

Everything is less terrible with doughnuts.

DOUGHNUT FLIX



JESSIE JANOWITZ

the DOUGHNUT FIX

JESSIE JANOWITZ

For Toby, Leo, and Sylvie

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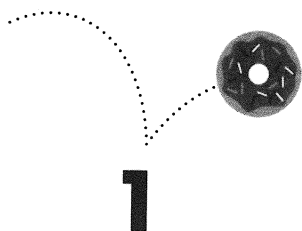
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It started off like any normal Saturday with Jeanine, Zoe, and me flipping through cookbooks on the living room floor.

For Mom, teaching us to bake was right up there with teaching us to read. As soon as we were old enough to digest chocolate, we got a Dessert Day, one day a week to make whatever we wanted. We'd pick our recipes on Saturday morning, then shop for ingredients after eating breakfast at Barney Greengrass, a deli a few blocks up Amsterdam Avenue from our apartment.

I'd been working my way through *Roland Mesnier's Basic to Beautiful Cakes* since I got it for my birthday in July. Roland is king when it comes to cake. He was the White House pastry chef for twenty-five years.

That morning, I decided to tackle the white chocolate dome

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cake Roland created for President Jimmy Carter, minus the nasty orange syrup he uses. Except for cutting out stuff I hate, I usually follow the recipe exactly, which drives Mom crazy. She says you have to make a recipe your own, but she's a professional.

As usual, it took Zoe no time at all to pick her dessert, because she always chooses snickerdoodles and knows the ingredients by heart.

Jeanine couldn't make up her mind between triple chocolate chip cookies and banoffee pie. Jeanine is Gifted and Talented, which means no matter the question, she's always sure there's a right answer. So when there is no right or wrong, when it's just red or blue, plain or sesame, she totally falls apart.

I was rooting for the cookies for the simple reason that banoffee pie is disgusting. It never even gets cooked, so it's all cold and slimy like hand sanitizer. I kept my opinion to myself though. I may be two years older, but Jeanine never listens to me about anything, not even dessert.

According to the New York City Department of Education, I, Tristan Levin, am not Gifted or Talented. I can make a perfect chocolate chip cookie, but Mom made sure we could all do that. I'm not entirely clear on what about me isn't G&T material, but I'm guessing the fact that I still use my fingers to do the nines trick has something to do with it. When Jeanine turned seven, it was

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like God had downloaded every single multiplication fact right into her brain.

What I do get about the whole G&T thing is that it's not something I can change. I'm pretty good at knowing what I can control and what I can't. I guess that's not something G&T tests for because Jeanine never knows.

I used to think my name was one of those things that I was just stuck with, but then I found out you can legally change your own name. Charlie's Uncle Ralph, now Uncle Damien, did it. Personally, I don't think Damien's any better than Ralph, but neither are as bad as Tristan.

What do you think of Jax? There's something especially cool about a name with an X in it, right? But then, sometimes I wonder if it sounds too much like a dog: "Here, Jax! Roll over, Jax!" You can't change your name till you're eighteen, and I'm only twelve, so I've got some time.

When half an hour had gone by and Jeanine still hadn't picked her dessert, I told my parents I'd meet them at breakfast. Barney's opens at eight thirty, and if you're not there by nine, you'll never get a table, even if you are a regular.

Barney's isn't fancy or anything. The wallpaper is peeling and has food smears on it, and most of the chairs are crisscrossed with duct tape. But I'm telling you, none of that matters once you taste

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the food. If I could eat only one thing for the rest of my life, it would be Barney's eggs and onions. The eggs are so creamy, they taste like custard, and the onions are so sweet, you'd swear they were cooked in maple syrup.

Then there's the smell. Just one whiff of that air dripping with chicken soup, sautéed onions, and garlic bagels, and *Shazzam!* The whole world goes all Willy-Wonka-big-glass-elevator-crashing-through-the-ceiling happy endings. That math test I have Monday? Who cares. That gang of weight-lifting private school jerks taking over the basketball courts? No problem. It's all gonna work out just fine.

Not! That's the Barney's magic. And once you feel it, you can never get enough.

My grandmother puts up these fresh air things all over her apartment. They have names like Irish Meadow and Seaside. I want a gizmo I can plug in and *Wham!* My room smells like Barney Greengrass.

Normally, Barney's won't let you sit unless everyone in your party is there, but since we're regulars, Zippo let me go straight to our table.

"Hey, kid," he said, holding out his palm.

"Hey," I said, smacking it as I slid into a booth next to the window display of challah breads.

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"The usual?" he asked, rolling a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Uh-huh."

"What about Mom? I have to check if the kreplach's ready."

Zippo has known Mom all her life. She grew up coming to Barney's with her parents, and Zippo was already a waiter back then. The guys in the kitchen love her because she gets the kreplach. According to Zippo, very few people order kreplach anymore, and nobody but her ever orders it for breakfast, so she's something of a celebrity. If you don't know, kreplach is like Jewish wonton soup. I'm not a huge fan, but you should decide for yourself.

"She and Dad both want kreplach," I said.

"Really? Tom's getting kreplach," Zippo said, impressed. "And what about Thing One and Thing Two?"

"Plain bagels with cream cheese."

"That's it?"

"That's it," I said.

Zippo rolled his eyes and then disappeared into the kitchen.

I don't know how long I was waiting, but by the time everybody else got there, the food was already on the table, and I was halfway done. When I looked up from my plate, they were making their way through the crowd by the counter. Zoe was crying, and my father was carrying her way out in front of him to

keep from getting stuck with one of the many chopsticks poking out of her hair.

Mom puts her own hair up with chopsticks when she's cooking, but she uses only two. Her hair wouldn't even hold more than two, but Zoe's hair is like Velcro—curly, orange, gravity-defying Velcro. Of course, my parents love it because the rest of us, including them, have boring, dirt-colored hair. It's not just my parents either. Everyone loves Zoe's hair: teachers, waiters, bus drivers, strangers on the subway. And the ones who don't know about the biting will even try to touch it.

"No more crying, Zo Zo," Mom was saying as they got to the booth.

Zoe dialed back the wailing to a whimper.

"What happened?" I said.

"The you-know-what was out in front of that new restaurant on Eighty-Sixth," Jeanine said as she slid into the booth.

Zoe is terrified of this twenty-foot, blow-up rat with red eyes that shows up around the city whenever somebody hires nonunion workers. If you hire guys who aren't in the union, you can pay them less, but the union guys get really mad and park the rat outside your job so everyone knows you don't hire union guys. I'm not sure why it's a twenty-foot rat, except that it's gross and hard to miss.

"I wanna go home the other way," Zoe whimpered.

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"Don't worry. We're going to the garage anyway," Dad said, groaning as he lowered Zoe into the booth. I don't know how my parents can lug Zoe around everywhere. She feels like she's made of bowling balls. It's not as if she's a big four-year-old either. Dad says it's because she's solid, which I don't get. Aren't we all made of the same stuff inside? How can her insides be more solid?

"What do we need the car for?" I said.

"Road trip," Mom said. "Apple picking. They have those Pink Ladies, the small ones we got at the farmers' market that time. And I found another farm on the way that makes its own ice cream."

"Cool," I said. "Do you know what flavors they have?"

"If you're asking if they have olive oil, I think it's unlikely," she said.

I had been. Ever since my parents took us to this Italian restaurant downtown that made it, I've been on a quest. I know olive oil ice cream sounds like it violates some basic law of the universe, but the weirdest thing is, when you taste it, everything you ever thought about ice cream gets completely turned around. *Vanilla* seems wrong. *Chocolate*? Crazy. Olive oil? What God put on the earth so we could turn it into ice cream. The whole experience really messed with me. I mean, if olive oil is really supposed to be made into ice cream, maybe we've been using other foods all wrong too. Like maybe there should be a steak-flavored yogurt.

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"Sorry," Mom said, "but maybe they'll have some fabulous flavors they make with stuff from the farm, like pear or buttermilk."

"Not the same," I said.

"Get over it, nuddy," she said, swatting me with her scarf.

"Nuddy" is what Mom calls us when we're being thick. It's short for *nudnik*, which means "stupid" in Yiddish, a language her grandparents spoke and pretty much nobody else does anymore. I guess that's kind of the point. It's not like she wants people to understand what she's saying. Besides, "nuddy" sounds sort of nice the way she says it, and "moron" sounds bad no matter how you say it.

Mom tasted the soup and made a face. "Kreplach's cold."

"Zippo will reheat it," Dad said.

"It's busy. I don't want to bother him."

Jeanine pushed her untouched bagel across the table.

"What's wrong with you?" I said through a mouthful of egg.

"Ask her." She pointed at Zoe with one hand and showed me a Band-Aid on the other.

"She was taking too long," Zoe said, looking at me through the holes in her bagel halves.

"It doesn't matter how long she was taking," Dad said. "No biting ever. We use our words."

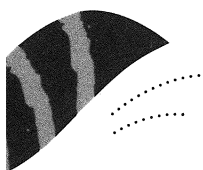
For some reason, when my parents talk to Zoe, it's always "we."

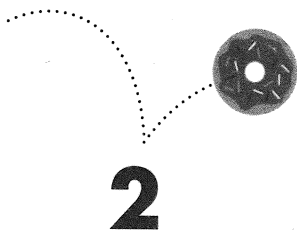
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We use our words. We don't blow bubbles in our milk through a straw up our nose. We don't scream when we see a bald person.

"But I *did* use my words. I told her she was taking too long. The words didn't work."

I was with Zoe on this one. Sometimes Jeanine leaves you no choice. Besides, she's a drama queen. Most of the time, Zoe doesn't even break the skin.





An hour later, we piled into the car and headed upstate on the highway along the Hudson River.

Somewhere in Westchester, my parents came clean. This road trip wasn't just about Pink Ladies and buttermilk ice cream.

"Surprise!" Dad said louder than you should ever say anything in a car, even if it is a station wagon.

"I don't understand," Jeanine said, leaning as far into the front seat as the seat belt would let her go. "You bought a house? Why?"

"Because we loved it," Dad said. The smile on his face was so big, it took up the whole rearview mirror.

Mom turned around, smiling the same huge smile. "And because it's beautiful."

"And because it's something different," my father added.

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"So it'll be like that place on the Jersey Shore Sam's family has?"

I said.

"That's a vacation home," Mom said.

"So what will this be?" I still didn't get it.

"A *home* home," Dad said.

That instant, it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the car. It felt like we were on a plane falling out of the sky, and those oxygen masks should have been dropping down from the ceiling of our car.

I couldn't speak. I looked at Mom, who was still turned around, and tried sending her messages with my brain to ask if this was really happening. And she must have understood, because she nodded.

"I don't feel good," Zoe said. I could feel her tugging on my sleeve, but I didn't do anything.

"Here, sweetie," Mom said as she reached back, pulled one of the old yogurt containers (also known as vomit buckets) off the armrest of Zoe's car seat, and handed it to her. Throwing up in cars, or really anything that moves, is normal for Zoe.

"You're gonna love it," Dad said, still grinning at us in the rearview mirror, the mirror I now wanted to chuck something at, shattering its stupid, happy face.

I think my parents kept talking. I'm not sure because all I could hear were my insides screaming as we dropped out of the sky.

"I don't understand. Why do we have to move?" Jeanine said,

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her voice catching at the end so that “move” sounded like two words instead of one.

“We don’t *have* to. We *want* to,” Mom said.

How could I believe that when I’d never heard them talk about leaving the city? Not once. Not ever. Besides, would they tell us that we *had* to move even if that were the truth?

This had to be Oscar McFadden’s fault.

Oscar McFadden was the reason my father had lost his job a month before. Oscar McFadden was the reason the bank where my father had worked since before I was born didn’t even exist anymore. Don’t ask me how. All I know is, the guy took the bank’s money and put it into some crazy scheme that lost more than the bank ever had in the first place. He’d hidden what he was doing so Dad didn’t have a clue, but once all the money was gone and the bank had gone up in smoke, it didn’t matter what Dad knew. Just having worked in the same room as that crook meant no bank would ever hire him again.

“We really want something different,” Dad said.

I hated the way he kept saying that. This wasn’t something different. This wasn’t even something. This was too big for something. It was everything.

What if Dad still had his job at the bank? Would he still want everything different then?

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"Look, Dad and I have lived in New York our whole lives. We know what that's like. We thought it was time to try living someplace new," Mom said.

"Once you guys see the place, I'm telling you, you'll get it. And, Tris, just wait. The land is so beautiful. You're gonna love it," Dad said.

"You think *I'm* gonna love the dirt and the grass and the trees?" I said.

"Yes, Tris, *you*," he said, pointing at himself in the mirror.

What was he talking about? I wasn't a nature kid. I knew those kids. They were the ones always digging in the dirt looking for worms at the playground when we were little, and now they went to sleepaway camps where the toilet was just a hole in the ground.

"Wait till you see the pond!" Dad went on, all excited like he was talking about a wicked roller coaster and not a large hole filled with water. "You can swim in it in summer and skate on it in winter."

"I don't know how to skate," Zoe said, the words echoing out of her vomit bucket.

"We'll teach you," Mom said.

"I hate skating," I said.

"Why?" Dad said.

"You just go in circles. It's boring."

"Not on a pond. On a pond, you can go anywhere," he said.

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"No, you can't. You're still skating in circles. They're just bigger circles."

"But we could fall through the ice," Jeanine said, suddenly panicked. "Zoe can't even swim. She'll drown."

"I swim," Zoe said.

"With water wings. Are you going to ice-skate in your water wings?" Jeanine said.

"Can I, Mommy?"

"Look, nobody needs water wings for skating because nobody's falling through the ice, got it?" said my mother, all serious now. She clearly wanted us to drop the whole subject.

"How do you know?" I said, glaring at her. I didn't care what she wanted. I might never care what either of my parents wanted ever again. And I didn't care about ice-skating on the stupid pond either, but I couldn't win an argument about moving.

"Have you thought about any of this at all?" Jeanine shouted as she burst into tears.

"Why's Jeanine crying?" Zoe said, peeking up from the vomit bucket. She still hadn't fully understood what was happening.

"Somebody will test the ice, okay? I promise. We'll make sure it's safe," my father said, as if Jeanine was actually crying because she was afraid of falling through ice.

"Like who? Professional ice testers?" I said, trying to force my

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face into a smirk and failing because smirking is impossible when you're dropping out of the sky.

"I don't know who," my father said, his smile finally failing. "All I know is that we're going to figure it out, and when we do, it's going to be great. The ice, the house, the land, all of it! And you're all going to love it!"

If it was all so great, and he knew we'd love it, would he have to keep telling us we would?

I knew great. Great was New York City. Great was Barney Greengrass. Great was Charlie Kramer, who'd been my best friend since we were in the Red Room in preschool together.

It was as if my parents had made up this story about some other family, one that loves ice-skating and nature and is bored of living in the greatest city in the world, and we were just supposed to play along and pretend that was us even though none of it was true.

Three hours later, Dad turned off Country Road 21B into woods so thick they cut out the sun.

"We're here!" he practically sang as we started up a steep, zigzagging dirt road.

But "here" wasn't where we were. "Here" was at the top of the mountain, and we were still at the bottom. We had another whole vomit bucket to go before "here."

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Finally, we came out of the trees and rolled to a stop in front of a sagging, purple house.

Dad was wrong. We were here now. I was seeing it—the land, the house, and all of it—and I wasn't getting it. Not the broken-down, grape-colored house with windows popping out in all the wrong places. Not the shed that really was only half a shed because the other half looked like someone had burned it to the ground. Not the miles and miles of lonely sky and house-less, people-less fields and woods trapping us on top of this cliff.

"C'mon, guys, don't you want to come check it out?" Mom said.

Jeanine, Zoe, and I didn't move.

"Can I have your phone?" Jeanine asked, sniffing.

"Why?" Dad said.

"To call Kevin." Kevin Metz, chess champion, is the male version of Jeanine. They met in Gifted and Talented in kindergarten and have been best friends ever since.

"You can call Kevin on the way home. Now you're seeing the house," Mom said.

"Where are we?" I asked, looking out the window.

"Petersville," Dad said.

"Is there an actual town?" I didn't see another house anywhere.

"About six miles away," Mom said.

"How are we supposed to get there?" I said.

"Car or bike," Dad said.

"We need to get in the car just to get milk?" I said.

"What do you think of the house? Big, right?" Mom was smiling that huge smile again.

Clearly, that was a "yes" on needing the car to go get milk.

"No more sharing," Dad said as he and Mom got out of the car. "You guys each get your own room. Don't you want to go in and look around?"

Jeanine, Zoe, and I still didn't move. For once, I'm pretty sure we were all thinking the same thing: if we went inside, that was it. The house was ours. From the outside, it could still belong to someone else.

Mom opened the door to the back seat. "Come on! Come see."

"Why are the windows all different sizes?" I said, staying put.

"It's neat, right?" she said. "An artist and her husband built it. They wanted something completely original. Something that would surprise you."

"Were they color blind?" Jeanine asked.

Mom laughed. "No, the artist's name is Iris, you know, like the flower. Most of their furniture was purple too. Pretty zany."

"Is that code for crazy?" I said.

"They aren't crazy," Dad said. "We met them. They're great."

"Mmm, like everything else here," I said into my T-shirt.

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Dad opened the back door on the other side. "Enough! Everybody out."

Jeanine, Zoe, and I obeyed but in slow motion, and we didn't go to the house. We just stood beside the car on the brown lawn. Even the grass looked unhappy to be there.

Jeanine leaned back against the car and studied the house. "Did they give it to you for free?"

"Of course not," Mom said.

"How do you know it's safe?" I plopped down on the grass next to Jeanine's feet. It wasn't just that I didn't want to get any closer to the house than I had to, I needed to stick with my side. This was us versus them, and we were going to lose—we'd already lost, even if Jeanine didn't realize it yet. And if we were going down—maybe even because we were—we had to stay together. Jeanine must have felt it too, because a minute later she slid down the car until she was kneeling next to me on the ground.

Dad blew his cheeks out like a chipmunk. He was definitely annoyed we didn't want to go in the house, but he didn't try to make us get up. Instead, he and Mom walked across the sad lawn and sat down on the porch stairs opposite us.

Zoe looked at my parents, back at us, and then climbed into my lap. She still didn't get the everything of what was happening, but even she knew there were sides and which was hers.

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"What does an artist know about building a house anyway?" Jeanine said. "Was her husband an architect?"

"He worked for the postal service," my father said.

"What's it called when you're not supposed to go into a building because they're afraid it's going to fall on you?" I squinted up at a portion of roof that looked like it was working particularly hard to resist the force of gravity.

"Condemned?" Mom said.

"Oh, yeah." Jeanine nodded. "It's totally condemned."

"It's not condemned," Dad said. "It's completely safe. It just needs some work. It'll be fun."

"I don't understand," I said. "Neither of you knows anything about fixing up things." I guess the parents in the made-up family we were pretending to be were also really handy.

"We're smart. We'll figure it out," Dad said.

"You couldn't even put together Zoe's toddler bed," I reminded him. "And that came with an instruction manual and pictures. You didn't even need to know how to read."

"Fair point," he said. "But I think I learned a lot from that experience."

"And how are you going to have time to fix up the house and do a job?" I said.

"Easy. I'm not going to get another job."

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"How's that going to work?" I asked. Mom hadn't cooked at a restaurant since I was born, and I was pretty sure we couldn't live on what she made catering a few parties every month.

"Yeah, don't you eventually need a job that pays you?" Jeanine said.

"We have savings. Plus, things are a lot less expensive out here, and your mom is going to start a business, so I'll help with that. Tell them, Kira."

"I'm going to open a restaurant!" Mom said, smiling her biggest smile, the one that goes all the way to the crooked tooth she doesn't like to let people see.

"China Palace?" Zoe said, jumping up.

"I don't think so, Zo Zo. I'm not going to serve Chinese food."

"But I love Chinese food."

"I know, but I'm going make food I like to cook. It will actually be the first restaurant in Petersville. Isn't that exciting?"

"There are no restaurants? How does it even qualify as a town?" I asked.

"Of course it's a town," she said. "But think how amazing it will be to open a restaurant in a place where there aren't any others."

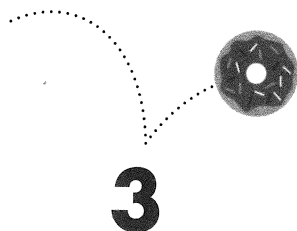
That wasn't what I was thinking. What I was thinking was: What was wrong with the people who lived here that it had never occurred to anyone to open a restaurant?

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We never did go inside that day. We just sat there on the ground till my parents gave up and told us to get back in the car. So I guess we won something.

Us: 1.

Them: everything else.



I didn't tell anyone we were moving, not even Charlie. He and I spent the whole day together that Sunday after we went to Petersville, and I didn't say a word about it. I couldn't. Just like going into the house would have made it ours, saying I was moving would have made it true. So I pretended I wasn't, and we played basketball till it got dark, practicing for the tryouts I'd never go to.

It helped that Charlie talks a lot, especially when he's worried, which he was. Charlie could go on forever about our chances of making the basketball team. The closer tryouts got, the more he talked about them. He was like Jeanine in spelling bee season, but unlike Jeanine, he was totally psyching himself out.

"Coach Stiles hates me," he kept saying that day as he shot and missed basket after basket.

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"What are you talking about?" I said.

"I know Raul told him the crickets were my idea."

Last spring, Charlie and Coach Stiles's son Raul had bought a hundred crickets from a pet store and released them in the ceiling over our classroom. The chirping drove Ms. Patel so crazy, she sent us all home at lunch. But somebody had seen Raul and Charlie go into the classroom super early that day so they were called to Principal Danner's office. Under questioning, Raul came clean, but Charlie denied everything.

"What did you expect?" I said.

"He got, like, two days' detention. Boo-hoo. But my dad doesn't work for the school. I totally would have been suspended."

"No way. It so wasn't a big deal. Everybody thought it was funny."

"Whatever. Stiles still hates me. No way he takes me."

"He will if the team needs you."

"He wouldn't take me if I were LeBron James. It's just like my dad says: don't tick people off because nobody's gonna miss a chance to get you back." Then he hurled the ball so hard it slammed into the backboard and boomeranged right back to him.

Charlie's father is full of these cheerful fortune cookie sayings like, "Getting what you want isn't about what you do but who you know," and, "Life's not fair. Get used to it." I know them by heart because he says the same ones over and over.

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Bottom line: Zane Kramer is a nuddy. But you can't tell your friend his dad's a nuddy. That's just something Charlie was going to have to figure out on his own. The problem was, Charlie wasn't figuring it out.

It wasn't his fault. You live with stuff long enough, it's bound to rub off. It happens to all of us. What had rubbed off on me was a serious chocolate addiction. At least eating chocolate makes you happy. What was rubbing off on Charlie was the idea that everything and everyone was out to get him. I hated seeing him going down that road, but I didn't know what I could do about it.

"Pass!" I called, running to the basket. Distraction wasn't a long-term solution, but it had been proven to work in the moment.

Charlie threw me the ball. I jumped and tossed. *Swish.*

Charlie chased the ball down, then stood on the free throw line dribbling, his tongue peeking out above his lip as he eyed the basket.

Charlie, age four, tongue peeking out, planted in a tiny chair outside the Red Room popped into my head.

"Hey, remember the water table?" I said.

Charlie stopped dribbling and looked at me. "The what?"

"The water table. In the Red Room?"

"Oh yeah." He grinned. "I loved the water table."

"Yeah, me too. So did Charlotte K, remember?"

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He whistled. "Charlotte K. I can't believe you still remember her name."

I will never forget Charlotte K.

The day I pushed Charlotte K—she'd been hogging the water-wheel again—she fell, slicing her head open on the corner of the water table. In seconds, her sparkly T-shirt was soaked red. "Charlotte K is dying!" some girl screamed. And I believed her, because how could anyone lose all that blood and survive?

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" I blubbered as Charlotte K was rushed from the room.

No surprise: Charlotte K wasn't actually dying, though nobody bothered to tell me. I didn't find out until I got home that three stitches in her scalp at the emergency room were all it had taken to snatch her from the jaws of death.

Charlie had been standing next to me at the water table, and even though he hadn't said anything, he hadn't left my side. He even crawled under the water table with me when I dove under there with paper towels to mop up the blood—it seemed the least I could do. Then, when it came time for yard, he refused to go because I couldn't. I had to stay inside and think about what I'd done (kill Charlotte K). Kylie and Maria explained to Charlie that this was my punishment, that he couldn't play with me, that I needed to sit alone to think about my evil, evil ways.

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“Fine,” he said and dragged his little chair just outside the classroom. “Then I’ll stay here.” And there he sat for all of yard, tongue glued to his upper lip, watching me, fifteen feet away on my own little chair as I bawled for poor Charlotte K (and myself).

Charlie Kramer was something different. Anything else would be something worse.

Charlie eventually found out we were moving from his mom, who’d found out from my mom. He couldn’t believe I hadn’t told him. I tried to explain about not saying it so it wouldn’t be true, but he didn’t get it. He was too mad. He seemed even angrier that I hadn’t *told* him I was moving than he was that I was *actually* moving, but I got why. Mad feels like it’s going somewhere at least. Sad just sits on your chest making it hard to move or breathe. If I’d had the choice, I would have picked mad too.

At home, I went radio silent. I’m pretty sure my parents didn’t even notice since Jeanine was in an all-out war and wouldn’t stop talking, mostly about how she’d never become president if she went to a school with no G&T.

Whenever anyone asked Zoe about the move, she told them that we were leaving the city so Mom could open a Chinese restaurant. Her true feelings were clear from the number of times Mom had to pick her up early from preschool because she’d bitten someone.

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Just so you know, I'm not saying my parents didn't notice my not talking to make you feel sorry for me. It's just a fact. When Jeanine's freaking out, it's hard to notice anything else. Besides, it was better that way since if my parents had noticed, they would have just kept pestering me to talk, which is about the worst thing you can do to somebody who needs to go quiet for a while.

I just kept thinking, if this move were really about wanting something different and had nothing to do with money, wouldn't my parents let us finish the school year? Or at least stick around until winter break?



Everybody thinks where they live is something special. Here's how I know the place I lived actually was: it sold in just three hours the day of the open house. In case you're lucky enough not to know, an open house is when complete strangers are invited in off the street to snoop around and see if they want to buy your home.

On November 3, my parents signed the contract selling our apartment. We wouldn't be kicked out until the closing though, and I figured we had at least a month because my parents hadn't even started packing. I hadn't counted on them cheating.

Did you know you can pay extra to get movers to pack your

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stuff before they move it? Yeah, well, you can, and those guys are fast, because it's all just stuff to them. *Wrap. Box. Repeat. Wrap. Box. Repeat.* Smoothe Move was a packing machine. In just one day, everything that wasn't nailed down was in a box. Two-year-old Halloween candy? Check. Half a Slinky? Check. I watched one guy Bubble Wrap an ant trap without giving it a second thought.

I couldn't believe how fast everything was happening.

November 15, a month after we'd gone to Petersville for the first time, we'd be living there. We wouldn't even get one last Thanksgiving at home. No camping out on Seventy-Seventh Street with a thermos of hot chocolate to watch the balloons being blown up for the parade. Not this year. Maybe never again. At least Charlie's family had promised to come to Petersville to do Thanksgiving together like always.

Our last night at home, my parents took Charlie and me to dinner at Katz's on Houston Street. Number one hot dogs on the planet. And unlike Barney's, it's about as far from the Upper West Side as you can get and still be in Manhattan, so going there was a big deal.

In the car on the way downtown, Charlie and I made bets on how many hot dogs we'd put away. Six is my record. I did eat seven one time, but I don't count it because I had to use one of Zoe's buckets on the way home.

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Charlie beat me that night by a good three dogs. I had to stop halfway through my second. It didn't taste right. Nothing tasted right. Not even the Dr. Brown's cream soda. I guess goodbyes, the everything-is-different-now, I-won't-be-around-next-time-you-almost-commit-murder-at-the-water-table kind of goodbyes, mess with your taste buds.

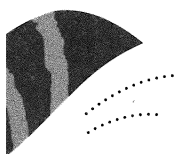
Next time I have a goodbye dinner, I'm going to pick some place I don't love the food.

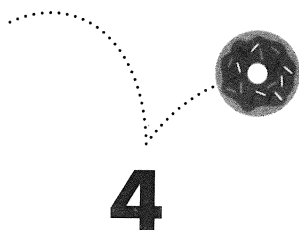
We didn't get to Petersville till late that first night because Zoe had handcuffed herself to the refrigerator in our apartment. They were only toy cuffs, but she'd flushed the key down the toilet, and none of us could remember the secret to getting them open. Dad called the toy company's helpline, but even that took forever because the cuffs were really old, and the new ones had a different trick. Anyway, by the time he was transferred to somebody who knew how to open these handcuffs, he'd been on the phone for almost two hours.

Then, when we finally got to the house, it turned out that my mother had packed the house key in a box on the moving truck that wasn't coming till the morning. Zoe eventually got us in by squeezing through a cat door we found after stumbling around the porch in the dark looking for doors or windows that had been left unlocked.

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Usually, I'm not into stuff about the universe speaking to you and all that, but sometimes when things happen in a certain way, it makes you think about why and what it means. You understand, right? If we'd all been dying to get into that house, wouldn't someone have remembered to take the key? Wouldn't one of us have remembered the trick to opening Zoe's handcuffs?





It doesn't bother me that my parents made me take the attic bedroom, even though it's pretty obvious from the rope ladder that before we got here the "attic bedroom" was actually just the "attic," the place people put things they wanted to forget but felt weird throwing away. What does bother me is that they think I'm stupid enough to believe that I got it because I'm the oldest and that it's some great privilege to sleep in a room where the ceiling slopes so badly it feels like an airplane. I may be a nuddy, but I'm not completely clueless. I'm the one sleeping in the attic because Zoe's too scared and Jeanine's too Jeanine.

On my way to the bathroom in the dark that first night, I missed the bottom two rungs of the ladder and landed hard on the hallway floor.

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“Tris?”

It was Jeanine. I felt my way along the hall to her door. She was in bed reading *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, a flashlight balanced on her shoulder and Paws, her bear, tucked under her arm like he was reading too.

“Don’t you have that book memorized by now?”

“It makes me feel better. And I can’t sleep.”

“Yeah, me too. The attic’s got this really bad smell, and it’s coming from this one spot on the wall right next to my bed.”

“Your wall smells?”

“I don’t think it’s the wall itself. I think it’s something dead trapped *inside* the wall.”

“Uch. That’s so disgusting. What made you even think that?”

“Probably the sound of all the not-dead mice running around in there.”

“Ew!” She shivered.

“Hey, how long do you think it takes a dead mouse to stop stinking? I mean, eventually it has to run out of stink, right?”

“I guess it depends how long he’s been there.”

“Something tells me Mom and Dad aren’t going to let me call Iris and ask her how long the attic has stunk of dead mouse.”

“You can stay here if you want.” Jeanine scooched over and shined the flashlight on the space she’d just made in the bed.

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“Oh, okay. Thanks. One sec.”

When I got back from the bathroom, I climbed into bed next to Jeanine. Then I just lay there listening to her breathe. She makes this tiny whistle when she inhales because she’s got a little asthma, or severe reactive airway disease if you ask her. Anyway, I guess I’d kind of been missing it up in the attic all by myself. Don’t get me wrong. I love not having to share a bedroom anymore, but I’d slept with that whistle my whole life or at least as long as I could remember, and now, even though it was gone, I couldn’t get myself to stop listening for it.

I must have gotten bored just listening though because I found myself reading over her shoulder. “What’s this about anyway?”

“What?”

“The Wolves of Willoughby Chase?”

She turned the flashlight around so it was shining right in my face. “You *really* want to know?”

I covered my eyes. “Yeah.”

“Yeah? Yeah like ‘whatever’?”

“No, yeah like yeah. I want to know what makes you read it over and over. Also, this part where the wolves attack the train actually seems good, you know, for a book.”

“It is. So good,” she said, shining the flashlight back on the book. “So you really want to know?”

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"Are you kidding me? How many times are you going to make me say it?"

"Okay, okay." She turned off the flashlight. "So, it's about these girls. And they're left alone with this woman, who is *supposed* to take care of them while one girl's parents go on a trip. Anyway, the woman turns out to be evil and wants to steal the parents' money, and she locks the girls up in this horrible orphanage. Oh, and then there's a shipwreck and everyone *thinks* the parents are dead, but they're not and—"

"Wait, what about the other girl's parents? Where are they?"

"Oh, right, those parents *are* actually dead, and the aunt is super old and is getting really sick while the girls are locked up and starved and tortured in the orphanage."

"*This* is the book you love so much you've read it like a million times? It's like a horror movie."

"I guess it is kind of like one terrible thing after another, but then the girls fight back and eventually they save the old woman, and everything turns out okay. But it's the horrible stuff that really sucks you in."

Neither of us said anything for a pretty long time after that, and I actually thought maybe Jeanine had fallen asleep, but then she whispered, "Do you think we'll get to go back if it's really bad?"

"Home?"

"Yeah. You know, like if we show that we're trying, really trying,

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but we're still not happy here." Her voice was all shaky now, not at all like it had been when she was telling me about the book. "Do you think they'll let us move back?"

"I don't know." I guess unlike me, Jeanine hadn't been pretending to believe my parents wanted to move just because they wanted something different. She actually believed it.

"I know you don't *know* if they'd move back. But what do you *think*? If we're really not happy?"

What I *thought* was that even if my parents wanted to move back, they wouldn't have the money to. What I *thought* was that this, Petersville, was it for good. But what I *knew* was that Jeanine wasn't really asking me to tell her what I thought, even if she didn't realize it. Jeanine was asking me to tell her what she needed to hear to fall asleep on our first night in a place that was not and might never feel like home. So I did. "Maybe they'd let us move back. Definitely maybe."

"Do you think we should ask them?"

"Definitely not."

"Why? I'd feel better if I knew for sure we could go back if things weren't... working out here."

"If Mom and Dad know you're thinking we might move back, they're never going to believe you're really trying here."

"I guess you're right," she said and then took a big breath that caught a couple of times on the way in.

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"Look on the bright side, we're not trapped in an orphanage starving while some evil woman tries to kill our parents and steal the family fortune, right?"

"Right," she said sadly and let her head fall onto my shoulder.

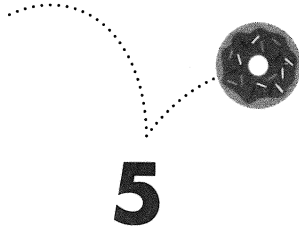
"You can read more if you want. I don't mind."

"Thanks. It helps." She turned the flashlight back on and leaned the open book against her bent legs. After a few minutes, I found myself reading over her shoulder again. She was right. All the horrible stuff did suck you in. One of the wolves had jumped through a train window and a passenger was fighting it off with a knife.

Jeanine must have known I was reading because when I got to the end of the page, she said, "We can start back at the beginning if you want."

"Okay," I said. I'd thought she'd meant we'd go on reading to ourselves, but when she flipped back to the first page, she began reading out loud, which was actually kind of nice because I could close my eyes and just listen and picture what was happening.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember is waking up to Jeanine drooling on my shoulder. She must have conked out while reading because the flashlight was still on and the book was crushed between us. Her room did smell better than mine, but she was hogging the one pillow so I turned off the flashlight and went back up to the attic.



When I woke up that first morning, it was still dark and my bed was wet. I couldn't believe it. I hadn't wet the bed since I was two. It had to be just one more sign from the universe that I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

Then something dripped onto my nose and I realized that my wet bed was actually a sign that it was raining and that there was a hole in the ceiling.

Welcome to Petersville!

Since it was still early, I tried to sleep some more but it was too quiet, and I couldn't find a comfortable position out of the wet spot. So when the sky finally started to pink up, I decided to bike into town. Just because there wasn't a restaurant in Petersville didn't mean there was no bakery or bagel place.

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Somehow, I made it down the rope ladder in the dark without breaking my neck or waking anybody. I wasn't interested in company or being told I couldn't go because it was too dark or too rainy or too whatever else my parents could come up with.

The rain had almost stopped by the time I got outside, but there were puddles everywhere, and I really regretted my decision not to wear socks since they would have been useful to soak up the mud seeping into my sneakers.

I ran across the lawn and around the back of the car.

Ugh. Dad had loaded my bike on the rack first. I was going to have to undo all the straps on each bike and drag everybody else's off to get to mine. If I'd known what it was going to take, I probably would have stayed in bed, but it was too late now. My shoes were already soaked. I might as well have something to show for it, something like breakfast.

Because I don't have a death wish, I walked my bike down Terror Mountain, my pet name for our driveway. Even walking though, I had a hard time keeping control of the bike, and by the time I got to the bottom, my shins were sore from banging them so many times with the pedals.

I walked the bike onto the main road, then climbed on and wobbled off. I hadn't ridden with cars before, and I kept turning around to check if one was behind me. My parents thought it was

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too dangerous to bike in city traffic, so I'd only ever ridden in Central Park on weekends when cars aren't allowed. Even though I didn't see any cars as I set out for town that morning, I was sure one was bound to whizz by any second, knocking me into some ditch too deep to climb out of.

But the cars never came, and the longer I rode without seeing any, the more I relaxed. It was actually easier than biking in Central Park. The road was smoother, and there were no people or strollers or other bikers. It was just me and the road and the woods all around. Flying downhill, I opened my mouth and whooped without knowing why, except that I wanted to, and nobody was around to tell me to stop.

I don't know how long I'd been riding when I started up a monster hill, but it must have been a while because when I finally came over the top, there was the sign for Petersville. That's when I noticed the train tracks headed like me toward the traffic light and a cluster of low buildings. They couldn't have carried a train in a long time because some sections were missing and others had been tarred over.

I got off my bike at the traffic light, even though there wasn't any actual traffic, car or people. Petersville was as dead as County Road 21B had been, so dead the place didn't even look real. It was more like one of those pretend towns they build for movies, and

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in this movie, something really bad had happened, and everybody had moved away.

The first three buildings in town were boarded up with plywood and had FOR SALE signs out front. Though Renny's Gas Mart, a convenience store with two filling stations, showed signs of life, I crossed the street to check out some place called Turnby's, hoping to find something better there than packaged coffee cake that had probably been sitting on a shelf since before Zoe was born.

Unfortunately, Turnby's wasn't a market or a bagel place or a bakery. I'm still not sure exactly what Turnby's is. Here's what was in the window that day: wool camping blankets, Silly Putty, fishing rods, socks, electric nose-hair clippers, a space heater, pipe cleaners, and candy necklaces. It was as if Mr. Turnby woke up one morning and said, "I'm going to open a store, and I'm going to sell whatever I feel like."

Next to Turnby's was the General Store, and the first and only thing I noticed about it was the large, handwritten sign in the window:

*Yes, we do have chocolate
cream doughnuts!*

Those have to be the best seven words you can read when you're starving and you've just moved to a town that it's pretty

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clear anyone who can has moved away from. Don't get me wrong. The strangeness of the sign wasn't lost on me. I mean, was that all they had? And if so, what about the store was general? But I was willing to focus on the positive: chocolate cream doughnuts!

All I had to do was wait till the store opened.

The General Store was the last building on that side of Main Street so I crossed back over to check out the largest building in town, a two-story brick house with a bright red door.

"Petersville Free Library," I read sadly on the sign over the door.

Books are okay, but you can't eat them.

Next to the library were two houses that must have been identical at one point but now looked like *Before* and *After* in one of those TV shows where people get strangers to come fix up their house. *Before* was covered in peeling, dirty paint and had broken windows and a mud pit front yard. Beside it, *After* exploded in blinding yellow with electric blue trim. A Gatorade-green lawn rolled out in front of the house, and a sign on the porch read: DR. CHARNEY, FAMILY CLINIC. *After* looked like it had been dropped on Main Street from another world, a happier, better world. Like me.

The last building in town—that's right, that was it!—was all by itself, far from the others, and if the General Store windows hadn't still been dark, I wouldn't have gone to see it.

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Just past the clinic, the train tracks popped up again, and like last time, they and I were headed to the same place, the one-story cottage with wavy trim like Mom puts on gingerbread houses.

When we got there, the tracks set off for the back of the building, and I stopped out front. A Petersville sign hung over the front door, and long benches lined the wide porch. I leaned my bike against the porch steps and looked through one of the broken windows.

Inside were a barred ticket window, more benches, and a tree about my size growing out of a crack in the middle of the floor. Soda cans, candy wrappers, and paper bags filled the corners of the room.

It didn't surprise me that the train didn't stop in Petersville anymore. Why would it bother? Who wanted to come here? Besides, you wouldn't want to make it too easy for the few people left to leave.

When I turned around, a light had come on in the General Store, so even though it was raining again, I hopped back on my bike.

I was soaked by the time I reached the store, but who cared about a little water when there were chocolate cream doughnuts to be had.

"I'll take a dozen!" I called out, barely through the door.

"Eggs are in the cooler," said a small, wrinkled woman sitting at

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a counter at the back of the store. She had long, yellow-white hair and was studying a book of sudoku puzzles.

"Not eggs. Chocolate cream doughnuts." I pointed to the sign. Just saying the words made my stomach rumble so loudly the woman's head shot up, eyebrows raised.

After giving me a quick once-over, she went back to her puzzles. "No doughnuts."

"Are they not ready yet? I can wait."

"We don't make doughnuts anymore."

"Not ever?" The disappointment was crushing.

"Not ever."

"But the sign?" I pointed at it again with both hands.

The woman sighed, then closed her book. "Yeah, well, most people know better than to ask. Besides, I like 'em to remember," she said and grinned showing a mouthful of teeth that perfectly matched the color of her hair.

Now I knew why everyone had moved away. It was this woman. She was evil. First, she had taken away the town's doughnuts. Now she was shoving the memory of them down everybody's throat with that sign.

"I don't understand. Were they bad?"

"Were they bad?" She snorted and pointed to a frame on the counter.

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I picked it up and wiped the glass. There was a newspaper clipping in it with the headline, "Small Town Store Hits It Big with Chocolate Cream Heaven."

This was just cruel. "So if they were so good, why don't you make them anymore?"

"Too much work. After that story, people came in here from all over, all hours of the day and night. Nearly drove me crazy. I really had no choice."

Just in case you think you don't get it, let me tell you, you do: the General Store's chocolate cream doughnuts were so good, and people liked them so much, they decided *not* to make them anymore.

"But weren't you making a lot of money from them if they were so popular?"

The woman waved me away like this question was so stupid she wouldn't even answer it.

"Do you sell anything like doughnuts?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm mostly just hardware now. And eggs." She pointed to the egg cartons stacked on the cooler behind me. "I got some chickens a couple of years ago and thought, 'Why not?' Won't find any better. Yolks are orange."

Was that good? I opened one of the cartons. The eggs looked like something out of Dr. Seuss, some green, some blue, some

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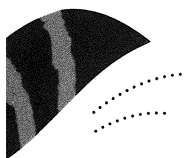
brown, all different sizes, including one no bigger than a marble.

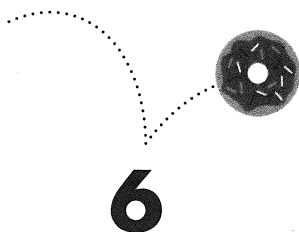
"Where are the white ones?"

"Different chickens."

"Oh," I said, pretending to understand. "Okay, I'll take these then."

They weren't doughnuts, but they had to be better than anything I'd find at the gas station.





Rain was hammering the windows of the General Store, but I didn't think I should wait till it stopped. I'd been gone a pretty long time already, and there was a good chance my parents were up now, calling the local sheriff or ranger or whoever it is you call out here when kids go missing. So I put the eggs under my sweatshirt, tucked the sweatshirt into my jeans, and ran out into the rain.

Just as I reached the traffic light, lightning split the sky. *Crack!*

I jumped, then swerved. I managed to keep the bike under me, but I was still wobbling when I hit the hill on the edge of town. In seconds, I was flying... blind. The faster I went, the harder the rain came at me and the less I could see. I tried to slow down, but the brakes weren't holding because of all the water.

Suddenly, the bike stopped, and what I mean is, *only* the bike

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stopped. Me and the eggs, we kept going. We flew right over the handlebars and landed with a splat, the sound of some number of eggs being crushed under me as I fell into freezing cold water.

Somehow, since I'd ridden into town, a pond so big it deserved its own name had formed at the bottom of the hill. Lucky for me too, because landing in the water was way better than landing on the concrete would have been. I wasn't even hurt, just wet and cold.

When I stood up, I couldn't believe how high the water was, up past my knees. My bike was gone.

Just then, a horn honked, and a white truck pulled up next to me. The window rolled down.

"Need a ride," said the driver, a man with a tangled mop of brown hair and a beard that had taken over most of his face.

"Uh, no thanks," I said. "I'm okay. My parents are just behind me. They'll be here in a second." According to my mother, only kidnappers pull over their cars and offer kids rides.

The kidnapper laughed. "Uh, okay, kid, but I just came from behind, and there's nobody back there."

My face went hot, which was kind of amazing since I'd started to shiver.

"Look, it's no skin off my back if you want to drown in a flash flood. I was just trying to help," the man said, rolling up his window.

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Did kidnappers give up this easily? It seemed unlikely. "Hey, wait, what did you say this is?"

"A flash flood. It's rained so much so fast, the ground can't absorb any more of it."

"I was on a bike. It's here somewhere." I waded back to where I thought I'd fallen.

"Ever heard of The Weather Channel?" He laughed as he got out of the truck. He went around to the back, pulled a long pipe off the bed, and began sweeping it back and forth through the water.

"There it is," he said a short time later, slapping the end of the pipe in the water.

I dove in and pulled up the bike. The seat was turned the wrong way, but otherwise it looked okay.

"You know you can't ride through this," he said.

"Yeah, I think I figured that out."

"Okay. Good luck then," the kidnapper said and got back in his truck.

"Hey, wait! Can I still get a ride?"

"I stopped to offer you one, didn't I?"

The first thing I did when I got into the truck was slide the carton of eggs out from under my sweatshirt. Amazingly, only three had broken, but I was covered in egg slime.

“Here.” The kidnapper passed me a roll of paper towels. “Those from Winnie?”

“What?”

“The eggs. Did you get them at the General Store?”

I nodded.

He started the truck. “I love those eggs. Yolks are orange.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said, dabbing at the egg with a balled-up paper towel.

Even though the kidnapper drove really slowly, the truck kept sliding from one side of the road to the other. I gave up cleaning off and quickly put on my seat belt.

“Hydroplaning,” the kidnapper explained. “Know what you’re supposed to do when the car does that?”

I shook my head as the truck began to slide left.

“Gotta turn into the spin,” he said, slowly turning the steering wheel to the left and then straightening us out just before we ran off the road.

I held tight to the seat belt with one hand and the door handle with the other.

“I’m Jim, by the way.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This is where you tell me your name.”

“Oh, right. Jax,” I said without missing a beat. I was taking the

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ride. He was going to see where I lived. No reason I had to give him my real name.

"Jacks, huh? As in more than one Jack?" He chuckled.

"No. Jax with an X."

"Okay, Jax with an X, you visiting?"

"Sort of."

"Haven't decided yet?" he said, winking at me.

"Something like that." I turned to look out my window, hoping it would discourage chitchat.

"So what do you think so far?"

No such luck. "Of what?"

"Town."

"I don't know. Not much to it—I mean...uh..." What kind of nuddy insults his kidnapper's hometown? "I just meant, it could use some more stores and stuff."

"I hear you," he said.

Maybe he was faking it, but he really didn't seem offended.

"The town is actually trying to get some more businesses in. In fact, people really want to see something go in the old station house."

"The place with the Petersville sign?" I said.

"That's right. The train used to run through town and stop there. We thought it should be put to some use, but nobody's sure for what."

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"I once went to a restaurant in an old firehouse. It was really cool. They kept the pole and everything. You could do something like that?"

"You think we should put a restaurant there?"

"The town could use one. I mean, it seems like there's no place where people can get together, and that place would be perfect." I considered telling him about Mom's plans but decided it was best to keep Jim the Kidnapper on a need-to-know basis only. Just then, I saw our driveway fly by. "This is it!"

"What?"

"Here, here, here, stop here!"

"All right, relax. You sure you don't want me to take you up that hill. Looks like you still have a long way to go."

"No, it's fine. I'll just get out here, thanks."

Jim the Kidnapper pulled over. I got out and pulled my bike off the back.

"Okay, bye," I said, waving.

"Just wait one second." Jim climbed out of the truck holding a small tool. "Let me see that seat." After a minute of tinkering, the seat was back in its place.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome, Jax. See you around."

"Yeah, right. See you around," I said, wondering where exactly

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you saw people around in Petersville. Did they hang out at Turnby's discussing the odd mix of products, trying to crack the code that tied them together? Judging from the chocolate cream doughnuts story, I couldn't imagine Winnie wanted a bunch of people chatting in her store even if they were buying stuff.

As I dragged my bike up Terror Mountain, I wondered how many state troopers my parents had out looking for me by now. After all, they'd woken up with me gone who-knows-where in the middle of a flash flood.

But there were no cars with sirens in front of the house when I finally made it there, just the moving truck. Wet cardboard boxes were already piled on the porch, and three guys in soaked SMOOTH MOVE T-shirts were standing in front of them, studying the sky.

"Hey," one of them said to me as I came up the steps.

"Hi," I said.

"That your sister in there?" another asked.

"Yeah." I didn't have to ask who they meant.

"She's totally freaking out, man," the first said.

"Totally!" the second said.

"She yelled and then she cried and then she yelled some more," the third said.

"Yeah. She does that," I said.

"It's crazy," the first said.

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"Totally," the second said again.

"And kind of scary," the third said with a shiver.

"Yup," I said.

Not only had my parents not been worried about me, they hadn't even noticed I was gone. And now that I was back, they barely seemed to notice that either.

"Does Tris know?" Jeanine shrieked when I came through the door.

"Know what?" I said.

"Go on. Tell him," she said.

"Right before we left the city, I got a call from the principal of Waydin Elementary. He seems so nice, really bright," Mom said.

"Get to the point!" Jeanine snapped.

"Jeannie," my father warned.

"Jeanine's upset because Mr. Kritcher doesn't want you two to start till second semester. He thinks it will make for a smoother transition," my mother explained.

"Do you even know how long that is? January! It's November. What are we going to do all that time?" Jeanine said.

I have to admit, I was with Jeanine on this one. What *would* we do all that time? I was all for an extra-long winter break, but given what I'd just seen of town, there was a good chance I'd die of boredom.

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"I don't know," Mom said. "Start a project or something."

"Perfect! I love that idea," Dad said. "I'm making it official. Both of you will come up with a project, something all your own, that you can work on before school starts."

This was so much worse than dying of boredom.

"A project isn't school. How can we not go to school for two whole months?" Jeanine sobbed.

"Please, calm down," Mom begged, pressing her fingers to the sides of her forehead.

"And don't exaggerate. It's less than two months," Dad said.

"Isn't this illegal? Don't we have to be in school by law? What if I call the police and tell them my parents are keeping me out of school against my will?" Jeanine was pacing the kitchen now, and her voice was all crazy like we were playing her on the wrong speed. "What if I call Kevin's dad and ask him if there's some kind of court case he can file? What if I write to newspapers and news stations and—"

"*Sa-Sooo-Feeee!*" my father shouted so loud the third Smoothe Move guy, who'd finally gotten the courage to start bringing boxes in again, ran back outside.

Don't ask me what Dad yelled. All I can tell you is that it was French. Even though he grew up in New York, he spoke French at home because my grandmother is from France. Now his French

never comes out unless he's really angry or talking to my grandmother—or both.

Jeanine doesn't speak French any more than I do, but right after Dad yelled, she ran out of the room too. Dad's French usually has that effect. Not just because he almost never yells, but also because getting yelled at in a language you don't understand is especially scary, which is strange when you think about it because, for all we know, he could be yelling, "I love croissants!"

"I need coffee," my mother said, searching through a box labeled *Pantry*. "Who's hungry?"

"Here, I got these." I put the eggs on the counter.

"Where are they from?" She opened the carton. "Wow! They're gorgeous. The ones that made it anyway."

"I went to town. The yolks are orange," I said as I headed upstairs to shower off egg slime and mud.

"Want me to make some?" she called after me.

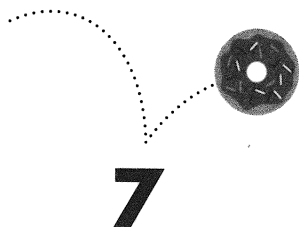
"No!" I called back. How could they not have even noticed I was gone?

"I have other stuff I brought from home. You want something else?"

"Chocolate cream doughnuts," I muttered as I moped up the stairs.

"What?"

"Nothing! I'm not hungry."



To: CKramerRocks@mar.com
From: JaxTLevin441@mar.com
Subject: Help!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ow ow ooowww. Yes. Coyotes do really sound like that. I know this because I heard them circling our house last night. No lie. If you don't hear from me again, a mother coyote has fed me to her pups. I guess there could be worse ways to go. Uh, maybe not. Torn apart by coyote teeth has to be one of the top ten worst ways to die.

What's up?

T.

JESSIE JANOWITZ

To: CKramerRocks@mar.com
From: JaxTLevin441@mar.com
Subject: Hello?

Did you get my email?

Coyotes closing in.

Have you ever seen a blue egg with an orange yolk?

We've moved to Whoville.

Please send bagels FedEx.

To: JaxTLevin441@mar.com
From: CKramerRocks@mar.com
Subject: Re: Hello?

Are your parents ever getting you a cell phone? You and my grandparents are the last people on earth not using one. Try working the YOU DESTROYED MY LIFE BY MOVING ME TO THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE thing. Maybe they'll feel bad enough to get you a phone.

Super busy getting ready for tryouts. My dad got me some private sessions with one of the coaches from Uptown Athletic Center so I could work on my shooting. Gotten way better already.

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Send pics of the coyotes.

What's up with the eggs there? We'll bring bagels when we come for Thanksgiving. Where do you go for fun up there in Peter's Village?



For the next two days, I did nothing except unpack boxes and think about chocolate cream doughnuts.

Did the doughnut witch use milk chocolate or semisweet or dark? Was the cream airy like mousse or thick like pudding? Did she glaze the doughnuts or sprinkle them with powdered sugar?

The second night, when I couldn't take it anymore, I went downstairs and searched all sixty-seven of my mother's cookbooks while I finished off the apple crisp we'd had for dessert.

Not even Roland had a recipe for chocolate cream doughnuts. I guess it's hard to make fried dough presidential. I'm sure I could have found one on the internet, but you never know about recipes you find online. Besides, I wasn't interested in making just any chocolate cream doughnuts.

On the third day, my parents announced we were going to the library. Jeanine needed books for her project. Of course, she had

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it all figured out already and was raring to go. She was so fired up, she'd even forgotten about her plan to put my parents under citizen's arrest for keeping us out of school.

"It's a field study of the land around our house," she explained on the drive to the library. "First, I'll do a map. Then I'll mark the topography, you know, where the land rises and falls and then—this is the coolest part—I'll identify and label all the trees, plants, and animals with their common and scientific names!"

"Cool!" I was hoping my enthusiasm for Jeanine's project would keep anyone from asking about mine.

"Sounds fantastic," Dad said. "Zoe? What are you looking for?"

"Fairy dust."

"I was thinking books."

"You didn't say that. You said, *looking for*, and I'm *looking for* fairy dust because the happy thoughts aren't working." Zoe had been watching this old Peter Pan movie nonstop. Now all she could talk about was filling her mind with happy thoughts so she could fly, which, I guess if you ask Peter Pan, is all it takes.

"I don't think they have fairy dust at the library," Mom said.

"Can we make some?"

"We'll see."

"When we get home?"

"We'll see."

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"Tawatty Tawatty Dabu Dabu hate 'we'll see.'" Zoe smacked the back of Mom's seat with her vomit bucket.

Tawatty Tawatty and Dabu Dabu are Zoe's imaginary friends. We have no idea what they look like, but they must be very small because she's always pulling them out of her pockets. It's also possible they're attached in some way because one never appears without the other, and she usually refers to them as the unit, Tawatty Tawatty Dabu Dabu.

Mom turned around and snatched the bucket out of Zoe's hand. "You know what *I* hate? When Tawatty Tawatty Dabu Dabu make a mess. No fairy potion project unless I specifically say so, got it?"

"Fairy dust, not fairy potion."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I did," Zoe said.

"And Tawatty Tawatty Dabu Dabu?" Mom said.

Zoe shrugged.

"Behave yourself," Mom said and handed Zoe back her bucket.

"What about you, Tris?" Dad called over his shoulder. "You come up with a project yet?"

There it was. The question I'd been dreading.

"Yeah," I said, drawing out the word to buy time.

The truth was, I had nothing. I blamed the doughnuts. I'd tried. I really had. I'd sat for hours staring at a blank sheet of paper, but

nothing came. Nothing, but those stupid doughnuts. Even now, with my brain spinning to give me something, anything, that's still all there was.

"So? What is it?" Mom said.

"Chocolate cream doughnuts," I said before I could stop myself.

"The ones you were telling us about?" she asked.

"Uh-huh?" I said hopefully. It had been an explanation, not an answer, but if they were willing to accept it as one, that worked for me.

"How can a doughnut be a project?" Jeanine said.

Excellent question. How *can* a doughnut be a project?

"Sounds like a project to me," Mom said. "Tell me more."

"I can't. I'm still figuring it out."

"Can't wait till you do," Mom said.

"Yeah, me neither," I said into my jacket.

At least now I had a good excuse for spending every waking second thinking about chocolate cream doughnuts.

When we got to town, I told my parents that I had some "research" to do at the General Store and that I'd meet them at the library.

The store looked the same as it had the first time I'd been there: dark and empty except for Winnie. She was in the back stacking egg cartons.

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"Hi," I said.

I waited for her to say something back, but when it was clear she wasn't going to, I went on. "Those eggs were really good." I paused again, but Winnie just kept stacking cartons like I wasn't even there. "My whole family thought so."

Still nothing.

"And you were right. Those yolks *were* orange. I mean, like *really* orange. I've never seen that before."

That's when she finally stopped and turned around. "It's because my chickens spend their days outside in the sunshine eating plants like God intended."

I wasn't sure what she meant. Did God bless you with better eggs if you were kinder to your chickens? I must have looked as confused as I was because then she said, "See, the sunlight and the chlorophyll from the plants give the yolk that orange color. Those nasty, pale, tasteless yolks mean the chickens don't go outside."

"Wow, that's really interesting," I said.

Winnie rolled her eyes. "You going to buy some more or what?"

"I actually wanted to ask you some questions about those doughnuts you used to make," I said, pointing to the sign.

"Oh, goodie."

"I just wanted to know if maybe, uh, if maybe I could have the recipe," I said quickly.

"My doughnut recipe?" She poured herself a mug of coffee from a thermos on the counter.

I nodded.

"Why?"

It was a simple question, but I panicked.

As she watched me stammer, she smacked a packet of sugar against her hand like Danny Delaney from Little League used to do with his bat right before he tried to hit you with it.

After a couple of false starts, something began to spill out. "See, I know they're your doughnuts, but since they were so popular, they're also part of the town too, you know, like its history, and I just moved here and I thought that making the doughnuts would be a way of sort of getting to know the town."

I'd barely finished talking when Winnie burst out laughing, spewing coffee all over me. You'd think if you laughed in somebody's face and spat a hot beverage at him, you'd apologize, but no. Winnie just went right on laughing till she was gasping for breath like she was having a heart attack. And I just had to stand there and take it while she laughed in my face with the coffee all over it.

"Oh, I needed that," she said when she finally came up for air. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a napkin, then handed one to me. "Now, why do you really want the recipe?"

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"Fine. Fine!" I snapped. I was over trying to get on her good side. What was the point? She clearly didn't have one. She was the evil doughnut witch of Petersville. "I just want one! Okay? My parents forced us to move here, and as far as I can tell, the best thing about this place is those doughnuts, so I just want one, okay?"

"Okay, okay. You just want one." She looked like she might burst out laughing again any second.

"That's not all," I said.

"There's more? You going to tell me now you think you can cure cancer with my doughnuts?"

"No. I was going to tell you that my parents are forcing me to come up with a project I can work on till I start school here, and I've decided your doughnuts are it."

"A doughnut's not really a project."

"I know! I know! A doughnut isn't a project. I get it."

"So I'm still not clear on how my recipe would help?"

Neither was I exactly, but an idea had begun to form right there as I'd been talking. "What if my project was bringing the chocolate cream doughnut back to Petersville?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you don't want people to forget the doughnuts, right? But eventually they will, unless they can still have them."

"I guess, but I told you I'm not making—"

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"I know. But *I* could make them. I could make them and sell them. Like a hot dog guy. Only I'd sell doughnuts."

"Let me get this straight: *You* want to make and sell *my* doughnuts?"

"Uh-huh."

"And how are people gonna know they're *my* doughnuts?" she asked like she'd just caught me cheating at cards.

"We can say it right there on the sign."

"Say what exactly?"

"Whatever you want. Winnie's Chocolate Cream Doughnuts. The General Store's Famous Doughnuts. Winnie's Heavenly Doughnuts."

"The General Store's Famous Doughnuts sounds pretty good," she said, nodding.

"So it's a deal?" I held out my hand for her to shake.

Winnie crossed her arms. "Not so fast. I can't just give you the recipe."

"Why not?" I should have known it couldn't be that easy.

"Cause I don't know if you can bake. You need to make me something."

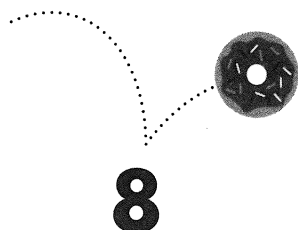
"You mean like a tryout?"

"That's right. Like a tryout, so I know you're good enough."

"Uh, okay. What do you want me to make?"

"Some kind of sweet. If I like it, I'll give you my recipe."

"Deal," I said, and this time, she shook my hand.



I found everybody sitting around a table in the library's reading room. Jeanine was deep into a book called *Rodents of North America*, while Zoe, Mom, and Dad were flipping through cookbooks and old cooking magazines.

"Mmm. Let's put this on the menu," Zoe said, holding up a photo of a glass filled with pink cream.

"Oh, I love fool," Mom said. "But it's only good when raspberries are in season, so I wouldn't put it on the regular menu."

Mom had decided to spend the winter experimenting with recipes for her restaurant, and then she'd look for a space in the spring.

"Couldn't you just make it with other fruit?" I asked.

"Not really. It only works because the raspberries fall apart when you mix them into the whipped cream."

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“Are we leaving soon?” I wanted to get home to plan what to make Winnie. I’d already nixed chocolate chip cookies. Not enough wow. Maybe I’d email Charlie and ask him what he thought I should make since he’d tasted all my greatest hits.

“I want to stay for at least another hour,” Mom said. “These old magazines are great, and I can’t check them out.”

“Go find something to read,” Dad said. “Kids’ Room is in the back.”

On my way to the Kids’ Room, I stopped at a computer to check my email. Since we’d moved, I couldn’t stop checking it.

Big surprise: nothing from Charlie this time either. He was acting as if I was asking him to send smoke signals. It’s not as if he couldn’t check his email right there on his cell phone. So I *couldn’t* text. What was the big deal?

I’d been trying to keep myself from sending him another email until he emailed me back, but I really wanted to know what he thought I should make Winnie.

To: CKramerRocks@mar.com

From: JaxTLevin441@mar.com

Subject: Hey

Guess what? Since we’re not starting school, my parents are making me and Jeanine do these projects so I’m

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starting a doughnut business. Long story. I'll tell you everything at Thanksgiving. Maybe you can help??? For now, I just need to know which of my desserts you like the best, not including the peanut butter–white chocolate chip cookies.

The peanut butter cookies were definitely Charlie's favorite but plenty of people don't like peanut butter or white chocolate, so they were way too risky. You'd be surprised. There are some serious white chocolate haters out there. I don't get it.

When I got to the Kids' Room, I headed straight for a pile of lumpy beanbags by the windows. I've never been a napper, but I hadn't been sleeping. It wasn't just the doughnuts. The house, also known as the Purple Demon, talked a lot more than our apartment ever did. Clanging, creaking, moaning—different nights, different sounds. But her message was always the same, and I heard it loud and clear: *Get out!*

Halfway to the beanbags, I stopped in front of a table with a bunch of books on display to look at one with a basketball on the cover.

"It's good," someone said.

I looked around the room.

Tucked behind the door was a boy, lying on a bunch of beanbags,

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several books open on the floor in front of him. Everything about him was long from his arms and legs to his chin and his shaggy, black hair.

"Oh, thanks. Uh, what's it about? I mean, you know, other than basketball." I was hoping he didn't think I sounded as dumb as I thought I did. I couldn't have cared less about the book, but I was pretty excited to be speaking to a real-live kid in town.

"This high school basketball team that's really awful and how they end up winning the state championship. It's the fourth in the series. They're all really good though." The kid spoke like someone was timing him. "Each book follows a team in a different sport, and each time the team has to get through something hard, like an injury or a scandal or something, so they can come together and win, but then sometimes they don't win, and then that's sort of the point too, you know?"

He stopped and waited for me to give some sign that yes, I did know, and as soon as I did, he started right back up where he'd left off.

"I think the first one was about a swim team or maybe that was the second." He kept speed talking, but as he did, he stood up, crossed the room, and pulled a book from a shelf like he'd had its location memorized. "Yeah, this is the one. *Both Hands*. You should start with this." He handed it to me.

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"Great. Thanks."

"So, you into basketball?"

"Yeah." I was relieved we were moving on from books to sports.

"Yeah, me too, but mostly just to watch. I really only play ice hockey."

"On a team?" Nobody I knew played ice hockey. Up until that point, I honestly thought the only kids who played lived in Canada, Minnesota, or one of those other states where it's cold like ten months a year.

"Uh-huh. It's pretty big here."

I could tell by the way he said "here" that he knew I was from somewhere else.

"I don't play," I said. "I was hoping that maybe there was a basketball team I could try out for."

"Sorry."

"No team?"

"No, there's a team, but all the good kids play hockey so the basketball team's...um, kind of..."

"Sad?"

"Pretty much."

Great, I was going to play on a sad basketball team with all the unathletic kids. Perfect.

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"Can't you skate?" he asked like he'd never met somebody who couldn't.

"A little, but I don't even know the rules of hockey."

"You play soccer?"

I nodded.

"Not that different. I could show you. There's an open sticks and pucks session every weekend at the rink in Crellin. No rink here, but plenty of places to skate when it gets cold enough. Hey, you hungry?" he asked like it was part of the hockey conversation.

It took me a second to catch up. "Uh..." I wasn't hungry at all. Mom had made apple pancakes that morning. "Sure."

The boy led me back through the library to a small office behind the circulation desk.

"My mom works here," he said as he poked around the shelves of a mini-fridge in the corner of the room. "I'm Josh."

"Tris."

"Like for Tristan?"

"Yeah. My parents found it in some name book I wish they'd never bought."

"I don't know. Tristan was a knight at King Arthur's Round Table, which is pretty cool, and he was a better fighter than just about all the other knights except Lancelot."

"Who?"

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Josh's face went tight, and he ducked his head behind the fridge door. "Sorry. He was just another big-time knight for King Arthur."

Josh went quiet for the first time since we'd met, and it was clearly not a good sign. What had I done and how could I fix it—quick?

"I guess you end up reading a lot if your mom's a librarian, huh?" I said. "We end up eating a lot 'cause my mom's a chef."

It must have worked because when Josh pulled a block of cheese from the fridge, he was smiling again.

"Get this. I know a guy named Michael Michael," he said.

It took me a second to retrace our conversation back to names. Ideas seemed to ping around Josh's mind like balls in a pinball machine.

"So, wait, Michael is his first and last name?"

"Yup. Mr. Michael Michael." Josh pulled a cutting board and box of crackers off the top of the fridge.

"I can top that. I know a girl named Sailor."

"Like on a ship?" he asked as he sliced cheese.

"She was in my sister's class."

"That's not right. Sailor's not even a real name." He handed me a cracker with cheese.

"I know. It's like child abuse."

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"Yeah, like what if parents wanted to name their kid something like ... Snot? That should be flat out against the law."

"Why would anyone want to name their kid Snot?" I said, laughing so hard bits of cheese flew out of my mouth.

"I don't know." Josh was laughing now too. "Why would someone want to name their kid Sailor?"

Josh and I spent the next hour eating cheese and crackers and coming up with a list of names we thought should be outlawed. A few times, we laughed so hard his Mom had to come in to tell us to keep it down.

When it was time to go, Josh filled out a library card for me and checked out *Both Hands* on it. He was sure I was going to love it. I wasn't, but I thought I should at least give it a shot.

"Hey," I said as I was leaving. "You know the General Store?"

"Sure," he said.

"You ever taste those doughnuts she used to make?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Were they really that good?"

"Not good," he said. "Life changing."

Life-changing doughnuts?

I had no idea what that meant, but I had to find out.



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When we got home that afternoon, I finally had an email from Charlie:

To: JaxTLevin441@mar.com

From: CKramerRocks@mar.com

Subject: Re: Hey

What are you talking about? Kids can't start businesses. It's like against the law or something because businesses need insurance and have to pay taxes. How many twelve-year-olds do you know paying taxes?

I slapped the laptop closed.

The first email Charlie sends me in days, and he's telling me I can't start a business? And what did Charlie know about taxes? This had Zane Kramer written all over it. Why did Charlie have to tell his dad what I was doing anyway?

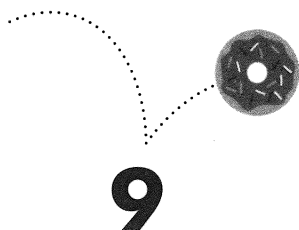
In my head, I wrote back: *What about lemonade stands? Why can't kids pay taxes?*

I opened the computer and hit Reply. But then I just stared at the screen. What was the point? Charlie would just keep repeating whatever his dad told him. I wouldn't even really be emailing with Charlie then.

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I hit Delete and shut the computer.

He hadn't even told me what dessert I should make for Winnie.



The day after we went to the library, it was so cold I could see my breath. I'm not talking about outside. I'm talking in my room, still in bed.

I ran to the window to close it, but it wouldn't budge, obviously part of a new plan by the Purple Demon to freeze us out.

I shoved my pillow in the window, layered up, and let myself down to the ladder through the hole in the floor.

Mmm. Mom was baking bread.

We never had homemade bread before we got to Petersville, but then Mom figured out it took her almost as long to drive to the nearest bakery as it did to make her own. At first, she just made simple stuff, like sourdough and whole wheat, but soon we were having sweet potato rolls, pumpkin biscuits, and hazelnut

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scones with homemade peach and strawberry butters. None of us were surprised when she announced she'd decided to serve a different homemade bread and butter every day when she opened the restaurant.

"Corn bread?" I said as I came into the kitchen.

"Close. Semolina," Mom said.

She and Jeanine were already sitting at the table eating breakfast. Even though there were no windows open in there, it was almost as cold as it had been in the attic.

The Purple Demon is a mad genius.

"Is the heat working?" I said.

"I think so." Mom handed me a plate of scrambled eggs and a thick slice of steaming bread with apple butter. "Houses are always cooler than apartments. It's much healthier. When it's too warm, it's the perfect environment for bacteria to flourish. That's why people are always sick in the city."

"Who was always sick?" I said.

"Don't you remember when we all got strep last winter?"

"Yeah, so? Don't people get strep in Petersville?"

"I'm sure they do, but it doesn't travel as fast because... because the bacteria can't move as well through the cold."

"Did you just make that up? Because it really sounds like you just made it up as you were saying it."

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"Look, I may not completely understand the science behind it, but I know it's better not to keep your house too warm."

"*Too* warm, maybe. But how about *at all* warm? I mean, look at Jeanine."

Jeanine was sitting at the kitchen table with a sleeping bag around her bottom half, a bathrobe around her top half, and a ski mask.

"I don't mind," she said. "It keeps me awake. I've read seven hundred sixty-five pages since yesterday."

"That's great, honey," Mom said.

Sometimes my mother's completely clueless. The only reason Jeanine was able to read that much was because, unlike me, she still couldn't sleep. Whenever I passed her room in the middle of the night on the way to the bathroom, she was up, reading by flashlight.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"Upstairs. He's really excited about this new idea he has for a pulley system to schlep stuff up the stairs."

"Oh. That's kind of cool, I guess."

"I think so—and definitely better than the intercom idea. I really do think you need to be a licensed electrician to do that kind of wiring."

Now that the unpacking was done, Dad had a lot of free time, and he'd been spending it on these home improvement ideas he kept

coming up with. Some actually weren't half-bad, but all required skills he hadn't picked up at the investment bank. Eventually, he'd be helping with the business side of the restaurant, but since there was no business side yet, the only way to help was by eating, which could only take up so much time.

"Zoe and I are headed to Crellin. Any takers?" Mom said.

Jeanine shook her head without looking up from her book.

"No thanks," I said. "Can I bake something?"

"What were you thinking?"

"Molten chocolate cake. I have to show the woman at the General Store I'm worthy of her doughnut recipe."

Mom laughed. "Sure, go ahead. Just remember to turn off the oven when you're done. And make a double batch so there's some for tonight."

I'd settled on molten chocolate cake for three reasons. First, I didn't know much about Winnie's tastes, but I thought I could be pretty sure she liked chocolate. She was weird, but I didn't think she'd have gone to the trouble of creating a recipe for chocolate cream doughnuts when she didn't like chocolate. Second, I'd never met anyone who didn't flip for my mother's molten chocolate cake. Third, other than chocolate chip cookies, I'd had more practice making it than anything else.

As soon as Mom and Zoe left, I turned on the oven and took

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out the ingredients; a saucepan for melting the chocolate; and ramekins, the little cups we use for making mini cakes. You have to make mini molten cakes because the cake is so gooey, a big one will fall apart. I learned that the hard way.

I was especially careful not to burn the chocolate because, in case you don't know, burned chocolate tastes like metal and looks like dog food, and we didn't have enough to make another batch. I was also super careful measuring out the sugar and flour. Really, a clump more or less won't ruin anything, but I needed these to be perfect.

Twelve minutes in the oven is usually just enough to get the crackly shell on top that lets you know the cakes are done. That day, because I kept checking and letting cold air in, it took almost twenty.

As soon as the cakes were cool enough, I popped them out of the cups and tasted one. The hot, gooey center, more batter than cake, oozed out onto my tongue.

Shazzam! Taste bud happy dance all around my mouth. Perfect. So perfect that when I finished eating one, I had to go into the living room to keep myself from eating another.

"Can I have one?" Jeanine called from the kitchen. She hadn't said a word the whole time I'd been cooking.

"No!" I called back.

I hadn't forgotten about her telling my parents that doughnuts

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couldn't be a project after I'd said her project sounded cool, which it didn't. The day my parents told us we were moving to Petersville, it was us versus them for the first time ever. And I'd thought it would stay that way, at least for a little while, but Jeanine had already gone back to her own side, the one that only has room for her.

"I can't have just one?" she shouted.

"They're for my project!"

"I thought your project was doughnuts!"

"It is, but I need to give a molten chocolate cake to Winnie to get the doughnut recipe."

"Was that English?"

"I just have to give one to somebody! Okay?" I yelled.

"Come on!"

"They're for dessert tonight too!"

"That still leaves five!"

"Fine! Have one!" I flopped onto the couch. She wouldn't have let up until I gave in, so what was the point of going another twenty rounds, especially when I didn't actually have a reason, or at least not one I'd tell her?

I pulled some blankets over me and started reading *Both Hands*, the book Josh had made me take out of the library.

I don't know how long I was sitting there, but before I knew it, I'd read almost forty pages. Normally, I don't get through more

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than a couple without thinking about what we're having for dinner or checking where the chapter ends, but I'd been too focused on whether Jack—he was the kid in the book—was going to make the state swimming finals to think about anything else. Jack had just won regionals when Dad came through the living room carrying his brand-new toolbox.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Fixing that leak in your room. I checked it out the other day. Guy at the hardware store says it shouldn't be too complicated. Just give me a hand getting the ladder out of the shed?"

"Sure," I said.

When I came back, Jeanine was lying in my spot on the couch.

"It's warmer here," she said.

"It's warmer there because I was sitting there." I ripped one of the blankets I'd been using out from under her. Then I got my book and sat down to read in one of the armchairs.

Before long, we heard banging above us.

"What's that?" Jeanine said.

"Dad."

"On the roof?"

"He's fixing the leak in my room."

"Do you know how long that's going to take? I'm trying to get some work done here."

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"I'm pretty sure he feels the same way."

She stuck her tongue out at me through the mouth hole in the ski mask, then went back to her book. I could tell she wasn't getting much reading done though, because after every bang, she looked up and gave the ceiling a dirty look.

If you want to know the truth, I couldn't tune out the noise either, but I knew it would drive Jeanine bonkers to think I could when she couldn't, so I went right on pretending.

After a while, she slammed *Conifers of the Northeast* shut, unzipped the bottom of the sleeping bag, stuck out her feet, and stood up. "That's it!" Then, still wearing the sleeping bag, bathrobe, and ski mask, she slid her feet into her boots and hopped out the back door.

Almost immediately, the noises stopped. Then came a loud thud that shook the house and a scream.

I jumped up and ran out the door.

Outside, Dad was lying on the ground, his face white.

"What happened?" I said.

"It's not my fault!" Jeanine said, kneeling beside him.

I dropped to the ground on the other side. "Are you okay?"

Dad sat up slowly.

"He's fine," Jeanine said. "Right, Dad? You're fine."

"I think so?" he said, not really sounding convinced. "Just my head."

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Jeanine pulled off her ski mask and grabbed my father's hand.

"Your pulse is pretty fast."

"I'm okay."

"Can you get up?" I said.

"He shouldn't move," Jeanine said. "What if he has a spinal injury?"

"You just said he's fine. Now he has a spinal injury?"

"You know, guys, I really think I'm okay to go inside."

"See!" I said.

"Fine. But don't blame me if he's paralyzed," Jeanine said.

We helped my father to his feet and slowly led him into the house. Jeanine made him lie on the couch, got some ice, and told him to put it on his head.

"You sure you're okay, Dad?" I asked.

"Huh?" he said like I'd just woken him up.

"You okay?" I said again. Something about his eyes didn't look right.

"Yeah," he said, but he still didn't sound sure. "Just my head."

"Do you know what you hit it on?" I was worried that maybe he'd hit a rock, but there wasn't any blood.

"Hit it?"

"Yeah, when you fell," I reminded him. Now, I was beginning to worry.

"Oh." He squinted like he was trying to see something far away.

"Yeah, you were on the roof trying to fix the leak, remember?"

Jeanine said.

"Oh, yeah," he said even though it was obvious by now that he didn't.

"Um, Dad, why don't you just keep that ice on your head. We'll be right back," I said. Then I grabbed Jeanine's wrist and pulled her into the kitchen with me. "He must have a concussion. Should we call an ambulance?"

Jeanine nodded. For once, she didn't seem to know what to say.

I turned to the wall behind me where a phone should have hung and would have hung if we were still at home, but this wall was blank. The landline still hadn't been put in.

Jeanine ran out of the room. She was back a minute later with my father's cell phone and handed it to me.

For a second, I just stared at her, blown away she didn't want to make the call herself. Then I dialed 911 and waited for it to ring.

Nothing. No sound at all.

I looked at the screen. Not even one bar.

I showed Jeanine the phone. "No reception."

"Is anybody there?" my father called.

I poked my head through the doorway to the living room.

"Yeah, Dad, we're here."

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He sat up. "I think I hit my head."

"Oh, yeah? Do you remember what happened?"

Silence.

"Okay, then why don't you just keep that ice on it."

"Oh, okay," he said and lay back down.

It was like talking to a little kid, a not-so-smart little kid, and that kid was my father. This was bad.

Jeanine dropped into a chair and began gnawing her fingernails. Tears were running down her cheeks. "What if he's ... he's bleeding into his brain? He could be having a stroke."

"He's not having a stroke. You can't even talk if you're having a stroke." At least I didn't think you could. "It's just a concussion. People get concussions all the time. Connor got one last summer in Little League. He was totally knocked out, and a couple of days later he was fine."

"But this could be different. Dad could have ruptured an artery. Brain cells could be dying every second."

"Everything okay in there?" Dad called.

"Everything's fine," I called back.

"Hey, do you know what this ice is for?"

"Your head!" Jeanine and I both yelled.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

"See," wept Jeanine, snot boinging from her nose. "He's dying."

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"He has a headache! He's not dying."

"How do you know?"

I didn't actually know. My best guess was that he wasn't dying, but the problem with Jeanine always acting like she knows everything is that sometimes you believe her. "So what do you want to do?"

"There's that clinic in town."

"How would we get there?"

"We could take the car."

"Dad can't drive like that!"

"Not Dad. You! It's not far, and it's basically a straight line."

"Are you crazy? I can't drive." Had Dad somehow also hit Jeanine's head on his way down?

"You can't get a license or anything, but you can drive. I've seen you play Speedway. You're a great driver."

"That's a video game! This is a real road with real cars."

"We're not talking about rush hour in Times Square. How many other cars will even be on the road?"

"Hello? Anybody there?" my father called from the living room.

This time Jeanine went. "Yeah, Dad. We're here."

"I have a nasty headache."

"Yeah, Dad. We know. You fell off the roof. Just keep the ice on."

Then she went to the front door, took my father's car keys from

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the hook, and put them on the table in front of me. “You really want to leave him there asking the same question every five minutes till Mom gets home?”

People get concussions all the time and don’t die, but Jeanine had really freaked me out with all that stuff about ruptured arteries and brain cells dying.

“Okay, let’s go, but I’m not taking the car.”

“So, how are we getting there?”

“I have an idea.”

