

REBECCA STEAD

WHEN



*you*



REACH



*me*



A Yearling Book

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Random House Children’s Books supports the First Amendment  
and celebrates the right to read.

The most beautiful experience  
we can have  
is the mysterious.

—Albert Einstein

*The World As I See It* (1931)

## *Things You Keep in a Box*

So Mom got the postcard today. It says *Congratulations* in big curly letters, and at the very top is the address of Studio TV-15 on West 58th Street. After three years of trying, she has actually made it. She's going to be a contestant on *The \$20,000 Pyramid*, which is hosted by Dick Clark.

On the postcard there's a list of things to bring. She needs some extra clothes in case she wins and makes it to another show, where they pretend it's the next day even though they really tape five in one afternoon. Barrettes are optional, but she should definitely bring some with her. Unlike me, Mom has glossy red hair that bounces around and might obstruct America's view of her small freckled face.

And then there's the date she's supposed to show up, scrawled in blue pen on a line at the bottom of the card: *April 27, 1979*. Just like you said.

I check the box under my bed, which is where I've kept your notes these past few months. There it is, in your tiny handwriting: *April 27th: Studio TV-15, the*

words all jerky-looking, like you wrote them on the subway. Your last "proof."

I still think about the letter you asked me to write. It nags at me, even though you're gone and there's no one to give it to anymore. Sometimes I work on it in my head, trying to map out the story you asked me to tell, about everything that happened this past fall and winter. It's all still there, like a movie I can watch when I want to. Which is never.

## *Things That Go Missing*

Mom has swiped a big paper calendar from work and Scotch-taped the month of April to the kitchen wall. She used a fat green marker, also swiped from work, to draw a pyramid on April 27, with dollar signs and exclamation points all around it. She went out and bought a fancy egg timer that can accurately measure a half minute. They don't have fancy egg timers in the supply closet at her office.

April twenty-seventh is also Richard's birthday. Mom wonders if that's a good omen. Richard is Mom's boyfriend. He and I are going to help Mom practice every single night, which is why I'm sitting at my desk instead of watching after-school TV, which is a birthright of every latchkey child. "Latchkey child" is a name for a kid with keys who hangs out alone after school until a grown-up gets home to make dinner. Mom hates that expression. She says it reminds her of dungeons, and must have been invented by someone strict and awful with an unlimited child-care budget. "Probably someone German," she says,

glaring at Richard, who is German but not strict or awful.

It's possible. In Germany, Richard says, I would be one of the *Schlüsselkinder*, which means "key children."

"You're lucky," he tells me. "Keys are power. Some of us have to come knocking." It's true that he doesn't have a key. Well, he has a key to *his* apartment, but not to ours.

Richard looks the way I picture guys on sailboats—tall, blond, and very tucked-in, even on weekends. Or maybe I picture guys on sailboats that way because Richard loves to sail. His legs are very long, and they don't really fit under our kitchen table, so he has to sit kind of sideways, with his knees pointing out toward the hall. He looks especially big next to Mom, who's short and so tiny she has to buy her belts in the kids' department and make an extra hole in her watchband so it won't fall off her arm.

Mom calls Richard Mr. Perfect because of how he looks and how he knows everything. And every time she calls him Mr. Perfect, Richard taps his right knee. He does that because his right leg is shorter than his left one. All his right-foot shoes have two-inch platforms nailed to the bottom so that his legs match. In bare feet, he limps a little.

"You should be grateful for that leg," Mom tells him. "It's the only reason we let you come around." Richard has been "coming around" for almost two years now.

We have exactly twenty-one days to get Mom ready for the game show. So instead of watching television, I'm copying words for her practice session tonight. I write each word on one of the white index cards Mom swiped from work. When I have seven words, I bind the cards together with a rubber band she also swiped from work.

I hear Mom's key in the door and flip over my word piles so she can't peek.

"Miranda?" She clomps down the hall—she's on a clog kick lately—and sticks her head in my room. "Are you starving? I thought we'd hold dinner for Richard."

"I can wait." The truth is I've just eaten an entire bag of Cheez Doodles. After-school junk food is another fundamental right of the latchkey child. I'm sure this is true in Germany, too.

"You're sure you're not hungry? Want me to cut up an apple for you?"

"What's a kind of German junk food?" I ask her. "Wiener crispies?"

She stares at me. "I have no idea. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"Do you want the apple or not?"

"No, and get out of here—I'm doing the words for later."

"Great." She smiles and reaches into her coat pocket. "Catch." She lobbs something toward me, and I grab what turns out to be a bundle of brand-new markers in rainbow colors, held together with a fat rubber band. She clomps back toward the kitchen.

Richard and I figured out a while ago that the more stuff Mom swipes from the office supply closet, the more she's hating work. I look at the markers for a second and then get back to my word piles.

Mom has to win this money.

## *Things You Hide*

I was named after a criminal. Mom says that's a dramatic way of looking at things, but sometimes the truth is dramatic.

"The name Miranda stands for people's rights," she said last fall, when I was upset because Robbie B. had told me during gym that I was named after a kidnapper.

I had left my keys at school and waited two and a half hours at Belle's Market on Amsterdam Avenue for Mom to get home from work. I didn't mind the waiting so much. I helped Belle out around the store for a while. And I had my book, of course.

"Still reading that same book?" Belle asked, once I had settled into my folding chair next to the cash register to read. "It's looking pretty beat-up."

"I'm not *still* reading it," I told her. "I'm reading it *again*." I had probably read it a hundred times, which was why it looked so beat-up.

"Okay," Belle said, "so let's hear something about this book. What's the first line? I never judge a book by the cover," she said. "I judge by the first line."

I knew the first line of my book without even looking. "It was a dark and stormy night," I said.

She nodded. "Classic. I like that. What's the story about?"

I thought for a second. "It's about a girl named Meg—her dad is missing, and she goes on this trip to another planet to save him."

"And? Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Sort of," I said. "But that's not really the point."

"How old is she?"

"Twelve." The truth is that my book doesn't say how old Meg is, but I am twelve, so she feels twelve to me. When I first got the book I was eleven, and she felt eleven.

"Oh, twelve," Belle said. "Plenty of time for boy-friends, then. Why don't you start from the beginning?"

"Start what from the beginning?"

"The story. Tell me the story. From the beginning."

So I started telling her the story of my book, not reading it to her, just telling her about it, starting with the first scene, where Meg wakes up at night, afraid of a thunderstorm.

While she listened, Belle made me a turkey sandwich and gave me about ten chewable vitamin Cs because she thought I sounded nasal. When she went to the bathroom, I sneaked a little bunch of grapes, which I love but can't ever have, because Mom doesn't like the way the grape pickers are treated in California and she refuses to buy them.

When she finally got there, Mom hugged Belle and told her, "I owe you," like I was some repulsive burden instead of the person who had very helpfully unpacked three boxes of green bananas and scoured the refrigerated section for expired dairy items. Then Mom bought a box of strawberries, even though I know she thinks Belle's strawberries are overpriced and not very good. She calls them SSO's, which stands for "strawberry-shaped objects."

"Where did Robbie B. get the dumb idea that anyone would name her own daughter after a murderer?" Mom asked. Our building was still half a block away, but her key was already in her hand. Mom doesn't like to fumble around in front of the building looking like a target for muggers.

"Not a murderer," I said. "A kidnapper. Robbie B.'s dad is a prosecutor. He says the Miranda warnings were named for a guy named Mr. Miranda who committed some horrible crime. Is that true?"

"Technically? Maybe. The Miranda warnings are essential, you know. People need to know that they have the right to remain silent and the right to an attorney. What kind of justice system would we have without—"

" 'Maybe' meaning 'yes'?"

"—and then there's Shakespeare. He invented the name Miranda, you know, for *The Tempest*."

It made perfect sense now that I thought about it: Mom wanted to be a criminal defense lawyer—she

started law school and almost finished her first year, but then I was born and she had to quit. Now she's a paralegal, except she works at a really small law office where she has to be the receptionist and the secretary too. Richard is one of the lawyers. They do a lot of free work for poor people, sometimes even for criminals. But I never dreamed she would name me after one.

Mom unlocked the lobby door, which is iron and glass and must weigh three hundred pounds, and she pushed hard to swing it open, her heels slipping on the tile floor. When we were inside, she leaned against the other side of the door until she heard the click that means the lock has caught. When the door swings shut by itself, it usually doesn't lock, which drives Mom nuts and is one of the things the landlord won't fix.

"So? Was he a kidnapper or not?" I punched the button for the elevator.

"Okay, you win," Mom said. "I named you after a monster, Mira. I'm sorry. If you don't like your name, you are welcome to change it."

That was so Mom. She didn't understand that a person gets attached to a person's name, that something like this might come as a shock.

Upstairs, she threw her coat on a kitchen chair, filled the spaghetti pot with water, and put it on to boil. She was wearing an orange turtleneck and a denim skirt with purple and black striped tights.

"Nice tights," I snorted. Or I tried to snort, anyway. I'm not exactly sure how, though people in books are always doing it.

She leaned against the sink and flipped through the mail. "You already hassled me about the tights this morning, Mira."

"Oh." She was usually still in bed when I left for school, so I didn't get to appreciate her outfit until she got home from work. "Nice nail polish, then." Her nails were electric blue. She must have done them at her desk that day.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you mad about waiting at Belle's? I was super busy—I couldn't just leave."

"No. I like it at Belle's." I wondered whether she'd done her nails before, after, or during her super busy afternoon.

"You could have gone to Sal's, you know." Sal and his mom, Louisa, live in the apartment below ours. Sal used to be my best friend.

"I said I *like* it at Belle's."

"Still. I think we should hide a key in the fire hose, for the next time."

So after dinner we hid our spare key inside the nozzle of the dusty, folded-up fire hose in the stairwell. The hose is all cracked-looking and about a hundred years old, and Mom always says that if there's an actual fire it will be of no use whatsoever and we'll have to jump out the window into the neighbor's garden. It's a good thing we live on the second floor.

You asked me to mention the key. If I ever do decide to write your letter, which I probably won't, this is the story I would tell you.

## *The Speed Round*

There are two parts to *The \$20,000 Pyramid*. Mom calls the first part the speed round because it's all about speed. Contestants try to make their celebrity partners guess seven common words by giving clues. So if the first word is "fork," a contestant might say, "You use this to put food in your mouth—not a spoon but a . . ."

If he has a brain, which Mom says he might not, the celebrity partner will say "Fork!" and then there'll be a ding and the next word will show up on a little hidden screen. Each team gets thirty seconds for seven words.

Then the little screens swivel around, and it's the celebrities' turn to give the clues and the contestants' turn to guess. Another seven words, another thirty seconds. Then the screens swivel back, and the contestants give the clues again.

There are a possible twenty-one points in the speed round, and a perfect score earns a cash bonus of twenty-one hundred dollars. But the most important thing is just to beat the other team, because the team that wins the speed round goes to the Winner's Circle, and the Winner's Circle is where the big money is.

There isn't a lot of time for practice tonight because it's tenant-meeting night. Once a month, the neighbors sit in our living room and complain while Mom takes notes in shorthand. Most people don't bother to come. It's always the old folks, who don't get asked to go many places and are mad that there isn't more heat. Sal's mom, Louisa, works in a nursing home, and she says old people can never get enough heat.

After the meetings, during which Mr. Nunzi has usually burned a new hole in our couch with his cigarette, Mom always writes a letter to the landlord and sends a copy to some city agency that's supposed to care whether we have hot water, if the lobby door locks, and that the elevator keeps getting stuck between floors. But nothing ever changes.

Our doorbell is going to start ringing any minute. Mom is running through a few speed rounds with Richard while I make lemonade from frozen concentrate and open the Oreos.

Louisa knocks her regular knock and I answer the door with the plate of cookies. She takes an Oreo and sighs. She's wearing jeans with her white nurse shoes, which she kicks off by the door. She hates these meetings but comes out of loyalty to Mom. And someone has to watch Mr. Nunzi's cigarette to make sure he doesn't accidentally set our apartment on fire.

"Lemonade?" I ask. I refuse to play waitress during Mom's get-togethers, but I'll pour Louisa a drink anytime.

"Lemonade sounds lovely." She follows me to the kitchen.

Just as I put the glass in her hand, the doorbell buzzes for about a minute straight. Why, why, *why* do they have to hold the button down forever?

"Old people," Louisa says, as if she can read my mind. "They're so used to being ignored." She grabs two more cookies and goes to answer the door. Louisa doesn't normally eat what she calls processed foods, but she says she could never get through a tenant meeting without Oreos.

Fifteen minutes later, Mom is sitting on the living room floor, writing furiously as everyone takes turns saying that the elevator is dirty, there are cigarette butts on the stairs, and the dryer in the basement melted somebody's elastic-waist pants.

I lean against the wall in the hallway and watch her hold up one finger to signal Mrs. Bindocker to slow down. Once Mrs. Bindocker gets going, not even Mom's shorthand can keep up with her.

Mom cried the first time she saw our apartment. The whole place was filthy, she says. The wood floors were "practically black," the windows were "caked with dirt," and the walls were smeared with something she "didn't even want to think about." Always in those same words.

I was there that day—in a little bucket-seat baby carrier. It was cold out, and she had a new coat on. There were no hangers in the closets, and she didn't want to put the coat down on the dirty floor or drape

it over one of the peeling, hissing radiators, so she carried it while she went from room to room, telling herself it wasn't so awful.

At this point in the story, I used to try to think of someplace she could have put her coat, if only she had thought of it.

"Why didn't you drape it over the rod in the hall closet?" I'd ask.

"Dusty," she'd say.

"On the windowsill in the kitchen?"

"Dusty."

"What about over the top of the bedroom door?"

"Couldn't reach," she'd say, *and dusty.*"

What Mom did that day almost twelve years ago was put her coat back on, pick up my bucket seat, and walk to a store, where she bought a mop, some soap, garbage bags, a roll of sticky shelf paper, sponges, a bottle of window spray, and paper towels.

Back home, she dumped everything out on the floor. Then she folded her coat and slid it into the empty bag from the store. She hung the bag on a doorknob and cleaned the apartment all afternoon. I knew enough, she says, to snuggle down in my bucket seat and take a very long nap.

She met Louisa, who didn't have a husband either, in the lobby on that first day. They were both taking garbage to the big cans out front. Louisa was holding Sal. Sal had been crying, but when he saw me, he stopped.

I know all this because I used to ask to hear the story over and over: the story of the day I met Sal.

## *Things That Kick*

Losing Sal was like a long list of bad things, and somewhere in the top half of the list was the fact that I had to walk home alone past the crazy guy on our corner.

He showed up around the beginning of the school year, when Sal and I still walked home from school together. A few kids called him Quack, short for Quackers, or they called him Kicker because he used to do these sudden kicks into the street, like he was trying to punt one of the cars speeding up Amsterdam Avenue. Sometimes he shook his fist at the sky and yelled crazy stuff like "What's the burn scale? Where's the dome?" and then he threw his head back and laughed these loud, crazy laughs, so everyone could see that he had about thirty fillings in his teeth. And he was always on our corner, sometimes sleeping with his head under the mailbox.

"Don't call him Quack," Mom said. "That's an awful name for a human being."

"Even a human being who's quackers?"

"I don't care. It's still awful."

“Well, what do you call him?”

“I don’t call him anything,” she said, “but I think of him as the laughing man.”

Back when I still walked home with Sal, it was easier to pretend that the laughing man didn’t scare me, because Sal was pretending too. He tried not to show it, but he freaked when he saw the laughing man shaking his fist at the sky and kicking his leg out into traffic. I could tell by the way Sal’s face kind of froze. I know all of his expressions.

I used to think of Sal as being a part of me: Sal and Miranda, Miranda and Sal. I knew he wasn’t really, but that’s the way it felt.

When we were too little for school, Sal and I went to day care together at a lady’s apartment down the block. She had picked up some carpet samples at a store on Amsterdam Avenue and written the kids’ names on the backs. After lunch, she’d pass out these carpet squares and we’d pick our spots on the living room floor for nap time. Sal and I always lined ours up to make a rectangle.

One time, when Sal had a fever and Louisa had called in sick to her job and kept him home, the day-care lady handed me my carpet square at nap time, and then, a second later, she gave me Sal’s, too.

“I know how it is, baby,” she said.

And then I lay on her floor not sleeping because Sal wasn’t there to press his foot against mine.

When he first showed up on our corner last fall, the laughing man was always mumbling under his breath. "Bookbag, pocketshoe, bookbag, pocketshoe."

He said it like a chant: *bookbag, pocketshoe, bookbag, pocketshoe*. And sometimes he would be hitting himself on the head with his fists. Sal and I usually tried to get really interested in our conversation and act like we didn't notice. It's crazy the things a person can pretend not to notice.

"Why do you think he sleeps like that, with his head under the mailbox?" I asked Richard back when the laughing man was brand-new and I was still trying to figure him out.

"I don't know," Richard said, looking up from the paper. "Maybe so nobody steps on his head?"

"Very funny. And what's a 'pocketshoe,' anyway?"

"Pocketshoe," he said, looking serious. "Noun: An extra shoe you keep in your pocket. In case someone steals one of yours while you're asleep with your head under the mailbox."

"Ha ha ha," I said.

"Oh, Mr. Perfect," Mom said. "You and your amazing dictionary head!" She was in one of her good moods that day.

Richard tapped his right knee and went back to his newspaper.

## *Things That Get Tangled*

Lucky for Mom, some of the old people at the nursing home where Louisa works like to watch *The \$20,000 Pyramid* at lunchtime. Louisa takes notes on every show and brings them over after work. She gets off at four, so I have time to write out the day's words on stolen index cards before Mom gets home.

Tonight, Mom and Richard are practicing in the living room. I'm supposed to be doing homework in my room, but instead I'm tying knots and I'm thinking.

It was Richard who taught me how to tie knots. He learned back when he sailed boats as a kid, and he still carries pieces of rope in his briefcase. He says that when he's trying to solve a problem at work, he takes out the ropes, ties them into knots, unties them, and then ties them again. It gets him in the right frame of mind.

Two Christmases ago, which was his first Christmas with us, Richard gave me my own set of ropes and started showing me knots. Now I can make every knot he knows, even the clove hitch, which I did backward for a few months before I got it right. So I

am tying and untying knots, and seeing if it helps me solve my problem, which is you. I have no idea what you expect from me.

If you just wanted to know what happened that day this past winter, it would be easy. Not fun, but easy. But that's not what your note says. It says to write down the story of what happened *and everything that led up to it*. And, as Mom likes to say, that's a whole different bucket of poop. Except she doesn't use the word "poop."

Because even if you were still here, even if I *did* decide to write the letter, I wouldn't know where to start. The day the laughing man showed up on our corner? The day Mom and Louisa met in the lobby? The day I found your first note?

There is no answer. But if someone sat on my legs and forced me to name the day the whole true story began, I'd say it was the day Sal got punched.

## *Things That Stain*

It happened in the fall, when Sal and I still walked home from school together every single day: one block from West End Avenue to Broadway, one block from Broadway to Amsterdam, past the laughing man on our corner, and then half a block to our lobby door.

That middle block between Broadway and Amsterdam is mostly a huge garage, where the sidewalk is all slanted, and we had to be careful when it was icy or else we'd slip right in front of the pack of boys always hanging out there. If we did fall, they'd make a really big deal out of it, staggering around laughing, and sometimes calling us names that made our hearts beat fast the rest of the way home.

The day Sal got punched, there was no ice on the ground because it was only October. I was carrying the big oak-tag *Mysteries of Science* poster I'd made at school. I had drawn big bubble letters for the title, which was *Why Do We Yawn?*

There are a lot of interesting theories about yawning. Some people think it started as a way of showing

off the teeth to scare predators away, or as a way to stretch facial muscles, or to signal to the rest of the tribe that it's time to sleep. My own theory, which I included on my poster, is that yawning is a semipolite way of telling someone that they're boring everyone to death. Either that or it's a slow-motion sneeze. But no one knows for sure, which is why it's a mystery of science.

The day Sal got punched, the boys by the garage were hanging out, as usual. The day before, there had been a fight, with one of them slamming another one up against a parked car and hitting him. The kid getting hit had both his hands up like he was saying "Enough!", but every time he tried to get off the hood of that car, the other kid pushed him down and hit him again. The other boys were all jumping around and yelling and Sal and I had crossed to the other side of the street so that we wouldn't get accidentally slammed by somebody.

On the day Sal got punched, the boys were being regular, so we stayed on our usual side. But just as we started past the garage, someone moved away from the group. He took a big step toward me and Sal and blocked our way so that we had to stop. I looked up and saw a not-too-biggish kid in a green army coat. He made a fist that came up like a wave and hit Sal right in the stomach. Hard. Sal doubled over and gurgled like he was going to throw up. And then the kid whacked him across the face.

"Sal!" I yelled. I glanced over at Belle's Market on

Amsterdam, but no one was out front. Sal was bent over and frozen. The kid just stood there for a few seconds with his head tilted to one side. It seemed crazy, but it actually looked like he was reading my *Mysteries of Science* poster. Then he turned away and started strolling toward Broadway like nothing had happened.

"Sal!" I leaned over to see his face, which looked okay but had one cheek all red. "Walk," I said. "We're almost home."

Sal's feet started to move. It took me a few steps to realize that the boys weren't laughing or whistling or calling us names. They hadn't made a sound. I looked back and saw them standing there, staring after the kid in the green army coat, who was still walking in the other direction.

"Hey!" one of them yelled down the block after him. "What the hell was that?" But the kid didn't look back.

Sal was moving slowly. He squeezed the arms of the blue satin Yankees jacket Louisa got him for his birthday, and tears were dropping down his face, and I almost cried but didn't. It was my job to get him home, and we still had to get by the laughing man.

He was on our corner, marching around in a circle and doing some salutes. Sal was crying harder and walking in a hunch. Some blood had started dripping out of his nose, and he wiped it with the blue and white striped cuff of his jacket. He gagged a lot. It sounded like he really might throw up.

When he saw us, the laughing man dropped his arms to his sides and stood up straight. He reminded me of the big wooden nutcracker Louisa puts out on her kitchen table at Christmastime.

"Smart kid!" he said. He took a step toward us, and it was enough to make Sal take off running for home. I ran after him, trying to hold on to my poster and get my keys out of my jeans.

When I had gotten us into the lobby, Sal went straight to his apartment and closed the door on me. I knocked for a while, but Louisa wasn't home from work yet and he wouldn't let me in.

If I'm not wrong, this is the beginning of the story you wanted me to tell. And I didn't know it yet, but it was also the end of my friendship with Sal.

## *Mom's Rules for Life in New York City*

1. *Always* have your key out before you reach the front door.
2. If a stranger is hanging out in front of the building, don't *ever* go in—just keep walking around the block until he's gone.
3. Look ahead. If there's someone acting strange down the block, looking drunk or dangerous, cross to the other side of the street, but *don't* be obvious about it. Make it look like you were planning to cross the street all along.
4. *Never* show your money on the street.

I have my own trick. If I'm afraid of someone on the street, I'll turn to him (it's always a boy) and say, "Excuse me, do you happen to know what time it is?" This is my way of saying to the person, "I see you as a friend, and there is no need to hurt me or take my

stuff. Also, I don't even have a watch and I am probably not worth mugging."

So far, it's worked like gangbusters, as Richard would say. And I've discovered that most people I'm afraid of are actually very friendly.

## *Things You Wish For*

"Miranda?" Mom calls from the kitchen. "We need you to keep time. This egg-timer ticking is driving me crazy."

So I watch the second hand of the kitchen clock while Richard feeds Mom clues. Then Mom gives the clues while Richard guesses.

"Can I play?" I ask after about five rounds.

"Sure. Richard, you keep time for a while." Mom stretches and peels off her purple sweatshirt. As it goes over her head, her hair falls free of the collar and bounces down around her shoulders. As usual, this makes me curse my nonexistent dad, who must be to blame for my hair, which is straight, brown, and just kind of *there*. I blame this stupid flat brown hair on my father, but otherwise I don't hold any grudges against him.

In my book, Meg is looking for her father. When she finally gets to Camazotz, which is a planet somewhere near the Big Dipper where he's being held prisoner, this evil man with red eyes asks her *why* she wants him, and she says, "Didn't you ever have a

father yourself? You don't want him for a *reason*. You want him because he's your *father*."

So I figure it's because I never *had* a father that I don't want one now. A person can't miss something she never had.

Richard is looking at the kitchen clock, waiting for the second hand to get to the twelve. "Okay, get ready—go!"

I look down at the first card. "Um, this is something you spread on toast," I say.

"Butter!" Mom yells.

Next card. "You drink a milk shake with this, you suck through it."

"A straw!" Mom yells.

Next. "It's leather and it holds your pants up!"

"A belt!"

"It's sweet—you drink it in winter, after you go sledding!"

"Hot chocolate!"

It's good to play, to think of nothing but the next word and to have Mom think of nothing but the next words out of my mouth. We fly through the pack of seven words.

"You're good at this," Mom says when we finish with five seconds to spare.

I'm smiling. "I really think you're going to win," I tell her.

"Don't get your hopes up," she warns. "This is just the speed round. The speed round is the easy part."

The truth is that our hopes are already up. Our wish list is stuck to the fridge with a magnet Mom stole from work:

*Trip to China*

*Good camera for trip to China*

*Wall-to-wall carpeting for Miranda's room*

*New TV*

And Richard has scribbled *Sailboat* at the bottom, though it's hard to imagine where we would park it.

That's the official list, anyway. Richard and I have our own secret plan for the money, if Mom wins it.

## *Things That Sneak Up on You*

The day Sal got punched, back in October, Louisa came upstairs after dinner to have a conference with Mom in her bedroom. They decided that Sal needed a mental health day, which meant he was allowed to skip school and watch TV the next day.

So the following afternoon I walked home alone. I was doing a lot of talking in my head so that I would be deep in conversation with myself by the time I got to the laughing man. I was almost to the garage when I realized someone was walking right behind me. I glanced back and saw the kid who punched Sal. He was maybe two feet away, wearing the same green army jacket he had worn the day before.

I was about to panic. I always know when I'm about to panic because my knees and neck both start to tingle. And then, before I had really decided what to do, I turned around to face him.

"Excuse me, do you happen to know what time it is?" My voice sounded almost normal. That was good.

"Let's see. . . ." He turned his head and looked back toward Broadway like maybe there was a giant clock hovering in the air right behind us. "It's three-sixteen."

I nodded like I could see the invisible clock too. "Thanks." He didn't look like he was about to hit me, but still, my heart was pounding.

He pointed. "See that big brown building? Yesterday the sun started to go behind it at three-twelve. Now it's about halfway gone." He glanced at me. "Plus, it's one day later, and it's October, so the days are getting shorter."

I stared at him. He looked down at his hand, which held a key. He pushed the other hand into his pants pocket. "I don't have a watch," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Me neither."

He nodded, and I wasn't afraid anymore. But as soon as the fear was gone, I filled up with guilt. "Look at you," my brain said, "chatting with the kid who punched Sal!" My brain has a way of talking to me like that.

"I've got to go," I said, and I didn't let myself glance back until I got to the corner. When I did, the kid who punched Sal was gone. That was when I realized that he must live in the apartment over the garage, the one with dead plants on the fire escape and bedsheets hanging over the windows.

I'd forgotten all about the laughing man. His legs were sticking out from under the mailbox, and I was careful not to wake him.

## *Things That Bounce*

After he got punched, Sal started playing basketball in the alley behind our building. Our living room windows face that way, and I heard him dribbling his ball back there from about three-thirty to five every day. There was a rusted-out metal hoop with no net that made a clanging sound whenever he hit it.

Sal and Louisa's apartment is mostly the same as ours. We have the same rectangular bedrooms, the same pull-chain light in the hallway, the same weird-shaped kitchen with the same unpredictable ovens, theirs right below ours.

There are differences. Their kitchen floor is yellow and orange linoleum squares instead of the white with gold flakes that we have, and Sal's bed is up against a different wall in the bedroom. But we have the same bathroom floor—these white hexagonal tiles. If I look at them long enough, I can see all kinds of patterns in those hexagons: lines, arrows, even flowers. They kind of shift into these different pictures. It's the sort of thing a person would never try to explain to anyone else, but once, when we were little, I told Sal

about it, and then we went into his bathroom to stare at the floor together. Sal and Miranda, Miranda and Sal.

Sal played basketball more and more and talked to me less and less. I asked him four hundred times whether he was okay, or if he was mad at me, or what was wrong, and three hundred and ninety-nine times he answered "Yes," "No," and "Nothing." Then, the last time I asked, he told me, while standing in our lobby and looking at his feet, that he didn't want to have lunch or walk home together for a while.

"Do you even want to be friends at all?" I asked him.

He glared at his feet and said no, he guessed he didn't for a while.

I was lucky, I guess, that this was the same week Julia decided to punish Annemarie for something.

The girls at school had been hurting each other's feelings for years before Sal left me and I was forced to really notice them. I had watched them trade best friends, start wars, cry, trade back, make treaties, squeal and grab each other's arms in this fake-excited way, et cetera, et cetera. I had seen which ones tortured Alice Evans, who, even though we'd started *sixth grade*, still waited too long to pee and never wanted to say out loud that she had to go. These girls would wait until Alice was pretty far gone, jiggling one foot and then the other, and then they would start asking her questions. "Alice," they'd say, "did you do today's

page in the math workbook yet? Where it says 'multiply to check your answer'? How did you do that?" And she'd desperately hop around while showing them.

I knew the way the girls all paired up, and Julia and Annemarie had been paired up for a long time. Julia I hated. Annemarie I had never thought about much.

My first memory of Julia is from second grade, when we made self-portraits in art. She complained there was no "café au lait"-colored construction paper for her skin, or "sixty-percent-cacao-chocolate" color for her eyes. I remember staring at her while these words came out of her mouth, and thinking, Your skin is light brown. Your eyes are dark brown. Why don't you just use brown, you idiot? Jay Stringer didn't complain about the paper, and neither did any of the other ten kids using brown. I didn't complain about the stupid hot-pink color I'd been given. Did my skin look hot-pink to her?

But I soon found out that Julia wasn't like the rest of us. She took trips all over the world with her parents. She would disappear from school and show up two weeks later with satin ribbons worked into her braids, or with a new green velvet scoop-neck dress, or wearing three gold rings on one finger. She learned about sixty-percent-cacao chocolate, she said, in Switzerland, where her parents had bought her a lot of it, along with a little silver watch she was always shoving in people's faces.

I still don't know what Annemarie did wrong, but during silent reading period that Tuesday, Julia told her that, as punishment, she wasn't going to have lunch with Annemarie for "the remainder of the week." Julia was big on announcing things in a loud voice so that everyone could hear. So on Wednesday, I asked Annemarie if she wanted to go out to lunch with me and she said yes.

In sixth grade, kids with any money, even just a little, go out for lunch unless something is going on and they won't let us, like the first week of school, when there was a man running down Broadway stark naked and we all had to eat in the school cafeteria while the police tried to catch him.

Mostly kids go to the pizza place, or to McDonald's, or, every once in a while, to the sandwich place, which has a real name but which we called Jimmy's because there was never anyone working there except one guy called Jimmy.

Pizza is the best deal—a dollar fifty will buy two slices, a can of soda, and a cherry Blow Pop from the candy bucket next to the register. That first day together, Annemarie and I got lucky and found two stools next to each other at the counter under the flag of Italy.

I found it slightly gross to eat pizza with Annemarie because she peeled the cheese off her slice like a scab and ate it, leaving everything else on her plate.

But she laughed at my jokes (which I mostly stole from Richard, who is bad at telling jokes but knows a lot of them), and she invited me over to her house after school, which more than made up for it. I would be spared an afternoon of listening to Sal's basketball. And the laughing man might be asleep under his mailbox by the time I walked home.

## *Things That Burn*

Annemarie's apartment didn't involve keys. Instead she had a doorman who slapped her five and a dad who opened the door upstairs.

"Did your dad take the day off?" I whispered.

"No," Annemarie said, "he works from home. He illustrates medical journals."

"Is your mom here too?"

She shook her head. "She's at work."

Annemarie's bedroom was about the same size as mine, but it had nice curtains and the walls were completely covered with all kinds of pictures and photographs, which I couldn't stop looking at. There must have been a hundred of them.

"We've known each other for a long time," Annemarie said, sitting down on her bed, which had some kind of Asian bedspread and about fifty pillows on it.

"Who?"

She blushed. "Oh—I thought you were looking at the pictures of Julia."

That's when I noticed that her room was covered

with pictures of Julia. Maybe not covered, exactly, but there were a lot of them—the two of them in pajamas, or in the park, or standing together all dressed up outside some theater.

“Knock, knock!” Annemarie’s dad came in with these tiny sausages on a plate. “I’m on deadline,” he said to me. “When I’m on deadline, I cook. Do you like mustard? Try the dipping sauce. I’ll be right back with some apple cider.”

He was back in thirty seconds with a glass of cider for me, but he handed Annemarie what looked like plain water. She didn’t seem to notice.

Annemarie’s rug was spongy and soft, almost like another bed, and I lay down on it. Mustard always makes my lips burn, but I didn’t care. It was worth it.

## *The Winner's Circle*

Mom is getting very good at the speed round. She almost always gets seven words in thirty seconds now, no matter who is giving the clues and who is guessing.

The second part of *The \$20,000 Pyramid* is called the Winner's Circle because you have to win the speed round to get there. In the Winner's Circle, the celebrity partner gives the clues and the contestant has to guess—not words, but categories. So if the celebrity says "tulip, daisy, rose," the contestant would say "types of flowers."

That's an easy one. Some of the categories are harder to figure out, like "things you recite" (poetry, the Pledge of Allegiance) or "things you squeeze" (a tube of toothpaste, someone's hand).

The last category is always incredibly hard to guess—maybe "things you prolong" or "things that are warped." The last category is what stands between the contestants and the big money, and Mom says it doesn't help that some of these celebrity partners are as dumb as a bag of hair.

If Mom wins her first speed round and correctly

guesses all the categories in the Winner's Circle, she'll win ten thousand dollars. If she wins a second speed round, the Winner's Circle is worth fifteen thousand dollars. And if she wins a third time, she'll go for twenty thousand dollars. That's what I mean by big money.

During the speed round, you can point or gesture all you want. If the word is "nose," you can point to your nose. But the rules change in the Winner's Circle. No hand movements of any kind are allowed, which is why I'm tying Richard's arms to my desk chair. I'm using the clove hitch.

"You've got it reversed again," Richard says, watching me. "That end should go *through* the loop. . . . *That's* it—right!"

Mom is looking at us like we're crazy. "Is this really necessary?"

"She has to practice," he tells her. "For when you win the sailboat."

Mom rolls her eyes.

I get my cards ready—I've written everything out in fat block letters so Richard can read them from a distance. I'm going to hold them up one at a time behind Mom's head, where Richard can see them. In the real show, they have these big panels that spin around behind the contestant's head to reveal the next category, but obviously we don't have that kind of technology.

Louisa's lunchtime notes are good—she's even written down what Dick Clark says at the beginning of

every Winner's Circle. He always uses the same words: "Here is your first subject. . . . Go."

We set the egg timer for one minute. Mom has to guess the names of six categories before it goes off. "Here is your first subject," I say, trying to sound like Dick Clark. "Go." I hold up the first card so Richard can see it.

The card says "things you climb." Richard nods and starts giving Mom clues.

"A jungle gym, a mountain . . ."

"High things?" Mom guesses.

Richard shakes his head. "Um . . . stairs . . ."

"Things that go up!" she yells.

He shakes his head again. ". . . a ladder . . ."

"Things you climb!"

"Ding!" I say, and hold up the next card.

"Okay," Richard says. "Paris, cheese, wine . . ."

"Fancy things!" Mom yells. "Romantic things!"

". . . fries . . ."

"French things!"

"Ding!" Next card.

"A pillow," Richard says. "A kitten."

"Soft things?"

". . . a cotton ball . . ."

"Puffy things—fluffy things!"

"Ding!" Next card.

"A baby carriage, a shopping cart . . ."

"Things that carry things?" Mom guesses. "Things with wheels?"

Richard shakes his head, thinks, and says, "A button."

“Things you push!”

“Ding!”

The egg timer goes off. We all look at each other— Mom has only guessed four of the six categories. No one says anything.

“It’s okay,” Mom says finally. “We still have two more weeks.”

## *Things You Keep Secret*

It was a while before I realized that the kid who punched Sal went to our school. We were working on our projects for Main Street, which is a scale model of a city block that we're constructing in the back of our classroom. Mr. Tompkin's class studies buildings every year. Mom says he's a frustrated architect.

"Why is he frustrated?" I asked.

"It's complicated." She said it had to do with the war. "Teachers didn't have to go fight in Vietnam. So a lot of young men who didn't want to fight became teachers."

Instead of what they really wanted to be, she meant.

Jay Stringer, who is a twelve-year-old genius and the head of the Main Street Planning Board, had already built an entire cardboard building, complete with fire escapes and a water tower, and he'd just started two phone booths that he said would have tiny doors that folded open and closed.

Annemarie was busy with her pebbles and her

extra-strength glue, working on a stone wall for the park that Jay Stringer had approved the week before. Julia was making a tinfoil UFO that she said would fly up and down the street on an invisible wire. The UFO hadn't been approved yet, but Julia was going ahead with it anyway. She had written *Proposal Pending* on a piece of paper and taped it to the end of a shoe box full of foil and fishing line. Alice Evans was trying to make fire hydrants out of clay, which so far just looked like pathetic lumps. Having to pee so badly all the time must have made it hard for her to concentrate.

I worked on the diagrams for my playground proposal. My slide looked too steep, and then too flat, and then too messy, because I had erased so much. I would have to ask for another sheet of graph paper, which always made Jay Stringer sigh and roll his eyes, because he brought it from home.

The classroom phone rang, and after he answered it, Mr. Tompkin asked if anyone wanted to go be an office monitor for a while. I raised my hand. The school secretary usually gives office monitors a few Bit-O-Honeys or Hershey's Kisses.

I grabbed my book and rode the banisters down to the first floor, where I found Wheelie at her desk in the main office. She's called the secretary, but as far as I can tell she basically runs the school. And she tries to do it without getting out of her desk chair, which has wheels, which is why everyone calls her Wheelie. She

rolls herself around the office all day by pushing off the floor with her feet. It's like pinball in slow motion.

"The dentist needs a runner," she said to me, kicking herself over to a desk, where she picked up a sheet of paper.

It's weird to go to a school for almost seven years and then one day discover that there's a dentist's office inside it. But that is exactly what happened. Wheelie stood up, and I followed her out of the office and around the corner to a short dead-end hallway I had never thought about before. There was one open door, and on the other side of it was a real dentist's office.

We walked into a waiting area, and I could see into another room with a regular dentist's chair. It had a little white sink attached, and one of those big silver lights over it. The walls were covered with posters about eating apples and plaque and brushing your teeth.

Wheelie called out "Bruce?" and a guy with a short gray beard popped his head into the waiting room. He was wearing one of those green doctor tops and he gave me a big perfect smile.

"Hey there. Are you my first appointment?"

"No, this is Miranda," Wheelie said. "She's your runner. I have the patient list right here." And she handed me the piece of paper.

I saw a bunch of names and classroom numbers. "They go to the dentist at school?" I said. "That's so weird."

Wheelie snatched back the paper and said, "There

are ninety-eight sixth graders in this school. Eighty-nine of them are in attendance today, so if you can't do this politely, you can go straight back to your classroom and I'll find another one for the job."

I felt my face go hot and actually thought I might cry. Sometimes when I'm caught off guard I cry at almost nothing.

The dentist put a hand on my shoulder and smiled again. He was like a professional smiler, which makes sense for a dentist, I guess. "My services don't cost anything, Miranda. Some families don't have the money to pay a dentist. Or they could really use the money for something else."

"Oh." I was thinking I shouldn't let my mother find out about this. She's always complaining about how health care should be free for everyone. I bet she would have me signed up for the dentist at school in no time.

The dentist looked at Wheelie, and she forced a little smile and handed me the list again. Then she fished a warm Bit-O-Honey out of her pocket and gave it to me right there in front of the dentist, even though Louisa had once told me that you might as well whack your own teeth with a wrench as eat Bit-O-Honeys.

I set out with my list. "Don't get the kids all at once," the dentist called after me. "Bring them in twos."

I decided to get the little kids first. I knocked on

their classroom doors and their teachers came hurrying to see my note, and the kids were handed over to me. I walked the two kindergartners to the dentist's office, read my book in the waiting room for a while, and then went back for a second grader and a fourth grader. It was a lot of climbing up and down stairs. Not in a million years could I imagine Wheelie doing this.

When I got back to the dentist with my second drop, one of the kindergartners was already waiting to go back to class. She had this big smiley-tooth sticker on her shirt. I brought her back to her classroom and then went for the last kid on my list, a sixth grader like me: Marcus Heilbroner, in class 6-506. I'd never heard of him.

I knocked on the little window in the classroom door, waving my paper. The teacher, Mr. Anderson, came over, and I showed him my list.

"Marcus," he called, and a boy stood up.

It was the boy who hit Sal. He'd gotten a very short haircut, but he was definitely the same person. My brain started yelling at me: "It's the kid who hit Sal! He goes to your *school*? The kid who hit Sal goes to your *school*?" And meanwhile, the kid had walked over to where I was standing with Mr. Anderson.

"Dentist appointment," Mr. Anderson whispered. Marcus nodded, went back to his desk, picked up a book, and then walked right past me and out the door. I followed a few steps behind him. He knew the way.

\* \* \*

"Welcome back, Marcus," the dentist called from the exam room. "Nice haircut."

The fourth grader was in the big chair, spitting into the little white sink. The other two kids were all stickered up and waiting to go back to class. Marcus sat down heavily and opened his book, which was called *Concepts in Mathematics*.

Mr. Tompkin acted like everyone in our class was part of one big happy math group, but it didn't take much to figure out there was a system: red math books for genius kids like Jay Stringer, orange ones for kids like me who did okay, and yellow ones for kids who left the room twice a week to meet with Ms. Dudley, who did "math support." Marcus's book was different—thick, with a hard cover and small type. So I guessed that even though it was blue—even farther down the rainbow than yellow—it was at least the equivalent of a red.

"You like math, huh?" I said.

He looked up, and I got the strong feeling he didn't know he had ever seen me before, that he didn't remember punching Sal or talking to me about the sun.

"Yeah," he said slowly, like I might be stupid or something. "I like math." And he went back to reading.

I delivered the two waiting kids back to their classes. One of them was holding a shiny paper card shaped like an apple that said she needed a follow-up visit. There was a line for her mom to sign. "Cavity," I thought grimly.

When I got back to the dentist's office, the fourth grader was still in the chair and Marcus was still reading his math book. That was fine with me—I grabbed my book from the table where I'd left it and settled back to read.

"Some people think it's possible, you know," Marcus mumbled.

"What?"

He pointed at my book. "Time travel. Some people think it's possible. Except those ladies lied, at the beginning of the book."

"What?"

"Those ladies in the book—Mrs. What, Mrs. Where, and Mrs. Who."

"Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which," I corrected him.

He shrugged.

"What do you mean, they lied? They never lied." I was getting annoyed. The truth is that I hate to think about other people reading my book. It's like watching someone go through the box of private stuff that I keep under my bed.

"Don't you remember?" He leaned forward in his chair. "They're traveling through time, right? All over the universe, right? And they promise that girl that they'll have her back home five minutes before she left. But they don't."

"How do you know they don't get her home five minutes before she left? I mean, there's no clock or

anything. They leave at night and they get back the same night. Maybe they left at eight-thirty and got home at eight-twenty-five."

He laughed. "You don't need a *clock*. Think. At the beginning of the book, that girl walks through the vegetable garden—"

"Meg."

"Huh?"

"You keep saying 'that girl.' Her name is Meg."

"—so she walks to the far side of the vegetable garden and sits on this stone wall, right? So, she can *see* the garden from where she's sitting and talking with that boy, right? And then those ladies show up and take them away."

"His name is Calvin. And so what if they can see the garden?"

"So the *garden* is where they appear when they get back home at the end of the book. Remember? They land in the broccoli. So if they *had* gotten home five minutes before they left, like those ladies *promised* they would, then they would have seen themselves get back. Before they left."

I put my book down and shook my head. "Think about it. They hadn't even left yet. How could they have gotten back already? They didn't even know for sure whether they *would* get back."

"It doesn't matter whether they knew it. That's got nothing to do with it." He leaned back and shoved his hands in his pockets. "If they land in the broccoli at

eight-twenty-five, they should be in the broccoli at eight-twenty-five. Period."

"That makes no sense," I said. "What if they couldn't do it—save Meg's father and get back in one piece?"

"Then they wouldn't have landed in the broccoli at all. But they did do it, right?"

"Yes, but—the end can't happen before the middle!"

He smiled. "Why can't it?"

"I don't know—it's common sense!"

"Common sense! Have you read *Relativity*? You know—by Einstein?"

I glared at him.

"Einstein says common sense is just habit of thought. It's how we're *used* to thinking about things, but a lot of the time it just gets in the way."

"In the way of *what*?"

"In the way of what's true. I mean, it used to be common sense that the world was flat and the sun revolved around it. But at some point, someone had to reject that assumption, or at least question it."

"Well, obviously somebody did."

"Well, *duh*. Copernicus did! Look, all I'm saying is that at the end of the book, they don't get back five minutes before they left. Or they would have seen themselves get back—before they left."

I gave up. "It was dark in the garden," I said. "Maybe they just couldn't see themselves from where they were sitting."

"I thought of that," he said. "But they would have heard all the yelling, and the dog—"

"My God, what does it *matter*? It's a story—someone made it up! You do realize that, don't you?"

He shrugged. "The story is made up. But time travel is possible. In theory. I've read some articles about it."

"Wow. You really *do* like math, don't you?"

He smiled again. With his supershort hair, his head looked like a perfectly round ball when he smiled. "This is more like physics."

"Fine. You really like *physics*, don't you?"

"Yeah." He picked up my book from the table and flipped through it. "Actually, I had almost this same conversation with my teacher right after I read this. She didn't understand me at first either."

"She? Mr. Anderson is a *he*. You really don't notice much about people, do you?"

"Not Mr. Anderson. This was in second grade. I wrote a book report about it."

"*In second grade?*"

He put the book down. "Yeah. Back in Detroit, where we used to live, till last year. But I don't talk about this kind of stuff anymore. Usually."

"Why not?"

He shot me a look. "People don't want to think about it."

"I can see why," I said. "It makes my head hurt."

"Still, you did better than most people. You're a pretty smart kid."

I rolled my eyes. "Gee, thanks."

"Okay, Marcus," the dentist chirped from the other room. "You're up!"

I watched Marcus slip into the big chair and begin to read his math book again, holding it up with one hand while the dentist worked from the other side. The fourth grader waited for me by the door with his sticker on.

"Miranda, you can go on back to your class," the dentist called. "Marcus is going to be here awhile. He can walk himself upstairs when we're through."

So I picked up my book and hiked back up the stairs with the fourth grader. As we started down the hallway to his classroom, he stopped, and I waited while he peeled the sticker off his shirt, folded it, and stuck it in his pocket.

## *Things That Smell*

For a long time, Colin was just this short kid who seemed to end up in my class every year. In third grade, he and I spent about a week convincing Alice Evans that velour was a kind of animal fur, and she refused to wear it for the rest of the year. But aside from that, we had never hung out together. I'd seen him with his skateboard in the park a few times, and he always let me have a turn on it, but that was all.

And then suddenly he was everywhere. He came downstairs with me and Annemarie at lunch, or yelled "Hold up" and walked to Broadway with us after school to get drinks at Jimmy's sandwich shop.

It was Colin who had the idea to ask Jimmy for a job. I'm pretty sure he was kidding. Colin was always saying weird stuff to people that made you partly proud to know him and partly wish you weren't standing next to him. Attention-seeking, is what Mom would call him.

"Hey," Colin said to Jimmy after school one day in the beginning of November, when we were paying for our Cokes. "You're always alone in here. How about talking to the owner about giving us jobs?"

"I'm the owner," Jimmy said. "And who's 'us'?"

It was me, Annemarie, and Colin standing there. "Us," Colin said. "We could work after school."

Jimmy grabbed a pickle chunk out of the setup tray, which I didn't know the name of yet, and tossed it into his mouth. "I don't need help that late. What about when I open up?"

"We have lunch at ten-forty-five," Colin said. A stupidly early lunch. At our school, the older you get, the stupider your lunch period.

Jimmy nodded. "That works."

I didn't think Jimmy was serious, but Colin said we should show up at lunchtime the next day, just in case.

And it turned out he was serious. The three of us worked during lunch for the rest of that week. We washed a lot of greasy plastic trays, weighed piles of sliced meat (which is as gross as it sounds), stacked up sodas in the refrigerated case, cut tomatoes, and did whatever else Jimmy said to do.

I guess it's obvious that Jimmy was kind of weird, because no normal person would have given forty-minute-a-day jobs to three sixth graders. On our first day, Jimmy spent about five entire minutes pointing to a plastic bank shaped like Fred Flintstone that he had up on a shelf in the back room. "Never touch the bank," he said. "Never."

When I pointed Jimmy's weirdness out to Annemarie, she said, "Yeah, but he's nice-weird, not creepy-weird."

"You think?" I said. "What about the creepy cartoon bank?"

She shrugged. "My dad collects stuff like that too. Lots of people do."

It turned out that Jimmy didn't intend to pay us any money. Instead, he let us each pick a soda from the refrigerator and make a sandwich from the stuff in the setup tray on the counter. The setup tray was just lettuce, tomato, onions, American cheese, Swiss cheese, and pickles. The other food—sliced turkey, ham, roast beef, and salami, a big tub of tuna salad, and meatballs in a plug-in pot—was off-limits.

Every day, we took our cheese sandwiches back to school and ate them at our desks during silent reading period. I sat next to Alice Evans, who never complained about anything, and Annemarie sat next to Jay Stringer, who was oblivious to the world when he was reading, but Colin sat next to Julia.

"Mr. Tompkin!" Julia said on the Friday of our first week at Jimmy's. "Colin is eating his lunch at his desk *again*. And I *despise* the smell of pickles."

Mr. Tompkin looked up over the top of his book, adjusted his toothpick, and said, "Try breathing through your mouth."

## *Things You Don't Forget*

Our apartment door was unlocked when I got home from school that Friday, which was strange. More than strange, actually—it had never happened before. But I figured Mom had probably just forgotten to lock it when she left for work that morning. It sounds stupid now that I say it, but that's what I thought.

Once I was inside, though, I had this sudden fear that I wasn't alone in the apartment. I dropped my knapsack in the hall and ran down to Sal's. He came to the door but opened it just enough to squeeze his body into the crack.

"My door was unlocked," I said. "Doesn't that seem weird?"

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe you forgot to lock it?" He stayed there wedged into the doorway. Definitely not inviting me in.

"Yeah, probably." I could hear the television behind him, blaring a commercial.

"Okay." He looked up at the ceiling behind me.

I felt like an idiot. "Okay. See you later."

I went back upstairs, made myself a bowl of Cheerios with an inch of sugar on top, and turned on the television. Mom walked in around six.

"You forgot to lock the door this morning," I said.

"What? No, I didn't."

"Well, it wasn't locked when I got home today."

"It wasn't?" She started walking from room to room, opening drawers and closet doors, and I followed her.

"It can't be," she said. "I would never forget to lock the door."

Nothing seemed out of place. She got to the kitchen and stopped. "I guess I don't specifically *remember* locking it, but I know I would never *not* lock it. . . ."

She filled the spaghetti pot with water, and we talked about other stuff while she set the table and I peeled some carrots, but every once in a while she would interrupt herself to say, "How could I have forgotten to lock the door?"

We were halfway through dinner when she suddenly stood up and walked out of the apartment.

"Mom?"

I found her standing in the stairwell, peering into the nozzle of the fire hose. "I knew it," she said. "I would never forget to lock the door. Never."

The key was gone. We searched every room all over again but couldn't find a single thing missing.

"It makes no sense," Mom said, standing over her

jewelry box and staring down at the gold bracelets that had belonged to her mother. "Why steal the key, unlock the door, and not take anything?"

That was Friday afternoon. I found your first note Monday morning.

## *The First Note*

Your first note was written in tiny words on a little square of stiff paper that felt like it had once gotten wet. I was packing my knapsack for school when I noticed it sticking out of my library book—which was about a village of squirrels, or maybe it was mice. I had not bothered to read it.

M,

This is hard. Harder than I expected, even with your help. But I have been practicing, and my preparations go well. I am coming to save your friend's life, and my own.

I ask two favors.

First, you must write me a letter.

Second, please remember to mention the location of your house key.

The trip is a difficult one. I will not be myself when I reach you.

I was freaked. Mom was freaked. She took the morning off and had the locks changed, even though she

said that “M” could be anyone, that this had nothing to do with our missing key, and that the note could have been stuck in that book by anyone, years ago probably, and we’d never know why.

“Isn’t it weird, though?” I said. “Our key was just stolen on Friday, and now on Monday we find a note asking where our key is?”

“It is weird,” Mom said. She put her hands on her hips. “But if you think about it, one thing really can’t have anything to do with the other. Someone *with* the key wouldn’t have to *ask* where the key is. It makes no sense.”

She was right, of course. It was backward. But somewhere in my head a tiny bell started ringing. I didn’t even notice it at first.

## *Things on a Slant*

Our second week, Jimmy said we could start serving customers.

"But first you have to learn the V-cut," he told us. "Very important." Except he said "Velly important," stretched his eyelids back with two fingers, and bowed down low—it was the classic fake-Chinese act. I had never seen a grown-up do it before. If Mom had been there, she would have whacked him on the head with a plastic tray.

"The V-what?" Colin said.

The V-cut was Jimmy's special way of cutting the sandwich rolls. "Always a forty-five-degree angle," he said. He was very serious about it, sawing down one side of the roll and then carefully sliding the knife out and inserting it in the other side.

The top of the bread was supposed to lift off in a perfect "V," which was why Jimmy called it a V-cut. He gave us each a roll and watched while we tried it. Annemarie's was perfect. Colin's was passable. Mine was a disaster. When I lifted the top off, flaps of bread

guts were hanging down, and Jimmy said it looked “unappealing.”

“You can use that for your own sandwich,” he said, making a face at my shredded roll. “Try again tomorrow.”

So Annemarie and Colin got to put on aprons, stand behind the counter, and help customers while I counted the bread order in the back and went to the A&P for napkins. Annemarie said later that Jimmy should talk, that *he* looked “unappealing” in his stretched-out white T-shirt with yellow underarm stains. That made me feel a little better, but not much.

As soon as Colin got his apron on, Jimmy started calling him “lady”—“Hey, lady, get some more mayo on there.” “Hey, lady, pass me those trays.” Colin just laughed, which is how Colin is.

Every day that week, I cut my roll as soon as I got to the store, and every day Jimmy shook his head no. Colin and Annemarie worked together behind the counter—Jimmy had started calling them the counter couple and making disgusting kissing noises at them when he walked by, which made Annemarie turn red, while Colin just smiled like a goofball.

Jimmy said that while I practiced my V-cut I could be in charge of hot chocolate. He used those Swiss Miss instant hot chocolate packets where you just add water. But no one ever ordered it. And I don’t think he really even looked at my rolls after the first couple of days. Anyway, they were only getting worse.

## *White Things*

The first time I brought Annemarie home to our apartment after school, I wished for two things. First, I wished that the boys wouldn't be in front of the garage. They'd just recently started saying things to me, different things, some of which included the words "sweet" and "baby." Mom said this happened to girls after a certain age, and that what the boys wanted was a reaction, any kind of reaction.

"Don't laugh, don't call them jerks, don't take off running," she said. "Do nothing. Act as if they're invisible."

My second wish was that the laughing man would be gone, or asleep, or at least distracted by someone or something else when we walked by.

We got to Broadway. "Want to stop for a soda?" I said.

Annemarie shrugged. "No thanks."

We started toward Amsterdam. I tried to follow Annemarie's conversation but mostly just squinted to see down the block. By some miracle, the boys weren't out in front of the garage. I offered up a silent thank-

you to the universe. And then we started across the street to my corner.

"Angel!" the laughing man called out. He was looking right at Annemarie, and I couldn't help thinking that, depending on your idea of heaven, Annemarie might appear to be something like an angel. Her coat was pure white and went all the way down to her toes, even though it was only the middle of November and really not all that cold. How her dad kept that coat so clean is still a mystery to me.

"Angel!"

I laughed. I was trying to show Annemarie how absolutely downright *funny* it was to have a weird homeless guy here on my corner. My very own weird homeless guy!

"Ha. 'Angel,'" I said. "That's a new one."

"Angel!" he called out again. And now he was *pointing* at her.

"Is he pointing at me?" Annemarie asked, slowing down.

"No," I said, steering her as far from the laughing man as I could without pushing her into crosstown traffic.

Upstairs, a weird thing happened. After living there almost every day of my life, I saw our apartment as if it were the first time. I noticed all sorts of things that were usually invisible to me: the stuffing coming out of the sofa in two places, the burns from Mr. Nunzi's cigarettes, the big flakes of paint hanging off the ceiling,

and the black spot next to the radiator where dripping water had stained the wood floor.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

In the bathroom, I stared at the white tile hexagons on the floor and saw nothing but the crud in between them. I hid Mom's twenty-year-old jar of Vaseline in the medicine cabinet that's been painted so many times it won't close anymore.

"I like your room," Annemarie called to me when I came out of the bathroom. I turned slowly and looked into my room, wondering what horror I would see in it. But it actually looked okay: no curtains or carpeting, but normal stuff, a normal room with a friend sitting on the bed, which had just one pillow. I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

When Mom got home, we walked Annemarie back to her building. Luckily, the laughing man was under his mailbox by that time. I wanted Mom to be surprised when Annemarie's doorman called me Miss Miranda, but she just smiled at him.

I could tell that Annemarie's dad was charmed by Mom—people always like her. He offered us some kind of powdered-sugar dough balls he had in the kitchen, and Mom ate two of them while I said no thank you, that I hadn't had my dinner yet, which made Mom laugh and cough up powdered sugar, which made Annemarie's dad laugh. I looked at the sugar on the front of her T-shirt and thought that if she had the slightest idea what she looked like, she wouldn't be laughing at all.

## *The Second Note*

The sandwich rolls are delivered to Jimmy's store early in the morning, before he gets there. I still see the tall paper bag leaning against his locked door on my way to school every day. I haven't put one foot inside Jimmy's place since December, but I look for that bag out of habit, and when I see it, I always think I can smell the bread inside, which I know is just a memory.

Last November, I counted Jimmy's bread delivery at lunch every day, pulling the rolls out by twos and dropping them into the previous day's empty bag as I went. I remember finding your second note about halfway down, on a Monday.

Same weird tiny handwriting, same crispy paper. But this one started with my name.

Miranda:

Your letter must tell a story—a true story. You cannot begin now, as most of it has not yet taken place. And even afterward, there is no hurry. But do not wait so long

that your memory fades. I require as much detail as you can provide. The trip is a difficult one, and I must ask my favors while my mind is sound.

A postscript: I know you have shared my first note. I ask you not to share the others. Please. I do not ask this for myself.

I read the note over and over. But I have to tell you that I had no idea what any of it meant, until later. And I have to tell you something else, too: I was scared. You scared the hell out of me.

"You counting those rolls or memorizing them?" Jimmy was behind the counter, running a hunk of ham back and forth in the electric slicer really fast, the way he liked to.

I stuffed the note in my pocket and started counting bread again, but I'd lost my place and I had to start all over.

A few minutes later, a delivery truck pulled up in front of the store and Jimmy went out to talk to the driver.

"Hey," Colin said as soon as the door had closed behind Jimmy, "let's find out what's in the Fred Flintstone bank."

"No way," Annemarie said. "You're crazy."

"You're the lookout," I told her, following Colin into the back room. He had the bank in his hands already. He shook it, but it made almost no noise.

"You guys," Annemarie said. "Don't."

"We're just looking at it!" I called back. "Hurry," I said to Colin. He was trying to get the rubber stopper out of the bottom of the bank.

"Let me try," I whispered.

"No," he said, "I've got it." And the stopper was in his hand.

We bumped foreheads trying to see into the hole at the same time, and then left our heads pressed together, which was something I hadn't expected to do. I couldn't quite see Colin's face from this perspective, but I felt him smile.

"Cool," he said. "It's full of two-dollar bills!"

He was right. The bank was practically stuffed with two-dollar bills, folded into little triangle shapes, with the "2's" showing on the sides.

"You guys, he's *coming*," Annemarie sounded panicked. We pulled our heads apart and Colin shoved the rubber stopper back in. I was out front by the time Jimmy held the door open for the delivery guy, who had a stack of sodas loaded onto a hand truck.

"Hey, lady!" Jimmy called. "I need you. This is man's work."

"Sorry." Colin came strolling out of the back in his apron. "Bathroom break."

Annemarie smiled at me while Colin and Jimmy were busy loading the soda into the big refrigerated case by the door.

"You're nuts," she said. "You know that, right?"

I could still feel the spot where Colin's head had

pressed up against mine. "I know. It was kind of stupid."

We walked back to school with Colin between us. He was zigzagging and bumping his shoulders against ours, saying, "Boing! Five points. Boing! Ten points," while we both laughed like idiots.

## *Things You Push Away*

"Ready?" Richard asks Mom. We are practicing even more now. He sits in a chair opposite her. I'm the timekeeper. Mom closes her eyes, and I know that she is lifting a corner of her veil. She nods, and we begin.

Mom says each of us has a veil between ourselves and the rest of the world, like a bride wears on her wedding day, except this kind of veil is invisible. We walk around happily with these invisible veils hanging down over our faces. The world is kind of blurry, and we like it that way.

But sometimes our veils are pushed away for a few moments, like there's a wind blowing it from our faces. And when the veil lifts, we can see the world as it really is, just for those few seconds before it settles down again. We see all the beauty, and cruelty, and sadness, and love. But mostly we are happy not to. Some people learn to lift the veil themselves. Then they don't have to depend on the wind anymore.

She doesn't mean that it's a real veil. And it isn't about magic, or some idea that maybe God is looking right at you, or an angel is sitting next to you, or

anything like that. Mom doesn't think in those ways. It's just her way of saying that most of the time, people get distracted by little stuff and ignore the big stuff.

To play in the Winner's Circle, Mom has to get herself in a certain frame of mind. She says it's sort of like lifting one little corner of her veil, enough to see more than usual but not so much that she gets totally distracted by life, death, and the beauty of it all. She has to open her mind, she says, so that when the clues start coming, she can see the thread that joins them. Of course, if her celebrity is as dumb as a bag of hair, it's hopeless.

I've thought a lot about those veils. I wonder if, every once in a while, someone is born without one. Someone who sees the big stuff all the time. Like maybe you.

## *Things You Count*

Right before Thanksgiving, Colin and Annemarie were behind the counter weighing a slimy heap of sliced turkey into quarter-pound piles separated by pieces of waxed paper. Jimmy said they should do a whole week's worth.

"Won't it go bad?" Annemarie asked.

"Nah. Stuff's full of preservatives."

Colin licked his lips and said, "Yum, yum. Chemical turkey."

"Shut it," Jimmy said.

For once, I was happy to be counting the rolls.

Now that he had us, Jimmy seemed to have nothing to do. He sat on one of the stools bolted to the floor in front of the big front window and watched me with his arms crossed over his chest, his hands tucked under his yellow-stained armpits. He had already rejected my V-cut for the day—it was waiting for me on a tray behind Annemarie, getting dry as usual. Luckily, Jimmy didn't limit our use of mayonnaise.

"Lookie," Jimmy said, pointing his chin toward the window. "There goes one of your little friends."

On the other side of the street, Julia was walking alone, wearing her orange suede knapsack and an orange suede headband that matched. Matching suede knapsacks and headbands were probably all the rage in Switzerland, I thought.

"You mean Swiss Miss?" I grabbed two rolls and dropped them into the bag at my feet. "She's not my friend. Not even close."

He smiled slowly. "Swiss Miss. That's a good one." He stared outside for another minute and then stood up. "You're funny, you know that?"

I shrugged, still counting, but happy. A compliment from Jimmy was a rare thing. When I finished, I folded the top of the bag and lugged it to its spot behind the counter. Jimmy had disappeared into the back. Annemarie was giggling at something Colin had said.

Ever since our foreheads had touched, looking at Colin made me feel strange. But good-strange, not creepy-strange.

"Eighty!" I called out to Jimmy. Right on the nose.

"Better luck next time!" he yelled back.

Colin looked at me and grinned, causing my stomach to sort of float inside my body. "He's dying for the bread order to come up short, you know. You should throw a roll in the trash one day, just to make him happy."

"Don't listen to him, Miranda," Annemarie said.  
"He's just trying to get you in trouble again."

But while she was talking to me, she was looking at Colin, and her expression was funny, as if her stomach might be floating too.

## *Messy Things*

Annemarie and I stopped in the fourth-floor bathroom before going back to class after lunch. She said she wanted to wash her hands again after all that turkey.

"Today was fun," she said, looking at herself in the mirror and combing her hair with her fingers. "I wish we got more than forty minutes for lunch."

"I hate counting bread," I said. "It's boring."

She laughed. "At least your hands don't smell like chemical turkey."

At least you get to goof around behind the counter with Colin, I thought. I'm always running to the store, cleaning up some gunk, or stuck talking to Mr. Yellow Stains.

"Let's go," I said. "I'm starving."

Julia was standing right outside our classroom, almost as if she was waiting for us.

"Oh, no!" She sighed deeply and pointed at Annemarie's arm. "Oh, Annemarie, your turquoise sweater. It's your favorite. Poor you!"

And Mom thought I was dramatic.

Annemarie looked down at the hem of her sweater, which had some mustard on it. I had no idea it was her favorite.

"It'll come out," Annemarie said. "My dad will get it out."

Julia leaned against the wall and adjusted her headband. "What I don't understand is why you're working at all. It's not like you need the money." Here she stopped to glance at me. "And no offense, but that place is kind of disgusting. I saw a roach there once."

"I like it there," Annemarie said. "It's actually pretty fun."

"That guy who works there is gross."

"He's not gross!" I said. "And he doesn't"—I made air quotes—"‘work there.’ He owns the store."

"We don't get paid," Annemarie said softly. "It's just the sandwiches."

"And sodas," I said, waving my Sprite.

"Right," Julia said, talking just to Annemarie, as if I didn't exist. "Like you're supposed to be eating sandwiches and drinking soda."

Annemarie's face folded up a little. "It's fine."

"Fine," Julia said. "Forget it."

Mr. Tompkin came to the door. "Why aren't you three inside? Silent reading period started five minutes ago."

As we walked in behind Julia, I whispered to Annemarie, "No wonder you don't want to be friends with her anymore. She's so rude to you."

For a second Annemarie didn't say anything. Then

she mumbled, "Yeah, sometimes," and we separated to go to our desks.

Mr. Tompkin had left a book on my desk. He was always trying to get me to read something new. This one had a picture of a spunky-looking girl on the cover, and some buildings behind her. I pushed the spunky girl aside, pulled my book out of my desk, and opened it randomly to see where I would land.

Meg was on the planet Camazotz where all these little boys are in front of their matching houses, bouncing their matching balls. All the balls hit the ground at exactly the same moment, every time. Then all the boys turn at the same second and go back into their identical houses. Except for this one boy. He's outside all alone, and his ball rolls into the street, and then his mother comes out looking all nervous and carries him into the house.

I was thinking about how much Mr. Tompkin would hate the idea of a place where all the houses look exactly the same when something stung me hard behind the ear. I jerked my head up and saw Julia laughing silently over her book. I looked down on the floor and saw the rubber band she had shot at me. At my head.

I'd thought we were just irritating each other, but I was wrong. This was war.

## *Invisible Things*

The next time I saw Marcus, I was absolutely sure he would remember me. I was in the main office, because Mr. Tompkin had sent me down to pick up some mimeographs.

"Why you kids need diagrams of the water system is beyond me," Wheelie said as she handed them to me from her chair.

"They're for Main Street," I told her. "We're trying to make working hydrants."

"Well, that may be the silliest thing I've ever heard," she said, waving me away.

I love the smell of new copies. Mom says I have an attraction to dangerous smells, her main example being the fact that I love to stand in a warm cloud of dry-cleaner exhaust and take deep breaths. There is something very food-but-not-food about the smell of dry-cleaner exhaust. She always pulls me away and says that she's sure in ten years we'll find out that it causes horrible diseases.

I was walking back toward the stairs, quietly

inhaling the smell of the thirty-two freshly copied diagrams of the New York City water system, when Marcus came out of the stairwell reading a book.

"Hey," I said, but he walked right by me, past the main office, and around the corner to where the dentist's office is.

Back in class, I passed out the diagrams like Mr. Tompkin asked me to. I accidentally ripped Julia's before I gave it to her, and accidentally crumpled it a little too. Alice Evans was squirming in her chair like she was doing a hula dance. I rolled my eyes. No wonder she was the only sixth grader who had to bring an extra set of clothes to school.

## *Things You Hold On To*

According to Jimmy, there's a two-dollar bill in circulation for every twelve one-dollar bills.

"But people hold on to them," he said while I was putting on my jacket to go to the store. The lightbulb over the sink in the back room had burned out, and Jimmy didn't have any extras. "People think two-dollar bills are special. That's why you don't see them around much."

Yeah, I thought. People like you! But I kept my face blank, because I wasn't supposed to know what was in his Fred Flintstone bank.

"They hate 'em over at the A&P, though. No space in a cash register for a two-dollar bill. They gotta pull out the tray and store them underneath. And they always forget they're in there. That's why you have to ask for them."

"Okay," I said. "I'll ask."

Annemarie was behind the counter with her apron on, looking happy. Some kids from school had come in—paying customers—and she was writing their

names in mayonnaise on their sandwiches before pressing her perfect V-tops down onto them. Colin was next to her, doing the same. Annemarie gestured me over. I noticed that she was either very warm or she was wearing makeup.

"I'm going to ask Jimmy if we can have meatballs for lunch," she whispered. "Since it's Thanksgiving tomorrow."

"Great," I said, even though I didn't find those meatballs any more appealing than my usual cheese sandwich. They just sat there in the pot, day after day. "I'll be back in a minute," I told her. "If anyone orders hot chocolate, tell them to wait for me."

There were no two-dollar bills at the A&P, and when I got back to Jimmy's with the lightbulbs, the kids were gone and Julia herself was standing in front of the sandwich counter. Annemarie and Colin had started making their lunches already. Jimmy had said no, I guessed, to the meatballs, because they were picking through the cheese.

Julia, who was pretending I hadn't just walked in, seemed to be in the middle of a long speech about how American cheese wasn't even real cheese, strictly speaking. I saw her long fingers gesturing toward the not-cheese, and I knew instantly that her V-cut would be flawless, that by Monday she would be behind that counter with Annemarie and Colin, and that her apron, the same kind that looked gray and baggy on

everyone else, would somehow be perfect on her. She would have a way of tucking it up to fit, some trick a waiter in Paris had taught her.

Then Jimmy came out from the back room holding a stack of dripping plastic trays. "You." He pointed at Julia with an armful of trays. "Out. I already told you once."

Julia snatched her hand back from the setup tray. Annemarie flushed. "We're just talking," Annemarie said. "There's no customers here now."

"Actually, I'm a customer," Julia said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I came to buy a sandwich. I have money." She stuck out one pretty boot so that the green leather tip pointed at the ceiling.

"Out," Jimmy said, practically growling. "Now."

After she left, I pretended along with Annemarie that Jimmy was a little bit crazy, but as we walked back to school with our cheese-and-lettuce sandwiches, I carried a new warm feeling inside. Jimmy could be a grouch, but he saw right through Julia, just like I did.

## *Salty Things*

On the Friday after Thanksgiving there was no school, but Mom still had to go to work. I'd been trying hard not to think about them, but I spent a good chunk of that morning worrying about your notes. I held one in each hand and read them over and over. The part about writing a letter wasn't too scary. The scary parts were "I'm coming to save your friend's life" and "Oh, by the way, where do you keep your keys?" and "P.S. Don't ever tell anyone about any of this." Seeing my name written out on the second note was also pretty creepy, because I was still trying to pretend the notes weren't really meant for me. And also where you wrote "I won't be myself when I reach you." I didn't like that part at all.

Come to think of it, there were a lot of scary parts.

After a long time, I put the notes away and turned on the television. I had been watching TV for two hours when I heard Louisa's regular knock.

"Potato-chip drop," she said when I opened the door. She was in her uniform, holding up a plastic bag.

Louisa is always bringing Mom food from the

nursing home where she works. She doesn't steal—it's leftovers from lunch, mostly little bags of potato chips or animal cookies. The health department says that once something has been served on a tray, it has to be thrown away even if no one touched it. So Louisa takes all the little bags home and gives them to Mom, who brings them to the pregnant-jailbird "parenting group" she runs downtown.

Once a month, Mom takes the subway down to this actual jail and talks to criminal pregnant women about what to expect after they have their babies. They all think she's some kind of saint for bringing them potato chips and animal cookies. Mom says that jail is a hard place, and that it can make people hard, too.

"It changes them," she told me once. "Jail stops them from becoming who they might grow to be."

"Isn't that the whole idea?" I asked. "It's supposed to stop them from being criminals!"

She shook her head. "That's not what I mean. A lot of people make bad mistakes. But being in jail can make them feel like a mistake is all they are. Like they aren't even people anymore."

Her bringing the chips and cookies is supposed to help somehow. It's not really the cookies, she says. It's the fact that someone brings them.

I took the plastic bag from Louisa.

She smiled at me. "You know what? You're getting tall."

I leaned against the doorway. "You think?"

She nodded. "I miss you, Miranda." It was the first time either of us had said anything about the fact that I was never at her apartment anymore.

"Yeah."

Her saying she missed me made me feel sort of hopeless for some reason. When she left, I lay on the couch with the TV off and my eyes closed, and I listened for Sal's basketball. Hearing it made me feel better, for once. That sound was like the last thread connecting us.

Mom didn't talk much at dinner that night. She was still in her work clothes, a denim skirt and a T-shirt with a picture of a coffee cup on it and the words *Get Your Own* underneath. Richard had brought strawberries over for dessert.

"Darn it." Mom threw down a strawberry. "SSO's again."

"I bet the grapes are delicious." I gave her a fake smile.

"Don't start, Miranda. I had a lousy day."

"You did?" Richard's eyebrows went up. "I didn't know that."

"How would you know?" Mom asked. "You were in court all day. It isn't much to you if the copier breaks, is it? Did anyone ask *you* to type three copies of a sixteen-page document?"

Richard shrugged. "But you're done now. It's over. Why let it wreck your whole evening?"

"Oh, stuff it, Mr. Perfect!" Mom stomped off to her

bedroom without even giving him a chance to tap his right knee.

Richard looked at me. "What did the zero say to the eight?"

I rolled my eyes. "Nice belt." He'd been telling me that one for at least a year.

Later, Mom stacked the dishes in the sink, turned the faucet on, and went to change her clothes. I stood there and watched as the greasy saucepan overflowed onto the plates underneath. The oily water reflected the light and made the whole thing look like a sparkly fountain. Sometimes I can stare at something like that for a long time.

Mom came back wearing sweatpants and started washing the dishes. I opened my math workbook at the kitchen table. A minute later, Richard came in and said, "Didn't I leave that extra pair of work shoes here a few months ago? I know they were in the closet, but I can't find them anywhere."

Mom's head snapped up. "I knew it. I just knew it."

We had been robbed after all.

## *Things You Pretend*

The Monday after Thanksgiving we were stuck in the school cafeteria for lunch. The naked guy was back, running down Broadway, and they wouldn't let any kids out of the building.

"Kind of cold out to be running around in your birthday suit!" Colin called over to us on his way to a table of boys. Annemarie giggled. I could see Sal over there. He'd glanced toward us once, but acted like he didn't see me.

I watched the boys for a few seconds, all of them trying to talk louder than the other ones. Sal was doing it, too—every once in a while I could hear his voice on top, and it reminded me of this game we used to play on the crosstown bus on our way to the city pool. Sal would be holding on to the silver bus pole, and I would grab the pole right above his hand. Then he'd move his hand so it was right above mine, and I'd put mine on top of his, until we were on our tiptoes, holding on to the pole near the very top, and usually some grown-up would say to stop fooling around, couldn't we see the bus was crowded and

one of us was going to fall and knock somebody over.

Annemarie picked at her food. The worst part of being stuck inside for lunch was that we had to get school lunch, which was gross.

"I wonder if Jimmy will count the bread order himself," I said. "I bet he won't. I think he just likes to make me do it."

She nodded. "To give you something to do."

"Gee, thanks." I threw my milk straw at her.

"Hey! I didn't mean—"

"Sure you didn't!"

Then her smile faded. She was still looking at me, but something had changed, like a switch had been flicked inside her. Like she was still there but was doing something else in her head.

"Annemarie?"

"Don't." Julia was standing behind me with a carton of milk in her hand. Before I could say anything, she slid onto the bench next to me, still looking right at Annemarie. "She'll be fine in a minute."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Just wait." Julia hadn't even glanced at me. Her eyes never left Annemarie's face.

Annemarie moved her head a little. She put her arm down on the table, blinked, and said, "What?" as if she had maybe missed something I'd just said.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Julia hit my knee with hers under the table. "Don't ask her questions," she hissed.

Annemarie noticed her just then. "Hi, Julia," she said, and a smile came over her face.

Julia smiled back. "Hi." Then she turned to me. "So, Miranda, how's the playground going? For Main Street, I mean."

She wanted to talk about Main Street? Now?

Her eyes held mine. "I heard your proposal was approved. Congratulations."

*Congratulations?* "Uh, thanks."

"Will there be swings? How are you going to make them?"

It was dawning on me that Julia was showing me something, teaching me how to help Annemarie.

"Paper clips," I told Julia. "I'm using paper clips to make the chains for the swings, and I'm going to cut pieces of rubber tire for the seats."

Julia was nodding. "That sounds great," she said. I could almost imagine us being friends, having this conversation for real.

"What else?" she asked.

"What?"

She looked annoyed. I wasn't catching on fast enough. "For the playground. What else?"

"Oh—well, seesaws. Definitely seesaws."

Then Annemarie spoke. "You know, balsa wood would be perfect for the seesaws—it's really easy to cut. I think my dad might even have some."

"Really?" I said. "That would be great. We could paint them orange, just like the ones in Riverside Park."

"Yes!" Annemarie said. "We can start them at my

house—maybe even today if you want.” She looked at Julia. “Want to come? And start Miranda’s seesaws?”

Before Julia could answer, I said “There’s no rush. I just got the plans approved. We can start next week. Anyway, Annemarie, you were coming to my house today, remember?”

I felt Julia pulling away. “See you guys,” she said, and stood up.

“Bye!” I said.

Annemarie looked up at her. “Bye, Julia.”

A few minutes later, the PA system crackled to life and Annemarie was called to the nurse’s office.

Annemarie shrugged, smiled, and walked away, saying, “See you in a minute.”

But she didn’t come back.

## *Things That Crack*

Outside our classroom, Julia waited for me with her hands on her hips. "God, you're an idiot. You're an idiot, you know that?"

"I'm an idiot?"

"She's been eating all that bread at that stupid job you got her. She's not supposed to eat any of that stuff. Idiot."

"I didn't get her the stupid . . . I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"It's her epilepsy, idiot. You total idiot. Her dad has her on this special diet. He makes her special food. She's not supposed to eat bread, or drink soda."

"She's not?"

"No, she's not. Idiot. And by the way, what's your problem with me, anyway? I'd really like to know."

"What?"

"Your problem. With me. What is it?"

"Besides the fact that you've called me an idiot six times in the last minute? Besides the fact that you shot a rubber band at my head?"

She waved all that away as if I had mentioned some

silly detail. "I'm talking about way before that. You've hated me forever. You've been giving me dirty looks since like third grade! Are you going to pretend you haven't?"

I stared at her. Some feeling had started in my stomach and was traveling up to my face, and I knew that when it got there I would turn bright red and hear the ocean, which is what happens when I get put on the spot. If I don't cry, I turn red and hear the ocean. It's a lose-lose situation.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"I have no idea," she said. "I really don't. But a person knows when someone hates her—at least, I do!" She flung her arm down and her little silver watch flew off her wrist and hit the floor with a crack. A very sharp, final-sounding sort of crack.

Her precious watch. I'm not proud of this now, but that sound, which echoed in the tiled hallway, made me really happy. I sucked my bottom lip so that I wouldn't smile.

Julia bent down to pick up the watch. I thought she would start to screech, but she just flipped it over in her hand and looked at it. A web of tiny cracks covered the face like a cobweb.

"Oh, great." She puffed out her cheeks and exhaled slowly. "This whole day just stinks," she said, and she walked away.

On the way home I found myself walking half a block behind Sal again. I'd learned not to run and catch up to him—he would only look at his sneakers and not talk.

So I watched him bobbing along in his navy blue knit hat, his head going from side to side a little, like it always does when he walks. I think he thought that hat looked tough the way he had it pulled down to his eyebrows.

Then Marcus came out of his dented front door next to the garage, wearing that green army coat he always wore. He started walking down the block—toward Sal.

Even half a block behind him, I could see Sal's body hunch and slow down. I knew what he was doing. He was looking for a way out. Should he pretend he needed to cross the street all of a sudden? That he had just remembered something he needed to buy at Belle's? But it was a little late for that—Marcus was almost in front of him.

I could have called out to Sal at that moment. It would have been easy. He would have had an excuse to turn around and start walking away from Marcus. And then Marcus might have stopped to talk to me for a minute, and Sal would have seen that it was all okay. He could have dropped his fear of Marcus right then and there. I've thought about this a lot, because I realize it would have changed everything that happened later.

Instead I watched. And what Sal did was squat down and pretend to tie his shoe. It was a plea for mercy. Dropping to tie your shoe was an I-can't-fight, I-can't-run, I-bow-down-before-you sort of a move. Plus, just in case some hitting did occur, it protected important body parts. I kept walking while Sal crouched there on the sidewalk and Marcus walked right by without even noticing him. And then Marcus walked right by me.

## *Things Left Behind*

"Guess what?" Annemarie said when I called her at home that night to see if she was okay. "Someone left a rose on our doormat."

"For you?"

"I don't know . . . maybe." Of course it was for her. Who else would it be for?

"Was there anything with it? A card?"

"No. Just the rose." Her voice sounded all thin and excited. "Weird, huh? I wonder—"

"Hey, can I ask you something? Are you not supposed to eat bread?"

She was quiet.

"It's not a big deal, just that Julia said—"

"No," she interrupted. "It is sort of a big deal. I should have told you. I have epilepsy—"

"Oh."

"—and I'm not supposed to eat bread or starches. It's this crazy diet my dad read about, but it actually works. I'm usually fine. People don't even really know I have it, because for years I've hardly had any seizures at all."

"Is that what happened today?"

"Yeah. I sort of took a break from my diet. It's been nice, working at Jimmy's with you guys, eating whatever I want and not having anyone look at me funny or lecture me."

Someone had lectured her, though. Julia had.

"You can still work at Jimmy's," I said. "Just don't eat his crummy food."

She laughed. "I know. Actually, my dad makes me a lunch every day. I've been throwing it in the garbage on the way to school. He's pretty mad."

That was hard to imagine.

"Anyway, my mother found this rose on our doormat when she got home from work. It's like this really perfect-looking rose. Weird, huh?"

I let her talk about it a little more, about who might have left it, and why. I knew she wanted me to say that Colin probably did it, but I just couldn't make myself say the words.

## *The Third Note*

The next morning was the first really cold day of December.

"You need the jacket with the hood," Mom rasped from her bed. Her voice never sounded normal until after coffee. "Look in the front closet." She seemed to think that it was really helpful to lie in bed, listening to the radio and calling out weather reports. I couldn't help thinking about how, in my book, Meg's mother had French toast waiting for Meg in the morning. She was a single mom too, with Meg's dad being held prisoner halfway across the universe.

I found the coat, still streaked with gray from last year's dirty snow, and put it on. A little stiff, but it seemed to fit okay.

"Where are my gloves?" I called.

"No idea. Sorry."

"Can I take some money?"

"Coat pocket."

I felt around in her coat and found a five-dollar bill and three singles in one pocket and her striped

scarf rolled up in the other. I grabbed the singles and the scarf.

“Bye!”

The laughing man was still asleep with his head under the mailbox. He had found some cardboard to put underneath him. Still, he must have been freezing. Some mornings, I'd seen kids banging on the mailbox and yelling, “Wake up, Kicker!” I hoped no one would do that today.

I watched my breath billowing in front of me and racewalked toward school. The sun was out but had no warmth yet. I shoved my hands in my pockets and felt a bunch of old tissues. Yuck. And the three dollars. And something else, a little piece of paper, folded in half.

I pulled it out.

I recognized your tiny handwriting right away, all wobbly and with those weird loops you put on top of your “t’s” and “l’s.”

You will want proof.

3 p.m. today: Colin’s knapsack.

Christmas Day: Tesser well.

April 27th: Studio TV-15.

P.S. Yawns do serve a purpose. They cool the brain by bringing air high into the nasal passage, which has the effect of increasing alertness.

The note was on the same dried-up paper as the first two.

3 p.m. today: *Colin's knapsack*. I had absolutely no idea what that could mean, or how you knew Colin.

*Christmas Day: Tesser well*. This one had something to do with my book. To tesser meant to travel, through space or time or both. It was how Meg got to Camazotz, the planet where her father was held prisoner. But it had nothing to do with Christmas, as far as I knew.

*April 27th: Studio TV-15*. April 27 was Richard's birthday. But of course back in December I had never heard of Studio TV-15, since Mom didn't get her postcard from *The \$20,000 Pyramid* until a couple of weeks ago.

I think it was the "P.S." that freaked me out most. I thought of the day Sal got punched, when I had carried my *Mysteries of Science* poster home.

I read the note over and over, until my hands were frozen and I was forced to put them back in my pockets. It made no sense. The only thing it really helped me understand was that you were watching me. And I had no idea who you were. Or what you wanted.

I was almost to the garage when Marcus came out of his door right in front of me. He had on his regular green army jacket, but he was wearing gloves and had a hat pulled down over his ears. I expected him to ignore me like he always did, but instead he waved and started walking along next to me.