell us when she won the academic scholarship to Winston Academy in Beverly Hills," Mom says unblinkingly.

I nearly give myself whiplash. Mom. What. The. Heck.

She smiles at them with her fake no-teeth grin, willfully ignoring my silent outrage.

Yuri snickers behind me.

My mother has been known to stretch the truth to make us look good. Like the time she complained to everyone at the restaurant about how difficult it was to find a costume after I was handpicked to sing the solo in my first-grade Christmas pageant. "She sings like an angel, just like her father," she told everyone. In truth, I was assigned the humble role of Wiseman #2, with no speaking parts whatsoever, much less a solo.

"You are blessed. Two obedient and smart daughters. My son here is so lazy. He never studies. All he ever wants to do is play his violin." Mr. Lee knocks his knuckles on



his son's scalp. "Last week, he told me he needs money to fly to New York to perform with his orchestra. Carnegie Hall or something. I tell him, what about your studies?"

So it begins. For the next good while, they go back and forth one-upping each other with their humble-brags.

Someone get me a barf bag.

If only my parents were proud of me for the things I can actually do.



# *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!*

by Jessica Kim



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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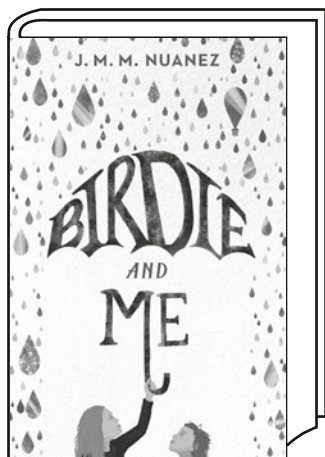
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*Cut or tear to share!*







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## *Birdie and Me* by J. M. M. Nuñez

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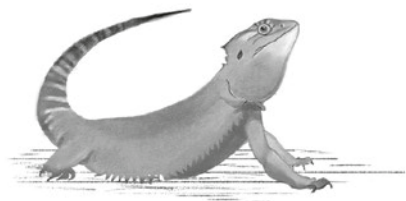
After their mama dies, Jack and Birdie find themselves without a place to call home. And when Mama's two brothers each try to provide one—first sweet Uncle Carl, then gruff Uncle Patrick—the results are funny, tender, and tragic.

They're also somehow . . . spectacular.

With voices and characters that soar off the page, J. M. M. Nuñez's debut novel depicts an unlikely family caught in a situation none of them would have chosen, and the beautiful ways in which they finally come to understand one another. Perfect for fans of *The Thing about Jellyfish* and *Counting by 7s*.

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## *CHAPTER 1*

### *HOW TO MOVE AGAIN*

Today is Saturday, the day we usually eat Honey Bunny Buns for breakfast and read the back page of the newspaper with Uncle Carl while he drinks coffee and smokes on the porch. The back page is the section of the newspaper that has weird news about things like two-headed llamas or people who get themselves stuck in air-conditioning vents or pets that are accidentally sent through the mail and survive.

But today isn't just Saturday. It's also moving day. And right now my little brother, Birdie, is on the couch waiting for me to open my eyes. I pretend to sleep, but even in the half-light, through squinted eyelids, I can see he's got Mama's old purple eye shadow on and a towel draped around his head like a glamorous headscarf.

"Jack," Birdie whispers. "Miss Jackie Jack Jacko."

"I'm sleeping. You should too," I say.

"I can't sleep any more."

He creeps across the couch, down to my futon, and lays his head next to mine. The smell of Dr Pepper lip gloss fills the air. In my ear he says, "I've got a stomachache and it's probably critical. I don't think we can move today."

I open one eye. "Critical?"

Birdie leans toward me and whispers, "Critical is the worst stage."

"You're not critical," I say, sitting up.

"Okay," he says, "but I do have a stomachache."

I peek out the dusty blinds. Patrick will be here to pick us up in two hours. "I do too, Birdie."

Birdie straightens his towel scarf and rewraps it under his chin and says, "Do I look like Audrey Hepburn? With my scarf?"

"Who?"

"Audrey Hepburn. You know. *Charade*. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. *My Fair Lady*."

I wait for him to say something about Mama and her obsession with these old movies, but he doesn't.

"You'd look more like Audrey Hepburn if you had sunglasses," I say. "But it's not bad."

He smiles a little, but unwraps the scarf and drapes it over his head like a lampshade. Then he takes a fashion magazine from the coffee table and opens it on his lap. "Maybe we should go to the library today," he says.



I don't say anything because even though he might pretend that today will be like any other day living with Uncle Carl, I see that he's already packed his backpack and two duffel bags. Birdie's only nine, but he knows there's nothing we can do about this move. Uncle Carl messed up too many times and now we have to move in with our other uncle, Patrick.

Two hours later, Uncle Carl comes out of his room in his shiny gold boxing robe. He salutes us, and then leaves the apartment with his empty coffee mug. His first cup of the day is always the free coffee from Juan at the Stop-and-Go down the street. He told us that him and Juan have an understanding. I don't know what exactly they understand, but as long as Uncle Carl brings his own mug, he comes back with free, steaming-hot coffee.

Birdie puts one magazine down and picks up another.

I try writing in my observation notebook, but my pen doesn't write anything except a giant question mark with a lopsided circle as its dot, which I color in until my pen starts to run out of ink.

I make a second piece of toast because Mama used to say that toast was good for stomachaches and other ailments like sadness and nervousness and writer's block. But after eating it, my stomach drops when I see Patrick's truck pull up.

Birdie must hear the engine, because he looks up from

his magazine and says, “But Uncle Carl isn’t back from the Stop-and-Go yet.”

“I think I see him now,” I say.

Uncle Carl and Patrick meet on the sidewalk and stare at each other, and for just a moment, it’s like Uncle Carl is standing in front of a mirror: the same white skin, same wavy gray hair, same bushy mustache, and same lanky frame.

But the mirror image isn’t wearing a gold boxing robe, sweats, and worn-out leather huarache sandals.

Instead, Patrick’s wearing what he always wears: an old Chevy baseball hat pulled low, a tucked-in plaid shirt (rolled to the elbows, arms crossed in front), jeans, belt, and work boots.

“Are they ready?” I hear Patrick ask Uncle Carl.

“Of course they’re ready.” Uncle Carl starts up the stairs. “You going to come up? Or should I send them down so you don’t have to step foot in my apartment? Wouldn’t want you to break your—*what*—almost yearlong streak?”

Patrick watches Uncle Carl climb the stairs to the second-story apartment, his hands now on the hips of his belt.

When Uncle Carl blunders in, I start holding my breath.

Birdie and me stand up from the couch and go behind the coffee table, which holds Marlboro, Uncle Carl’s two-foot-long taxidermied bearded dragon. Birdie is still kind of freaked out by her glassy real-looking eyes and her spiky skin, which Uncle Carl insists is second to no animal’s in

radiance and beauty. I keep thinking that Birdie will be less afraid of the giant lizard now that she isn't alive, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

It's ten heartbeats before Patrick shows up in the doorway. Birdie and me stay behind Marlboro.

"They're ready," says Uncle Carl, after taking a long drink of coffee by the kitchen counter. "All packed just like you asked."

We haven't been in Patrick's truck since that seven-hour drive almost ten months ago from our home in Portland, Oregon, to here in Moser, California (aka a small town in the middle of Nowhere, Northern California).

Patrick gathers up our bags that are piled by the door. He looks at Birdie in his yellow shirt that has polka-dot strawberries all over it and his rainbow sneakers. At least his leggings are just plain black and the purple eye shadow has mostly rubbed off. He cradles his favorite purple jacket like a stuffed animal. Patrick won't stop staring.

Then he silently goes out to his truck with our bags. Uncle Carl turns toward us.

"Phew. Okay. I have some parting gifts even though I fully expect to see you tomorrow. I know it's a bit of a walk from Patrick's, but I promise a sundae from the Fry Shack or something better if you come visit me."

"We're going to visit you," I say. "You don't need to use bribery."

“Okay, but I have to make a grand gesture so I don’t cry. Now here, just take them.”

The big paper bag in his hands is full of individually wrapped Honey Bunny Buns, the mini cinnamon buns they sell down at the Stop-and-Go for fifty cents each.

Before we can thank him, he puts a hand on each of our shoulders and says, “Now, look. I should have paid better attention to your schoolwork and your teachers, but how was I to know there are truancy laws, right? And I didn’t mean those things I said about your teacher, okay, Mr. Bird? You know I was just really broken up about Marlboro.” He stands up straight and rubs the back of his neck and looks away. “All I’m saying is, things are going to be different for you at Patrick’s. That goat has lived alone for thirty years, so who knows what he’s going to think of living with two kids. But just because you live with him now doesn’t mean you can’t come to me if you need anything.”

He takes a deep breath and I think he’s going to continue his speech, but he doesn’t. Then all of a sudden he’s ushering us downstairs to the truck, where Patrick sits in the driver’s seat with the passenger door open. The engine roars to life.

We don’t hug Uncle Carl. We don’t even say goodbye. After climbing in and clicking our seat belts and closing the door, I roll down the window. The truck pulls away from the curb as Uncle Carl says, “I’ll see you guys later.” He watches us go, sipping his coffee the entire time so that the mug covers his face.

...

A week after Mama died, Patrick showed up at Mrs. Spater's, who we'd known our whole lives because we rented the unit next to hers. She owned the duplex, but she was also our friend. And even though she's eighty-two years old, there was no question that she'd look after us until family showed up.

It was the first time I'd ever seen Patrick. Somehow he looked too old to be Mama's brother. Mama had never talked about him and I never saw any family photos with him. She had three pictures of Uncle Carl, but she didn't keep them on display like she did with ones of us or her friends.

We'd actually met Uncle Carl four years before when him and his then-girlfriend rode up to Oregon on his motorcycle. Mama was not expecting to see him. He gave us all big hugs and gummy bears and two Honey Bunny Buns each, even Mama. I don't remember his girlfriend's name, but she didn't have a full right leg. The part below the knee was prosthetic and we could see how it connected with her real leg since her leather skirt was so short. Her entire thigh was covered by a tattoo of a giant red lobster, which seemed to glow against her light skin. The next morning Uncle Carl gave me a short ride around the block on his motorcycle and I remember thinking how lucky his girlfriend was to ride it all day long. Mama wouldn't let Birdie ride, though, since he was so small.

So anyway, Birdie and I were sitting quietly like Mrs. Spater told us to when she answered the door.

“I’m Patrick. Beth’s brother.” Patrick’s voice was a quiet mountain rumble. At first, I couldn’t think who Beth was exactly—I didn’t make the connection to Mama. “You and your brother are going to come with me,” he told us when he came inside. He seemed sad, but I didn’t see him cry.

Instead of hugs and Honey Bunny Buns, Patrick just looked at us until Mrs. Spater directed him to our bags.

It was almost like he’d come to pick up a family heirloom or a piece of expensive equipment—something serious and important, but not something real. Not his actual niece and nephew.

Right then I had an urge to write that down in my observation notebook. My notebook was in a little bag slung across my back, but I didn’t move.

I asked Patrick where Uncle Carl was and he said that we’d see him soon enough. He looked at our stuff and I was afraid that he’d say that we’d have to leave some behind even though he’d said we could bring three bags each. Uncle Carl didn’t have much room, he’d told Mrs. Spater over the phone.

At first, I couldn’t believe we actually had to leave it all. But then she’d said her daughter was coming to help her pack everything else up. She’d take care of our things. We shouldn’t worry about it now. And then she gave me some of her lemon pound cake and all I wanted was to go back to a time when Mama was there to say, “This cake is so good I hereby request a bed-sized piece so I can sleep in it.”

But Patrick didn't say anything about our bags. He picked them up without a word and went outside. We followed him and got into the truck. Mrs. Spater asked him if he was sure he didn't want anything from Mama's house. But Patrick put up a hand and shook his head. "No, thank you," he said in his mountain voice.

Mrs. Spater looked at Patrick through the truck's passenger window. "You take good care of these kids, Mr. Royland. And I'll make sure to take care of the rest." She pursed her lips and I know she was trying to keep from crying. "Goodbye, you two. Be good for your uncles. I know you will be." And then she took a step back. "I'll miss you."

I don't remember what I said because I couldn't decide what to say. I hadn't thought about it at all. "I'll miss you too" didn't seem to make sense. We would more than miss her. I think Birdie said her name just as the truck began backing away.

Mrs. Spater waved from her porch, her old cocker spaniel, Colin, staring at us through the window. With her other hand, she covered her mouth, so that only her eyes could be seen.

I grabbed Birdie's hand, each of his fingers with chipped turquoise nail polish, and squeezed it again and again, like a beating heart, the whole ride to California.

I try not to watch Uncle Carl in the rearview mirror because I hate my last memory of Mrs. Spater and Colin and their sad faces shrinking down to nothing as we drove away.

I tell myself that it doesn't matter. I'll see him soon. We're only moving a mile or so out of town.

Patrick doesn't say a word and only once looks over at us when Birdie's feet start fidgeting, which is one of his many nervous habits.

I swear I see Patrick's mustache sag into a frown.

After a minute, we get onto the highway and pass a big gray-and-black bus going the other way.

I know bus number 331 goes from here all the way to Portland, Oregon. I know that bus fare is twenty-six dollars for minors and thirty-two dollars for adults. I've known this information since our second day with Uncle Carl when Birdie and me went to the library for the first time. But that was the same afternoon that Uncle Carl bought us our first Fry Shack ice cream sundaes and I forgot about the bus for a while after that.

"When going to and from town," Patrick suddenly says, "try not to walk along the highway. It's too dangerous. There's no safe place to walk. There's another route I can show you." He turns down a small road and points to a dirt path. "It takes a little longer, but it starts near my street and ends close to the elementary school."

He turns the truck around and goes back to the highway, only to turn off onto another road less than thirty seconds



later. We drive past a few houses until we come to one that has a chain-link fence and hedge around it. The gate is open and we drive through and stop in front of a small garage attached to an old house.

Patrick shuts off the engine. "Well, okay then."

He gets out and grabs our bags and heads to the front door.

Patrick lives in a shoebox. At least that's what it looks like to me, a giant shoebox with a few squares and rectangles cut out for doors and windows. The roof looks almost completely flat, like someone ran out of building materials.

Birdie looks at me and I just shrug.

Inside, we follow Patrick up a staircase without a word. He opens two bedroom doors, puts our bags down, and then opens the door to a bathroom. He doesn't open the curtains, so everything is in shadow even though it's almost ten o'clock in the morning and the sun is shining outside. Patrick walks back to the staircase and stops. A dog barks.

"That's Duke. He's harmless." Patrick's baseball hat is pulled low, so low I can't see his eyes. He rubs the back of his neck like Uncle Carl does. "I need to go back to work for a few hours. There's some eggs and cheese in the fridge. Peanut butter and tuna and other things on the shelf. Carl says you know how to use the stove all right."

I nod.

He takes a breath and rubs the back of his neck again and looks down the wooden staircase and it dawns on me

that he really is about to leave. We've lived in this town for ten months and this is the first time we've ever been in this house and now we somehow live here.

"You kids know why you couldn't stay with Carl anymore, right?" He pauses. "He's not reliable. You're better off here."

We don't say anything. Patrick clears his throat. "I put my cell number and the address here on a paper by the phone. One for each of you. Carry it with you." He stares again at Birdie and then knocks twice on the wall and takes the stairs down.

Birdie picks a bedroom and goes in.

The hallway is dark.

Somewhere there is a clock ticking.

On the way here, I tried to pretend that today was a Wolf Day, Mama's greatest invention: a spontaneous amazing adventure. But Wolf Day was all about saying *yes*. Moving to Patrick's is all about saying *no*.

No to Fry Shack ice cream sundaes.

No to fashion magazines for Birdie.

No to easy walks to town.

How can it really be true that Patrick is Mama's brother?

## \*\*Observation #773: Shoebox Inventory

- 5 bedrooms, 0 decorations on the walls unless you count some painting of a ship in a bottle & another of wooden ducks
- 1 ancient basset hound (named Duke) that might be blind & also deaf
- 1 fridge (no magnets):
  - 3 pounds of frozen ground beef, 2 pounds of frozen ground elk, 2 packages of bacon (1 frozen), 1 bag of tortillas, 1 jar of mayo, 1 jar of grape jelly, 1 block of cheddar cheese, 3 sticks of butter, 8 eggs, 4 carrots, 1 cabbage
- 2 wooden cupboards (with the doors removed):
  - 9 giant cans of beans, 5 cans of tuna, 2 boxes of cereal (no milk), 1 jar of peanut butter, 2 onions, 1 jar of nuts, and something round wrapped tightly in foil and covered in a small towel
- 1 overgrown backyard with a big lonely-looking oak & 4 other smaller trees
- 1 giant circular shed on the side of the house (Birdie said it's an old grain silo that's been shortened—he saw one on some home makeover show he watched with Uncle Carl)
- 1 large something next to the shed, covered in a giant tarp on a trailer—a boat?
- 1 big living room window that would let in a lot of light if only you'd pull the curtains back
- 1 wood-burning stove with a giant pile of logs & kindling (the only thing in the whole house that is anything like home)
- 0 pieces of evidence that Patrick is related to Mama or Uncle Carl or any of us



## CHAPTER 2

### *DINNER WITH A CLAM*

After unpacking a little, I find Birdie sitting on the back of the living room couch, staring out the large front window, his face close to the glass. The curtains are open, so light floods in.

“Are you cold?” I ask. “You look cold.”

He’s got his purple jacket on with the hood up. It’s October and starting to get chilly because of the nearby mountains, but I’m not sure I’d wear a hood indoors just yet.

“It’s so windy here but with no rain like at home. It’s cold sitting by the window.”

“Then why are you sitting there?”

“Because if you sit right here and look out, it almost reminds me of our front yard.”

I stand behind him but don’t see it. Our house didn’t have a chain-link fence. We had tall rosebushes and a little fig tree.

I'm not cold, but I go to the wood-burning stove and make a small bridge of wood, just like Mama taught me, and shove crumpled newspaper and wood chips underneath and then light a match. The newspapers catch quickly and I watch the flames for a moment and then close the little door.

In the kitchen, there's no bread, so I use tortillas for peanut butter and jelly, which was something an old boyfriend of Mama's used to do before she broke up with him—I'm pretty sure the tortillas were to blame.

When I return to the living room with the food, Birdie's eating a Honey Bunny Bun.

"Birdie, stop. I have real food."

Birdie looks over at the rolled tortillas and the little pile of nuts and a couple of carrots.

"I don't think I've eaten a carrot since home," Birdie says, finishing his Honey Bunny Bun. "I don't even remember what they taste like. Probably not as good as a Honey Bunny Bun—is that peanut butter and jelly in those tortillas?"

I don't think we've had any kind of raw vegetable since Mama's house. "You can't live on Honey Bunny Buns forever," I say.

"Says who?"

"Says me, your wise, all-knowing, Honey-Bunny-Bun-expert older sister."

"Um, if anyone is the Honey Bunny Bun expert, it's me."

"Actually, it's probably Uncle Carl."

"True."

We don't say anything else for a long time. We sit on the back of the couch and look out the window and eat our picnic lunch, and there is the faintest crackle coming from the wood-burning stove and it's finally warm enough for Birdie to put his hood down.

I'm about to ask Birdie what makes the view from Patrick's window so much like Mama's when I see it. Maybe not what he sees, exactly. But with the fire and the stupid crunchy carrots like the ones Mama would make us eat all the time, and sitting in a real living room, on a real couch (a couch we don't have to sleep on at night), I feel like home with Mama wasn't just some dream like I've been telling myself the last ten months. We *did* live in a house. We *did* have our own rooms, with our own things, our own real lives. It had all really happened.

When I hear Patrick return right after the sun sets, I'm lying on the rug in Birdie's room as he sorts through his binder of fashion collages. He made it from magazines and gel pens and stickers. Uncle Carl even bought him a whole stack of new magazines once. Birdie calls it *The Book of Fabulous*.

When the truck goes quiet, Birdie sits up straight and taps his pinkie on his leg.

The front door opens and Duke's collar jingles.

I sit up. Birdie and me watch the door.

Each footstep seems to echo and I catch myself holding my breath again, just like earlier at Uncle Carl's.

Patrick appears, glances into the room, wipes his hands with a gray bandanna, and says, "Dinner will be ready in about half an hour." Then he nods and disappears and Birdie and me look at each other.

"Are we really going to eat dinner with him?" asks Birdie.

"I think we have to."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's because you're eating too many Honey Bunny Buns."

He gathers up his supplies. "When we first moved here, Uncle Carl asked us so many questions. He even wanted to know about that lizard we caught that Mama made us release in the backyard. He *remembered*. What does Patrick remember?"

"Patrick's not a big talker. Like Uncle Carl says, he's a giant clam in pants."

"I don't want to have dinner with a clam. Especially one who doesn't like us."

Birdie pulls out his mad cap, which is this old sparkly purple knit hat that comes to a point, like an elf hat. Mama made it when she was in one of her knitting crazes, which used to happen once a year or so.

I call it his mad cap because Birdie only wears it when he's mad.

When it's time for dinner, Birdie and me go downstairs. Even before we walk into the kitchen, something perfect and wonderful hits my nose, but I can't place what it is.

At the kitchen island, Patrick slices a big round loaf of homemade bread. I realize this is what was covered in foil under the towel in the cupboard. The bread knife is small in Patrick's hand. Two iron skillet filled with steak, onions, and broccoli rest on the counter.

Duke lies on the floor a few feet from where Patrick stands.

Patrick looks at Birdie and his mad cap as he plates our food and says, "Take a seat."

Patrick sets our plates down, along with the bread, some forks, knives, and a roll of paper towels. I automatically close my eyes and inhale and the aroma goes straight down into my chest.

For a moment, I think that I shouldn't eat it because Mama wasn't a fan of red meat.

But before I realize what I'm doing, I have a bite in my mouth.

It tastes perfect.

Almost too perfect.

And I suddenly realize that we've been eating Fry Shack, instant noodles, and snacks from the Stop-and-Go for the last ten months.

Patrick sits down, drops some food on the floor for Duke, and then starts to eat.



Birdie stares at his plate, his arms in his lap.

“Need me to cut it?” Patrick asks, looking at Birdie’s steak. When Birdie doesn’t say anything, Patrick looks at me, like maybe Birdie doesn’t understand English and needs me to translate.

“We didn’t eat a lot of steaks,” I say.

“He doesn’t eat steak?” Patrick asks. His eyebrows might be raised in surprise, but it’s hard to know for sure under his hat.

“No. That’s not what I mean,” I say.

“Carl said you didn’t need much help in the way of food.” Patrick looks back at Birdie’s hat. “Are you cold?”

“He just likes to wear it,” I say. “Helps him adjust to new stuff.”

I give Birdie a piece of buttered bread, which he nibbles on.

Patrick finishes quickly, then he gets up, washes the pans, and goes out the front door. Duke follows.

For years, all Birdie has asked for is a dog. Too bad this dog doesn’t care about anyone except Patrick.

I go out to the front window and peek through the blinds. There’s a light on in the round silo shed and the glow makes it look like a UFO.

I call to Birdie to come look at the UFO lighting, but he doesn’t answer. I find him at the trash can, scraping his dinner off his plate.

“Birdie—”

“I have a stomachache. Good night.”

And that’s how I’m left alone in the kitchen with an old green ticking clock and a hole in my chest going down to the center of the earth.

Patrick is outside for over an hour. When he does come in, he stays downstairs.

I don’t want to leave the bedroom, but I can’t sleep without a glass of water near me.

When I go downstairs to find one, Patrick is standing at the kitchen island again and this time he’s kneading dough.

I go to the sink and try not to stare at Patrick’s dusty hands as they move the dough around.

I’m about to leave when he says, “The clothes Birdie’s been wearing, are those yours?”

“All the clothes he wears are his,” I say.

I watch Patrick put one mound of dough to the side. He grabs another, throws a bunch of flour on the counter, and lays the dough down and begins kneading.

The clam makes bread.

He continues, “Tomorrow I will show you around the house a bit more. How to take care of the kitchen. And some things about the yard, like where to put ash if you’re going to make another fire. Also, the washing machine and where to hang-dry clothes.”

“Okay.”

I wonder if I can go now.

He washes his hands at the sink. “Birdie needs some proper clothes,” he says. “This seems to be part of the problem he has at school.”

“He doesn’t have a problem.”

“Missing twenty-seven days is a problem.”

“But it doesn’t have anything to do with his clothes.”

Patrick stops drying his hands. “That’s not what his teacher said.”

“Ms. Cross-Hams?” I don’t mean for this to slip out, but I’m shocked Birdie’s school troubles are being blamed on his clothes. Then again, Birdie’s teacher—whose arms are like giant ham hocks—hasn’t been a fan of Birdie since we showed up last year, a couple weeks into December.

According to Birdie, the first thing Ms. Cross-Hams said to him was that he couldn’t have his purse in class.

Birdie’s always been the teacher’s favorite, so he didn’t know what to say. And he hasn’t figured it out since.

Patrick sighs again and hangs the towel by the sink. “Now that you live here, there’s going to be some changes.” He calls Duke, who stands at the sound of his name, and they head out of the kitchen. Right before he goes out, he stops and says, “On Monday, I’ll drive you guys to school. I’m going to speak to Birdie’s teacher. We’ll get it sorted out. She has some ideas.” Before I can think of anything else to say, he and Duke go, leaving me standing next to the mounds of dough.

Mama always let Birdie wear what he wanted. He never wears skirts or dresses to school because he says they aren't comfortable for dodgeball, which is another thing Birdie likes. Even still, most people do notice that Birdie doesn't dress like most boys. But his pink and purple shirts, rainbow shoes, and leggings covered in pink donuts, and everything else, have never really been a problem.

Of course, getting Birdie to go to school has also never been a problem.

I press my finger into a doughy heap. It is soft and still warm from being kneaded.

I want to smash it into nothing.

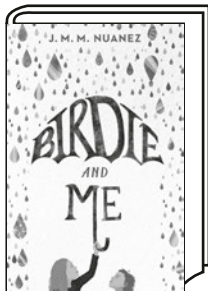
## \*\*Observation #774 Old Bedroom Inventory

- 81 books: novels, comics, biographies, reference books, and 6 poetry books, which I rarely opened (all from Mama)
- 11 observation notebooks
- 4 plants, left over from a science fair project
- 4 strands of twinkling lights on a fake palm tree from Birdie's 7th birthday party
- 1 Swiss Army knife
- 1 Treasure box of rocks and shells
- 9 board games, plus one I made when I was 8
- 1st place ribbons: 6th-grade science fair, spelling bees & math league
- 1 bean bag chair (for reading)
- 1 banker's lamp (found at a garage sale) on a small white writing desk (which Mama found on the side of the road, sanded down, and painted)
- 1 life lived freely (even if my room was half the size of the one at Patrick's)



# *Birdie and Me*

by J. M. M. Nuñez



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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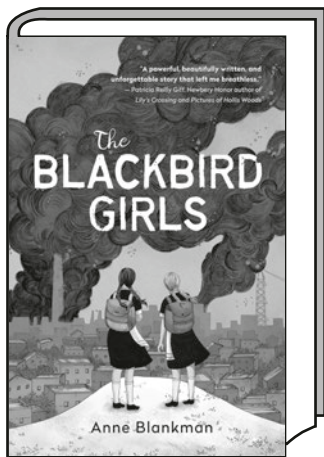
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Cut or tear to share!









Historical Fiction | Grades 4 - 7 | 9781984837356

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# *The Blackbird Girls*

by Anne Blankman

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On a spring morning, neighbors Valentina Kaplan and Oksana Savchenko wake up to an angry red sky. A reactor at the nuclear power plant where their fathers work—Chernobyl—has exploded. Before they know it, the two girls, who've always been enemies, find themselves on a train bound for Leningrad to stay with Valentina's estranged grandmother, Rita Grigorievna. In their new lives in Leningrad, they begin to learn what it means to trust another person. Oksana must face the lies her parents told her all her life. Valentina must keep her grandmother's secret, one that could put all their lives in danger. And both of them discover something they've wished for: a best friend. But how far would you go to save your best friend's life? Would you risk your own?

Told in alternating perspectives among three girls—Valentina and Oksana in 1986 and Rifka in 1941—this story shows that hatred, intolerance, and oppression are no match for the power of true friendship.

**• PENGUIN •**  
*Book Tasting*



# (1)

PRIPYAT, UKRAINE, SOVIET UNION

APRIL 1986

## Valentina

**VALENTINA WONDERED WHERE** the birds had gone.

They weren't waiting on the sill when she went to the sitting room window that morning. All year she had put slices of salami out for them. Blue jays came every day, and blackbirds sometimes, and sparrows least of all. The birds would stand on the sill, their claws black as soot against the gray concrete, and fly away when she unlatched the window, only to flutter back when she set out the pieces of salami.

Today, though, they were nowhere in sight. Valentina leaned out to look. Overhead, no blue jays circled one another, vanishing into the clouds, then reappearing. There were no blackbirds or sparrows, either. All of Pripyat's birds seemed to have disappeared. The sky was empty.

Except for a crimson glow in the distance. Valentina squinted. Usually, at half past seven, the sky was the pale blue of a robin's egg.

Not now. The sky in the south was red. Smoke churned up toward the scarlet-colored clouds. The smoke wasn't black or gray, but a strange, unearthly blue. It was so thick that Valentina

couldn't see anything below or behind it: all she could see was the wall of smoke coiling up and up into the red sky. But she knew what stood under that billowing smoke.

The nuclear power station where her father worked.

She whirled away from the window. "The power station is on fire!"

Her mother hurried out of the bedroom, buttoning the cuff of her blouse. "What did you say?"

Valentina pointed at the window. Her mother joined her and gasped. "Oh my God!"

"Where's Papa?" Valentina glanced at the empty kitchen table. Her father worked the night shift at the power station. Usually, he was back in time to eat breakfast, tired and hungry after a long night. Then he would go to bed once Valentina had left for school. When he hadn't been at the kitchen table this morning, Valentina had assumed he was already in the bedroom, asleep.

"He hasn't come home yet." With shaking hands, Valentina's mother latched the window. "Do you remember he said he would have a busy night? The supervisors were planning to run a safety drill. So when he didn't show up an hour ago, I wasn't worried."

She pulled Valentina in close for a hug. "I'm sure he's fine, Valyushka. If he was hurt, someone at the power station would have telephoned us."

Valentina leaned into her mother, breathing in the comforting scent of her violet perfume. Mama had to be right. An accident at a nuclear power station was a statistical impossibility. A one-in-ten-million chance, her father had told her. And in school she and her classmates were taught that nuclear

power was the safest, cleanest source of energy in the world. It had brought heat and light for the first time to thousands of citizens in the Soviet Union. But . . .

“Why isn’t the smoke black?” she asked.

Her mother held her tighter. “I don’t know. Maybe I shouldn’t send you to school,” she murmured. “But I have to go to work. And if we don’t show up, people might talk . . .”

Valentina understood what her mother meant. They mustn’t do anything out of the ordinary, *ever*, or they risked attracting attention. And attention was bad. It meant someone was watching you, waiting for you to make a mistake. And mistakes—like saying the wrong thing, criticizing the government, making someone important angry—led the secret police to you. People who were taken away by the secret police, the KGB, often weren’t seen again. When Valentina’s mother was a university student, one of her classmates had been arrested by the KGB. The last time anyone had seen him was when he was shoved into the back of a car. Valentina’s mother had never forgotten it.

“I want to stay home and wait for Papa,” Valentina said.

“If Papa was injured, one of the other workers would have let us know,” her mother replied. “If we don’t carry on as usual, we look as though we don’t trust the people at the power station. And we mustn’t—”

“Risk attention,” Valentina interrupted. She pulled herself free from her mother’s embrace. “But what if everybody’s hurt and no one can telephone us?”

“Then the hospital workers would call.” Her mother gave her a gentle push toward the door. “Papa’s fine. Now you’d better hurry or you’ll be late.”

“Yes, Mama.” Valentina grabbed her satchel and rushed out the door. Her mother didn’t understand. She never did. She cared more about being safe than anything else. If Valentina did the best in her class on a mathematics exam, her mother said next time she ought to get one or two questions wrong on purpose. “We’re Jews,” she would say when Valentina complained. “Others are looking for a reason to hate us. Don’t give them any.”

“Come straight home after school!” her mother called after her. “I have to work this morning, but I’ll be home by lunch. I’m sure Papa will be back by then.”

“Okay,” Valentina called back. Saturdays were half days at school. On Saturday mornings, her mother played the piano during ballet lessons at the culture palace. Many children who were too little for school went there for ballet or swimming instruction. Usually, after her mother finished the lessons and Valentina was done with school, they had lunch together while Valentina’s father slept.

Then Valentina would play in the park with her best friend, Larisa, while her mother shopped for groceries. When Valentina would get home, her father would usually be awake, and they’d tinker with different experiments. Last month they had rewired the electrical outlets in their apartment. Currently, they were working on a design for a water heater. Ordinarily, Saturdays were golden, glorious days, but now as Valentina walked down the corridor, she couldn’t stop worrying about her father.

The stairwell of their building was full of small children. On the landing, kids played with dolls and jacks. Valentina

stepped over them, nearly bumping into her neighbor, Dyadya Sergei. When she was little, she had thought all of her family friends and neighbors were her uncles and aunts, because that was how she had been taught to address them. It wasn't until she was older that she had realized calling grown-ups *dyadya* or *tetya* was a custom, and all these "uncles" and "aunts" weren't blood relations. She still liked calling them the traditional names, though, because she hadn't any uncles and aunts of her own, for both of her parents had been only children.

"Good morning, Valentina," Dyadya Sergei said. He was dressed only in trousers and had a book tucked under his arm. "I'm going up to the roof to sunbathe and watch the fire. Did your father tell you how it started?"

"No, Dyadya Sergei." Her voice trembled. "He isn't home yet."

Dyadya Sergei patted her head. "I suppose he stayed to watch the firemen work. You ought to go down to the station, have a look about. It's the sort of thing one sees only once in a generation."

He sounded as though he thought the fire was some sort of entertainment! "I have to go to school," she said, skirting around him.

His laugh followed her down the stairwell. "Poor Valentina! Having to go to school on such an exciting day is a true misery."

Valentina paused at the landing to look out the window. The sky still flickered red. Below it, the city of Pripyat lay burrowed like a bird in a nest. People walked the streets; under

the scarlet dome of the sky, they looked as flimsy as paper dolls. Blocks of pink-and-white plaster-faced apartment towers stretched into the distance. The enormous Communist hammer-and-sickle insignia crowned several buildings, their neon lights dark in the daytime. Beyond them rose the gunmetal-gray domes of the four reactors of the power station where her father worked. The station's proper name was the V.I. Lenin Power Station, but it was usually called Chernobyl, after an ancient nearby village.

Valentina's father said Pripyat was a model city because the station powered electricity for millions of people in the western Soviet Union. Its citizens got the best of everything, like shaving cream from East Germany and toothpaste from Bulgaria, sweaters from Poland and dresses from Finland, and cheeses and chocolates and caviar. They were lucky to live in such a paradise, he often told her. Valentina knew he was right: she remembered the years they had lived in Siberia, where the winters were so cold you could actually hear your breath turn to ice.

Outside the air tasted of metal, not the wild roses and cut grass that Valentina was used to. *No fire should smell like this*, she thought. The scent of soot should carry on the air, but not this hot metal that tickled the back of her throat.

Everywhere she looked, she saw police officers leaning against walls or standing on corners. The city was a sea of blue-and-red uniforms.

She'd never seen so many policemen in her life. What were they doing here? They couldn't all be from Pripyat's police force; there were too many of them. Some must have been



summoned from nearby cities. Were they patrolling because of the fire?

Some of the grown-ups walking past sent nervous looks at the policemen. But they kept walking, their eyes going from the police officers to the red sky overhead. Nobody asked the policemen what was going on. Questions were dangerous, Valentina knew.

Children streamed along the avenue, staring at the police officers. Ladies carrying string shopping bags went in and out of stores; young mothers pushed babies in carriages or held toddlers by the hand, guiding them toward parks or nurseries where they would be cared for while their mothers worked. Everybody looked at the blue smoke coiling up into the red sky, and nobody said a word to the policemen.

Valentina's steps slowed. Her father was somewhere behind that wall of smoke. Maybe hurt.

She *had* to know what was happening. Before she could think herself out of the decision, she dashed over to the nearest policeman. "Are you here because of the fire?" she asked.

The man flicked his cigarette into the gutter. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I'm on my way." Valentina hesitated. Her parents often said her chattering mouth would get her into trouble. Maybe she ought to keep walking to school. But then she thought of the strange blue smoke enveloping the power station and of her father who was in there somewhere. "Why isn't the smoke black?"

The man narrowed his eyes at her. "There isn't any smoke. That's steam, and you ought to be accustomed to it from living

near such a large power station. Now you'd better get on."

"Thank you," she muttered, and walked on, frowning. The policeman was wrong. Steam was thin and gray, not thick and blue, and it didn't turn the sky red: she knew that much from living close to the nuclear station. Was the policeman lying or mistaken?

As she went through the school gates, she saw she had another problem to deal with. And it was waiting for her in the schoolyard.

Oksana Savchenko.

She was leaning against the fence, toying with the white ribbons at the end of her braids. She looked like the perfect Ukrainian girl—blond hair, blue eyes, pink-and-white skin, a porcelain doll come to life.

But Valentina knew there was nothing sweet or doll-like about Oksana.

The other girl caught sight of her. She pushed off the fence and called, "Valentina, come here!"

Valentina's heart sank to her shoes.

She wished she could run home. But she'd get in trouble for playing truant.

Better to get it over with.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked into the schoolyard, where Oksana stood waiting for her.

# ( 2 )

## Oksana

**OKSANA WATCHED VALENTINA** Kaplan come closer. Valentina was almost the tallest girl in the fifth grade, second only to Tatiana Gavrilenko. She might look ordinary with her braids and white ribbons, like the other girls in school, but Oksana knew she wasn't.

"All Jews are liars," her father had told her again and again. "They're always watching you, trying to find a way to steal your job away from you or take your place. That's how they've survived as long as they have, by working together and trying to destroy the rest of us. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," she had always said. Valentina's father was the reason her papa hadn't gotten a promotion last year at the nuclear power station.

A wave of pain washed over Oksana. The back of her shoulder ached so badly she had to clench her jaw so she wouldn't groan. It didn't matter. She deserved the pain, for having a saucy mouth.

She focused on Valentina, who had come to a stop a few feet away and was waiting, her expression wary.

“Let’s race,” Oksana said.

Valentina bit her lip. Oksana knew what she was thinking—that she’d like to say no but didn’t dare refuse.

“Okay,” Valentina said.

They went to the far end of the yard, where they crouched on the pavement. The other children stopped playing tag or marbles and came over to watch. Their loud voices filled the air. “Run hard, Oksana! You can beat her!”

Oksana looked up at the sky. It was the same shade of scarlet as her mother’s silk shawl. She knew the color should make her afraid, but instead it made her want to draw the image inside her mind, so it would never go away. A scarlet sky, dotted with clouds that looked as if they had been dipped in red dye, and above the tops of the brick-and-plaster buildings, columns of blue smoke, the sort of blue you’d get if you mixed pale blue with black, giving you an almost navy.

“You can win, Oksana!” someone shouted.

Oksana flinched. What was wrong with her, daydreaming about colors? She was stupid—stupid and weak.

Crouching on the pavement, she reached forward, pressing the tips of her fingers into the rough surface. She’d win the race. Valentina wouldn’t be so foolish as to run fast. And then tonight at supper she could tell her father, and he’d pat her cheek and say he was proud of her.

“Go!” one of the other fifth-grade girls shouted.

Oksana took off. Her feet flew across the cracked pavement. The back of her shoulder throbbed, like a tooth gone rotten. It made the breath hitch in her chest. She could feel herself slowing, her legs stumbling.

“Come on, Oksana!” her classmates cheered. “You can do it!”

*Don't stop*, she told herself, and raced on. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a blur of movement. Valentina. She was surging forward, her brown braids streaming behind her. She slapped the wall of the school building. She had *won*.

Oksana's steps slowed. Automatically, she reached out, her fingertips grazing the rough stone wall. Valentina had won. She had beaten *her*. Valentina hadn't followed the rules they all knew, although no one ever spoke them aloud.

Oksana could never tell her father. Never.

All of her body went hot, then cold. She touched her left shoulder. Through the thin fabric of her school blouse, she could feel the smoothness of a bandage.

She made herself smile, even though her stomach felt sick. “I wasn't really trying,” she said to Valentina. “Races are for little kids anyway.”

Valentina's eyes narrowed. “You certainly looked as though you were trying. Or are you always out of breath?”

Oksana couldn't think of anything to say. Behind them, someone shouted, “Cheating Jew!”

The girls spun around. The forty other boys and girls in their class stood at the opposite end of the yard, watching them. Everyone looked the same, dressed in their school uniforms: the girls in brown dresses, white blouses, and black pinafores, and the boys in button-down white shirts, black trousers, and black blazers.

Their faces were solemn. Nothing in their expressions told Oksana who had shouted. And they wouldn't say a word

to Valentina. Nobody would tattle on a classmate to a Jew.

“I didn’t cheat,” Valentina said loudly. Her cheeks were red.

“Everybody knows Jews are crooks.” Oksana smoothed her hair ribbons, making sure to frown at Valentina. “My papa says your family ought to go back to Israel.”

At her sides, Valentina’s hands clenched into fists. “That shows what your father knows. We’ve never even been there.”

“That’s where your kind belongs!”

Valentina glared. “At least I’m not a baby who whines every time I lose.”

“Fight, fight!” the other children chanted.

Oksana froze. This wasn’t what she’d meant to happen. She mustn’t fight at school. If she did, at best she’d be sent to the headmaster’s office. At worst, it meant the headmaster would call her father’s supervisor at the power station and Papa would receive a black mark in his work record—for something *she* had done.

“Why would I want to fight Valentina?” she said, inching away. “She’ll only cheat.”

But her words were drowned out by the other children’s shouts. “Fight, fight!” They swarmed around her and Valentina, laughing and waving their arms.

“Stop!” A woman’s voice cut through the commotion. It was their teacher, Svetlana Dmitrievna.

At once a hush fell over the schoolyard. The fifth graders looked at one another. Quickly, they formed a line, as they were supposed to do every morning before entering the school. Oksana found herself and Valentina standing at the end.

Keeping her gaze trained on the pavement, she listened to Svetlana Dmitrievna’s high heels click closer. She was going

to be in so much trouble. Even worse than the time she'd accidentally left her essay at home.

The shoes stopped in front of her. "What," said Svetlana Dmitrievna sternly, "is the meaning of this?"

"It's her fault," Oksana began just as Valentina said, "We got carried away."

"Quiet!" Svetlana Dmitrievna snapped. "Sniveling excuses are unacceptable. I'll deal with the two of you inside. The rest of you—march. Not a word or you lose morning recess."

Oksana could scarcely breathe. What would Svetlana Dmitrievna do to her? Was she going to telephone her father?

Maybe Svetlana Dmitrievna wouldn't be able to reach him or his supervisor. After all, the fire was still burning—wasn't it?

Overhead, smoke drifted like a screen, turning the sky into a patchwork of black-blue and red. The air tasted of metal and something else she couldn't identify, like scorched earth. Surely her father and his supervisor were too busy coping with the fire to receive a telephone call from her school. Tomorrow, Sunday, they didn't have school, so hopefully by Monday, Svetlana Dmitrievna would have forgotten about the almost fight and Papa would never learn about it.

The line inched up the steps into the school. In one of the big plateglass windows, Oksana glimpsed her reflection. The red tie knotted around her neck was the one bright spot. A pin, embossed with the face of Vladimir Lenin, the man who had helped their country become a Communist republic and was now long dead, was clipped to the front of her blouse.

They were proof that Oksana belonged and Valentina never would. Oksana had received them last year, when

she turned ten and was accepted as a member of the Young Pioneers.

Valentina hadn't been let in. Jews weren't welcome. Everyone was encouraged to join, of course—all citizens were supposed to be equal, regardless of their background or religion. But, as Oksana's father said, Jews weren't Soviet citizens. They were intruders.

Now Oksana followed Valentina into the classroom. Together they stood against the back wall, waiting for their punishment. Oksana didn't care what it was, as long as it didn't involve her parents. She could handle whatever Svetlana Dmitrievna dished out.

Taking a deep breath, Oksana touched her Young Pioneer pin. Her father had been so proud when she had received it. He had even called her "my angel." She must make him proud again.

She glanced at Valentina, who was staring straight ahead, her face pale and set. Valentina knew the rules, or she ought to by now. Why couldn't she have just let Oksana win?

Oksana wouldn't tell her father about the race. But if Valentina told her own father, and if Comrade Kaplan mentioned it at work, then her father would know. And then she would never forgive Valentina.

Never.



# (3)

## Valentina

**VALENTINA WATCHED SVETLANA** Dmitrievna take a bag of rice from her desk and pour its contents on the floor. Then she dropped her and Oksana's workbooks onto the floor, along with two pencils.

So it was going to be the rice punishment. That wasn't too bad, as punishments went. Far better than the time her first-grade teacher had made her wear a pointed cap and instructed her classmates to point at her and shout, "Dunce!" At least now she wouldn't be made to feel stupid for being a lousy speller.

Without a word, Valentina and Oksana knelt in the rice. The granules dug into Valentina's knees through her tights. She bit her lip so she wouldn't make a sound. She must be quiet. Complaining or reacting would make it worse, for then Svetlana Dmitrievna would smack her hand with a ruler.

Valentina looked around the room, certain the other children would be making faces at her, silently making fun of her for getting in trouble.

But no one was looking at her or Oksana. Her classmates were all staring out the windows. Outside, the sky still

flickered red. Far off in the distance, Valentina could see curls of blue smoke.

*Papa*, she thought.

She had to think logically about this. As an engineer would, like her father. In her mind, she wrote up a list. No contact from Papa. Red sky, blue smoke. Policemen everywhere.

Something terrible must have happened. And no one was telling her, or anyone else, what it was.

Suddenly, she was so frightened that she felt cold everywhere. She wrenched her gaze away from the window, back into the classroom.

Svetlana Dmitrievna rapped a ruler on her desk. "Attention, students! Who can tell me the names of the republics in our great Soviet Union?"

Nobody raised a hand. After a moment, a girl in the front row said timidly, "I beg your pardon, Svetlana Dmitrievna, but what happened at the nuclear power station?"

The teacher glanced at the window, then quickly away. "Obviously, there has been a mishap. A minor accident, one that I'm sure is already being taken care of. Because, children?"

"Because the Motherland protects us," they recited. Valentina, too. She had had to say the words so many times they were practically embroidered on her heart.

"That's correct," Svetlana Dmitrievna said. "Capitalist nations, like America, are full of greedy people who care only about themselves. Here in our great socialist nation, we are always safe. Our government protects each one of us. Now," she said briskly, pointing at the map on the wall, "who can tell me the names of our republics?"

A forest of arms, held at the proper ninety-degree angle,

shot up. Valentina and Oksana kept their hands at their sides. Everybody knew to stay silent during punishments.

Valentina's stomach churned. Why hadn't she let Oksana win the race, as she usually did? She should have. Something about the little smile on Oksana's face, though, when she had challenged her to run had made her want to win.

Svetlana Dmitrievna called on one of the boys, who stood up next to his desk. "The republics are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan."

"Correct," Svetlana Dmitrievna said. "And recited in alphabetical order—well done!"

Valentina leaned forward so she could write the date—April 26, 1986—in her workbook, which was lying on the floor in front of her. Today was a Saturday, so Svetlana Dmitrievna would collect their workbooks at the dismissal at noon and mark them tonight.

Valentina knew her workbook grade had better be a perfect five-plus this week to balance the black mark she was sure to receive for arguing with Oksana. She couldn't afford to do poorly. So few Jews were accepted into universities or good professions. Since she wanted to be a scientist, she needed to be better than good. Today's fight might have damaged her future chances.

She swallowed hard. There was nothing she could do to help herself now. Besides, it was hard to care when she was so worried about her father.

The grains of rice felt as sharp as needles. Shifting uncomfortably, she held her breath so she didn't let out a moan of pain.

She had to distract herself or it wouldn't be long before she was begging Svetlana Dmitrievna to let her get up.

She studied the map, where each of the republics was a different color. Russia, the largest, was red, and Ukraine, the second largest and where they lived, was white. The section of the map where she had been born, Siberia, was red, too, for it lay within Russia. When she had first come to Ukraine, she had missed Siberia so much. She had loved the way the steppe seemed to go on forever, and the forests of towering pine trees, and the realization that spring was coming because it was finally warm enough to carry metal coins in your pocket.

"Girls, that's enough." Svetlana Dmitrievna's voice interrupted Valentina's thoughts. "You may return to your seats."

Thank the stars! Valentina staggered to her desk. Her best friend, Larisa, gave her an encouraging smile as she passed. Valentina smiled back.

As soon as they were settled, Svetlana Dmitrievna asked, "Valentina, what's the birth date of our nation?"

She had to stand to answer. Prickles stabbed up and down her legs, forcing her to grip the edge of her desk so she didn't sway. Somebody giggled.

This time, Valentina paid no attention. She mustn't risk getting in trouble again.

"Valentina?" Svetlana Dmitrievna prompted. "The birth date of our nation?"

"Nineteen seventeen," Valentina said quickly. The year wasn't exactly correct, but everybody knew that was the answer the teachers wanted. Their country was centuries old. Only sixty-nine years ago, it had been ruled by a tsar. Then

the Bolsheviks—now called the Communists—had revolted, and the country had plunged into civil war. Eventually, the Communists had emerged victorious, and their country had become a republic. Now it was called the USSR, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and it had only one political group: the Communist Party.

“Very good,” Svetlana Dmitrievna said. “Valentina, you may sit.”

Valentina eased into her seat. She sneaked a hand under her desk to rub her knees. Grains of rice had stuck to her tights, and she brushed them off.

As the teacher droned on, Valentina gazed at the numerals *1917* on the chalkboard. Before then, her parents said, their countrymen had been allowed to follow different religions.

Not anymore. The government didn’t approve of any religion, not Christianity, not Islam, not Judaism. Valentina’s teachers said religion was a trick that drugged people’s minds. The highest power was the Motherland—not faith.

Svetlana Dmitrievna wrote another answer on the board. Once her back was turned, Valentina felt a finger poke her in the back. Oksana.

She ignored her.

Oksana’s wooden desk creaked as she leaned forward. “Did your father come home this morning?” Oksana whispered.

That got Valentina’s attention. Oksana’s father worked the night shift with Papa. Maybe Oksana knew what had happened at the power station.

Valentina shook her head no.

“Mine didn’t, either,” Oksana whispered. Wood creaked again as she settled back into her chair.

They didn't speak to each other again all morning. When the dismissal bell rang at noon, Valentina joined the throngs of children spilling into the schoolyard.

Smoke wafted across the red sky. The air still tasted of metal and earth. The back of Valentina's throat tickled. She wondered if her father was home yet. She needed to run back to their apartment as fast as she could, to see if he was there.

Larisa came up to her. "I felt so awful when Svetlana Dmitrievna caught you fighting! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Valentina said. "The rice punishment isn't too bad."

"You ought to know." Larisa giggled.

Ordinarily, Valentina would have made a face, for Larisa was right: Valentina had been ordered to kneel in rice several times before, when she was caught whispering in class. She had such a difficult time not talking because she had so many big ideas crowding her head all the time, waiting to be let out.

Now, though, she didn't care about getting in trouble. "I need to go home," she said to Larisa. "I have to see my father. He might be hurt."

"You heard Svetlana Dmitrievna," Larisa said. "There was only a little accident at the power station."

The words "How does she know that?" almost leapt out of Valentina's mouth. She swallowed them barely in time. She mustn't say bad things about the teacher, in case someone overheard and reported her.

"I have to go home," she said again.

"All right," Larisa said.

Together they weaved through the crowd. All around them, classmates were making plans for the afternoon. None

of them seemed scared anymore; Svetlana Dmitrievna's reassurances must have done the trick. Some of the children said they would play in the schoolyard; others would go to the parks or fish on the banks of the river. Several boys were going to get their bicycles after lunch and ride over to the nuclear station to look at the fire. Oksana and her friends were going to the amusement park, where they would ride the Ferris wheel and drive the bumper cars.

"Do you want to meet in the park after lunch?" Larisa asked. "I'll borrow my sister's jump rope so we don't have to share yours."

"Maybe," Valentina said. All she wanted was to see her father.

She and Larisa reached the pavement. Military vehicles rumbled down the road toward them. Truck after truck after truck.

All of the drivers were wearing gas masks.

The trucks rolled closer. The gas masks made the soldiers look like massive bugs or creatures from a nightmare. Where were the soldiers going? To the power station?

*Papa*, Valentina thought.

"I've got to go," she said to Larisa.

Understanding flashed across Larisa's face. "Go," she said, and Valentina took to her heels, running as fast as she could, with only one word echoing in her head.

*Papa*.

# ( 4 )

## Oksana

AS OKSANA WALKED home from school, she saw policemen everywhere. They slouched against walls, smoking, or stood with their hands in their pockets, watching everyone with wary eyes. The sight sent a chill down Oksana's spine. What were all these policemen doing here? It must have to do with the fire, but she couldn't imagine why: extra firemen ought to be here, putting out the flames, not police officers.

She half listened to her friends chattering about going to the amusement park after lunch. When they reached the block of apartment towers where they lived, she said goodbye and hurried to her building. Maybe her father was home and he could tell her and Mama what was wrong.

The back of her shoulder throbbed. Gritting her teeth, she slipped into the lobby. It was a box of a room, made of dirty plaster walls and chipped linoleum. She trudged across it, making for the stairwell. Along the back wall, a woman was talking on the communal telephone. "Oleg and I are going to Sochi on holiday . . ."

Her voice faded as Oksana climbed the stairs. It was



deserted now; all of the building's little kids must be in their apartments, eating lunch or napping, or at the nurseries provided by their mothers' employers.

Above her, she heard someone talking. "Something's happened at the power station," a girl said.

She recognized the voice. Valentina. Why did it have to be *her*? Oksana would have to walk past her in order to get to her floor.

Sighing, Oksana kept climbing. There was someone else talking now, a man. "Naturally something's wrong at the power station," he said. "It's the biggest fire this city has ever seen. Something to tell your grandchildren about, eh?"

Oksana rounded the curve in the stairwell. On the landing above stood Valentina and one of the men who lived on the second floor, Dyadya Sergei. He wore only trousers. He must have been sunbathing on the roof. Lots of the building's residents went up there to sunbathe or to tend to their garden. Oksana's mother kept several pots of herbs on the roof, and she had told Oksana at breakfast that she planned to pick rosemary and sage today.

"You were white as milk this morning," Valentina said to Dyadya Sergei.

"I've never tanned so quickly in my life," he said, sounding pleased. "There must be something in the air."

It was an expression Oksana had heard many times before. "Love is in the air tonight," her parents said when they saw a young couple out for a romantic evening stroll. Or, "Spring is in the air," they said when wild roses bloomed in the forests outside Pripyat. And, "Winter is in the air," they said when they could smell the sharpness of snow.

Today, though, the words made Oksana uneasy.

“Ah, Oksana,” Dyadya Sergei said. “I didn’t see you standing there. You’re as quiet as a shadow.”

Although she wanted to rush past him so she wouldn’t have to look at Valentina, manners forced her to put on a smile and say, “Good afternoon, Dyadya Sergei.”

“I have to see if my father is home,” Valentina said without looking at Oksana. She hurried up the stairs.

“I saw your mother on the roof,” Dyadya Sergei said to Oksana. “There was a crowd of us. You ought to go up there before the fire’s put out. It’s quite a sight! Above the station, you can’t even see the sky. It’s all smoke, blue everywhere.”

That meant Papa was sure to be angry, because the fire was probably someone’s fault. Or a machine’s. Either way, he would be furious, for the fire would mean filling out loads of paperwork and accident reports. Papa might even be in trouble because the fire had started during his shift.

She started shaking deep inside. Dimly, she heard Dyadya Sergei saying something, but she couldn’t pay attention anymore. “I have to go home,” she said, and pushed open the swinging door at the landing. She mustn’t be late for lunch. The soup would go cold, and Papa must be hungry.

Inside the apartment, her mother stood at the stove, stirring a pot. “Good, you’re home,” she said without looking up. “Set the table.”

Oksana didn’t move. “Where’s Papa?”

Now her mother did look at her. “He isn’t home yet.” Her smile didn’t touch her eyes. “We’ll eat lunch without him.”

“Mama, I saw military trucks. The soldiers wore gas masks. And there are policemen all over the place!”

Her mother pursed her lips. "I'm sure the authorities are merely taking precautions. Everything's fine," she added when Oksana didn't speak. "I telephoned the power station, and nobody answered. The workers must have their hands full. The best thing we can do is leave them alone."

Oksana nodded. She hung her satchel on a peg by the door and went into the kitchen area to wash her hands. She loved being home, when it was just her and her mother. Their apartment was far nicer than any of her relatives'. They had two whole rooms—the main living space and a small bedchamber for her parents. They even had their own bathroom, which they didn't have to share with the neighbors.

Old rugs covered the wooden floorboards, and framed pen-and-ink drawings dotted the walls. There was even a bookcase, where she had an entire shelf to herself, and a radio. Her parents had just spent their savings on a television set, too. And Papa had promised that once she brought home a school report full of fives they'd buy her a proper bed and she wouldn't have to sleep on the sofa anymore.

"Set the table," her mother said.

"Yes, Mama." Oksana grabbed a handful of silverware.

After they had sat down and begun eating, her mother asked, "How was school?"

Oksana thought of the footrace and shifted uncomfortably. She hoped Valentina wasn't downstairs in her apartment, tattling to her mother about beating Oksana today. "Fine," she muttered. She dragged her spoon across the bottom of her bowl, creating ripples along the surface of the borscht. It was her favorite kind of soup, because it was the same deep purple as a sky long after the sun had set, before black crept in.

“Valentina said her father didn’t come home this morning, either.”

Her mother rapped her knuckles with the back of her spoon. “Enough. I already told you not to worry. Did Svetlana Dmitrievna return your essay on Comrade Lenin?”

There had been a 3 scrawled across the front of her paper. Oksana felt her cheeks warm. “No,” she lied.

There was a knock on the door.

“Eleonora, I must speak with you,” called a woman’s voice.

Eleonora was Oksana’s mother. With a sigh, she got up and opened the door. Valentina and her mother, Galina Yurievna, stood in the corridor. Valentina was still dressed in her school uniform and clutched a burlap sack to her chest.

The Kaplans had never come to their apartment before. What could they possibly be doing here?

“May we come in?” Galina Yurievna asked.

Oksana’s mother hesitated. “Of course,” she said after a moment, and ushered them into the main room. “Please sit down,” she added, but Galina Yurievna shook her head.

“I have news about the fire,” she said. “A friend just telephoned me. She’s a nurse at the hospital. She said there was an accident at the power station last night.”

“Yes, we know about the fire—” Oksana’s mother started to say, sounding impatient, but Galina Yurievna interrupted.

“It isn’t only a fire. Reactor number four exploded.”

Reactor number four was where Papa worked! Was he hurt?

“Something went wrong during the safety drill,” Galina Yurievna went on. “There was an explosion. And now the whole building’s caught fire.”

Oksana's mother had gone white. "The men—"

"Are at the hospital," Galina Yurievna said.

Thank the stars! Oksana took a shaky breath. Her father would be fine. The doctors would fix him, and he'd come home and everything would be all right.

"We're leaving for the hospital now," Galina Yurievna said. Oksana noticed that her hand rubbed Valentina's shoulder absently, as if she didn't notice she was doing it. As if the movement were automatic.

Oksana glanced at her mother. But Mama didn't touch her. Instead, she tapped her lips with her finger, as she always did when she was thinking. "We'll go with you," she said. "Oksana, pack Papa's medicines."

Oksana knew what her mother meant. Every child in Pripyat knew about radiation poisoning. It was a sickness you could catch from working with nuclear power. Thankfully, it was easily cured. All you had to do was drink milk or mineral water and eat plenty of cucumbers, and you'd be well in a day or two.

She found two cucumbers and a glass bottle of milk in the refrigerator. Quickly, she wrapped the cucumbers in wax paper and slid them into her mother's string shopping bag. Then she realized what Valentina must be carrying in her burlap sack: her own father's medicines.

Together they all went down the stairs. The mothers walked ahead, talking in low voices. Hurrying a few paces behind, the girls were silent. Oksana sneaked a look at Valentina, whose face was pale and anxious. Valentina didn't look back.

Good, then they were ignoring each other. Oksana held the string bag tighter. The medicines would help Papa,

and he would be so glad she'd brought them. He would kiss the top of her head. *You saved me*, he'd say, smiling at her. *You're a good girl.*

Not that he'd ever said those words to her before. He called her an angel when he was in a good mood, a brat when he wasn't. But never "good."

That was all right, though. She already knew she was bad. She didn't need anyone to call her good, because it would be a lie.

In the lobby, they found Dyadya Sergei slumped on the floor. A puddle of vomit was spreading across the linoleum tiles. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he whispered. "I'm so dizzy."

His face was now a faded brown. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

Oksana's mother placed a hand on his forehead. "You're burning up, Sergei. You need to go to the hospital."

While she used the communal telephone to call for an ambulance, Galina Yurievna knelt at Dyadya Sergei's side. "Help is on the way."

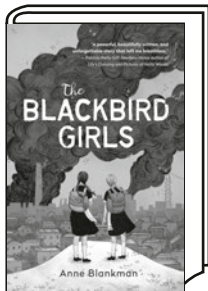
His eyes flickered open and closed. Oksana couldn't tell if he had heard. She remembered his earlier words: *something in the air*. She thought of the soldiers' gas masks and the strange, metallic taste in her own mouth, which she had felt while playing in the schoolyard.

"Galina Yurievna," she said, "is there something in the air that can hurt us?"

"Of course not," Valentina's mother said quickly. But from the way she didn't look at Oksana, Oksana knew she was lying.

# *The Blackbird Girls*

by Anne Blankman



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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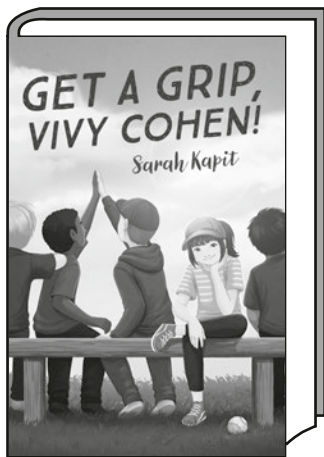
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*Cut or tear to share!*









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## *Get a Grip, Vivvy Cohen!* by Sarah Kapit

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Vivvy Cohen is determined. She's had enough of playing catch in the park. She's ready to pitch for a real baseball team.

But her mom is worried about Vivvy being the only girl on the team, and the only autistic kid. She wants her to forget about pitching, but Vivvy won't give up. When her social skills teacher makes her write a letter to someone, Vivvy knows exactly whom to choose: her hero, major league pitcher VJ Capello. Then two amazing things happen: A coach sees Vivvy's amazing knuckleball and invites her to join his team. And VJ starts writing back!

Now Vivvy is a full-fledged pitcher, with a catcher as a new best friend and a steady stream of advice from VJ. But when a big accident puts her back on the bench, Vivvy has to fight to stay on the team.

**. PENGUIN .**  
*Book Tasting*



FEBRUARY 10

Dear Vincent James Capello,

Hi! I'm Vivian Jane Cohen—VJC, just like you. That's a sign of a connection between us, isn't it? I think so. But I don't go by VJ like you do. People just call me Vivy.

Well, that's not really important. The really important thing is this: I want to be a knuckleball pitcher when I grow up. Just like you. My mom says that's impossible because there's never been a girl in the major leagues. Still, someone has to be first, right? And I'd like it to be me.

I don't know if it's actually possible, but my brother, Nate, says I throw a wicked knuckleball. He's on the varsity team as a catcher even though he's only a freshman in high school! That's really impressive, don't you think? So if Nate says my knuckleball is good, then it must be at least a little bit true.

The problem is, I've never pitched in a real game. I don't play for a team. And I don't know if I ever will.

But that's not a very happy subject to write about, and I want this letter to be happy. So now I'm going to talk about something else.

I bet you're wondering why I'm writing to you, out of all the bajillions of people in the world. Well, besides your general awesomeness, we actually know each other. Sort of. I met you three years ago, when you were still pitching in the minors. You probably don't remember, but for me, well, it was the most important day ever!

Here's what happened. My family and I went to a California Tornados game for this social thingy with the Autism Foundation. I didn't like the game—loud and boring, which means, not for me. The seat felt so sticky against my skin. I bounced up and down even though Mom kept telling me, "Sit still, Vivy!"

Then we went into the clubhouse to meet the players.

You weren't like the others. They talked to us in loud voices, which was pretty stupid because being autistic doesn't mean you can't hear anything. They used that funny voice teachers do sometimes, the one that needs to explaaain thiiinnnggs veeeeerrry sloooowllly. Not you.

You saw me wandering around in the back corner and came up to me with a big smile on your face. You tried talking to me, but I don't talk to strangers.

I fought very, very hard against the urge to run. I wanted so much to get back to my own room, away from all the strangers and their big voices and stinky armpits.

That's when you pulled out a baseball and showed me your knuckleball grip—four fingers clenched into a fist.

"The knuckleball is a very special pitch," you said. "It completely defies the laws of physics because it doesn't spin in the air like other balls. Try it."

I didn't understand much about physics and stuff, but I liked the idea of throwing a super-special pitch. Except I didn't think it would be a very good idea to throw a baseball with all those people right there. "Now?" I asked.

You laughed. "Not in the clubhouse! But when you get home, will you give it a try?"

"Yes," I said.

You smiled. "I think you'll like it."

When I went home that night, I tried throwing the knuckleball for real. The first two pitches bounced into the grass. Then the third pitch sailed right over the backyard fence, so I lost the ball forever. Nate got really mad at me, because I borrowed it from him without asking. Oops. After that I asked Mom and Dad for my very own baseball. Even though it was hard, I knew I wanted to learn the pitch that defies the laws of physics. Your pitch.

Every day since then, I've practiced throwing the knuckleball. I'm not sure how many days that it is, but it must be an awful lot. I can also throw a two-seam fastball, though it isn't exactly fast. But I guess no one says they throw a two-seam sort-of-but-not-really-fastball. Even if it is closer to the truth.

I wish so much I could pitch for a real team. Like in that movie where girls played baseball because all the boys were off fighting in World War II and stuff. But all that happened a really long time ago. In real life, girls don't play baseball. Especially not autistic ones. I've asked about it a million and three times, but Mom keeps saying I should play softball instead. No matter how many times I explain everything to her, she doesn't understand that it's harder to throw a knuckleball with a great big softball.

And if I can't throw the knuckleball, I don't want to play.

I'm writing to you because I need to write a letter to someone for my social skills group and I chose you. My dad says it's okay. He's a big fan of yours too.

To be completely honest, I don't understand the point of this assignment because everyone in the whole world uses email. DUH. But when I mentioned this fact to Sandra, the counselor who runs the group, she just let out a sound that sounded very not-nice to my ears. "Just do what you're told, Vivy," she said.

Adults sure like saying that, don't they? And I want to be good, so I am doing what I'm told. Even though I don't entirely understand why I'm doing it.

Oh, sorry. You're probably not very interested in Sandra. Since you're a super-famous pitcher and all. I mean, you've been an All-Star twice, plus you won the Cy Young Award! You probably don't have time to read letters from eleven-year-old girls at all. But I wanted to try anyway. It took a really long time for me to find an address on the official team website. Someone should fix that, in my opinion. But I did find it and now I'm sending you a letter. Since we've met before, we're not strangers.

Also, pitchers and catchers report to spring training today and I wanted to wish you good luck. Not that YOU of all people need luck, of course, but I figured you're probably pretty down after what happened in the World Series last year. That must have been really hard. I know what it's like to mess things up.

I wanted to tell you that even after what happened, you still have lots of fans like me who are rooting for you. My dad says it's our year, and I think he's right.

Sincerely,

Vivian Jane Cohen, also known as Vivy

P.S. Do you know why the knuckleball is called a

knuckleball when you don't actually use your knuckles to throw it? Wouldn't it make more sense to call it a fingertipball?



FEBRUARY 14

Dear VJ,

Is it okay if I call you VJ? I know it would be proper manners to call you Mr. Capello, but all the TV announcers call you VJ, so that's how I think of you.

You're probably surprised to hear from me again. I was only supposed to write one letter for social skills group, but I liked it so much I thought I'd write another one, just to say hi. I like writing letters to you for some reason. And I found a big stack of envelopes and stamps in the kitchen, so I figured, well, why not?

You didn't write back to me, but that's totally okay. I know you must be busy in spring training. Mom and Dad say that if I'm good maybe we'll get tickets for a game this year. Of course, I really want it to be a game where you pitch, but any game will be exciting. I'm much more grown-up now than I was three years ago. Now I understand baseball.

Also, I really don't want to bother you or anything, but something's been bugging me. It's about baseball, so I thought maybe you could help.

Well, actually, some ONE has been bugging me: Nate. I used to throw with him all the time, but now he won't play baseball with me anymore! The other day I went into his room to see if he wanted to throw a ball around in the backyard.

I found Nate sprawled out on his bed. And let me tell you, that bed was totally NOT made in the way Mom likes. The walls of his room were covered in posters of baseball players—mostly all the super-great catchers like Buster Posey and Gary Sánchez. Except for this one picture of a dark-haired pitcher I didn't recognize.

The moment I entered, Nate twisted his face all funny and slammed his laptop shut. "You know, there's this thing called knocking," he said in his grumpy voice. "You might want to try it sometime. Works great."

I know you're probably wondering how I managed to remember everything he said so well. The answer is that I just keep thinking about what happened. What I could have done better. So I really do remember every single thing he said. Maybe one or two words aren't completely right, but that doesn't matter. The point is, he was being mean.

“I know what knocking is,” I told him, because duh. “But I wanted to know if you can do a throwing session with me.”

Nate glared at me so hard that I could feel my spine shrink in. “I’m not your personal catcher, Vivy. I have my own life and it’s kind of important. Not that anyone around here gives a flying Triceratops about that.”

Actually, he did not say “flying Triceratops.” I can’t repeat his actual word because it was very bad and I am not going to use a bad word in my letter to you. I changed it to “flying Triceratops” because it’s such a funny expression. Dad says it sometimes.

“I care about your life,” I insisted. “But when DO you want to play with me?”

Maybe it was stupid to keep talking when he was obviously in a super-bad mood, but VJ, I just didn’t understand why he was acting like this! I know he’s busy with baseball, but Nate always throws with me at least once a week. And we haven’t done it in ten whole days. Which is basically forever in pitcher-time. So obviously we needed to do it again soon. Right?

Nate gave me another grumpy monster-glare. “When I feel like playing catch with you, I’ll let you know, okay? But right now I’m busy and I just can’t.”

The way he said *playing catch* . . . VJ, I’m not exactly

sure how to describe it, but there was just something in his voice that I didn't like. I always thought our throwing sessions were more important than just playing catch, you know? But I guess he doesn't agree.

"Okay," I whispered. I could feel an awful prickly feeling swell up in my eyes, so I had to get out of there. Before I did something really, really stupid.

VJ, why would my brother act like this? He never used to be mean! Did I do something wrong? I say the wrong thing a lot, even when I don't mean to, so maybe that's what happened. What do you think? You can give me your honest opinion. I promise.

Sincerely,

Vivy

FEBRUARY 16

Dear VJ,

Oh my gosh, VJ, I have GOT to tell you about everything that just happened. I can't talk to anyone else about it right now and it's just so amazing and . . . anyway, I'll try to explain.

I told you before about how weird Nate's being and how he never wants to play with me anymore. It's very confusing. I know he's a high school student and a varsity catcher and all, but how can he be too busy for ME, his sister? Does he not want to spend time with me anymore? (I've been wondering: Do you have any siblings, VJ? I bet they always want to play ball with you.)

But today Nate said we could go to Crescent Memorial Park and throw together. FINALLY! You probably don't know much about Lakeview, California, but Crescent Memorial is the biggest park we have. There are two whole baseball diamonds, but during the season they're usually

full. That doesn't leave much pitching time for knuckleballers who don't have a team.

Since it was gray and chilly out, there weren't many people at the park—good news for me! I'm certainly not going to let a few clouds keep me from pitching. You wouldn't. I remember that one game when there was lightning and stuff but you still threw a shutout.

Today Nate was totally being Nice Helpful Older Brother Nate, not Grumpy Nate Who Always Says No. If you ask me, it's weird that he acts so different one day as compared to the next. I hope this means Nate's grouchiness is over for good!

Nate says the pitcher's mound at the park is set to youth baseball standards. I guess that means it's shorter than the mound you throw on, but every time I get up there I'm still amazed by how tall I become. The extra height makes me feel just a little braver.

I threw to him for about half an hour. My first fifteen pitches were all way outside the strike zone, but then Nate came over to give me some tips. He knows a lot about pitching because he used to be a pitcher himself. He taught me my delivery and everything. A few years ago, he switched to playing catcher because pitching hurts his arm too much. Personally, I think sitting crouched behind the plate all game long looks way worse than throwing a few

pitches, but it's nice for me that he can catch. He's even good at catching the knuckleball.

"You have to imagine the target in your mind," he said. "Like a big red X. Then you throw to the mark every time."

I started to imagine giant red Xs floating around in the strike zone, and then the knuckleball came to me. It zigged and zagged all over the place. Just like a good knuckleball should.

That's when the most amazing thing happened. After about thirty pitches, a tall man came up and started watching us. He had been throwing with his son out on the field, but he left to watch me. Can you believe that, VJ?

For about ten pitches, he just watched me from the sidelines. I had to try really, really hard to concentrate on pitching. I'm sure you probably don't care about people watching you, but for me it was all so new. And kind of scary.

Finally, the man spoke. "You!" he said without smiling. "Where'd you learn how to throw that knuckleball?"

Like I said before, I don't talk to strangers. But since he asked me a direct question, I knew I should answer. I looked over at Nate and he nodded.

So I said, "VJ Capello."

He laughed really, really hard at that. I don't think he

believed me. Even though it's 100% true: You taught me the grip.

"I think I like you, kid," he said. "Hey, you ever use that knuckle in a game?"

"She's not into softball," Nate explained for me. He stepped closer to me while the man asked all those questions. He even put a hand on my shoulder.

"Got it," the man said. "You can't throw a real knuckleball with a softball, especially not with those small hands. But I bet you could fool batters with that knuckle in a baseball game."

Pitch in a baseball game! Me!

I knew right then that this was a Very Important Moment.

But Nate just didn't get the important-ness of everything. "Um, what?" he said.

"I coach a team in the Apricot League," the man said. "And we could always use pitchers. You look like you're around eleven, right? That's perfect for my team."

People always say "my heart skipped a beat" and I never know what that even means because how can your heart ACTUALLY skip a beat? But right then I swear that my heart really did skip. I started flapping my hands like crazy, even though my therapists always say not to. It's



hard to explain to people, but I guess I just needed to feel my hands flick up and down. The man's stern face didn't change one bit.

I don't usually pay much attention to faces, but I tried to remember a few things about this man: Brown hair, graying around the edges. A lined and pale-ish white face that looked very serious, but maybe also kind.

"But she's a girl," Nate said.

"That's sexist!" I told him. Really, I expect better from my brother.

The man pulled his shoulders up. "Yeah, I can see she's a girl. So what? You ever hear of Mo'ne Davis? 2014 Little League World Series, she goes out and throws a shutout. Or how about Eri Yoshida? She's a knuckleballer too. Played pro in the Japanese leagues."

I flapped harder and carefully placed those names in my memory, so I could look them up later. Mo'ne Davis and Eri Yoshida: my new heroes. Along with you, VJ, of course.

It's weird, but it didn't occur to me before that there could be other girls playing baseball right now. But of course there are, and that made me want to play more than ever. Who knows? Maybe someday people will talk about Mo'ne Davis, Eri Yoshida, and Vivy Cohen.

"Um. It's not just the girl thing," Nate said. He shot me

a look and mouthed a word that looked an awful lot like *sorry*. “My sister, she has special needs. I don’t know if my parents will be okay with her playing baseball.”

I could feel all my hope go POOF the moment he said “special needs.” Nate was right, of course. I just knew the man would walk away, saying obviously he’d made a mistake. No special needs girls for his team.

Only he didn’t. “The only special I care about is that knuckleball,” he said. “Now that is something special. Hey, why don’t we ask her what she thinks? Would you like to be on my team, kid?”

“Yes,” I said. I didn’t need to think about it.

He finally smiled a little. “I thought so. Now why don’t you go talk to your family about it? You don’t need to decide anything right away.”

Then he scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Nate. “Call me after you’ve talked to your folks,” he said.

By now his son had wandered over to us and I realized I know him from school. He’s a grade ahead of me and his name is Chris or Kevin or something. I don’t know. I’m not good with faces and I’ve never cared about the seventh-grade boys at all. Since I’m in sixth grade, there’s really no reason for me to talk with them, ever.

“What are you doing?” the boy whined. “We have to work on my curve!”

“Patience, boy,” the coach told him. “I’m recruiting for the team.”

“HER?”

I suddenly felt hot all over and I really, really wanted to break my no-talking-to-strangers rule to tell off Chris or Kevin or whoever he was. But the coach did the telling-off for me. “Yes, HER,” he said. “Now zip it or beat it.”

I guess it was pretty mean for the man to say that to his own kid, but the boy WAS being horrible. I liked this stranger-man more and more.

The terrible boy gave me a really nasty look, but he wasn’t stupid enough to say anything else in front of his dad. I noticed that the boy and coach had the same square jaw and dark eyes. Except somehow it looked ugly on the boy.

“Think it over,” the coach said to me. “We could use your knuckle for sure.”

“I have a question,” I blurted out, just as the coach began turning away.

“Sure, kid.”

“What’s your name?” I asked. I wanted to know so he wouldn’t be a stranger.

“Call me Coach K,” he said.

Coach K—K for strikeout! Isn’t that great? It’s one of those things that just feels right, like you and me having the same initials. I flapped quietly while Coach K and the awful boy left.

“Do you think I can be a real pitcher?” I asked Nate. I figured that if anyone would know, it’d be him. I hoped so much he would say yes, but I wasn’t at all sure.

“Yeah, I do. But Mom and Dad might need some convincing.”

Oh, right. Them.

I flapped my fingers so hard they started to ache.

So . . . I haven’t told my parents what happened, even though we left the park more than five hours ago. I just can’t do it yet. Maybe by the time you get this letter I’ll work up the nerve. Then again, maybe not.

I’m extra-worried about Mom. She has a lot of funny ideas about what I should do. And what I shouldn’t. Back in elementary school she wanted me to stay in special ed even though it was the most boring thing ever. And then she wasn’t sure about me going to Hebrew school for some weird reason. Eventually she gave in when our rabbi started a special program for autistic kids. It’s not that I mind doing stuff with other autistic kids—I don’t!—but I

don't know why she thinks I can ONLY do things that are For Autistic Children.

So I need to be very, very careful, when I tell her about Coach K and baseball. It has to be 100% perfect, not like that time a few months ago when I asked Mom if I could quit social skills group and she said, "Absolutely not, now finish your cauliflower."

I don't know if they'll let me join the team.

But VJ, I want it so much.

Sincerely,

Vivy

FEBRUARY 17

Dear VJ,

It's not going to happen. I hate everything.

Vivy

FEBRUARY 18

Dear VJ,

My last letter didn't explain things very well. I thought I would write again to tell you exactly what happened. Just in case you happen to be interested, which you probably aren't.

The day after I met Coach K, Nate and I sat down for a Very Important Talk with my parents. Nate suggested it. (Yes, I know it's not grammatically correct to capitalize things like that, but I feel like the capital letters show how super-important the talk really was. Plain old regular letters just aren't enough sometimes.)

I'm really glad that Nate decided to help me. Maybe he's back to being nice Nate 100% of the time. That would be so great, wouldn't it?

Nate's a much better talker than me, so I let him do most of the talking. "I've got this," Nate told me before we went in. "You're going to be pitching in real games soon, just wait."

But when Nate finished explaining everything that

happened at the park, Mom just stared into empty space for a really long time. My palms started to sweat—very gross! I looked at Dad. He’s on my side, probably, but he won’t say so. Not until after Mom said her thing—whatever that is.

I waited for a bajillion years. (Okay, so it wasn’t actually a bajillion. Obviously. But it sure felt like a long time.)

Finally, Mom spoke. “I hate to say it, but I really don’t know about all this. I just don’t think it’ll be good for Vivy.”

“Why not?” Nate asked. “You’re always saying Vivy should get more involved in extracurricular activities and stuff. Playing baseball would be awesome for her.”

My brother is annoying sometimes—well, a lot of the time. But I love him so much. I really do.

Mom sighed. “Yes, I know. But baseball . . . that’s a boy’s sport. It’s dangerous. She’s so young and small and I’m just not sure it’s right for her. Why not play softball instead?”

“You can’t throw a knuckleball with a softball!” I told her.

That’s actually a little bit of a lie. You can throw a knuckleball with a softball, but it’s way harder. I don’t want to bother learning that when I still need to perfect my REAL knuckleball. I didn’t tell Mom, though. She doesn’t know the difference between a knuckleball and a split-fingered fastball, so there’s no use trying to explain baseball stuff to her.



Besides, it never matters what I say.

Mom's frown got bigger and I could tell she was Very Unhappy. "Honey, is it really so important for you to do this knuckleball thing? Can't you play without it?"

"No," I said.

She turned to Dad, who'd been very quiet through this whole thing. "See, this is the problem," she said. "The whole knuckleball issue seems like a fixation, and the therapists are very clear on this. We shouldn't be encouraging her fixations."

I hate hate HATE when she does this. I'm right there and she talks about me like I can't hear it! And I especially hate when she calls my knuckleball a "fixation."

No matter what she says, my knuckleball isn't some silly thing that little kids do, like when I was younger and carried my stuffed panda Lolly around everywhere. I've worked so hard on my knuckleball and a real live coach thinks I can pitch. Doesn't that mean something, anything?

I bet no one ever told you that you couldn't play.

The problem is that Mom doesn't care about baseball, if you can believe it. She's always complaining about how Dad watches baseball all the time. She doesn't get what it's like to be totally sucked in by a game, to sit on the edge of your seat with every ball and strike. And she definitely doesn't understand that feeling of wonderfulness that comes over

me when the ball hits the catcher's mitt with a loud SMACK.

You understand. I've seen you talk about it in your post-game interviews. (I always, ALWAYS watch the postgame interview for your starts.)

Dad kept quiet through all this, which was kind of annoying, to be honest. I know baseball is super-important to him because he always says that he has two religions—Reform Judaism and baseball. So obviously he should want me to play. But he let Mom talk first.

Then he spoke. FINALLY. He took off his glasses and fiddled with them while he talked. "Rachel, I know you're worried. But this could be good for Vivy," he said. "It's a chance for her to make friends. I think we should consider it."

A tiny bit of hope returned to me. Maybe this could work out after all. Maybe, maybe, maybe! It's better than a no.

Mom's face did all sorts of twisty things. I don't always know exactly what her faces mean, but I'm pretty sure this meant she was thinking about it.

"I just don't know," she said finally. "There's so much that can happen out there. I really think we should talk to Dr. Reeve about this before we make any big decisions."

Even though Mom didn't say absolutely not, talking to Dr. Reeve probably means no. She's my therapist. If I want

something, she says no most of the time. This isn't going to be any different. I know it.

Personally I think it's all very unfair that Mom still treats me like a baby even though I'm going to be twelve in just five months. Twelve is a very grown-up age, AND it's only one year away from thirteen, which is very important because when I turn thirteen I'm going to have my bat mitzvah. That means I'll be an Official Adult according to Jewish law (even if I still won't be able to drive and all of that). But Mom sure doesn't act like I'm going to be a sort-of-adult soon, does she?

So ever since the Talk, I've been playing it over again and again in my head. Wondering if maybe there was something I could have done differently. But I can't think of a single thing that would have convinced Mom.

I shouldn't have hoped for anything. Coach K was just so cool and nice that I thought maybe . . .

At least your baseball season starts soon. Six weeks to Opening Day! I bet you're super-excited, right? I sure am. I know you're going to do great.

I just . . . well, I just really wish I had my own Opening Day.

From,  
Vivy

FEBRUARY 20

Dear VJ,

I'm meeting with Dr. Reeve today. Wish me luck!

Vivy

FEBRUARY 21

Dear VJ,

Yesterday I had my appointment with Dr. Reeve. I don't know if you've ever been to therapy, but I'm guessing probably not. So I'm going to explain it to you.

My mom takes me to appointments, but she usually waits outside while I talk to Dr. Reeve. Sometimes she comes in, but usually that is a Very Bad Thing.

Anyway, the appointment began like usual. Dr. Reeve asked me a bunch of questions about how things are going at school, at home, blah blah blah. I showed her my behavior chart, which proved that I had absolutely no meltdowns in the past week. I think that's pretty good, don't you?

"So your mother tells me you want to play baseball," she said. "Let's talk about this. Why baseball? Why not softball?"

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, but I knew if I did she'd never let me play. VJ, why do people keep

saying that girls should play softball and ONLY softball? It's not like being a girl means I can't throw or hit a baseball! (Actually, I am bad at hitting, but I don't think it's because I'm a girl. That would be like saying I'm a bad hitter because I have brown hair. It's just stupid!)

If I were smarter, I would have told Dr. Reeve all this. But I didn't.

Instead, I took a few deep breaths and tried to explain to her about the knuckleball and how it works and stuff. I even pulled out the baseball I keep in my backpack to show her the knuckleball grip.

"Hmm," she said after I finished. "I see."

What does that even mean, she sees? What did she see? I wanted to ask her, but I knew I needed to be 100% good. I did my best to look her in the eyes when I talked with her. To show her I deserve to pitch.

Like always, she had loads more questions. "I know the knuckleball is important to you, but don't you think you'd like to play with other girls?"

"I see other girls at school," I said. I didn't mention that they're not exactly my friends, though Dr. Reeve probably knows that already. "Why can't I play with boys? It's mostly boys at social skills group, and you make me go there."

Her lips twitched and I got the terrible feeling that

somehow I'd messed up. Because of course I'd mess up and say something stupid at a time like this.

That's when Dr. Reeve shooed me from the room. "Thank you for sharing your feelings. Now I need to talk with your mother. Okay?"

I could only hope I hadn't completely blown my chance. You say that great pitchers always make the most of their opportunities. Did I do that? I wasn't sure.

There was no one else in the waiting room. Just the boring old goldfish in the tank.

I knew I shouldn't, but I crept up to the office door and listened in. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying, but I'm pretty sure Mom said the word "appropriate" at least three times. I don't think I like that word very much. Also, I didn't understand why she kept talking about baseball and whether or not it's APPROPRIATE. Coach K thinks it's appropriate for me to play! Wouldn't he know? Also, I looked it up online and found out that lots of girls play baseball. EIGHTEEN girls have played in the Little League World Series, including my new hero, Mo'ne Davis. I don't know why Mom thinks baseball is INAPPROPRIATE for me.

Dr. Reeve called me into her office. (Luckily, I was back in my seat by then.)

“Maybe you can explain to your mother why you want to play baseball. Like you did with me,” Dr. Reeve suggested once I came in again.

I forced myself to look at Mom. Even though I couldn’t quite manage to look right into her eyes, I tried for her nose. Hopefully I didn’t stare at her too hard, because they don’t like it when I do that, either.

“Baseball is fun,” I said. “Coach K says I can help the team, with my knuckleball. I just . . . I really, really want to play.”

That wasn’t even close to everything I wanted to say. I wanted to tell Mom about the happy flutter that tickles my stomach when the knuckleball floats in just the right way. I wanted to tell her about meeting you three years ago. How I want to do you proud. It’s just hard for me to find the right words sometimes, especially when I have to Make Eye Contact. Ugh, eye contact! It’s totally the worst.

I grabbed the squishy orange ball Dr. Reeve keeps in her office. Before I realized it, my fist clenched into my knuckleball grip. I just kept thinking *pleasepleaseplease!* Please let Mom allow me to do this one thing.

Mom grunted and I allowed myself to hope. Just a little bit. “You want to help the team,” she repeated.

Hello, didn’t I just say that? But I didn’t say that out loud because it would be Extremely Rude.



“Well, I don’t know. This is quite a step. But I guess we can give it a try,” she said.

She said yes!!! She really did!

I got so excited that I could barely keep track of all the things she said next. And I flapped my hands, because if that’s not a hand-flapping moment, then what is?

For once, Mom and Dr. Reeve didn’t say anything about the flapping. But Mom had plenty of other things to say.

“But it all depends on your behavior,” she said in her serious voice. “You have to show us that you can handle the stress of playing a sport, Vivy.”

Of course. Mom and Dr. Reeve went over a bunch of rules: I go to social skills group every week without complaining, eat my vegetables even when Mom serves really gross ones like yellow squash, and don’t have any meltdowns that involve screaming. Plus a whole bunch of other things that will probably be really hard to do.

Right now, I don’t care. I’m going to play baseball!

Wish me luck,

Vivy

P.S. Oh my gosh, I just realized what this means. I am going to play in a game. For real. Were you this scared before your first game? Probably not.



# Get a Grip, Vivvy Cohen!

by Sarah Kapit



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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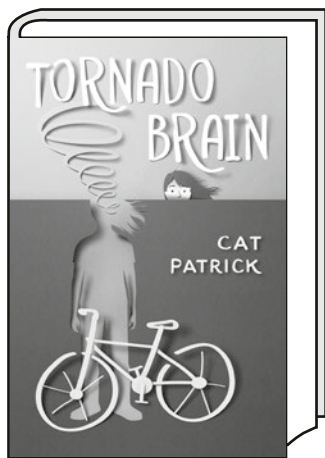
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Cut or tear to share!







Realistic/Contemporary Fiction | Grades 5 & up | 9781984815316

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# *Tornado Brain*

by Cat Patrick

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Things never seem to go as easy for Frankie as they do for her twin sister, Tess. For one, Frankie has a string of acronyms attached to her that Tess does not have: ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder), and AS (Asperger's Syndrome). Tess doesn't have to see a therapist and doesn't mind people touching her. Loud noises don't hurt Tess's ears and she doesn't get as distracted as Frankie does. And most of all, Tess has lots and lots of friends while Frankie has only one—before her sister stole her away.

With just a few weeks left in seventh grade, Frankie's now former friend, Colette, goes missing. Putting aside her hurt and bewilderment over her friend's betrayal, Frankie becomes determined to figure out the clues Colette left behind to find her before it's too late.

**• PENGUIN •**  
*Book Tasting*



# 1

## Myth: Tornadoes only move northeast.

People used to believe that tornadoes only move in one direction—to the northeast—but that’s not true. Sometimes they go southwest. Sometimes they touch down and don’t go anywhere, getting sucked right back up into the sky. That’s disappointing. Sometimes they zig and sometimes they zag. Tornadoes are unpredictable.

If a tornado was in middle school, it might get a lot of weird looks from other kids. Its counselor might call its behavior “unexpected.” Its mom might try to get it to move in the same direction as the other tornadoes just to fit in. But maybe the tornado doesn’t care about fitting in—even if it means not having a lot of friends.

I can relate because I used to have one friend but now I don’t. It’s complicated.

I met her during a tornado.

It was the first week of kindergarten. My memories from back then are foggy because I was just a little kid and also my memory is weird, but here's how I think it went. Everyone was at recess and I was circling the outside of the play area alone, thinking of roller coasters because I was obsessed with them then, feeling my way along the chain link because I liked the way my fingers dropped in the spaces between the links and the way my hand smelled like metal afterward. Not a lot of people like that smell.

Sometimes I don't notice things at all and sometimes I notice things too much. That day, I noticed when the wind turbine at the far end of the playground stopped turning. I live in Long Beach, Washington, and it's known for being windy—so windy that there's an international kite festival every August—so when the turbine stopped, it was different. I notice things that are different. The creepy green-gray circular clouds behind the unmoving turbine were different, too. That's called a mesocyclone, which is a word I like.

I don't know if any other kid on the playground saw the twister fall from the funnel cloud that day. I was probably the only one who was looking up instead of playing tetherball or hanging upside down from the monkey bars or something. Being upside down makes my head feel funny.



I watched as the tornado hit the ground and started bumping toward us, tossing things that looked like bugs but were really recycling bins. The emergency system was loud, so I covered my ears. Kids ran inside but I didn't run; I walked . . . in the direction of the tornado. I took my hands off my ears and heard the train sound, far away at first, then louder and louder. The tiny bottom of the tornado got bigger as it collected stuff, pulling up and tossing small trees and even sucking up a utility pole, sending sparks into the sky like fireworks.

I was sucked up, too—by an adult. He grabbed me and started running toward the school. I watched the tornado rip out the far part of the playground fence, which was probably the coolest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

“What is wrong with you?” the adult shouted, too close to my ear.

An audiologist once told me that I have better-than-average hearing, so it hurt. If you don't know what an audiologist is, it's a doctor who studies hearing loss and balance issues related to the ears. I don't have either of those things but still I went to one—along with many other doctors that have *ologist* at the end of their titles.

I cupped my hands over my ears, but I could still hear him shouting: “You need to listen to directions! You could have been killed!”

“It's not my fault,” I said. “No one told me any directions.”

I bounced along in the teacher's arms, watching the turbine pick up speed until I couldn't see it anymore because it had tornado wrapped around it like a big tornado hug. The teacher banged through the doors and we were inside the school, running down the hall toward the cafeteria. Without the distraction of the tornado, I noticed his painful grip around my thighs and back. I stiffened and started to slip from his grasp. By the time we made it to the cafeteria, where all the other kids and teachers were hiding under tables, he was holding me only under the arms, my board-straight legs swinging like a pendulum in my flowered capris. My armpits hurt when he finally set me down next to a table in the middle of the room.

"Found her," he said to my teacher. I don't remember her name. I didn't like her very much.

"Come under, Frances," she said. "Sit next to me. It's going to be okay."

"My name is Frankie," I said, crawling under the table. "And I know."

"You gave us a scare, Frankie," she said, stroking my hair. I honestly don't know why people think that's comforting.

"Don't touch me," I snapped, scooting as far away from her as I could get. She looked surprised at first, then frowned and turned to

talk to the man who'd carried me.

"I was just watching," I said softly to myself.

"Watching what?" a girl on my right asked. She had braided orange hair with red bows tied at the ends, too many freckles all over her cheeks and forehead, and a terrified expression.

"I saw the tornado!" I said.

"I want my mommy," she said before putting her thumb in her mouth. Now she looked like a baby. "Is it going to get us?" she asked around her thumb, making it harder to understand her. "Will we die? I don't want to die, I want to be a singer. Do you want to hold hands?"

I definitely did not want to touch the hand that she had in her mouth, and I was overwhelmed by her questions.

"What?" I asked, blinking.

"My name is Colette," she answered.

"That's not what I asked."

"What's your name?"

"Frankie."

"I'm scared," she said.

I wasn't feeling scared until the train sound got loud enough to rattle the windows. Then Colette hugged me, and I let her without

thinking. Unpredictable as they are, the tornado would turn southwest at the last minute and just miss our school before being whooshed back into the clouds, but of course we didn't know that at the time. I found out later that it was an EF3 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, which is classified as "intense." I didn't know that then either.

Then I just knew that I was scared, too. I squashed my cheek against Colette's, my arms around her. She was probably the first person other than my family members I'd ever hugged.

"If we don't die, let's be friends," Colette said.

"Okay," I said.

We didn't die, so we were friends.

## 2

Fact: In some parts of the country, middle schools have built-in tornado shelters.

Colette went missing on the second Friday in April, almost at the end of seventh grade. It was seven and a half years after the tornado in kindergarten, and Colette and I hadn't been friends anymore for two months.

Before any of us knew she was missing, it was a normal morning. My mom appeared in my doorway at six thirty. Opening my eyes and seeing a person in the doorway made my heart jump.

"I hate it when you do that!" I complained.

"Good morning to you, Frankie," Mom said in a soothing voice. "Time to get ready for school!"

I closed my eyes again.

I'd had trouble falling asleep the night before because I'd been playing something over in my head and when I'm thinking too much at bedtime, my brain doesn't turn off and go to sleep. Plus, I'd forgotten to take the vitamin that helps me sleep. And then I'd woken up twice during the night for no reason, once at two thirty and once at five. It's hard for me to get back to sleep when that happens. Adding it all together, I'd probably had about four hours of sleep.

I rubbed my eyes with my fists, then scooted deeper under the covers, wishing my mom would go away. But I could still smell the scents she'd brought in with her: nice shampoo and disgusting coffee. I pictured a cartoon drawing of coffee-smell pouncing on a cartoon drawing of nice-shampoo-smell. The nice-shampoo-smell fought back and shoved the coffee-smell off, then . . .

"Are you awake, Frankie?" my mom said.

*I am now.*

Lately, I'd been concentrating on using manners, so I focused on not yelling that I wanted her to leave so I could wake up in peace. *Do not yell*, I told myself, my voice loud in my head. *Do not tell her to get out. Make your voice match hers.*

I opened my eyes and looked at her sideways because I was on

my side.

“Hi,” I groaned, my tired, grumpy, scratchy voice not sounding like hers at all. She ignored it.

“It’s Friday!” Mom said. “Or, since it’s your early-release day, should I say, Fri-yay?”

We got out of school at 11:25 a.m. on Fridays, so we were only there for three hours and five minutes, or three class periods—and one of them was homeroom—unless you were an overachiever who’d chosen to take zero period.

“Uh-huh,” I growled, rolling away and pulling the covers over my shoulder. “I’m awake, you can leave now.”

“You know the rule,” Mom said. “I can’t leave until you’re upright.”

*That is the stupidest rule ever!* I shouted in my head. It was almost painful not to say it out loud, but I thought about manners and counted to ten and managed not to yell. I threw off my covers and got out of bed, hunched forward, my fists clenched, frowning. But upright.

“There,” I said.

“Thank you,” my mom said, which bugged me.

I guess I should say right now that I love my mom, so you don’t get the wrong idea. She’s not mean or anything. I just . . . things bother me really easily. Or they don’t bother me at all. I tend to have extreme

feelings one way or the other, not usually in the middle. Maybe that's why I'm sometimes unhappy. I don't know. Anyway.

When my mom finally left, I put on my softest skinny jeans, the ones that I wore at least twice a week. That day, I noticed the seams digging against the sides of my thighs and I hated it, so I changed into a different pair. I pulled on my black hoodie with the thumbholes, testing out the feeling of that for a second, deciding it was okay. The seams of the new pants bugged me, too, so I changed into leggings. They had a hole in the knee but felt okay. I stuck my long fingernail in the hole and made it bigger.

I shoved my unfinished homework into my backpack, then went to brush my teeth. In the mirror, a girl with messy, chin-length hair and too-long bangs, bloodshot brown eyes with dark circles under them, and cracked lips stared back at me. I looked down at my toothbrush: There was a hair on it. I threw it away and leaned over to get a new one out of the cabinet. While I was searching, I found a headband I used to wear all the time when I was younger. I'd never wear it now, but I tried it on, wishing I could text a picture of myself to Colette because I looked hilarious, but I couldn't because we weren't friends anymore. I left the bathroom, dropping the headband on the floor.

I pulled my hood up over my bedhead. From the mini-fridge in my room, I got out the milk, then made myself a bowl of the single



brand of cereal I like in the world. I checked my TwisterLvr feed and read about an EF2-category tornado that'd happened in Birmingham, Alabama, the night before. I didn't check my other social media anymore because I didn't want to see all the pictures of Colette and her other friends.

I got my jacket and left. I wanted to ride my favorite yellow beach cruiser to school, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be, so I had to walk. Only a minute or two into the walk, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

**MOM:** Do you have your backpack?

I turned around to get it. At the door, Mom held out the pack in one hand and a protein bar in the other. Her dark hair was in a tight bun that looked uncomfortable. I patted the top of my head.

"Don't forget to eat it, please."

"I won't," I said, turning to leave again. She was always reminding me to eat. She didn't remind other people to eat—just me. I guess maybe I needed to be reminded sometimes, but it was still annoying.

"I don't want you to get hangry," she said.

Did you know that the word *hangry* is officially in the dictionary now? It is. I looked it up.

“I’m old enough to know when I need to eat,” I complained.

“Yes, at thirteen, you *are* old enough,” she said in a way that made me think she was trying to make a point. “Did you brush your teeth?”

“Yes,” I said, not totally sure whether I had or not. “Bye.”

“Have a great day, Frankie! I love you!”

I made a sound and left again, taking the beach path so I could shout into the wind if I felt like it. I didn’t that morning, but I like having options. I like choosing what I get to do because it feels like people are always bossing me around. The only thing is, the beach path takes longer than just walking straight to school. It’s like turning the route into an obtuse triangle instead of an acute one.

Do you know what that is? It’s geometry, which I like.

I was late to school so often that the hall monitor didn’t blink. I left some books and the uneaten protein bar in my locker, which I don’t share with anyone because I don’t like when their books touch mine, and left a trail of sand like bread crumbs as I walked down the carpeted hallway to homeroom. The bell rang when I was about halfway to class, and Ms. Garrett didn’t say anything when I walked in.

All the other kids were already at their desks, most of them socializing. That’s a thing I’m not good at, probably because I don’t like *chitchat*—the word itself or the act of doing it.

I sat down at my own private desk island by the window and checked my TwisterLvr account again. Nothing new had happened since the last time I'd checked, which was disappointing.

"Phones away or they're mine," Ms. Garrett said. Some people groaned, but everyone made their phones disappear. Not literally: I don't go to Hogwarts.

Ms. Garrett kept talking: "Let's all work on something productive. That means you too, Anna and Daphne. Marcus! Settle down now."

The room got quiet. Everyone took out homework. I opened *Call of the Wild*, which is about a dog named Buck who lives in the freezing Yukon. Sometimes I specifically don't like books that other people tell me to read, but I liked that one even though reading it wasn't my idea.

This lady—this specialist who was always checking in with me at school—popped her head in the room. Her name is Ms. Faust and she's fine, I guess, except no one else has weird ladies checking up on them, so I pretended not to notice her and eventually she left. Ms. Faust was assigned to me or whatever, so it was her job to check in, but I didn't care. I didn't want her anywhere near me.

I was several chapters into my book, when Ms. Garrett put her bony hand on my shoulder, startling me. I cringed and pulled away from her, biting my tongue so I wouldn't say anything she'd think was

rude. I didn't want her to call my mom. I touched my opposite shoulder to even myself out, looking down at my notebook and noticing that I'd drawn a few tiny tornadoes while I'd been reading.

"Sorry, Frances," she said, looking embarrassed.

"My name is Frankie," I snapped accidentally. Thankfully, she let it go.

"Again, I apologize. I know you don't like when people touch you, but you didn't answer when I said your name." I strained my neck looking up at her because Ms. Garrett is skyscraper tall (not literally, of course). She kept talking. "Uh, I notice that you're reading your book for English, which is great, but I wanted to make sure you've finished your math homework. We only have a few minutes left in the period and Mr. Hubble asked me to check with you. He said that yesterday, you—"

"It's in my backpack," I interrupted, which wasn't a lie. It was in my backpack. It was also unfinished.

"I see," Ms. Garrett said. She tilted her head to the side like my dog does sometimes.

Behind Ms. Garrett, across the room in the regular rows, several kids were watching us. Tess smiled at me with her mouth but not her eyes, a halfway smile, which was confusing; Kai smiled at me with

his mouth *and* his eyes, an all-the-way smile, which was confusing in a different way; and Mia didn't smile, just stared, which wasn't confusing in the least. I frowned at all of them and they went back to their classwork.

Ms. Garrett opened her mouth to say something else—maybe to ask to see my homework—but the announcement bell chimed, and the office lady started talking. That was unexpected, because it wasn't announcement day, which is Tuesday. And if we *had* had announcements, they would have been at the beginning of the period, not the end.

“Attention, students and staff,” the office lady said. “Please proceed immediately in an orderly fashion to the auditorium for an address from Principal Golden. Thank you.”

Ms. Garrett looked at me blankly for a few seconds like she was stunned, but then she told everyone to get up and move toward the auditorium. Kai smiled at me all-the-way again as he left the classroom with his friends. Confused about how I felt about that, I waited until everyone else left, too, and then went into the hall.

I watched Kai walk like he was going to wobble over, laughing so hard his eyes got watery as his friend Dillon told a story about some try-hard tourist who had wiped out at the skate park. Kai had on dark blue skate pants with cargo pockets and checkerboard slip-on

sneakers and his shiny black hair looked especially interesting that day, like he'd been blasted by a huge gust of wind from behind and his hair had gotten stuck. I could see a scab on the back of his arm above his left elbow, which grossed me out.

Their conversation got quieter, then Dillon turned around and looked at me, so I stopped watching Kai and stared at the wall instead.

You should know that most people think Ocean View Middle School looks incredibly strange. About five years ago, when the old school was getting run-down, instead of wrecking it and building something new, they just added on. The front part with the offices, cafeteria, and math and English halls is clean and bright, but the back part with the auditorium and shop and music rooms is dark and smells like old sneakers.

I like to run my hands along walls when I walk because I don't like being surrounded by the other kids since they sometimes accidentally bump me. That's what I was doing when Tess appeared next to me.

Tall and skinny, not as tall as Ms. Garrett, though, she walked sort of bent in on herself like she was trying to be shorter. Her smooth, dark hair was parted on the side, so she had to tuck the hair-curtain behind her right ear to make eye contact. Eye contact made me uncomfortable.

"Did you get in trouble?" she asked quietly, raising her perfectly

neat eyebrows. I stared at them: Eyebrows are really weird, actually. They never exactly match. There's always . . .

“Frankie?”

“Huh?”

“I asked if you got in trouble?” Tess repeated.

“For what?”

“For not doing your homework?” She practically whispered it. Tess talked super-quietly, like she didn't want anyone to hear her. I barely could.

“I did my homework,” I said, which wasn't a lie. I'd done *some* of my homework. And it wasn't really her business in the first place. But I managed not to tell her that. Despite getting hungrier by the second, I was doing okay at manners so far that day. I mean, except when I'd snapped at my teacher. But since she hadn't gotten mad, it didn't count.

“Oh, okay,” Tess said. “Sorry.”

Mia nudged Tess and told her to look at something on her social media feed and Tess did and they both giggled—Mia loudly and Tess softly—and I was happy not to be asked any more questions about my homework.

In the auditorium, I followed Tess and Mia down the aisle. Tess

was half a head taller than Mia and Mia's butt was half a cheek bigger than Tess's. Tess walked like a normal teenager in her skinny jeans and gray T-shirt with an open sweater that looked like a blanket over it. Mia swayed her hips back and forth in her flowy jumpsuit, making her long, curly blond hair sway, too. They picked a row and I sat behind them on the end by the aisle. I looked around, not seeing where Kai was sitting.

I did notice Ms. Faust smiling at me encouragingly from where she was leaning against the far wall. I wished she'd look at someone else.

"Move over," a mean kid named Alex said, staring down at me. He was always yelling at people: a few times even teachers. I may have big emotions, but not like Alex. "Make room for other people."

"I was here first," I said, my need to sit on the aisle outweighing my desire not to get yelled at by Alex. I really don't like being surrounded. "Here," I said, moving my knees to the left so he could squeeze through.

"Whatever," Alex said, shaking his head and stepping on my foot as he shoved past me.

"Ouch!" I said loudly. He rolled his eyes and didn't apologize. I folded my arms over my chest and slumped down in my chair.

It took a while for all 323 students to sit down. Well, 322 that day,



but we didn't know that yet. The room felt like being on a beach when an electrical storm is coming, like you could get zapped any minute. That's figurative language—similes and metaphors and stuff. I was trying to use it more instead of being so literal all the time because people laugh at you when you're literal.

Onstage, Principal Golden held up a hand with her middle and ring finger touching her thumb, the pointer and pinkie sticking straight up: the Quiet Coyote.

“So lame,” I heard Alex say loudly. Principal Golden looked right at him in a way I wouldn't want to be looked at by the principal, and he didn't say anything else.

Principal Golden sniffed loudly into the microphone.

“Something has happened,” she said, her *p*'s making irritating popping sounds in the mic. “This morning, there has been an incident. We're not sure of the details, but one of our Ocean View students is missing.”

I could only hear the buzzing of the microphone for a couple of seconds because the entire auditorium went silent. And then whispers erupted from all over the place.

*“Did she say missing?”*

*“I wonder who it is?”*

*“What do you think happened?”*

My mind started ping-ponging from the idea of a missing student to the missing-kid posters on the bulletin board at I Scream for Ice Cream, where my biological father made me and my sister go when he visited last year even though it was the middle of winter and pouring rain and my sister is lactose intolerant. I shook my head to tune back in to what Principal Golden was saying.

“ . . . investigating and we don’t know anything more at this time. The police are searching the school and want to speak to select students. Rather than further disrupting this already short school day, the administration has decided to cancel class for the rest of the day. If you ride the bus, please see Mrs. Taylor in the office for instructions on . . .”

Everyone got up at once and started talking except me: I stayed in my seat, waiting for the auditorium to thin out. My row had to exit from the other side because I was blocking my end: even mean Alex went the other way and I was glad because I didn’t want my foot trampled again.

It was 9:40 and I was supposed to be starting second period, English, but instead I was going home. My stomach rolled with the weird feeling of change. Change is my enemy.

“She’s not answering her phone.”

I looked over to see Tess and Mia huddled together in the aisle, whispering to each other. “When’s the last time you talked to her?”

“Last night before dinner,” Mia said, spinning the ring on her middle finger. “She wasn’t in zero period. I thought she slept in.”

“That’s not like her, though,” Tess said, chewing her lip. “Her bag’s not in our locker.” I leaned forward so I could hear Tess better, wondering if it bugged her that Mia’s curls were touching her hand. I brushed my own hand like they’d been touching mine. “Is she home sick?”

They looked at each other, both with big eyes that reminded me of a certain comic book cat, Mia’s blue like a sunny day and Tess’s green-gray like a cloudy one. Maybe they felt me watching them because they both looked at me at the same time.

“Have you talked to Colette?” Tess asked in her tentative voice.

“Of course I’ve talked to Colette,” I said.

“I mean *recently*,” Tess clarified. “Like, did you talk to Colette yesterday?” Now she was pulling on the lip she’d been biting. It was distracting: I wished she’d leave her lip alone.

“No,” I said, just to say something. *No* is an easy response for me.

“This is serious,” Mia said, leaning forward like my therapist did

sometimes. She lowered her voice. “What if it’s her?”

“What if what’s her?” I asked.

Mia sighed loudly. “Why are you always so spacey?”

Tess gave her a look, then explained, “Frankie, what we’re asking is: What if the missing student is *Colette*?”

I stared at her without saying anything because that idea really didn’t make sense to me—since I obviously didn’t know at the time that the missing student *was* Colette and since I’d been mostly thinking that it felt strange being told to go home when I’d just gotten to school. This was not my normal routine.

“Come on,” Mia said, pulling on Tess’s arm, “let’s go see if the teachers need help.”

# 3

Myth: Twin tornadoes are extremely rare.

The psychiatrist is the one who labels you.

My mom picked up clothes and books and papers from the floor while I lounged on my bed, trying to ignore her, instead of being at school. I concentrated on not being annoyed about her touching my stuff because if I exploded, she'd probably make me go to the psychiatrist again.

Our deal was that if I could keep my anger and other stuff under control, I could stay off medication. And I really wanted to stay off medication: It made me sleepy or starving or spacey or bloated or weepy or forgetful or jittery—or all of the above—depending on which one I was taking. I was only *on* medication because of the labels—and like I said, the psychiatrist is the one who labels you.

I got labeled when I was in fourth grade. I'd been digging through my mom's desk, looking for glue. Instead, I found something that looked like a test—except the questions weren't about math or history or science: they were about behavior.

The directions said to fill in the bubble that fit best. You had to pick whether the statements were not true, sometimes true, often true, or almost always true.

*The child wanders aimlessly from one activity to another.*

*The child has difficulty relating to peers.*

*The child stares or gazes off into space.*

*The child gets teased a lot.*

*The child walks between two people who are talking.*

*The child offers comfort to others when they are sad.*

*The child has more difficulty with change than other children.*

There were seventy-five statements. None of the bubbles had been filled in yet. My name was at the top of the page.

For a week, I snuck out of bed in the middle of the night to check the drawer and see if the bubbles had been filled in, bringing a notebook with me to write down the words I didn't know so I could look them

up in the dictionary. I wanted to know if my mom thought that I never, sometimes, often, or almost always wander aimlessly from one activity to another. If she thought I never, sometimes, often, or almost always have difficulty relating to peers. If I never or always gaze off into space. If I never walk between two people who are talking. If I always get teased a lot.

*The child has more difficulty with change than other children.*

I wanted to know what my mom thought of me. But I never found out because one night the bubbles were empty, and the next they were gone. They appeared again in the psychiatrist's office—but no one would show them to me. I remember that I was mad about the bubbles—and also mad because the psychiatrist said labels I didn't understand, but looked up on the internet later like “neurological disorder” and “attention deficit” and “poor executive functioning”—labels that were directed at me! There were all sorts of articles about how parents could “cope with” kids with these problems. Until the labels, I didn't know I was someone my mom had to “cope with.” Until the labels, I didn't know I had “problems.”

Mad about the bubbles and about not being included in the conversation and about being talked about in a way that felt gross, I had kicked the back of the psychiatrist's desk. That made my mom mad, which made me madder, which made me kick harder. Eventually,

I melted out of the chair onto the floor, kicking the back of his desk with full force, over and over and over. My mom and the psychiatrist left until I calmed down, but before they did, I remember my mom crying. I don't like to think about that.

Sometimes I don't remember things at all, and sometimes I remember them too clearly. That's a thing I wish I'd forget.

"Frankie?" my mom asked, back in the present. She was holding a pile of my books and staring at me. I stared back at her reverse-parentheses wrinkles at the top of her nose between her eyebrows. "Did you hear me? I asked if I should call Gabe and make an appointment for you. I'm concerned that you haven't seen him in a while. And with everything going on now, I think it'd be a good idea."

Gabe is my therapist, which is way better than a psychiatrist. Therapists spend more time with you and try to talk to you and give you suggestions. I don't remember that much about the first time I met Gabe, but I do remember that his office was filled with board games and musical instruments and toys and he talked to me alone, without my mom, and didn't label me or hide bubble worksheets from me. And he let me draw tornadoes while he asked me questions.

"Frankie, are you listening to me?" my mom asked.

"Yes!" I said, taking a deep breath. "But you don't need to call Gabe.



I don't need to go to therapy every time some little thing happens." I focused on keeping my voice calm. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

Often, Gabe makes me feel better about things. But I still didn't want to make an appointment with him. I wanted to prove that I could do it on my own. I didn't want weird Ms. Faust trying to smile at me at school. I wanted to be a normal person who could just live regularly without needing help every other minute.

And I was doing okay—as long as my routine stayed pretty much the same. But then Colette went missing—though I didn't know it was Colette for sure yet—and her current best friends, Tess and Mia, had asked me questions I hadn't exactly answered truthfully and I was home when I should have been in English, so my routine was not the same that day.

My mom put down the books and moved super-close to the end of my bed, maybe going to sit on it, and I really didn't want her to. I have a thing about people sitting on my bed, even people I love like my mom.

"This isn't a little thing, Frankie . . ."

*Don't sit on my bed*, I thought.

" . . . this is a big thing, a missing child."

*Don't lean against it like that; it'll make you want to sit!*

“Gabe might have some strategies for—”

She sat down.

“Mom! Stop!” I shouted at her, unable to keep my voice level anymore. “The kid is probably dead. We’ll all just have to deal with it.”

“Frances Vivienne Harper!” Mom gasped.

*Whoops.*

“I didn’t mean that,” I said quickly, backpedaling. “I just said that because I’m hungry.”

“Get up, then,” Mom said, mad, standing and turning toward the door, her knees popping when she moved. I don’t know when she’d gotten so creaky. “We’re going for a walk and then we’ll eat. It’s nonnegotiable.” Her voice didn’t have that nice mom tone to it anymore; it was flat.

“I don’t want to go for a walk,” I whined. “Can’t we just eat lunch? I’m starving.”

“You’ll be fine,” Mom said, still with an angry tone.

Tones are something therapists teach you to try to notice. Gabe calls them “cues.” Most people just understand them automatically.

Thinking of that made me think of when I was little and I thought automatic toilets were called *automagic*. On my big list of things to do in life is to write a letter to the people who make the dictionary to see

if they'll change it because my word is better. I was thinking about that when my mom raised her voice, which she rarely does.

“Frankie! Get up from that bed!”

“Fine,” I said, knowing I was going to get in big trouble if I didn't.

When I stood up, she left. I pulled my puffy vest on over my hoodie, lifted the hood over my head. I couldn't remember when I'd last brushed my hair and there was a huge nest in it. I like my hair—it's really thick and wavy—but I don't like brushing out the nests it makes at all.

I stepped into my red rain boots and tromped out of my room, down the hall, and to the elevator. My mom says the elevators are for the guests—Did I mention that we live in an inn?—but I felt like breaking the rules.

Outside, the billowy clouds had parted, and I could see blue sky for miles. It was windy, so I kept my hood up over my head. Wind in my ears is terrible.

Charles, my mom's boyfriend, and our dog, Pirate, were waiting for me in the parking lot, ready to go for a walk on the beach. Charles had on his usual outdoor uniform: work boots, faded jeans, a black T-shirt, a gray windbreaker, and a red beanie with his light brown hair flipping out underneath. When it wasn't topped with a beanie, Charles wore his

hair messy, like I did, but his was styled to look that way—with special organic hair products he ordered from Seattle and that my mom teased him about, which usually made him kiss her, which always grossed me out.

I like Charles and used to wonder sometimes if my mom would marry him, but then she didn't so I stopped wondering. My mom isn't the marrying kind: She and my biological father weren't married. Well, I mean, he was married . . . but to someone else. Adults make dumb choices sometimes, but I guess if they hadn't made that dumb choice, I wouldn't exist.

Anyway, my mom and Charles work a lot, so they started this tradition of meeting up at break times for a short walk. Usually, we only have to do it on weekends or when we're off school for teacher work days. I guess they didn't feel like they were seeing me or my sister enough—or asking us enough uncomfortable questions.

“Hey, boss,” Charles said, holding out a to-go cup that I knew had hot chocolate in it. His jacket sleeve pulled back when he reached out, showing a peek of the tattoos that covered his entire arm. Arms.

I grunted something as I accepted the cup.

“Say it's mint tea if she asks,” Charles instructed, scratching his stubble, and I nodded. My mom doesn't want us having sugar all the

time. Well, she doesn't want *me* having it all the time. Or red dye. Or processed foods. "You okay?"

"I'm okay," I said, giving Pirate a rub behind her ear. Her name is Pirate because another dog scratched out her left eye in a fight and she looks like she has a permanent eye patch. It's pretty disgusting, but the rest of her is cute so I try not to look at her eye and love her anyway.

"Did they leave without us?"

"I told them to go ahead," Charles said. "I said we'd catch up."

Charles looked at me sideways like he was trying to figure out my mood, which he does a lot. Sometimes I'm okay with it and sometimes I want to growl at him, which I don't do anymore because Gabe says it's socially unacceptable, but I still think it's a useful way of telling someone to quit it.

It's hard to understand why expressing yourself in growls, or just directly saying that you don't like something is bad. Manners seem like wrapping words in cotton balls, and I think it's just easier to say the words without the fluff. I don't have any friends, though, so I'm probably wrong. You probably shouldn't take any of my advice.

We started walking and we didn't say any words for a while—regular ones or cotton-ball ones. The silence made me happy. I missed that about being friends with Colette: she was good at walking without

talking without it being weird.

I listened to the sound of Pirate's tags clanking together as we went down the short paved road toward the ocean. They made a little song and I imagined myself dancing, but didn't actually do it.

Soon the pavement turned to sand and my bootheels dug in deeper with every step. I splashed through puddles from a quick rain that had happened earlier, then moved over to the left side of the sandy path to run my hand along the wispy beach grass that came up to my waist.

We got to the point where the grass ends and opens up to the beach, which stretches for miles in both directions. I shaded my eyes so I could see where my mom was: she and my sister were walking at the edge of the tide.

"Some people think the missing kid might be Colette," I said to Charles, watching the water. It was choppy today and looked like the waves were siblings fighting with each other. The wind was threatening to pull back my hood, so I yanked the strings tighter. "She wasn't at school today and no one could reach her."

"It's scary, no matter who it is," Charles said.

"Yeah," I said, not sure I really felt scared. I felt more like a mixture of curious and excited, which I'm pretty sure is not the right way to feel when a kid from your school could be in trouble. My emotions

don't always work like they're supposed to, and it felt like they were extra off right then because I should have been at school, but I was walking on the beach.

"What if they don't find the kid?" I asked Charles, watching my mom and sister walking, holding hands. I didn't do that with my mom, and it made me feel jealous.

"That would be awful," Charles said, taking Pirate off her leash. She bolted toward the water to chase the seagulls as they searched for lunch of their own. "No matter who it is, it'd be awful."

"Yeah," I said, wondering if I'd really feel awful or if I'd have to pretend to feel awful so everyone wouldn't think I was weird.

Pirate bounded back our way with a huge stick in her mouth, circled Charles, and dropped it near his feet. She waited for him to throw it, then took off again in a flash.

"Hey, Charles?"

"Yeah?"

"I think it's Colette," I said. I just had a feeling.

The truth was, I'd lied to Tess and Mia: I *had* seen Colette the day before. She'd randomly come by my room for the first time since February. We'd had a fight and she'd left. Thinking through the fight was the reason I couldn't fall asleep the night before: it'd stuck with

me into the late-night hours. Now I was feeling really confused.

“I hope you’re wrong, buddy,” Charles said, smiling at me.

*Me too*, I thought.

“Now what’s she doing?” Charles asked, shielding his eyes from the sun and watching Pirate. It looked like she was trying to dig up a crab. “She’s going to get pinched again,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

I nodded and walked over to a log that the ocean hadn’t wanted anymore. It had sand packed into the grooves, but it was dry enough to use as a bench. I inspected it for bugs, then sat down, thinking about nothing or everything.

I picked up a stick and wrote *Hi* in the wet sand.

Charles took the stick and wrote in the sand *Hi back*. I hadn’t noticed him there again. Then my mom and sister were on their way toward us, and I wondered how much time had gone by while I was spacing out. That happens sometimes.

“What’s in the cup?” Mom asked.

“Hot chocolate,” I said without thinking. My mom gave Charles a mad-ish look and Charles shrugged.

“No more sugar for you today,” Mom said to me, continuing on toward the inn. Charles and Pirate started jogging together in the same direction.



My sister followed them, and as she walked by me, she said, “That sucks for you: she just said she’s making chocolate cake for dessert tonight.”

“Why are you always such a jerk?” I snapped. It was only when I saw the hurt in her eyes that I realized she’d been showing empathy, not rubbing it in.

“Whatever, Frankie,” Tess said quietly, shaking her head. “I don’t know what’s going on with you lately.”

She ran off like a gazelle on her long legs and I was left to walk back to the inn alone on my shorter ones.

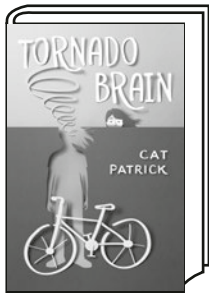
Oh, did I say that Tess is my sister? Yeah, she is. She’s one minute older than me. Yes, that means we’re twins. Not identical ones: the fraternal kind.

And yes, my twin sister stole the only friend I’d ever had.



# Tornado Brain

by Cat Patrick



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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Cut or tear to share!



• PENGUIN •



# Book Tasting



Which book sample left you the most “hungry” for more?  
Tell us why!

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Cut or tear to share!

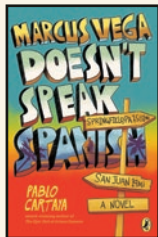


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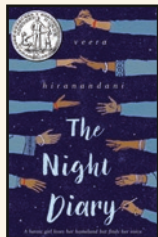
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