

The Elinormal Saga
the Adventures of Elinor Malcolm



Kate McCarroll Moore

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A City of Light imprint

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MARC R SALE

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Book 1

Elinormal





Part One

NOT FOR SALE

"Dancing is just discovery, discovery, discovery."

~ Martha Graham



ONE

Prelude

*M*y mother slapped the newspaper down on the kitchen counter.

“Well, will you look at that, Elinor? We won!”

I looked up from my cereal, to see what she was so excited about. She usually just paced the kitchen with her Bluetooth, talking to somebody in China or New Jersey – not to me.

She waved the paper in front of me. “Look – we made the front page!”

I squinted to see, but at first all I could see was a big blob of red in the middle of the page. The blob came into focus. The Blob. Was. Me.

“For goodness sake, Elinor, stop slurping and listen to this.”

I set down my spoon a little too hard.

“Budding Ballerina Takes Center Stage. Due to negative publicity surrounding its restrictive entrance requirements, the prestigious Ballet Academy of Santa Marita will likely admit local dance enthusiast, Elinor Malcolm, to its fall program.”

My head felt all light, like it was a birthday balloon floating above me.

“Oh, and get this, Elinor. They end the article with my quote, ‘We should celebrate uniqueness and not be held to some outdated, unrealistic standard of beauty.’”

Outdated. Unrealistic. Those words rang in my ears, making me even more dizzy.

“This is truly a momentous day! My baby girl is heading to the Ballet Academy. We’ll show all those skinny little waifs what a normal girl can do. What do you think, Elinor?”

What do I think? I think I hate that my mother is a lawyer. I hate that she made me audition for the Ballet Academy. I hate that they said I didn’t fit the profile of a Ballet Academy student. I hate that she wrote that threatening letter. And I hate that now there’s a full-page picture of me in a red leotard on the front page of the Times Tribune.

“Um, what do I think? I think you’re a very good lawyer. I better go get ready for school.”

I stood up too quickly, nearly knocking over my chair. My head was still spinning.

The Elinormal Saga

“Please be more careful, Elinor. You’re a prima ballerina now.”

I walked slowly to the door, trying my best not to slump.

“I’ll move my afternoon appointment so we can get you new pointe shoes after school today. Now hurry up!”

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Barre Belles

The Ballet Academy is on the third floor of a very old brick building in a part of the city my mother calls regentrified. Whatever that means. When you get here, you ring a doorbell and wait to hear it buzz. You have to push hard for the door to open, then you climb three flights of creaky old stairs.

A grumpy looking woman with long purple fingernails and a too tight uniform is sitting at the top of the stairs, reading a book.

“Excuse me. Where do I go?”

She doesn’t look up.

“Sign in.” She taps a clipboard on the table in front of her. “And go through that door.” She snaps her fingers, then shoots her thumb over her shoulder behind her like a hitch-hiker, never once taking her eyes off her book.

It must be a very interesting story. Probably a murder mystery. For all she knows, I could be a mass-murderer.

I sign my name and think about saying thank you, but I don't. Usually people are surprised when you say thank you, and then they smile and say something back like *oh, you're welcome* or *no problem*. But something tells me to just mind my own business and go through the door. That's what my mother calls my sixth sense.

I thought I was right on time, but already there's a group of girls hanging onto a bar that juts out of the wall. The ballet room is huge. One wall is lined with mirrors, and the ceiling seems like it's a hundred feet high.

There is a skinny man in a suit and a bow tie sitting up stick straight at a big grand piano in the corner. He is running his fingers lightly over the keys, warming up. The girls are all warming up too, stretching in front of the mirror, making their bodies do things that are not humanly possible.

I scurry over to the opposite corner and plop my dance bag at my feet. I plop down too, and stare at the scene in front of me. This is worse than I thought. Way worse. In front of me are thirty very skinny girls in pink tights and black leotards. They all have hair slicked back into very tight buns that make their faces all look very pinched and very blank like they don't have one idea inside their heads besides, "pointe, pointe, pointe." They are real ballerinas. I am not.

Suddenly the room goes quiet. The piano player pauses with his hands on the keys. The girls all freeze in place. I make myself as small as possible here in the corner. I will say my throat hurts if they ask me. It kind of does anyway, so it's not really lying. I am definitely not dancing.

A short, fat old lady in a black leotard and a long swishy skirt comes through the door. She claps her hands three times and glides to the front of the room.

"Hello, my darlings! Let us finish our stretching and get ready to show that we're serious students of the ballet arts."

The music begins again and the girls are in motion, bending and stretching, going up on tiptoes, and standing like storks. The old lady raises her arms over her head. "Reach, reach, reach," she says.

The girls all reach high above their heads.

"Excellent, excellent!" the old lady says, clasping her hands together in front of her like she's praying.

"What lovely young women we have here. La crème de la crème!" She kisses her fingertips the way that fancy chefs do when they taste something delicious.

"Now, first position please."

THREE

First Position

All the girls make a vee with their feet, pushing their heels together and pointing their toes out to the side. Their arms are bent so that it looks like they're all holding imaginary loads of dirty laundry or heavy books. The ballet teacher looks as light and delicate as a butterfly when she does it. She doesn't look old and fat anymore as her back straightens and her skirt swishes gently from side to side.

I watch the girls follow along as she demonstrates each position. "Long neck, girls. Tuck those tummies in." When she calls out, "fifth position," the girls all twist their feet weirdly and move both arms above their heads. And when the teacher raises her arms over her head, calling out, "Reach, ladies, reach," she looks as light and delicate as a butterfly. Her arms seem to be dancing above her head.

I close my eyes and try to picture myself gliding across the floor. I try to imagine my arms above my head, reaching gracefully toward the ceiling. And for a moment, I can almost see it. I want to see it. But it's no use. I am sitting here, an invisible blob, on the floor of this massive mirrored room, pressing my knees into my chest, wondering how I got here and how I'm going to get out.

All the girls here fit the profile of a Ballet Academy student. I understand now what that means. They all move like robots, in perfect time with the music. The teacher positions herself in front of the tiniest girl in the front row. She stares right at her without saying a word. Then she points her foot, slides it a little to the side, and slides it back into position. The girl does the same thing. The teacher winks at her and a tiny tremor of a smile passes over the girl's face. I bet she's already the teacher's pet.

That's the reason I'm sitting on the floor. I know that if she showed me a million times how to do it just right, my pointe would still be wrong, and I'd twitch not glide, and I'd be just a half a second behind everybody else. That's not okay in ballet. In ballet you have to be perfect. I lower my head and hug my knees tight until the music stops, but I don't cry. Not even one tear.

A little later I'm startled by the sound of the teacher's voice shouting over the piano. "That's enough for today, loves! Excellent progress on those pirouettes!

You may be excused. Don't forget to say thank you to Mr. Phillip on your way out."

The teacher claps her hands again loudly and the girls who were all so perfectly robotic during class, turn away from the mirrors, spinning and chattering and giggling their way across the floor. As they pass the man at the piano, some of them stop to curtsy, and say in sing-song voices, "Thankyou, Mr. Phillip," before linking arms and sashaying right past me.

And so, the worst afternoon of my life comes to a fitting end. I pick up my dance bag and get in line with the others as they head out the door. And no one says a word to me.

Good News/ Bad News

*A*fter we got the news about the Ballet Academy, my mother had a meeting with the principal at school. I don't know what she said to him, but I got my schedule changed and I get to leave school after fourth period every day so I can make it to Santa Marita on time.

The good news – no more stupid flag football and dodgeball in gym class. The bad news – the Ballet Academy program will count for my physical education and I don't know how they will give me a grade. Based on today, I am picturing a big, fat F.

The good news – no more too-much-homework advanced math with boring Miss Simon. The bad news –

the only math class that would fit is general math with the rowdy class and the pretty Miss Chasten who cries a lot. Everything else will stay the same, except that now I will be spending lunchtime and the rest of the school day traveling to the city before being tortured in an itchy leotard and shoes that pinch.

It was only a week ago that my mother was telling my father in that bossy voice of hers, “Stop being such a worrywart. She doesn’t need advanced math. In fact, I’m sure that the advanced choreography is equivalent to geometry. All those angles and that precision. Elinor’s a natural mathematician. It will be fine.”

My mother has an answer for everything. She drove me here today, but she usually has important meetings every afternoon, so I’ll be taking the long way home. There’s a Metro train that stops right outside the Ballet Academy building. I have to ride it to the rapid train station, then take the rapid train to the Park & Ride lot, and then take the MovingKids car service home from there. It takes a long time, but the good news is I can write in my journal the whole way home.

Sitting on the floor for hours was exhausting, so I hope I don’t fall asleep on the way home and miss my stop. My mother says if you go past your stop, you could end up in a bad place, and that would be really bad news.

We did a dry run last week, and afterwards my mother told me, “You’re a smart girl, Elinor. It’s not a big deal. For pity sake. Just do everything in reverse. Instead of going south, you’re going north. Look at the signs. Follow your nose.”

I check inside the little zipper pouch in my dance bag for my Metro card, just as I hear the screech of the Metro train approaching. I climb on board and lean my head against the window for the first leg of my journey home. And guess what? I’m too excited to fall asleep, so I just look out the window and count the stops till I get off.

Second Position

*T*his morning, just as I'm heading out the door for school, my mother steps in front of me and puts her hand on my shoulder. I pop the last of my cereal bar in my mouth, and wait.

"That was JP on the phone," she tells me. "It looks like we're going to trial next month which means things are really ramping up at the office."

"Oh cool," I say. "You love going to trial."

She hands me my dance bag, and picks up her briefcase. "Right. But you know what that means. I'll be really busy."

"I know, but that's ok. You're always really busy."

Her hand on my shoulder tightens. I'm trying to read her look. It's somewhere between good news and bad news, but I can't tell exactly where.

“Look, the bottom line is you’ll have to take public transportation to ballet for a while too. I’ll make arrangements for MovingKids to pick you up at school and drop you at the Park & Ride. You can take it from there. No biggie, right?”

What my head says is, *it is a big deal. I don’t even like ballet. I hate going there. This wasn’t even my idea.*

But instead, I say, “Yup. No biggie. Can we go? I don’t want to be late.”



It only took one hour and ten minutes to get home yesterday, so that’s how long I figured it would take to get to ballet. There was some sort of activity on the tracks though, so it took way longer, and I was frazzled when I got off the train and out of breath when I ran through the Ballet Academy door.

I was just signing in when three girls came pushing up behind me in one big clump. They were whispering and giggling and I don’t think they were one bit worried about being late. I looked from girl to girl and they all just kind of looked like the same person, kind of like a three-headed pinch-faced dancer. And even though I looked right at them, they didn’t see me. They just headed through the door together, a pack of floating ballerinas,

and I knew I couldn't go sit on the floor and watch again today, so I just turned around and left.

Maybe you'd be afraid if you were eleven and you were all by yourself on a crowded street in a big city. Maybe I should have been, but I wasn't. I guess that's because in a lot of ways I'm not really your average kid. I've been packing my own lunch and doing my own laundry since I was eight. I have my own ATM card and I know how to make real dinner – not just frozen pizza rolls or mac and cheese. The truth is, the city is noisy and crowded, and real, not phony. It's way better than that boring ballet room with those phony robot dancers and that piano player playing the same thing over and over.

I'm not sure which direction to go, so I just do what my mother always tells me, I follow my nose. When I get to the corner, my heart starts to beat faster. Instead of more buildings, there's a little park. At first all I can see are grownups there, standing against the trees and sitting on the ground talking and singing.

There's a fountain in the middle, full of leaves, but no water. There's a group of boys crawling across the dirt in a path that has been worn through the grass – barking and meowing like cats and dogs, chasing in a frantic circle around the dried up fountain. They collapse together in a heap, whooping and laughing, big belly laughs of joy.

I try to imagine what the ballet girls are doing right now. I can almost hear the piano music and the teacher clapping and see the girls stretching in a long row in front of the wall of mirrors. I know they are there right now and that's where I'm supposed to be too, but I'm here. And here makes me feel so happy.

Behind the fountain I spot a girl sitting on a white blanket. She has long hair and a long flowy skirt that covers her legs. She is sitting with her hands folded in front of her like she is praying. Her back is very straight. It looks like her eyes are closed and she is swaying back and forth very slowly.

I can't stop looking at her. She is like a bush gently swaying in the wind. Leaves fall down around her, and she just sits. I want to get closer to her, but it seems like I shouldn't. I take out my journal and make a sketch. Underneath it I write, *Girl Praying*.

When I look up from my page, she is gone.

That's it, I decide. I will take MovingKids and two trains here every afternoon. But I will leave my ballet shoes under my bed. I will put my journal and my books in my ballet bag and I will come to this park. I will be happy here.

When I get home, the house is empty so I just push the code on the garage and head straight to my room. I don't even go downstairs and make myself something to

eat. I never knew before how much happiness could fill you up.

I drop my dance bag at the foot of my bed and collapse on top of my covers, holding my journal with the sketch of the mystery girl. I don't wake up until I hear my mother's voice.

"Hey, ballerina, sorry I'm so late. How was your day?"

I open one eye. My room is pitch dark but I can see the numbers glowing on my nightstand clock: 10:31.

"Mmmm," I manage.

"Did you get to be in the front row today?"

"Mmmm."

"Did you brush your teeth?"

"Mmmm."

"You must be exhausted. You can show me what you've been learning in the morning. But now, go back to sleep."

Two things I know must be true. It can't be a lie if you don't really answer. And in the morning, she'll forget she asked me to show her what I learned.

Human tree

The next day I decide I don't even need to enter the ballet studio and sign in, I just get off the light rail train and head to the park. Walking straight towards me is the three-headed dancer, arms all linked together so that they take up the whole sidewalk. I have to stand in the doorway of the copy shop so they don't bump into me when they go by. I am invisible.

I make my way to the bench and plop down. I am directly across from the girl I sketched yesterday. Today she is a tree I think. She is standing on her white blanket, one leg rooted to the ground, the other leg bent in mid-air, her foot pressed against her knee. She is balanced like one of those birds that stands on one leg and her hands are over her head, pushed together like praying hands.

I look around the park to see what else is going on. There's a coffee wagon where people are lined up, two ladies pushing babies in strollers, a sweaty group of joggers, but my eyes keep going back to the girl on the blanket. Her eyes are closed and she is standing perfectly straight. Just like yesterday, she is swaying back and forth a little.

I take out my journal and sketch her. It takes all my concentration to make her look so still and strong on my paper. How can she keep her balance? Under my sketch I write, *Girl Praying, day 2*.

I close my journal, wait a minute, then open it again.

The praying girl doesn't move. She stands like a tree in the park. The leaves on the ground look like they've fallen from her. I wonder what she's thinking.

I add a swirl of wind to the picture I've drawn and put a bird's nest on top of the praying girl's head. I close my journal and watch her sway.

I decide to move closer so I can study her. I sit down on my dance bag right in front of her. Her breathing is exaggerated like the wind rustling through leaves. I'm sitting right in front of her, but she doesn't open her eyes.

I am looking right at the praying girl, sitting directly in front of her, but she doesn't even sense me there. She just keeps on stretching and breathing. Even my spirit must be invisible.

Finally, the praying girl opens her mouth and breathes one loud breath. She lowers her hands to right in front of her, then soundlessly lowers her foot to the ground. She bends both her knees, then lowers herself to the blanket. Everything is in slow motion. She opens her eyes and I'm looking right into them: big, deep brown eyes.

It sounds like she says, "in a gadda da vida."

"What?"

"What's the sound of one hand clapping?" She tilts her head slightly and gives me a lop-sided smile.

I just look at her. I don't know what to say.

She looks at me for a moment longer and laughs.

Her name is Indira. She is fourteen. She says she comes to the park every day to get real.

"What?" I ask her.

"Oh, you know," she says, "out there it's pretty hard to be real. Everybody expects you to do stuff like homework, and honor society, and ridiculous multiple choice tests. I have this teacher. Ms. Fris. No lie, that's her name. Everyday it's like, 'Showtime!' She has all these perfect clothes that all match, and she does her hair about a hundred different ways, and she wears more makeup than you could ever imagine on anyone, and every day I just look at her and I think *Ms. Fris, why the big show? 'Cause you know we're all going to end up dead one day. So why the big show?*"

I look at Indira's hands when she talks. She waves them all around. Her hands are in constant motion.

“And she cares so much about grammar. Always making sure this noun agrees with this verb. Like it matters! She always says this stuff makes your brain grow. She doesn't get it. Our brains are just going to stop functioning one of these days. Flatline! I'm teaching my spirit to grow. I really worry about some people, you know?”

I'm not sure I do know, but I think I like Indira. She is real. Even if she is a tree.

Journey

Indira tilts her head and looks at me quizzically.
“So, what’s your story, morning glory?”
I wonder if she always talks this weird and rhymey.
“You look like you need some serious chilling.
Chillax,” she says, “close your eyes.”

I don’t know why I do what she says, but I do.

“Ready for a little spiritual journey?” she asks.

I open my eyes.

“Uh-uh. Keep them closed. Roll them up to your
third eye space.”

This definitely sounds a little freaky, but Indira is
so serious.

“Listen,” she says, “in between your eyes is this cool
space where your third eye is. You don’t see out with this
eye. You see in. Trust me on this. Relax and just listen to

what I say. Start from right here. We're going to take a little walk across the park."

I make a movement to stand up. Indira laughs.

"No, no! Remember this is a spiritual journey not a physical one. Your body stays right here. We're just going to help your mind wander a little."

I put my hands in my lap and try to sit still. My eyes are closed and it feels like I am swaying back and forth just a little, just like Indira was doing when I first saw her.

"You're walking deeper and deeper into the forest," she tells me. "The tree branches are brushing up against you. You can smell the rich smell of pine, and every step crackles and crunches. You have to slow down and bend down to get through the tangle of trees. Stop a minute and get your bearings," she says. "Breathe in the leaf smell. Become one with the trees."

I sit up straighter. I feel like a tree.

"Ok," says Indira. "Start moving again. Straight ahead. There's a crack of light. Follow it. It's getting brighter and brighter. Up ahead is a clearing. See that little house on the other side?" I nod my head. "The path you're on leads right to the front door. Stay on the path. Look," she says, almost in a whisper, "the front door is open."

I am breathing really hard now, and my skin is tingling. It feels like all my nerves are alive. Indira's voice is so slow, so calm, and she has brought me right to the

front step of this perfect little house. I don't want to open my eyes, I don't want it to disappear. It is so real!

"Come inside," Indira says. "Look around. Why don't you climb the stairs?"

She is silent for so long that I think I'm going to have to open my eyes to make sure she's still there. Instead, I keep climbing.

Finally, she starts up again. "It's time to enter the room at the top of the stairs," she says. "Look at all the things in here. Go ahead, pick them up, one by one. Touch anything you'd like."

I am surrounded by shelves and shelves. They are brushing up against me like tree branches.

"Choose one thing," says Indira. "Just one. That's yours to keep. Choose wisely. Hold on tight to it, and come on back. I'll be waiting for you."

Indira hums softly while I retrace my steps. Just when I sense myself getting back to the blanket, she says, "Okeydokey, artichokey. You're back among the living. Open your eyes, bright eyes."

I open them up and the world is changed. The park seems to have emptied out. There is a strange grey stillness settling down around me and my hands are clasped together tight in my lap.

"You better take a peek at the object in your hands. What are you holding?"

For a moment I really believe there will be something solid here in my hands, but it's only a memory that I'm holding on to.

"Concentrate. This is important," Indira says. "You're holding the mystery of your youth in your hands right now."

When I open my hands, I catch the glint of my smartwatch, and my heart stops. "Oh, my gosh! I'm dead!" I look up at Indira and for a moment I am frozen in place, my heart doing crazy flip-flops in my chest. Without another word, I jump up, grab my dance bag and make a mad dash for the Ballet Academy, even though I know my train has already come and gone while I've been sitting here.

Indira is shouting after me, but I can't make out what she's saying. All I can hear is the thrum thrum thrum of my pounding heart. I try to match the rhythm by saying, "stay calm, stay calm, stay calm," over and over, but it doesn't work. Instead, the little voice inside my head just keeps repeating a different mantra. *I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead.*

When I get to the doorway of the Ballet Academy, I am a sweaty mess. But then a miracle happens. Like magic, a light rail train pulls up, and I climb on. When I get off at the rapid train station to change trains, there's one stopped right there with the doors open, waiting for

the transfer passengers to board. And when we finally pull up to the Park & Ride, I just click on the MovingKids app, and two minutes later a ride appears.

I need to pay closer attention to the world, I think. My mother always says, “When one door closes, another opens.” Now I know that when one train leaves, another one is probably right behind it. There must be an endless stream of cars and trains getting people where they need to go every day.

When I get to my house and push the code on the garage door, the first thing I see is my mother’s big old car parked in there. I’m sure she must be worried sick about me, but I know her worry will turn to anger when she finds out why I’m so late. I turn the knob slowly and enter the house on tiptoes, ready for whatever comes next. I can hear her before I see her.

She’s in the kitchen shouting. “I need those briefs on my desk in the morning, so you’ll just have to wait there until the courier comes. Call me as soon as they’re delivered!”

It takes me a minute to realize that she means law briefs, not my dad’s underwear, and somebody else is getting yelled at, not me.

I could go into the kitchen and face my punishment, but I don’t. Instead, I head up the back stairs quickly and sprint to my room, where I drop my dance bag on

the floor and belly-flop onto my bed. I lie there quietly for a minute to catch my breath, then I do something weird, but I can't help it. I sit up, clasp my hands together tightly, and close my eyes. I picture Indira sitting in front of me like she was earlier today at the park. I sit as still as I possibly can, then I bring my clasped hands close to my face, open my hands just a little, and concentrate. And there it is. The object that I found on the shelf on my spiritual walk is wedged there in my hands, as clear as day.

I stare and stare at it until it feels like the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up, just like they do in cartoons when someone gets scared. But I don't feel scared exactly. It's more like that feeling you get when you're standing in line to get on a roller coaster and you sort of want to step out of line, but you don't.

The intercom in my room clicks on, and there's my mother's voice reverberating through my room. "Soup's on, Elinor! Wash your hands and come down to dinner."

And just like that, the object in my hands is gone. I get up from the bed, trudge downstairs, and enter the dining room where my mother is waiting.

Warrior Stance

“*Surprise!*” my mother says when I sit down. “I decided we could treat ourselves to a special treat tonight,” she says as she pulls my favorite sushi from the EatUp delivery bag. “Dad called and said his flight is delayed, and I’ve had a heck of a day, and I do mean a heck of a day, so...”

She passes me a California roll and my chopsticks.

My father has been gone for three weeks. He is working on some big project in Turkey, and he usually FaceTimes us during dinner which is his early morning which is pretty weird. Time is crazy like that. I forgot he was supposed to be here when I got home tonight.

“So, like I said, absolutely nothing went right today. The case is a calamity. JP is out with the flu. And now your father is gone another day. You don’t know how lucky you are to be eleven without a worry in the world.”

I stab a crab roll with a chopstick and pop it into my mouth.

“I could use a little good news. How was your day?”

I don't want to lie so I just tell the parts that I can. “We read a really cool story in Language Arts about a place where it's been raining for seven years straight, Mr. Chamberlain said I had the best grade on the Science quiz, and the MovingKids driver played Taylor Swift the whole way home.”

After dinner she asks me to demonstrate what I've been learning in ballet so I stand up, make a vee with my feet, and position my arms like they did the first day in ballet. I know that's not enough, so I try to do some of Indira's moves. I balance like a tree with my arms over my head and then I do this thing Indira calls her warrior pose.

“Beautiful,” she says, looking up from her phone. “You're getting strong. Now I've got to go work on lining up some more witnesses, so go start your homework.”



The next day I can't wait to apologize to Indira for running away like that. And I want to tell her how my mother never even realized I was late. I guess she just

came home from work and got right on the phone like she always does figuring I was upstairs in my room when I was actually running through Santa Marita all sweaty and scared. I want to tell Indira everything, but she is nowhere to be found.

Maybe she's just late today. I decide to sit and wait, and after a while I decide to try balancing like a tree. At first my balance is shaky on this lumpy ground, but then I figure it out. You have to make one leg be a tree trunk, strong and still. I push it as hard as I can into the ground and picture it growing roots that hold it in place. Then I bend my other leg and rest my foot against my calf at an angle.

"Breathe," I tell myself. "Just breathe."

My breathing becomes steady and slow, and I close my eyes. I am trying my best to be a tree, but instead, I am picturing myself in ballet. I swing my arms high above, reaching towards the sky, to the sound of the ballet teacher's voice in my head saying, "Reach and reach and reach!" I wonder what she'd say if she could see me now. I wonder what all those robot ballerinas would think.

I stand like that for a long time, until I get a tingly feeling, like someone is watching me. When I open my eyes, I see Indira walking towards me from behind the fountain. She has something cupped in her outstretched hands and she is laughing.

“Whoa! Got to work on your form there, buttercup. It’s not supposed to look so painful.”

I drop my arms to my side and plop to the ground.

“Oh, pish posh, Hieronymus Bosch! Don’t look so sad and blue. It’s called yoga practice precisely because it takes practice.”

Indira drops down beside me and holds out her cupped hands. “I’ve got your whole world in my hands,” she sings softly. She extends her hands till they are right under my nose, almost touching.

Sitting in the little bowl of her hands is something small and blue.

“Take it,” she says. “For you.”

I take it and close it tightly in my hand.

“Your very own bluebird of happiness,” Indira whispers. “A gift from the universe.”

A tingle of excitement runs along my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up like they did yesterday. But yesterday it was something I imagined; today it’s real. The little glass bluebird is exactly the same as the one I found on the shelf of my imagination. My heart jumps in my chest.

Indira looks right into my eyes. “Now, are you ready for the next lesson?”

Unschool

I do my best thinking when I walk,” Indira tells me, “so let’s take a little stroll.”

She adjusts her backpack and I pick up my dance bag. “I’m working on an important project right now,” she says, “and you can help me.”

“Oh, cool. I love projects. Right now I’m trying to figure out what my science project will be. I love science.”

“Well, good luck with that. Science projects are lame. What I’m working on is not for school.”

“Oh,” I say. “Yeah.”

“What I want to know is why we never get to do anything meaningful in school. I mean really. Ms. Fris had us looking up the vocabulary words from *The Great Gatsby* all period today. What does languidly mean?

Use it in a sentence. Then tomorrow it'll be on some ridiculous multiple-choice test. But none of the choices will be what it really means."

She stops walking and turns to look at me.

"You know, the supposed correct answer will be listlessly or sluggishly or something lame like that. And if I write in the margin, *Well, I think Fitzgerald kind of was a poet because he said they walked slenderly, languidly into dinner, and that doesn't really make me picture listless or sluggish, it's more like seductive, you know? I mean really, Ms. Fris, think about it.*"

She takes a deep breath and brushes the hair out of her eyes.

"They're walking in this slow, deliberate manner in front of the guys, kind of like they're saying I have you in my power, you know, not like I'm listless and sluggish, but she'll just mark it wrong."

She bends down and scoops up a little stone on the path, then slips it into her pocket.

"Plus," Indira continues, "I never even can finish the test because every ridiculous multiple-choice question needs to be explained, and I'll just end up flunking the test. Teachers want you to be so dumb."

The whole time Indira is talking, I'm clutching the bluebird in my hand, running my thumb over the smooth part where the head dips down, and thinking about the

science quiz I just got an A on. Mr. Chamberlain said I had a great head for science.

“Let’s sit under that tree,” Indira says, pointing to a big oak tree whose leaves have already starting turning the color of fall.

She unzips her backpack, pulls out a bundle of white blanket, and spreads it on the ground. She kneels down, opens the backpack’s front pocket and drops items one by one onto the blanket: a beer bottle cap, a Barbie doll head, a broken pencil, a crumpled dollar bill, a bird feather, and a baby sock. She reaches into her pocket and drops the little rock into the mix.

I sit down next to her on the blanket. “What’s all this for? Is this part of your project?”

Indira waves her hand over the collection of things in front of her like one of those ladies on TV who are showing the audience all the things they can win. “Look closely,” she says. “What do you see, chickadee? Can you spot the connection in my collection?”

“I see a lot of useless junk. Except for the money, I guess.”

Indira rolls her eyes. “None of it is useless,” she says. “These objects are the remnants of life. The detritus. Think about it. These all represent the biographical details of the park. See? Every object tells a story. Just think about it.”

I put my bluebird of happiness on the blanket in front of me and pick up the little blue sock. “This is a baby’s sock,” I say. “What does it have to do with the park?”

She takes the sock from me and lays it back down on in the pile of objects. “Think for a minute. How do you think it ended up here?”

“Well, probably some mom was pushing her baby through the park in a stroller, and she was talking to her friend so she didn’t see when he kicked it off and it landed on the path. Right?”

“A-ha!” Indira jumps up and points at the sock. “He kicked it off! He?”

“Well, um, it’s a blue sock,” I manage.

“My point exactly! A blue sock doesn’t have to belong to a boy. That’s so sexist! And you think he’s being pushed in a stroller by his mother? What made you jump to that conclusion?”

I clear my throat, a little afraid to give the wrong answer. “I’m not sure. But every day I see mothers pushing babies in strollers when I get here.”

“That, my friend, is an assumption. And a wildly speculative one. Maybe those women are babysitters. Or nannies. Maybe they’re aunts or kidnappers. How do you know they’re moms?”

I pick up my bluebird and stroke it with my thumb. I feel a sense of calm come over me. “You’re right, Indira. I

was assuming. My mother always says when you assume, you just make an..."

"Bingo! Assumptions are big problems in this world. You might think the baby just innocently dropped that sock." She picks it up again and waves it in front of me. "What if the baby flung it to the ground to leave a trail so someone could come to the rescue like in Hansel and Gretel? Or maybe it was used to conceal drugs or something in a sting operation. It could be anything. Don't you want to know who it belonged to and how it got here? Don't you want to know the story?"

Now I do. But before, all I could imagine was a mother and a baby boy and an innocently dropped baby blue sock. None of these other scenarios even crossed my mind.

"See, school, it wrecks you," Indira says. "It takes away all the interesting possibilities until there's only one lame answer. How sad is that?"

I pick up the bluebird of happiness from the blanket and grasp it tightly before sliding it into the pocket of my dance jacket.

Gathering Walk

Indira is supposed to be writing a biography for English, but she has decided to write the park's story instead. Every day she picks up one object to add.

"See," she tells me, "the way I figure it is like this. If you're writing about a person, you take all these little scenes from their life and you string them together into a story. But that just gives you a bunch of snapshots of their life. It doesn't really tell you about the whole person. It really tells you more about the writer than the subject, don't you think?"

Before I can answer, she goes on. "I mean why do they write about the time it was so cold that the grandfather had to sleep on a hot brick wrapped in a towel to stay warm instead of about the time he sat in a

chair in the library and read two chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* one rainy Sunday afternoon? Both things are true. Both are important.”

A squirrel scampers across the path in front of us and rushes up the oak tree. A shower of acorns land on our blanket. “I get it,” I say. “I could write about getting the bluebird today or about almost getting conked on the head with an acorn. Both things are true and both are important.”

“Well, I think the gift from the universe is slightly more important, but yeah, kind of like that. Anyway, it’s the little details that make a story come alive. I tried explaining that to Ms. Fris but she just gave me her usual pained expression and sighed.”

“She seems mean.”

“Nope, not mean. Just sort of clueless. Anyway, I decided I’m going to write the park’s story for my biography. That’s my project. And it’s not really for school. It’s for me.”

I hold out the little bluebird in my hand and finally ask Indira what I’ve been wondering the whole time she’s been talking. “So,” I say, “did you find this in the park, too? Is it part of your project?”

“Your bluebird of happiness? No, of course not, pepperpot! It was on a shelf in my room. I have a whole collection of little glass animals, and when I saw it

yesterday, I just knew it was something you needed. I just knew it. Am I right?"

My arms are covered in goosebumps, and I can feel the hair on the back of my neck doing that stand-up thing again.

Indira smiles at me. "I knew you'd think it was special. Now, want to help me find today's artifact? We can start over there." She points to a bench where two old guys are feeding the birds. "The trick is to walk quietly and be patient. Don't pick up the first thing you see. You have to wait until you can feel it wanting to share its story."

We walk slowly, and I fight the urge to pick up everything. "Let me show you how it works," Indira tells me. "You have to listen with your heart."

Indira keeps her head down and her hands clasped behind her back as we walk and I do the same. "Tune out all distractions," she says. "Focus on the story of the park."

"I think I can hear something," I say as a big gust of wind rattles the leaves on the trees along our path.

Indira stops, and stands perfectly still, her toes turned toward each other and her hands on her hips. She slowly raises her hands above her, with her palms open and lets out a long, loud exhale of breath.

She is staring at something small and light that rolls right across our path, pushed by the wind. Indira tiptoes over to a tree where it's come to a stop. She bends

down and picks it up gently, then holds it out towards me. It looks like a clump of string sitting there in her outstretched hand.

“Yipes, stripes,” she whispers. She probes it with her finger. “Will you looky here? It’s a little bird’s nest.”

“Wow! That must be for a very tiny bird!”

“Not even close,” Indira replies. “This is an abandoned nest. Poor bird never even finished it. Blown away before it had a chance. This is the best discovery yet. You have very good karma, my friend. Exceptional karma, I’d say!”

Indira hands the nest to me. “You can carry it. This is a special day.”

The path winds around a grove of trees and exits onto a sidewalk that runs along the outside of the park. “This is a shortcut back to our spot,” Indira tells me. “This is the quickest way to get back.”

As we are walking along, the weirdest thing happens. Three girls, all hooked together arm in arm, are coming towards us, taking up the whole sidewalk. Indira and I have to step off onto the dirt to let them pass.

They all have identical blond hair pulled into tight buns.

They don’t even see me, but they look right at Indira. The girl in the middle says, “Hey, Tiffany!” then they all giggle and keep moving.

“Who’s Tiffany?” I ask, but Indira doesn’t answer.

She holds out her hand to me. “That’s your signal to leave, I guess,” she says. “I’ll take the nest. You’d better run!”

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Family Dinner

When I enter my house, I hear voices coming from the kitchen. Laughter. And something smells really good. My dad is standing at the kitchen counter opening a bottle of wine. My mother is wearing my dad's *Kiss the Cook* apron that we gave him for his birthday.

"Well, there she is!" my dad says when he sees me standing in the doorway holding my dance bag. "Our little ballerina!"

"Elinor," my mother says as she opens the oven door, "go wash up for dinner and then you can join us in the dining room. Chop, chop!" She claps her hands together, just like the ballet teacher did that first day. "We've got some exciting news!"

"But first, give your old man a hug," my dad says. "I've missed my girl." He walks toward me and wraps me in a big bear hug.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Leo, she’s all sweaty from dancing all afternoon. Not to mention that dirty train. Let the girl wash up.” My mother pulls a pan of lasagna from the oven and sets it on the counter. Steam rises up, fogging her glasses, which she pulls off and wipes on the apron.

“Missed you too,” I whisper into my dad’s suit coat, then I pick up my dance bag and dash upstairs.

At dinner my dad pours me a glass of sparkling cider then raises his glass saying, “A toast!” He touches his glass to mine, then to my mother’s. I don’t know what we’re celebrating but it’s been a long time since we all sat together and shared a meal like this so it must be pretty important.

The candles on the table are real, not the fake battery powered ones that we usually use. Their glow is reflected in the mirror across from me, casting the room in soft amber light. I can see myself reflected there too and I like how I look for once. This is how happy looks, I think.

I pass my plate to my dad and he scoops me a huge square of lasagna. My mother adds a scoop of roasted brussels sprouts and a hunk of garlic bread. After everyone’s plate is full, we hold hands and bow our heads. Then he begins.

“Tonight, after you do your homework, I’ll tell you all about the mosques and the open-air markets in Turkey. I have a few little treasures from my travels for

you too, but that will have to wait till the airline delivers my suitcase. Can you believe they lost it?"

"Not to mention they canceled your first flight and rerouted you through Romania of all places. You can probably kiss that suitcase goodbye."

"I have faith in the system. And, I believe in fate." My father takes a sip of his wine and pats my mother's hand. "After all, if I hadn't been rerouted, we wouldn't be celebrating!"

"What are we celebrating?" I say. "The suspense is killing me!"

"Please don't talk with your mouth full, Elinor. And use your napkin, dear." My mother says, refilling her wine glass.

"You're right," my father says. "I won't make you wait any longer. Here's the deal. You know how your mother always tells us that things happen for a reason?"

I nod, and look across the table at my mother who is smiling widely.

"So, I'm sitting in the airport in Romania, dead tired from being delayed. Just want to get home to my girls. The woman sitting next to me strikes up a conversation. Long story short, she's a reporter for the Boston Globe. Real reporter, international beat."

I swallow my mouthful of lasagna and drain the last of my sparkling cider. "Like Norah O'Donnell?"

“Sort of,” my dad continues. “She’s not on tv, but she’s a very good reporter. I recognized her byline. Anyway, I told her your story, how all you needed was a chance and how now you’re knocking it out of the ballpark dancing with the best ballet company in California...”

I put my fork down and feel my stomach flip over. The room begins to spin.

I don’t remember much of what my dad said after that except it meant that this reporter from the Boston Globe was doing a story on kid activists around the country and my story sounded very promising. My story.

“You are quite the role model!” my dad says again, reaching up for a high five, “and it looks like you’re going to be famous.” I give his hand a quick pat and then ask to be excused.

“No dessert?”

“I have a lot of homework tonight, and I couldn’t eat another bite,” I say, pushing my chair in quickly and rushing up the stairs before they can see my tears.

Tiny Dancer

The room is spinning when I flop on my bed and let the tears come. I think about what my mother always says when I cry. “Shake it off, Elinor. Strong women do not weep or whine.”

I am not a strong woman, I am an eleven-year-old blob who hasn't been to ballet all week. But still, I wipe away my tears, and make a plan.

When I was five years old, we went to London for my dad's fortieth birthday, and my mother surprised us with tickets to the Royal Ballet. I can still picture all the dancers spinning across the stage. Giselle was the star of the ballet and she was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. She looked like she was floating on air.

“I'm going to be a ballerina when I grow up,” I said when the curtain went down and all the people stood up and applauded.

I remember my dad picking me up and dancing across our hotel room later that night. “You will be the most beautiful Giselle the stage has ever seen!” he said as he whisked me off to bed. As he tucked me in, he told me how when he was a little boy his parents took him to see Giselle in New York and he watched some man named Baryshnikov dance. “I thought he was the most amazing athlete I’d ever seen,” he said. “That man could leap so high, I thought his head would hit the rafters, and I decided I was going to be a ballet dancer too. But instead, I work for a bank.”

He kissed my forehead, and stood up to turn out the light. “Sweet dreams, my tiny dancer. Dream big. Someday you’ll light up the stage and your mother and I will be there to cheer you on.”

“Dream big,” he told me when I was five. Back then, ballet was my dream. So, I close my eyes and picture myself dancing across the stage like Giselle. I imagine my parents sitting in the audience and telling all the people in their row, *that’s our girl up there. Our little Elinor is Giselle.*

Here’s my plan. I grab my laptop and search YouTube for Giselle. I reach under my bed and get my ballet shoes. The leather is soft and beautiful. The music is soft and beautiful. Tonight, I will not do my math homework. I will not study for my history test. I will

dance along to the Giselle videos and I will learn to point my toes and be graceful.

I stand in front of my bedroom mirror, reach up high over my head and sway to the music that fills my room. I point my foot and slowly rest it above my knee. At first I have to concentrate hard to get my balance, but then I can feel it. My body relaxes and I am calm and peaceful. I am standing tall and strong in the middle of my bedroom, eyes closed, arms reaching high above me. I can hear the ballet teacher's voice in my head, *reach, reach, reach, reach*, and I'm doing it.

I'm still balanced like this when the music ends.



Some kids forget to do their homework all the time, but I always do mine. I have never not done my homework before.

In first period, Ms. Chasten tells us all to take out our math homework. I walk up to her desk, and my knees feel all wobbly.

"I don't have it," I say, my voice catching in my throat.

"What?" she says while she's writing the answers on the whiteboard.

“My homework. I don’t have it today.”

“Oh, Elinor, that’s not like you. Why don’t you sit in the back and do it now? You can turn it in at the end of class.”

Next period, I walk into my history class feeling better until Mr. Hoy says, “Remember folks, history is told by the victors. Will you be victorious today?” That’s when I remember the history test I didn’t study for.

I tell him I’m not ready, and he puts his hand on my shoulder. “Goodness gracious, Elinor, that’s something I’ve never heard you say. Did you read the chapter?”

“Um, no, not really,” I say. “I wanted to, but I was kind of sick last night.”

“Well,” he says, “you must have been really under the weather. How are you feeling now?”

“Still not so good,” I say, and that’s not a lie. I really do feel sick.

“Ok,” he tells me. “Study this weekend and you can come in for a makeup test Monday at lunch. Why don’t you sit in the back and try to do some reading now?”

I guess when you are a very good student, you can get away with anything.

Changes

*A*fter school, I check my dance bag to make sure my ballet shoes and my leotard are there. On the way to the Ballet Academy, I keep going over my plan in my head. I will sign in and get in line with the ballerinas and I will follow the movements of the other dancers, pretending I know the steps. “Fake it till you make it,” is what my mother always tells me is the key to success, so that’s just what I’ll do.

I’m a little bit early when I get there, and something doesn’t feel quite right, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. Maybe it’s because I sort of lied to my teachers today and got away with it, but something just feels wrong.

I pick up the clipboard with the sign-in sheet and the security guard looks up at me and smiles. “Good afternoon, young lady,” she says and winks at me. Strange.

My eyes run down the sign-in sheet and back up again to the top. I am looking for *Malcolm, Elinor*, but it's not there. That wobbly knee feeling I had in math this morning comes back.

"Um?" I croak.

"Something wrong?" She is still looking at me with a knowing smile.

"I don't see my name. I can't sign in."

She takes the clipboard from me. "And you are?"

"Elinor. Elinor Malcolm."

"Malcolm, Malcolm. Let's see. Nope. Not on the list."

I am trying hard not to cry. Strong women don't weep or whine.

"Don't worry, miss. Not a big deal. What we're gonna do here is have you wait over there till I get the rest of these girls signed in. Then I'll call the office and find out what's what."

I am frozen in place.

"Come on, out of the way, miss. Wait over there. You're holding up my line."

I back out of the line and lean against the back wall. When the line presses forward and blocks my view of the guard, I do the only sensible thing I can think of. I fly down the stairs and push through the door to the sidewalk. I run as fast as I can to find Indira, who is sitting like a statue in front of the fountain.

When I plop down beside her, she opens her eyes, and stands up.

I stay sitting on the ground, all sweaty and confused. That's when all my troubles come tumbling out at once. Indira stands perfectly still and listens, then she smiles at me and nods, turns around, and walks away down the path.

"Indira!" I shout. Where are you going? Wait up!"

She stops suddenly and whirls around. "Who are you?" she asks.

"Indira, don't do this to me. You know who I am. I'm Elinor."

I spring up and run to where she is standing in the middle of the path. She's not smiling anymore. She puts her hands on my shoulders and gives them a little squeeze. "Really, who are you?" she asks while staring deep into my eyes. "Elinor who? I can't help you with this one, kiddo. You're on your own, and you know what to do."

She turns once more and walks away. I have never felt so alone. I am standing in the middle of a winding path, in the middle of the park, in the middle of the city, and without warning, hot tears start falling.

"You have to help me, Indira. I don't know what to do." My eyes are so blurry that it looks like she is floating away. I feel rooted to the ground. "Please help me!"

Indira keeps walking and doesn't turn around. Her voice is carried back to me on the wind. "Help yourself," the wind hisses. "Help yourself."

I stand there for a long time trying to imagine what will happen next. Everything has changed. A big gust of wind rattles the leaves on the trees along the path, and a flurry of red and gold dances and swirls in front of me. I reach out and grab an enormous red leaf as it floats to the ground. It is the most beautiful bright red, shiny and bright. But when I turn it over, I see that the other side is already mottled brown. It is just one leaf, but it seems important. How can something look so colorful and alive on one side, and so dull and dead when you flip it over?

I don't know what else to do, so I sit back down and wipe away my tears. I reach into the zipper pocket of my dance bag and root around until I feel the little bluebird there. It is still a mystery to me how Indira knew exactly what I needed then. I hold it tight until I feel calm inside. Maybe she thinks I need to be alone in the park today too.

I take out my journal and slowly sketch both sides of the leaf. I use my colored pencils to color one side brown and the other side bright red. Next to the dead-looking side, I write, "This leaf is like me. Dull and boring. About to crumble." That's the old me, I decide.

Next to the red side I write, "I wonder how I'd look with red hair. I don't want to be invisible anymore."

Book-A-Look

*M*y mother tells me everything always seems better in the morning, and she's right. At least today. It's Saturday, the sun is shining, and I woke up to the smell of pancakes.

"Well, don't you look chipper today!" my dad says as I walk into the kitchen. He's standing at the counter, pouring syrup on a tall stack. "Your mother's going in for a tune-up this morning and if you play your cards right, I bet she'll take you."

My mother goes to the beauty salon once a month for what she calls her 3,000 mile tune-up. I usually go with my dad to run errands on Saturdays if he's not playing golf.

"Wait till she gets off the phone and you can ask her. Want one of my special chocolate chip pancakes?"

I can hear my mother in the other room, yelling at someone on the other end. “There are leaves all over the lawn and the gardener was just here yesterday. Yes, I know it’s been windy, but I will not have my yard looking like a jungle. I expect this to be cleaned up when I get home this afternoon. And you can have him cut back the rose bushes too. They’re way too scraggly.”

I tiptoe into her office just as she’s hanging up. “Mom?”

“Just a minute. One more quick call.” She starts punching numbers again. “Finish your breakfast.”

I head back to the kitchen where a steaming stack of chocolatey pancakes is waiting.



An hour later, we’re in the car zipping along the freeway, heading to the fancy salon in the city.

“Aren’t you excited about our special day? The two Malcolm ladies getting the works!” my mother says.

I’m excited, but I probably shouldn’t have eaten so many pancakes. “Yeah, just feeling a little carsick. Can I roll my window down?”

“For goodness sake, Elinor. You can’t open the window on the freeway. Just take some deep breaths.”

I do and it does help a little bit. Then I reach into my pocket and rub my little bluebird of happiness with my thumb.

“I called ahead this morning and told Traci I wanted you to get the princess treatment. Hair, nails, maybe even a little lip gloss and mascara. They sell cute little tops there too.”

She’s in such a good mood. I can’t believe my luck.

“I was thinking maybe I might dye my hair,” I blurt out.

“Great minds think alike,” she says. “Maybe lighten you up a bit.”

I twirl the ends of my hair as we reach the exit ramp. It’s hard to believe this is the same city where the Ballet Academy is. My mother says this is the ritzy part of town. This is where the money lives, she tells me. She stops the car in front of a fancy building and a teenage boy wearing a tan uniform takes our keys and passes my mother a card. “Welcome to Book-A-Look, ladies,” he says. Have a wonderful experience.”

Inside, we are greeted by a girl with spiky red hair who ushers us into a waiting room. “I’m Annie. What’s your pleasure this morning?” she asks. “Coffee or tea?”

“We’ll take two cups of jasmine tea, no sweetener,” my mother answers. Then she turns to me. “Check out the bookcase, Elinor. They have such a great collection to

choose from. And since you'll be coming with me now, you should take advantage."

There are hundreds of books lining one wall of the waiting room. A large overhead sign reads,

book-a-l ook promot es l it er acy
for l iving your best l ife
a beaut ifu l ext er ior is n ot hing
wit hout a b eaut ifu l inner l ife.
pl ea se hel p yoursel f
to w ha t ever c atc he s your fancy.
r ea d it her e, and t ake it w it h you.
smil e and pass it o n to ma ke t he worl d a mor e
beaut ifu l pl ace.

And right there on the shelf, right in front of me, is that book Indira was telling me about. I pull it off the shelf and head back to where my mother is leafing through a magazine.

"Well, look at that, good old Fitzgerald!" she says. I excitedly clutch the copy of the book in my hands, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. "I guess this means you really are growing up!"

Highlights

This is turning out to be the best day. I think this salon must be my mother's happy place, and it makes me feel like I can't do anything wrong.

Just as I sit back down, a girl with pink hair enters the room. "Hi," she says, extending an arm covered with beautiful flowery tattoos. "You must be Elinor. I'm Lonnie – I'll be washing you. Follow me."

I leave my book on the table and move across the way to a steamy shampoo room that smells like a summer garden. Afterwards, with my hair wrapped in a towel, Lonnie takes me to another room to wait for my hair stylist. A cup of jasmine tea is waiting there for me along with *The Great Gatsby*. I take a sip, open my book, and begin to read. I can't wait to see what Indira was talking about.

But it's really hard to concentrate on the first page with all the music and conversation happening around me. Plus, there's a lot of words I'm going to have to look up when I get home.

Lonnie is standing in the doorway when the girl with the spiky red hair walks by. They look at each other and burst out laughing, and Lonnie says, "I totally lucked out. Didn't have to shampoo that melon head today."

The spiky redhead gives her a high five. "I mean no offense, but what makes her wear her hair so short and severe like that?"

"Sshh, Annie," Lonnie laughs, "she'll hear you!"

Annie lowers her voice to a whisper, but I can still hear her. I'm definitely not concentrating on my book now.

"I mean really, you take somebody like Halle Berry. Well she's so dang pretty she can get away with that cut. Or Katy Perry with those big beautiful eyes of hers. But old melon head – she could use some hair to soften her up a bit."

"Yeah, well, I swear she still wouldn't smile," Lonnie says in a stage whisper.

"And for sure she'd still never tip!" Annie answers.

They high five again and then move away from the doorway, still laughing. That's when I see who they were talking about. My mother is sitting across the way in the shampoo room, getting her scalp massaged. When her

head is wet it looks like she doesn't have any hair at all.

When I look back down at the book in my lap, the page is all blurry. People always tell me I look just like her. Does that mean I am just like her? I look in the mirror and try to practice my smile. I make a vow to myself right then that when I grow up, I'm going to be different. I'll change my name to something cool like Daisy, and I will never cut my hair again.

A few minutes later, we're sitting side by side waiting for our stylists when Annie with the red hair walks in with a stack of magazines. "I love your hair," I tell her.

"Thanks," she says as she arranges them on a table.

I still have the towel wrapped around my head, and I'm picturing a whole new me. "That's what color I'm thinking of making mine."

My mother lets out a little gasp. "Don't be ridiculous," she says, not even waiting for Annie to leave the room. "That is out of the question. A few highlights would look nice, but you are not going to look like a cartoon character!"

I can't wait till we're out of there and headed back home, but afterwards, when we get in the car (me with blond highlights that you can't even see), my mother says, "Well, that didn't take as long as I thought. So, surprise! We still have time to make it to the Ballet Academy in time to watch the professional troupe rehearse."

This cannot be happening, I think. "I have a lot of homework," I say. "We really should get home."

"Oh, nonsense, Elinor. I can jump on the freeway here, and it's only another two exits. We can be there in fifteen minutes and we're already ahead of schedule."

"But, I have a big test Monday, and..."

"No buts. No ands. This is a special day. Besides, won't the director flip when we tell him about the big story that the Boston Globe is going to run about you? Dad's reporter friend is calling us next week. We've got to line up those interviews with him and your ballet teacher and probably even some of the other dancers. I just can't wait to see the look on his face when we tell him!"

We pull into the parking lot across the street from the Ballet Academy. My mother hops out of the car. "Hurry up, slow poke." She is practically running. I climb out and catch up to her, as the walk sign flashes. When we get to the door, she pushes the bell, and waits. She pushes it again.

"Maybe they're deep in rehearsal and can't hear the buzzer," she says, glancing at her watch. "I know they rehearse till four on Saturdays."

"It looks dark," I say. "Maybe we should just go."

She pushes the bell again, then pulls out her phone and types something.

"Oh, for goodness sake," she says. "Just our luck."

It turns out that the studio is closed this weekend so that dancers can put on a charity dance performance in L.A. No one is here – not the director, not the ballet teacher, not even the security guard. I can't believe my luck.

She lets out a big sigh, and I feel like a giant boulder has just been lifted off my heart. Indira told me I have very good karma and I think it must be true.

“Well, now, just look at us. All dolled up with no place to go. What do you propose we do, Elinor? Your call.”

I want to say I think we should kiss that locked door and go celebrate my great good fortune at a fancy restaurant somewhere. Catastrophe avoided. But instead I say, “Let's just enjoy this beautiful day. Want to go to the park, Mom? It's right up the street.”

“Oh, for heaven's sake!” she says. “Why on earth would we go there? That's not a park. It's a homeless encampment. That's one place I don't want you ever to go near. Ever, do you understand?”

I don't say anything. I can't.

“Let's go get you some new pointe shoes so the afternoon's not a total waste. Yours must be nearly worn out by now.”

I trudge behind her back to the car as she leaves a voicemail for the Ballet Studio telling them she has some great news to share.

Out of the Box

Indira's in her usual spot in the park when I get there on Monday. She doesn't say anything about last week and I don't either. She just keeps balancing on the blanket; her arms stretched high above her head, back arched, head tilted backwards.

I put my dance bag down and take up the same position, facing her. Soon we are breathing together, breath for breath.

"This is mountain," she says. "Tadasana. Feel the strength inside you. Strength is beauty. Breathe."

We stand there like that, completely still for a long time. I already feel stronger. Indira shakes one foot, then the other, and sits down slowly. "Shake it out," she says. "You need to sit in your strength."

I sit down and tell her all about my weekend. About the fancy salon and the blond highlights that you can't see and the locked Ballet Academy door and my good karma. I tell her about the homeless encampment and the girl with the spiky red hair and the no tipping.

"Wait, let me stop you right there," she says. "First of all, these people here aren't homeless, they're free. I have a home, you have a home, and frankly, that's insulting. And no tipping, man, that's just plain rude."

I feel my strength starting to leak out of my bones, so I take a deep breath, and fight the tears.

"Oh, jeez, sorry," she says. "I mean that's your mother we're talking about. So sorry. She's probably a very nice person."

"She is. A nice person, I mean. She just has a lot on her mind most of the time. But that's not what I wanted to tell you. I was just setting the stage for the worst part."

Then I tell her about how when we got home there was a certified letter sitting on the kitchen table. How my dad signed for it because we weren't home, but he didn't open it because he would never open mail that wasn't addressed to him, even if it was about his own daughter. How maybe everything would be better if he had opened it instead of her.

"I'm not following," Indira says. "What's so bad about a letter?"

"It was from the Ballet Academy. It said they were sorry I had decided to discontinue my pursuit of ballet, but they were quite sure I'd find something else more suited to my creative pulse. Or something like that."

"No comprendo, senorita," Indira says, clasping her hands behind her in a stretch.

"They think I quit. No one answered the phone there, so my mother left a long message. It wasn't pretty."

"Holy cow. What did she say?"

"Something like, this message is for Mr. Tony Rabisham. This is Marsha Malcolm of Walters and Walters calling in regards to ballet student, Elinor Malcolm."

At that, Indira starts to laugh.

"It's not funny, Indira!"

"I'm sorry," she says. "I just never knew that was your name. Elinormal Calm. It's pretty funny."

"That is my name! Elinor Malcolm. What are you talking about?"

"Not Elinor Malcolm. Say it slow. Elinormal Calm. It should be Elinotnormal Notcalm."

She can be so weird sometimes. "Can I just please finish my story?"

"Yup. Sorry, Charlie. No more talkus interruptus,

I promise.”

“Luckily, she has a big meeting today that she couldn’t get out of, but she’s coming here tomorrow. That’s why I need your help. I think I should run away.”

Indira moves to a kneeling position with her hands on her hips and shakes her head. “Wow,” she says. “You really are in deep. But running away won’t solve anything. What’s called for in this situation is a little meditation medication. It’ll fix what ails you.”

“I don’t feel like meditating. I need answers.”

“Exactly,” she says, “answers are just what the doctor ordered. You’ll be sorry if you do something rash.”

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

“Get it? Rash? Doctor? I just love words. But seriously, Elinotnormal, you’ve got a major problem on your hands. And I do mean major.” She reaches out and takes both my hands in hers and squeezes gently. “I get that this seems like the worst thing that ever happened,” she continues, “but what would running away prove? I mean, no offense, but you’re not exactly cut out to live on the street. And where would you go?”

I squeeze her hands back and it’s so weird. I can feel her energy flowing into me.

“I hate to quote her ‘cause she’s so weird, but one thing Ms. Fris always says is you’ve got to think outside

the box. You've got to use that other 90% of your brain that's asleep if you want to soar."

She has me put my dance bag under my head and lie back on the blanket. "Everything you need is right inside you. I'm just going to help you find it. Close your eyes. Now, toes go to sleep." Indira's voice is low and slow, mesmerizing. "Ankles go to sleep. Shins go to sleep." As I lie here on the blanket, every part of me goes to sleep, right up to my eyeballs.

"Picture the sky," she says. "It's dawn. A new day. The sky is just lighting up. Pink. Grey-blue. Golden. Here comes a cloud. Take one of your worries. A small one. Put it on a cloud. Whoosh – it's gone."

I can feel my heart pounding with excitement as Indira whispers, "Elinormal. Calm. Elinormal. Calm. Inhale slowly. Hold it. Hold it. Now exhale. Again."

I lie there in silence for a little while, then I hear her voice again, even more slow and quiet. "Here comes another cloud. It's small and wispy. Put a tiny little worry on it. Whoosh. You can kiss that worry goodbye."

I am feeling very calm and very sleepy.

"Ah," she says. "I can see a big dark raincloud gathering strength. Don't let it ruin your day. Take your biggest worry, the one that's weighing you down, and put it right up there on top of the cloud. Make sure to get the whole worry up there."

The world is perfectly still, so still that I can even hear the blood swishing around inside me. I can see myself lifting a giant worry over my head. Indira's voice is soothing, like a gentle gust of wind. "Got it all? Big whoosh. It's gone. Totally gone."

My whole body feels light, like I'm floating on a cloud. I can feel the sunshine pressing against my closed eyelids. My head feels hot. My arms are all tingly.

"Okay, mon amie. Time to shake it out. Jeepers creepers, girl. Open your peepers. Sit up nice and slow when you're ready."

Slowly, I sit back up. It felt like I was asleep for hours, but when I look around everything is still the same. There's still an old man sitting on the bench tossing bread crumbs on the ground to a few pigeons, there's still a girl sitting on the ground looking at her phone, there's still a guy in an army jacket pushing an empty swing.

"Well," Indira says. "Did you clear your head? Do you know what to do?"

"Okay," I answer. "I think so. Maybe I won't run away, but I think I should dye my hair!"

"Now you're talking," she says, jumping up. She reaches down to pull me to my feet. "Elinormal is out of the box. Let's go!"

There's not enough time to actually dye my hair and catch the train back home, so we do the next best

thing. We pack up our stuff and head to the drugstore on the corner. One whole aisle is filled with cans of spray-on hair dye in every color – eggplant purple, grassy green, robin’s egg blue. I pick up can of blue and consider it. It’s the same color as my bluebird of happiness and that would probably be very good karma, but then I think about what Indira said, strength is beauty. Red is the strongest color. Red is beautiful.

I pick up a can called red-hot red. The girl on the front of the can has spiky red hair like Annie from the salon and she’s dangling a red pepper into her open mouth. “Spice up your life,” it says in big bold letters.

“This one,” I tell Indira as I unzip my dance bag and fish out a twenty.

“Cool,” she says. “You pay. I’ll wait for you over there.”

After I pay, and we’re walking out the door, I swear the boy who just waited on me says, “See you, Tiffany.”

Who’s Tiffany? I wonder. But Indira just shoots me a look that says don’t ask.

Sing Song

If you have a dad who travels all the time and a mother who is super committed to her work, then you probably know what it's like to be on your own. Sometimes I pretend that I live all by myself in this big house, and it's actually kind of cool.

When no one else is here, I can cook whatever I feel like eating. Tonight I decide to make my famous fettuccine alfredo. My mother's text said she'll be home late, not to wait up, so I decide to double the recipe and leave the leftovers in the fridge. She'll be tired and hungry when she finally gets home and that should make her happy. I can't even imagine what she'll say when she goes to the Ballet Academy tomorrow to clear up what she said must be an unfortunate misunderstanding. Maybe she'll go easier on me if I make her something delicious tonight.

While I cook, I blast the music through the whole house. I like to turn the bass part up really high so the house feels like it's a dancing machine. It makes the cleanup go a lot better too, when the music is blasting.

I'm feeling a nervous kind of excitement afterwards when I finally head to the bathroom to use my red spray. I put an old towel on the counter and one on the floor. Taylor comes on just as I start to spray. Her voice echoes through the whole house and I'm singing along real loud, *"So oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh You need to calm down, you're being too loud."*

I sing and I spray and I see myself changing right before my eyes. My hair goes from mousy brown with highlights that you can't even see to fire engine red. I lean in close to the mirror and stare.

Last week Indira asked me who I was, and it made me so mad and confused. Now I'm looking hard at myself and I can see who I am. I am Elinor Malcolm and I am not who my parents think I am. I am not a ballerina. Sometimes I don't do my homework. My best friend is a girl named Indira. I have red hair.

I keep staring at myself in the mirror for a long time. I look older. I never noticed before that my eyes have little flecks of gold in them. Yesterday my hair was dull and my eyes were boring. Everything about me is changing.

I should be doing my homework, but instead I take out my journal. I sketch my hand, palm up. I spend a long time on it, noticing all the little lines that I never really paid attention to before. There are hundreds of little crisscrossing lines that are mine alone. I can't believe they've been here all along but I never paid attention. They tell the story of me.

I take out my little bluebird of happiness and study it closely, then I draw it in the center of my hand sketch. While I'm drawing, a poem pops into my head and I write it next to my sketch.

*Seasons change and so do I
This little bird just wants to fly
It has to leave the nest one day
To see the world and fly away
Away she'll fly with open wings
Its happy heart just sings and sings*

I read it out loud over and over. It has rhythm and rhyme, just like a Taylor Swift song. One thing I am really good at is poetry, but I don't think my parents know that about me either. Maybe I should get a guitar and put my poems to music.

I spend the rest of the night sketching and singing, then go downstairs to check all the lights and the locks once more before heading to bed. I set the alarm on my

phone and climb under the covers where it's always safe and warm.

It's not that late, but tomorrow is going to be a big day. My mother always says, "Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life." That never made sense before, but tonight I get it. Tomorrow things will be different. Really different.

I think of another poem as I'm turning out the light, but I don't want to get out from this warm space, so I don't write it down. I just say it out loud over and over, like a mantra, until I fall asleep. Tomorrow I'll write it down.

*Red hair, red hair on top of my head
I'm not sleepy but it's time for bed
There's no one here to tuck me in
No one here to care
But it doesn't really make me sad
Because I've got red hair.*

When I wake up it will be the first day of the rest of my life.

The Best Laid Plans

I wake up before my alarm and jump out of bed. In the bathroom, I'm startled for a minute by the girl in the mirror. I don't even look like the old me. Today is the first day of the rest of my life and I'm ready.

I make my way downstairs, only to find that the house is empty. There's a note on the kitchen table next to my cereal bowl. "Early appointment. Catch a ride with Mrs. Feinstein. I'll catch you later." I assume it's from my mother, but I try playing Indira's game.

What if the note is from a murderous kidnapper who's planning to attack me when I'm in the shower?

What if aliens landed during the night and they've parked their space ship behind the garage waiting to take me to their leader?

What if Mrs. Feinstein has been pretending to be my nice wonderful next-door neighbor all these years and she's finally going to unleash her evil plot when I ring her doorbell this morning?

I can really freak myself out sometimes. I have to do that mountain thing for a minute there in the middle of the kitchen, breathing and saying it slowly, Elinormal. Calm. Elinormal. Calm. I have learned so much from Indira. It really does work.

I open the refrigerator to get milk for my cereal. The leftover fettuccine is still there. I wonder if she ever even saw it there last night. I should have left her a note.

Mrs. Feinstein is in her driveway when I get to her house, and her car is running. She acts surprised to see me, but she doesn't mention my hair, just says, "It would be nice if your mother warned me that you'd need a ride this morning. It's a good thing you caught me. I was just leaving for Zumba." She doesn't say another word to me the whole way to school.

If Andrea Romero came to school with red hair, the whole building would be buzzing. She'd probably get sent to the principal's office for causing a commotion and then her mother would have to come get her, just like when she wears those tiny shirts to school and she has to go home to change. It happens every week. Some of the boys in my class even take bets on what she'll do to get

sent home next.

But here's what happens when I come to school with bright red hair. Ms. Chasten says, "Getting ready for Halloween, Elinor? I can't wait to see your costume tomorrow. Let me guess, Little Mermaid?"

I have never ever forgotten about Halloween before. It's my favorite day of the whole year. I love getting dressed up to become someone completely different. Last year my whole family went trick-or-treating together at the Country Club. I was Wednesday, my mother was Morticia and my father was Lurch from the Addams family. It was so much fun. We haven't even talked about what we're going to be this year. It's tomorrow, and I totally forgot.

For brunch recess I go to the library to help the librarian, old Mrs. Dickens, shelve books. She usually lets me check out an extra book as a reward for working. When I come in today, she looks at me like something's different, but then she says, "My goodness, Elinor. You sure are getting tall." I brush my hair back from my eyes dramatically, but she just smiles and goes back to arranging spooky books on the display counter.

I thought having red hair would change my whole life, but nobody's swarming all over me like they swarm all over Andrea. It's just the same old, same old and I am just the same old boring me. The whole day is boring

until I'm on the train heading to the city. That's when I hatch my plan.

I figure if I am dancing when my mother gets there, she'll blame the whole thing on the Ballet Academy. "She's right there in the front," she'll tell them. "This certified letter must have been sent by some incompetent office worker. You really need to pay more attention to who you hire." She'll tell them all about the reporter and she'll make them apologize for causing our family so much anxiety.

So, I'll wait outside the studio until a group of ballerinas gets buzzed in and I'll head upstairs with them. While they're signing in, I'll go behind the security guard and sneak in. I'll start stretching at the barre with everyone. That's when I realize it's not going to work the way I'm imagining it. I'll look like I don't know what I'm doing because, duh, I don't know what I'm doing. Like I said, I'm no ballerina.

Another mother might see her daughter struggling at the barre and feel sorry for her. She'd say to the teacher, "I see it's hopeless. You did your best. Believe me, it's not your fault. The girl is just not made for dancing. We're sorry to have troubled you." Then they'd go have milkshakes and laugh about it, and the mother would say, "Let's find you a different hobby. What is it you want to do?"

But I don't have another mother, I have my mother, and she's still fuming about that letter.

What if I just run to the park when the train stops. I'll get Indira to come back with me. She is so smart, and everybody likes her. My mother will have to listen to her. She can tell her about the life of the park and how happy I am there. She can convince her that the Ballet Academy is just not right for my personal development.

I grow completely calm, imagining the three of us, me, Indira, and my mother, walking to the park. We'll get some hot chocolate at the coffee wagon, and sit on a bench. My mother will say my hair looks spunky and it's so wonderful to see how I've matured. Bluebirds of happiness will fly all around us while music swells just like in a movie, as the credits roll.

But, this isn't a movie. The train slows to a stop as the voice over the speaker says "Theatre District! Downtown Theatre District stop!" and I'm jolted back to reality.

Stony Silence

I yank my dance bag over my shoulder and grab the handrail on the door of the train. The brakes groan and the door whooshes open. I step down and look up at the same time.

My mother is standing right there.

Her arms are crossed in front of her, one foot is extended in front of the other, tapping, and her mouth is set in a tight line across her face, but opens in surprise when she sees me.

I don't have time to run to the park or to dart past her to the Ballet Academy. She stands frozen with her mouth hanging open. I do too.

The next thing I know, she has her hand on my arm and we are walk-running away from the Ballet Academy, past all the dancers making their way toward the entrance.

She pushes me into the street, not even at the crosswalk, but right in the middle of the street, practically right in front of a bus.

Everything looks blurry to me. I think I must be crying.

My mother doesn't say a word to me until we get to the car.

"Get in," she whispers. The voice that comes out of her does not sound like my mother. It sounds like it belongs to a different person, someone small and weak.

She clicks the key fob and the doors unlock with a little beep. She opens my door and slams the door hard once I'm in, then goes around to her side without even looking at me. She pushes the button to start the car, and stares straight ahead. I have never felt more invisible.

"This," she says through her teeth, "is intolerable. Intolerable. All this trouble I've gone through to secure this opportunity for you, and you just threw it all away. Just threw it away!"

Her voice is stronger now, but still sounds like whispering. I turn my head to look at her, and I see that her face is wet. Her hands on the steering wheel are shaking. Inside my stomach, it feels like a war is going on. Everything is crashing together inside me.

"What were you thinking, Elinor? What were you trying to prove?"

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. I realize I'm shaking too. I want to tell her that ballet was her idea, not mine, and they were right – I don't fit the profile of a Ballet Academy student. I'm not like those other girls. I'm not a ballerina. I want to tell her about Indira. I want to tell her about poetry and singing and the real me, and I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Not one word.

“You've made a total fool of me,” she hisses. “Can you imagine what that feels like? That ballet teacher hasn't seen you for weeks. Weeks!”

I keep staring at her. She must be able to feel my eyes on her, and finally, she turns to face me. It's too warm inside the car by now, my seat is heating up, and all the windows are completely foggy.

My mother reaches out and grabs a hunk of my hair. “And now this. This...,” she repeats. “What on earth is this?”

I think the best thing to do is just make up a story about how it's just temporary because I'm planning to be Ariel for Halloween. I just can't make myself tell another lie though. “Sorry,” I say. “I like red hair.”

Right away I know that I said it in what my mother calls my “snippy” tone. I didn't mean for it to come out like that, and I wish it hadn't. It's too late to take it back.

My mother looks startled by my words. She looks at me like she doesn't even know me. I think maybe I don't even know me.

Last summer we were sitting in the yard, reading our books and drinking lemonade when we heard a really loud thump. We both jumped up at the same time and there was a little brown bird lying right on the patio between us. It had flown into the sliding glass door and now it was lying there with a broken wing. Its eyes looked so sad and afraid, boring right into my heart. I started to cry and I couldn't stop the rest of the afternoon.

My mother looks at me with that same expression and I feel my heart start to break. She looks at me silently, then turns away. She turns on the wipers to clear the fog from the windshield, puts the car in gear and backs out of our parking space. All the way home I wish she would yell at me or say something so that I could start talking, but she drives in stony silence, and I slump further and further down into my seat.

When we get home, I go straight up to my room, but she doesn't follow. I sit by the door with my head pressed against it and listen to her muffled voice for an hour. I hear my name but I can't make out what she's saying. I just know she's pouring out all her anger and disappointment to my dad far across the world in Hong Kong.

I wonder what time it is there. I wonder when he'll be home and when everything can go back to normal.

Darkness/Dreams

*F*or Halloween we do the worst possible thing you can do. We turn out all the lights and pretend we aren't home. Last year when we went trick-or-treating together, we really weren't home, so we left a big bowl of candy on the front step with a note that said, "Help yourself to a Halloween treat, and make sure to leave some for the others! Boo!" But this year we don't even do that.

I spend the whole evening lying on my bed in my pitch-dark room, feeling empty. The doorbell keeps ringing and I can hear kids yelling mean things like, "What a ripoff!" and "You'll be sorry!" In the morning when I leave for school there are smashed pumpkins in our driveway, and streams of toilet paper hanging from all the trees that line our walk.

For days I just come home from school, go to my room and wait. I wait for dinner. I wait for bedtime. I wait for someone to come home. I am waiting for things to change.

And then they do. The red washes out of my hair and I'm plain old me again on the outside. My mother gets over her big mad, and we don't talk about ballet anymore or about how much I embarrassed her and my dad. By the time he gets home next week, everything will be back to the way it was before, but I'm not the same inside.

I can't stop thinking about the park, and breathing deeply, and Indira. I keep trying to close my eyes and put my worries on a cloud so they can be whisked away, but it doesn't work without her. I wonder where she thinks I've gone. I picture her doing her tree pose on the blanket like the first day I saw her there. I don't know how to tell her what happened.

A year ago, I didn't even know that park existed. I didn't know Indira existed. I didn't know about good karma and spiritual journeys. I didn't know about robotic dancers who point their toes while a piano plays in the background. I didn't know about cans of hair dye that can change your whole personality.

Every day, I think to myself, everyone is going about their lives, doing the things they love, and I'm just sitting alone in my room doing nothing. I need a friend.

At least I have my journal, and it helps to write down my feelings. I keep writing poems about Indira, and birds, and trees, and the life of a park in a city an hour away. I even write poems about a three-headed ballerina and a floaty ballet teacher.

I write a lot about my bluebird of happiness which does not seem to be doing its job lately. I keep it under my pillow for good luck, but nothing seems to help. Today I wrote about the cat that I wish I had to keep me company. I asked my mother if we could maybe go to the shelter and adopt a kitten, but she just said, "I will not have a dirty animal in this house, Elinor. You know they harbor fleas and their fur gets all over the furniture. That is out of the question."

Even though she said no, I can still dream. Here's my latest poem about the cat of my dreams:

*I keep a bluebird under my pillow
to help me sleep at night
when I close my eyes
a sweet dream
comes to me
each night
I picture you, kitty
Little ball of fur
Curled up tight*

*Sleeping by my side
Purring so softly
With happiness inside*

After I close my journal, I say the poem out loud by heart. When I say it, I picture sharing it with Indira on her blanket in the park. I wonder what she would say. I guess I'll never know.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

*"It takes courage to grow up
and become who you really are."*

~ E E Cummings



Part two

NOT FOR SALE

Dancing Tree

*T*oday is a day that I'll never forget. I woke up with the weirdest feeling – all tingly and excited. I kissed my mother when I went into the kitchen for breakfast, and made her a latte. “Well, what a nice surprise!” she said as I handed her a frothy mug. I emailed my dad good morning before I left for school and told him I was thinking of learning to play the guitar. The day was full of sunshine and the birds were especially noisy on my way to school; I actually skipped my way into the classroom.

Mean Christine who sits next to me in first period looked up at me when I sat down and said, “Hi. Cute shoes.” There was not a trace of sarcasm in her voice. I have read about miracles before, and I think I must be experiencing one. The whole day feels like a string of little miracles.

After school, I sit on my bed and listen to the music from Giselle – even though I don't like ballet, I still love the music sometimes. It makes me feel all warm and happy inside. I take a brand new journal off my shelf and open to the first page. "I have been waiting for the first day of the rest of my life to be different. I think today it is!" I write. Then I start writing a new poem called *Indira*. I can hear her voice inside my head asking, "What's up, buttercup?" And I can picture her so clearly, standing perfectly still, being a tree.

Indira

*Once there was a girl who was a tree
She opened her eyes and looked through me
She taught me how to breathe
She taught me to stand tall
She said to pay attention
It's her spirit I recall
Most all the time*

Usually I miss her so much that it's hard to breathe when I think about her. But today, when I picture her, I just feel happy and full, not empty and alone. Another miracle.

I close my journal, get off my bed, and move to the middle of the room. I close my eyes and slowly raise my arms up high over my head. I remember my third eye space and I try to focus.

"I'm going on a little spiritual journey," I say out loud, standing perfectly still. I breathe in as slowly as possible, pretending that the air is a big drink of refreshing cold water and I'm very, very thirsty. I swallow it down deep and hold the air in my lungs while I count to ten. Then I let it out slowly, in thin little wisps of air. Elinormal. Calm. Elinormal. Calm.

I keep my eyes closed and lower myself to the floor. The music from *Giselle* is playing on repeat. I'm very aware of my breathing. I can feel my heart beating in my chest and I am aware of my skin and the hairs on the back of my neck. I start to shiver, and those neck hairs stand straight up.

I keep sitting perfectly still while the music swells and the clock downstairs chimes the hour. Outside my window, a tree brushes against the window and gently taps out a steady rhythm against the glass.

Suddenly, the weird feeling that I woke up with this morning returns, making me all tingly inside again. It feels like someone is staring right at me, even though I'm all alone. I open my eyes just to make sure. The room is empty.

I close my eyes again, but the feeling of being watched is stronger than ever. It feels like someone is sitting right in front of me, staring into my soul.

The tree outside is brushing its branches against the house slowly, gently, back and forth, back and forth.

I know that the leaves all fell to the ground weeks ago and that the branches are naked, waiting for the magic of spring.

I stand up and move to the window, dancing along to the music that the tree is making. I open the shutters and watch the tree dancing. I move my arms gracefully in time with the tree and it feels like I am part of nature. I feel so happy, like I am coming back to life after a long, cold winter.

I don't know why, but I want to touch the tree. I undo the lock on the window and push it open. The tree is dancing, I am dancing, the sun is shining, the birds are singing, and everything feels so alive and beautiful. I reach out and touch the closest branch. It's then that I see her.

Standing on my front lawn, skirt swirling around her ankles, hair blowing wildly across her face, hands clasped in front of like she's praying, is the best miracle of all. Indira is here.

The Gift

Indira is standing as still as a statue on my front lawn. Her skirt is swirling around her ankles in the breeze as she stares up at my bedroom window. On this day of miracles, it seems perfectly natural that she found her way to me.

I open the window wider and call out to her, madly waving my arms. “Hey, Indira. Indira! Up here!”

“Well look at that – she lives!” she shouts, “Come see, come sah, Elinah! I come bearing gifts!”

I have missed her so very much. I fly down the stairs and out the front door, nearly bursting with happiness. This is a dream come true.

Indira laughs and tells me what a lot of trouble I am. “Jeez, Louise,” she tells me. “Do you know how hard you were to track down?”

She takes her backpack off and puts it on the ground, then loosens her hair from its ponytail and shakes her head. “There,” she says, “that’s better.” She takes a big breath and laughs. “Okay, so I asked all those little tutu-wearers about you, but they weren’t any help. Like at all. It took me forever to follow your scent. But, now, here we be. First find for Indira’s Detective Agency.”

The words are spilling out of her so fast, her hands waving and fluttering in front of her. Her whole body moves like she’s on springs when she talks. She pulls an elastic off her wrist and secures her hair back into a ponytail as she explains, “You’ll see. I really think I’m on to something here. I’m going to call it Sleuthadelic, what do you think? Is that the coolest name or what?”

“Wait, you mean like sleuth?”

“Exactly. I’m a super sleuth, don’t you think? And get this. I’m designing an amazing website. It’s like totally incredible. Ms. Fris thought my park biography was so cool. She had me share it with all her classes, and now I’m mentoring all these kids who hate to write. I set up a site for teaching, and voila, now it’s even better.”

The sun suddenly peeks out from behind a skyful of clouds and lights up Indira’s face like she is in a painting or a movie. She grabs my hand and continues. “Just wait till I post about finding you on my website. I’ll be in business, big time. Indira Makepeace, super sleuth. Super

seeker of truth and lost souls. This is life changing stuff. Ah, but I digress!"

She finally takes a breath, so I guess it's my turn. "That's cool, Indira. But why? I mean why did you go to all this trouble? Why did you come looking for me?"

I wonder if she knows how much I've missed her. How every day I wanted to come back to the park and find her, just to be with her. I wonder if she knows how much I needed to see her again.

"Well, duh," she says. "You didn't come to me so I figured you were probably being held captive by these people. Your spirit called out for me to come help you. That's obvious. And here," she says, unzipping the backpack. "This little guy needed you for sure. He was hot on your trail!"

With one hand she reaches into the bottom of the backpack and scoops out a little orange ball of fur. It is a kitten, so tiny and perfect that it fits in the cradle of her hand. Water springs to my eyes.

"Oh, my gosh!" I exclaim. "I've been praying for a cat forever. Like literally forever!"

"Bingo!" she says, handing the kitten to me. "Bonding time. Get to know this little guy while I try to figure out how we're going to get you out of here. What to do, what to do?!"

I wish I had all the right words to say like Indira always does. I want to tell her how much I wanted to

come back to the park and how much I thought about it every day, but how I just couldn't. I nuzzle the kitten up to my face and breathe in the sweet kitten smell, and I'm crying happy tears. I just can't find the words that are in my heart.

"So, tell me," she says. "Like why didn't you just hop on that train and come back? Like even once so I would know what happened?" She is looking right at me, intensely. "I mean what have these people done to you? Has your brain been totally washed? What's up, buttercup?"

The kitten is purring against my face. Its fur is so soft and it tickles my chin. I can hear its inside sounds, a quiet little purr and a happy heartbeat. I close my eyes and breathe in its kitten smell, sweet, like just peeled oranges.

"Hey, wake up, shake up, girl," I hear Indira saying from somewhere that sounds far away. I open my eyes as she says, "Time to show me your room and work on fixing your life. Let's go."



We spend the rest of the day getting the kitten set up. I tuck him under my sweatshirt so I can feel its soft fur

against me as we work. We go out to the garage, dump out one of the plastic bins of Christmas ornaments, and fill it with shredded newspaper.

“Voila, environmentally-sound kitty litter box,” Indira proclaims as she carries the plastic box back to my room. “Paper, of course, is biodegradable, so you can just rip up yesterday’s newspaper every day and put it in here for the kitty.”

Indira moves into my closet and begins to clear a place on the floor. “Jeez Louise – even a movie star wouldn’t need all these shoes,” she says as she tosses them behind her to make room for the litter box. “What size do you wear?” she asks, holding one of my new leather clogs up to her own foot. Before I can answer, she is slipping off her tennis shoe.

“Um, they look like they’d fit you. You can borrow them if you want.”

She stops what she’s doing, grabs the matching clog from the jumble of shoes there, and slips them on. Then she stands up and does a kind of jazz walk across the floor.

“Actually, you can have them if you want. They look a lot cooler on you.”

“What a gal, what a pal,” Indira says. “Elinor of the ‘burbs, she’d give you the shoes off her feet!”

The kitten stirs under my sweatshirt.

“Listen,” she says, “I’m not going to take your shoes, girly girl, but do you think I could borrow them for a little while?” She hikes up her skirt a bit and does a kind of jig like those Irish dancers do. “They kind of complete the look, don’t you think?”

I would give her anything right now. Pressed against me is the softest ball of fur - living, breathing fur. I’ve never felt anything so perfect. And it’s all mine.

Indira clears her throat, kicks off my shoes and claps her hands lightly. “Chop, chop. Time to get back to work, mon amie. We’ve got to get this little guy oriented to your room. Put him down for heaven’s sake, and let’s see what he does.”

I reach under my shirt to remove the kitty, and he sinks his thorn-like nails into my stomach. He is clinging there when I try to pull him away, and that just makes him dig his claws in even more. “Ow! Bad kitty, bad kitty!” He lands on the floor with a thud.

“Well, that was not cool,” Indira says. “You’re going to have to learn how to be a better mommy. Luckily, they have nine lives. But that might have been the end of the first one.”

Before I can even start to panic about the red scratches that are stinging like mad or how much that fall might have hurt him, the kitten does the cutest thing and Indira and I burst out laughing. He gives a quick

little kitten sneeze and shakes his head, then he hops. He turns around to look at me, and continues kitty-hopping across the room. He hops right into the wall, then gives out the cutest little mew and topples over.

Indira and I are laughing like hyenas. The kitten shakes his head like he's dazed, gives another little kitty sneeze, and hops straight into my closet. He is so little that he hops right into Indira's tennis shoe and promptly snuggles in for a catnap. We are laughing so hard now and I can't tell if my stomach hurts from that or from the scratches the kitten left when he fell to the floor.

Did you ever see a kitten fall asleep? It is the weirdest, cutest thing. One minute they are hopping across the room like a frog, and the next second they are sound asleep in a shoe. And the funny thing is, they are just as fun to watch as when they are hopping. We sit on the floor inside my closet watching him for a long time while I try to come up with the perfect name.

What's in a Name?

“Finding the right name is important,” Indira tells me as she pulls on her ponytail elastic and puts her hair into a sloppy bun on top of her head. “It has to fit.”

I keep staring at the sleeping kitten and picturing how he hopped right across the room when he hit the ground. The first name I come up with is Tigger, because, well you know, Tigger in *Winnie the Pooh*.

“A little obvious,” Indira says, “and besides, how many pets named Tigger do you know?”

Well, none actually, I think to myself, but Indira must know lots because she just shakes her head at me. That is a name she won't even consider.

Then I say, “How about Kermit?”

She raises one eyebrow at me.

“Because Kermit’s a...”

“Well, duh,” she says. “Of course he is, but it’s been done. This cat is an individual; he needs a unique name that will honor his individuality.”

I sigh and stare at the sleeping cat.

“Think bigger, Elinor. Leap, for lizard’s sake! The name you have in life is very important to your spirit. It tells the whole world who you are. Not to be taken lightly, if you know what I mean.”

I’m afraid to say the wrong name, so I just sit there quietly watching my kitten. My kitten! I never, ever thought I’d get to say those words.

“It’ll come to you if you concentrate hard enough,” she says. “Just focus on his catness, and it’ll come to you.”

“Why don’t you name him, Indira?” I ask. “You’re probably way better at it than me.”

“Oh, pish posh. You’re the mommy. Look at your wittle baby!” she strokes him under the chin and he opens one eye, sneezes, and then just like that, he’s off to dreamland again. “What name does he need to tell the world that he’s present and accounted for?”

“I think I need to watch him a little more,” I say. “I want him to have the right name. I bet if I put on my music it’ll come to me.” I tiptoe over to my bed and grab my phone, then pull up my “thinking music” playlist, and there, right on top is the music from Giselle.

Have you ever seen a ballet dancer on stage? They move like magic and they can do this cool little jump where they lift off the ground, click their feet together in the air, and then land soft, just like a cat. It's sort of like the way my kitten looks when he hops, like he's a ballet dancer. He silently springs off the ground, clicks, and lands. I think maybe I should give him a ballet kind of name, but I don't want Indira to laugh at me again.

Indira stands up and walks over to where I'm standing, and she takes my hands in hers. "Let's breathe to the music," she says. She guides me back to our watching place in front of the closet where the kitten is still nestled asleep in her shoe. We do some of our inner peace movements along to the music.

The kitten wanders out of the closet while I'm sitting in that pose where you look like a pretzel and snuggles right in my lap. I can hear him purring and feel the vibrations against my leg. We're already bonding.

That's when it hits me! It's just like karma. I think about the world's greatest ballet dancer ever and I picture him leaping across the stage when I was five, when I believed that I could move like that too. My dad's favorite ballet dancer, Mikhail Baryshnikov, can jump higher than anyone in the history of ballet. I saw him do it. And I've never heard of a cat named after him!

I'm feeling the unique catness of the soft little

creature purring so peacefully in my lap, and I'm picturing Baryshnikov leaping high above the swirling worry clouds in my mind. I know my kitten's name. I will name him Baryshnikov, but I'll call him Bari for short. It must be destiny.

I open my eyes. The kitten is purring, soft and warm in my lap.

Indira is directly across from me, sitting still and tall with a hand on each knee, breathing slow and deep with both eyes closed. Waiting. I don't want to disturb her just yet, but the kitten shifts in my lap and I feel a very sharp claw poke my leg.

"Ow!" At the sound of my voice, the kitten plunges both front paws with needle sharp claws into my thigh. "Yikes! Bad kitty!" The more I yelp, the deeper he plunges.

Indira opens her eyes, slowly emerging from her trance. Her glance goes from my face, where my eyes are welling with tears, to the kitten, now arched on my leg, hanging on for dear life.

"Sharp little talons he's got there, doesn't he?"

"He hurt me! Bad kitty!" The tips of his spiky claws are still dug into my leg, but Indira shows me how to gently loosen his grip.

"It's a good sign. He's bonded with you already. Claimed you as his own. Just don't wear shorts around him for a while or your legs will be a bloody mess, Queen

Elinor,” she says with an English accent. With that, she scoops him from my lap and lowers him gently to the floor. “Your subject awaits his name. But first, the bestowing of gifts.”

Indira unzips the backpack that she brought with her and pulls out two wrapped packages. She unwraps a box of kitten chow, punches her thumb through the top corner, and shakes a few fish shaped morsels into my palm. “*Cat-chow*,” she says, patting the kitten on his head, “*so you’ll never know hunger*.” She turns the kitten around so he is facing my outstretched hand. He looks around curiously, then scoops up a mouthful with a surprisingly scratchy tongue that tickles and makes goosebumps rise all the way up my arm.

“Now you,” she says as she hands me a round lumpy package covered with blue paper and thick tape. “A little tricky to wrap,” Indira says. A little tag attached with purple ribbon dangles from the side. “Read it,” she says.

“*Cat-toy, so you’ll always be playful!*” I read out loud. I shake the package and hear a little bell sound. I start to unwrap the package, but Indira rests her hand upon mine.

“Wait,” she tells me, “there’s more. Read the other side.”

I flip the tag over and read, “*For a ‘Bari’ special kitty*.” The hairs on my neck stand straight up. I am covered with goosebumps from head to toe.

Indira is grinning from ear to ear. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

I drop the package into my lap. “How did you know I was going to name my new kitten Bari?” I whisper.

“Yipes, stripes, is that his name? Well, how perfectly purrfect!” she answers.

“I know it’s perfect, Indira, but how did you know?”

“I guess Bari is just the name bestowed upon him by the universe and the all-knowing stars in the sky. It’s the name he was born to proclaim. It’s part of his essence, his *joie de vivre!* And you, Elinormal Madre Extraordinaire, are just tuned in enough to know what the wind already knows. You are blessed to be this cat’s earthly mommy. What a lucky little feline he is!”

My eyes keep moving from Indira to the kitten to the shimmering tag in my lap.

“And holy smokes,” she says, “look at the time! Let’s give him his toy to see if he likes it, and then you can walk me out. I believe my mission is fini, mon amie.”

She takes the still unwrapped package and removes the tape and paper, revealing a little stuffed bluebird that she tosses to the kitten. The cat toy makes a tinkling bell sound when it lands, startling the kitten who springs back into the closet.

“Give him time,” she says. “There’s a lot to get used to. He’ll be your trusty sidekick until you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” I ask.

“Life in the real world,” she says, stuffing her feet back into her sneakers. “I came here to help you escape but I can see you’re not ready yet. But don’t worry, you will be. One of these days you’re going to fly! And then, watch out world.”

And with that, she stands up, drops my clogs into her backpack, slings it over her shoulder and heads for the stairs.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Bless You

It's dark outside when I hear my mother downstairs clanging around. I kiss Bari's cute little nose, then settle him in the closet with his food and his litter box and his bluebird cat toy. I take my softest pillow off my bed and scrunch it up for him on the closet floor.

"This is your own little house," I tell him. "You just curl up here and go to sleep. I'll be back soon, mo na me."

My mother is sitting slumped at the kitchen table which is strewn with papers. Her head is resting on her hand, and she doesn't look up when I enter.

"What's for dinner?" is what comes out of my mouth. I know it's the wrong thing to say the moment I say it.

"Is that all you can say? What's for dinner? How about, *Gee, you sure look busy there, Mom. What can I do to*

help? Or how about *How was your day?* *Can I get you a cup of tea?* Or what about, *I'll get out of your way, Mom. I think I'll just grab a bowl of cereal and take it to my room?*"

Uh-oh. It's going to be one of those nights. "Sorry, Mom. How was your day?" She shakes her head, but still doesn't look up. "Looks like you could use a break. I'm going to just have a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios, want one? We've got strawberries and bananas to make it a meal. Or I could make you a salad?"

"No, thank you," she says. "I'm good. Achoo!"

"Bless you. Can I just sit here and work on my math while I eat? I promise I won't bother you."

"Oh, for..." She's going to say something, but then she sneezes again. "I'd better not be coming down with anything," she says. "I cannot afford to be sick with this trial hanging over my head."

I take a bowl from the cupboard and stand in front of the open refrigerator. Our grocery delivery came today so the shelves are stocked with lots of fresh fruits and veggies.

"All right, sit at the counter, but I can't be bothered with your chatter. Tomorrow's a big day in court and I've got to be sharp. You're on your own tonight, kiddo."



The hardest thing I've ever had to do is to leave my kitten all alone all day. I kiss him on his little whiskery nose a hundred times each morning before I leave. I make sure he's got food and water and a clean litter box. I've made him some extra toys like a ball of aluminum foil and a bunch of yarn and strings hanging from a hanger so he doesn't get bored without me, but still he looks so sad when I leave; I can't stop thinking about him all alone in that closet all day long.

He's really got this thing about sleeping in shoes, but he's growing so fast that pretty soon he won't be able to fit in mine. I bet my dad won't even miss them if I take an old pair of his shoes from the back of his closet.

Bari has been my cat for three days, but it feels like forever. It is just the strangest thing, how love grows. How did I ever live without him? I keep trying to imagine what it was like before I got him, and I just can't. I wonder if he remembers anything before me. He must have had a mother, and I know that usually a whole litter is born at one time so he must have brothers and sisters. I wonder if he misses them?

He kind of reminds me of Indira, in a good way. Like I know a cat is not the same as a person, but he is my connection to her and the park. When I hold him on my lap and rub behind his ears, he makes soft little purring sounds that help me close my eyes and relax. I can picture

standing in the park facing Indira while we focus on our breathing and stand perfectly still in mountain pose.

If I could take him to school with me, I would, but I can't figure out how he'd be better off zipped up inside my backpack all day. At least there's plenty of oxygen in my closet.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Action Plan

The best thing about having a mother who's so wrapped up in her job is that she doesn't pay much attention to my schedule. She forgets that we get out early on Wednesdays, and she never remembers teacher work days.

Once, when I was in first grade, I had to sit on the bench all day because she dropped me off on a day when only the teachers were there, and I forgot that her cell phone number was written on a card inside my backpack. Back then I was too shy to go to the office and ask for help, so I just sat and waited all day on the bench. The only good thing about it was that I had my library book with me. I sat and read all of *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

When I brought it up to the counter in the library the day before, Mrs. Reedy, the librarian said, "Oh sweetie,

that's an awfully big book. Why don't I save this for you till you're a little older? There are lots of great picture books that you'll like better over there."

That's when Mrs. Minamide, my first-grade teacher, stepped in and said, "Oh, no, this book is actually perfect for our little Elinor. She's a reader." I'll never forget that. So anyway, I'm sure glad I had that book in my backpack instead of a picture book because I had to sit there the whole day and I got to read the whole book without feeling one bit sorry for myself. It ended up being a great day. If I had a dog instead of a cat, I'd want one just like Winn-Dixie.

These days, I have all my important numbers saved in my phone: Mother's office, Dad's cell, Mrs. Feinberg, MovingKids, and DoorDash. I keep track of my own schedule, and that's how I know she won't remember that I don't have school tomorrow.

Our teachers are all spending the day learning. Ms. Chasten said she'll be sitting in a desk just like us, learning new math strategies from a math guru named Dr. Numero. That's not his real name, but he calls himself that because Ms. Chasten says numbers are his life. It would be good if he could teach her more about controlling the class instead of more about math. All the teachers will be busy learning at school, and I'll be going on an adventure. I'm going to track down Indira in the city.

Instead of doing my homework after dinner I do a different kind of work – I’m getting ready for tomorrow. I lay out all my clothes on my bed, then rifle through my desk for my park journal with the drawings of Indira and the leaf and all my park poems. I find my favorite gel pen, some colored pencils for sketching, and a little change purse for money, my ATM card, and my library card, just in case. I make a list of everything I’m going to need and put a check mark next to things as I gather them: flashlight, check; water bottle, check; two power bars, check; cell phone, check. Bari hops up on my bed and curls up on top of the sweater I’m wearing tomorrow.

I can’t resist. I climb in next to him and rub his little back. Sparks of electricity shoot up and crackle each time my hand touches his fur. It looks like sparks of light are shooting from my fingertips as I stroke his head and back. Bari snuggles in closer, opens his eyes and looks right at me. His eyes are shiny green with little specks of gold. I try to outstare him, but it’s no use. He doesn’t blink, just keeps looking deep inside me and purring quietly.

“That’s it,” I tell him. “You’re coming with me tomorrow.”

I lie on my back and pull him onto my chest, and just like that he yawns, closes his eyes and crawls up till he’s nuzzled right under my chin. His soft purring sounds

like a lullaby. It's so comfortable and warm snuggled there together, that I drift off to sleep. When I open my eyes again, it feels like only a minute has passed, but the red numbers glowing on my alarm clock say that it's 9:07.

I feel groggy and want to just roll over and go back to sleep, but I make myself get up. I head to the garage to find something to carry Bari in if he's going to be my side-kick. I know my backpack or my dance bag won't work. If we'll be gone all day, he's going to need oxygen.

In the back part of the garage there's a bunch of labeled plastic bins. I find the one marked "totes" and pull it down. When I open the lid, I'm looking at the most perfect cat carrier. It's a soft sided cooler with lots of side pouches and a top that opens with a zipper. The inside is lined with shiny silver material designed to keep hot things hot and cold things cold. The silver material has lots of little holes in it that will make it easy for Bari to breathe.

I put the bin back on the shelf and carry the kitty tote that used to be a picnic cooler into the house. The hallway is dark and I tiptoe carefully past the laundry room and the kitchen. Just as I round the corner, the hall light clicks on.

"My goodness, Elinor. I thought I heard noises coming from the garage. What on earth are you up to?" My mother is standing in front of me in a red velour

sweatsuit stretched too tight across her middle. Her hair is wet and flattened against her head. She takes up the whole doorway, and I am frozen stiff.

“What?” I stammer. “Oh, I didn’t know you were still up, Mom. This is for school tomorrow. Sixth grade is having a picnic lunch in the courtyard. I said I’d bring a cooler.”

“Achoo.” My mother’s eyes are all watery and her mascara is smudged under both eyes. “Well, I hope it doesn’t rain. There’s a brand new bag of chips in the pantry that you can take. Top shelf.”

“Thanks,” I say without even a trace of guilt. “Are you all right?”

“It’s the strangest thing,” she says, leaning against the doorway. “I’ve been sneezing ever since I got home again today. I keep thinking I’m getting a terrible cold, but when I get to work, I’m fine.” She pulls a tissue from her sleeve and blows her nose. “I thought a hot shower would help, but look at me.” Her nose and her cheeks are bright red, the color of her sweatsuit. “I’m going to see Dr. King-Fisher in the morning. It just came on me out of the blue and I can’t seem to shake it.”

“Well, I hope you feel better tomorrow. I better get to bed. G’night,” I say as I push past her. As I start up the stairs, I brush a big clump of cat fur off my shirt.

“Elinor?”

I turn around quickly, clutching the cooler tight to my chest.

“I’m not going to the office before my appointment tomorrow. I’ll drive you to school.”

I swallow hard. “Oh, great, Mom. See you bright and early.”

On the way up the stairs, I’m already plotting my escape. I am turning into a sneak and a liar. I wonder what Indira will say.

NOT FOR SALE

The Cat's Out of the Bag

The alarm on the phone under my pillow rings at four a.m. and I spring into action. I grab Bari and put him into the closet where he can't escape, then I creep silently down the hall. I stand motionless outside my parents' bedroom, pressing my ear to the door and trying not to breathe. I turn the doorknob in slow motion and count to ten. Then slowly, soundlessly, I push the door open and stand in the entry in mountain pose, still as a statue while my eyes adjust to the darkness.

My mother is lying on her side, her mouth wide open. She is making soft little noises that sound kind of like Bari's purring, and she's wearing her purple sleep

mask. I bet she has her ear plugs in too; I creep closer to see but it's too dark to know for sure. She looks so peaceful sleeping there, turned towards the wall on my dad's side of the bed, holding his pillow tight, like a teddy bear. I try to remember where he is this week, Boston or Bosnia, or some other place that starts with a B, I think. It's hard to remember.

I tiptoe towards the bed and reach for the alarm clock glowing on the nightstand next to a tall pile of papers and folders. In one swift motion I turn the switch to its off position and replace the clock, careful not to disturb anything. I take one more long look at my sleeping mother, then back slowly out of the room and pull the door closed tight.



Three hours later my alarm goes off again. I jump up, make my bed quickly, and stuff the bag of chips from the pantry underneath my bed. I give Bari a kiss on the nose, then lower him into the main compartment of the cooler along with his bluebird toy, a Ziploc bag of kitten food, my water bottles and power bars, then hurriedly zip it closed. I've already put my wallet and bluebird of happiness in one of the outside pockets, and my journal,

pen, and pencils in the larger side pouch. I make sure my cell phone is on silent, and I zip it into my jacket pocket, then head downstairs.

My plan is in full swing. I feel like Harriet the Spy from that book I read at camp when I was little. I set the cooler down in the front hallway and hope that Bari can stay nice and quiet in there. I pour myself a bowl of cereal and read the back of the cereal box while I'm eating.

And then I hear the sound I've been waiting for. My mother's feet hit the floor and she's swearing. A lot of bad words come flying down the stairs. I jump up and click on the intercom to her bedroom. "Mom," I say, "Are you okay? What's the matter?"

"I can't believe it! That worthless alarm never went off and I know I set it! This#*@#! stuffed nose made me oversleep. I can't be late to the doctor!"

"Oh, my gosh," I say in my best calming voice. "It's okay, Mom. Don't worry about me. Just get yourself ready. I'll grab the bus!"

And before she has a chance to protest, I dump my cereal bowl in the sink, grab the cooler by the front door, and take off running. When I get to the corner, I pull out my phone, pull up the MovingKids app, and hail a ride to the train station.

My heart is pounding with excitement, but I don't want to take calming breaths this morning. I want to feel

all the feels. I take a look all around, making sure to be aware of my surroundings, like my mother always tells me. The early morning people look different than the people who used to ride the train after school. Everybody here is dressed up and distracted, reading the news on their phones or talking loudly on their Bluetooth devices as they climb aboard the train.

As soon as I am on board, I'm squooshed. There are so many people standing and holding on to the straps that dangle from the ceiling while they continue to read and talk to invisible people. I can't reach the straps, and the seats are all full so I kind of lean against the lady next to me for balance. Every time the train screeches to a stop, more people pile on and a few people get off. There's a guy with a bicycle bumping into everyone, and my sweater feels super itchy against my neck.

I manage to get off with a huge clump of people to transfer to the light rail train that's waiting in the city center station, and we all pile on that together. After only two stops, the conductor calls out "Theatre District!" I push my way to the door, clutching my cooler tight, but I can't get out before the door closes and the train lurches forward again. I am stuck, smooshed up against somebody's itchy black coat until the next stop, where I get pushed off the train with the crowd in an unfamiliar part of the city.

I don't know where I am. This was not part of the plan.

I make my way to the escalator, up and out to the bright morning. From the cooler, I hear a faint mewling. Bari must sense the change in the air, because as I walk to a nearby bench to get my bearings, he starts scratching away and his cat noises get louder. I sit down and unzip the cooler a little bit, to let him know that I'm here and everything is all right. I should realize what a scared cat would do in a situation like this, but it doesn't occur to me until it's too late.

The second I start unzipping the top of the cooler, Bari springs out like a tiger jumping through a flaming hoop, and he takes off. Without even thinking, I take off too, chasing him through a crowd of people down a busy city street.

Not So Random Acts

Just as I'm about to dart across the street following Bari, I am startled by a city bus squealing to a stop in front of me. Like lights being clicked on one by one in a darkened house, the city comes sharply into focus. There's this bus, then all these cars honking, rushing office workers moving along side by side, a trumpet player greeting people on the corner, a wall of windows on a tall building with a doorman on one side of me, and right next to me on the other side, a green kiosk piled high with magazines and newspapers. I freeze in my tracks. What chance does a little orange kitty have in all this chaos?

A sick feeling rises from the bottom of my stomach and slowly fills up my insides with fear and sorrow. I just stand there on the curb, holding the cooler, unable to move.

The man selling newspapers in the kiosk calls out to me. “Hey, young lady, you lose something?”

I look up to see him walking towards me, with a spring in his step and a broad smile across his face. He’s got a newspaper under one arm, and a ball of orange fur held tightly against his chest.

“Bari!”

“This your beast?” he says, nuzzling Bari under his chin.

“Thank you, thank you!” I pant. “I can’t believe it. I thought he was gone for good.”

“City’s no place for a little kitten to be roamin’ around, for crying out loud. Traffic don’t even stop for pedestrians, never mind a little helpless creature like this guy.”

He tells me to come with him so he can get me a leash. I follow him to the newsstand where he cuts a long piece of twine from around a stack of newspapers and loops it around the kitten’s collar, then ties a double knot.

“This should do it,” he says. “You shouldn’t let him out again, but at least if you do, you’ll know he’s safe.” He kisses Bari right on the nose and hands him back to me. “And you be safe too, young lady. People don’t look out for each other these days, so you got to look out for yourself.”

“I will,” I tell him. “How much do I owe you?”

“Are you kiddin’? Consider this my random act of kindness for the day. You take care to pass it on.” He

winks at me and his mustache twitches when he smiles, revealing a big gold tooth right in front.

“Can I buy a paper then?” I ask, but already he has turned to talk to someone else.

I lower Bari carefully back into the cooler, and make sure to zip it all the way closed. Then I stuff five dollars into the coffee can on the kiosk’s ledge and help myself to a copy of *The Santa Marita Spirit*. I fold it into a pocket on the side of the cooler and start walking down the sunshine side of the street.

Sidewalk Story

I am sure I'm walking in the direction of the park because I'm following my nose, but after twenty minutes carrying a cooler full of kitten, I'm not so sure. The longer I walk, the heavier it seems to get, and nothing looks familiar. I decide it's time to take a break, find a patch of sunlight, and plop myself down under a tree. Lots of people are doing the same thing, leaning against buildings and trees and bike racks, and no one seems to care. Some people even look like they're asleep. There are almost as many people on the ground as there are people walking by.

I lean into the tree and look around. I'm already hungry and thirsty but I realize I made a big mistake by zipping my water and power bars inside the cooler with Bari. I'm not ready to go through that scary ordeal again,

and I don't have all that much faith in a leash made of string, so I try to think of something besides my growling stomach and parched throat.

I start to daydream there in the sunshine and I remember that quote on the wall at the beauty salon, a beautiful exterior is not hing wit hout a beautiful inner life. That makes me think about all the things Indira taught me, and I try to imagine what Indira would say if she knew I was sitting on the ground in an unfamiliar place with my kitten in a cooler and a newspaper waiting to be read. I bet she'd say, "Take some time to nourish your spirit with lifenews. Read all about it!" Even though she's not here, I can hear her voice, so I take her advice, and open the paper.

It looks so different than the one we get at home. For one thing, it is much thinner. And there is not one picture on the front page. Not one. Across the top where the headline should be it just says FREE.

Nothing grabs my interest on the front page, so I open it up. The first thing that catches my eye is a grainy black and white picture of a woman smiling right at me. She looks so familiar. Eerily familiar. Underneath her picture it says, behind the wheel... carpool conversations brought to you by shosha nafi nkl e-woo.

I've never been in a carpool.

I relax against the tree and start to read.

What's a mother to do when her teenage girl's got a yin-yang full of angst? Simple. Just give her space. Let her breathe. That's what I do, and take it from me, it works.

In the carpool these days, I'm as silent as a lamb. Just put it in gear and drive.

Remember a few short years ago they were a giggling bunch of middle school wannabe's, spilling their guts on the way to school? Now I'm lucky to get a grumbled hello. But you know me. I don't mind.

Seems like they're just trying to catch an extra ten minutes of shut eye before I drop them off at school. The carpool is a sleep chamber these days. But like I said, I don't mind.

As long as I can go along for the ride while they become independent women of the world, I'm okay. I feel blessed to witness the transformation.

Luckily, I have other ways of keeping up with the high school scene, so I can keep you up to date. It's a mother's job to know what's happening in their lives.

Right now, it's Daisy Mae Drag time, a tradition that's a holdover from when we were all in school. All the high school girls are getting ready to use their feminine wiles to woo the boy

of their dreams and ask him to dance. And for the record, it works. That's how I snared Chester Woo those many moons ago.

If you find out who Tiffany plans to ask, you can just email that good news to me here at the Santa Marita Spirit. After all, he could turn out to be my son-in-law one day. You never know!

Speaking of my Tiffany, allow me to brag just a bit. I've heard through the grapevine that she is quite the wonderkid on the computer. Latest buzz has it that she's teaching writing to a bunch of lucky underclassmen. Wonder where she got that writing gene?

In other news, the drama club is performing What's Eating Gilbert Grape next weekend, and the amazing jazz band is traveling to Tucson Tuesday for the Camel Classic Big Band Fest. Let's hear it for the arts!

From my heart to yours, remember to always support our kids. They are our future, and the future is bright. Till next time, you can share your thoughts, opinions, and epiphanies at WoozyMom@smt.com

I stare at the picture of Shoshana Finkle-Woo for a long time. It feels like I know her, and I wish I did. She

sounds like such a great mom. She drives her daughter and her friends to school every day and knows all about what's going on in her life without being pushy. She sounds so proud.

I read the story over one more time, slowly.

Without warning, a big splat lands on the picture smiling up at me. I use the sleeve of my jacket to wipe my eyes, and I can't even tell if I'm crying happy tears, or sad ones. I feel all mixed up inside. I really wish I could take out my kitten and feel his soft purring against me. I wish I could find Indira. I wish I could meet the carpool mom and ask her advice about life.

Instead, I fold up the newspaper and tuck it back in the side of the cooler, take a deep breath, stand up, turn around and head back the way I came.

My adventure wasn't what I planned, but my journal is full of sketches of the people I saw, and I wrote a really good poem on the train ride home. Also, I got to spend a day off of school having an adventure on my own, and learning some cool life lessons. I'm glad I went, but no life lesson could have prepared me for the scene I came home to.

Stachybotrys Chartarum

When the car service drops me off at the end of my street right on time, I jump out and head home just like it was an ordinary school day. I'm thinking about what I'll say when she asks me how the class picnic was. If she even remembers.

I sense it before I see it. Something's changed.

At first, I don't even see my mother's car in the driveway because of all the trucks. There's one parked in the driveway behind her car, and two on the street in front of our house. A ladder is leaning against the side of the house, workmen in white coveralls standing in clumps on the lawn, and the noisy whirl of a machine that makes my teeth ache.

I press the cooler tight against me and dart around the other side of the house. The trick is to sneak in the back door and get Bari settled back into my closet before anyone notices me. Then I've got to track down my mother and find out what all the commotion is about.

I look all around to make sure there's no one there, then quickly push the back door open. My mother is standing in the doorway to the mud room, with her back to me, talking on her cell phone. I walk on my tiptoes, holding the cooler tight and whispering, "Please don't wake up yet." Bari is as quiet as a mouse.

"Achoo!" My mother reaches into her sleeve and pulls out a used tissue. "There I go again," she says into the phone. As she does, she turns around and sees me standing there. She gives me a little wave and then holds up one finger to tell me to wait. "We're tearing the house apart and not one symptom all afternoon. Now just like that, my head, achoo! sorry, feels like it's stuffed with cotton. I told Leo we're going to sue that lousy builder."

She keeps talking so I signal back that I have to go to the bathroom, and make a mad dash for my bedroom. I unzip the cooler to let Bari out, but instead of leaping out like an excited frog the way he did in the city, he stays huddled in a tight little ball in the bottom of the cooler. I reach in and try to lift him out, but he hisses at me and gives me a mad look. I decide to wait and let him climb

out when he feels safe and ready. I leave the bag open there on my closet floor, turn on the light, close the door, and head downstairs to see what all the fuss is about.



It's nine o'clock by the time the workmen all leave for the day. My mother has me get a wet washcloth for her head, while she lies down on the sofa in the den. She hands me her phone and I find the meditation app that helps her fall asleep at night. I scroll through the different sounds until I find the one that is a babbling brook and set the phone down on the pillow next to her head.

We're both starving so I go into the kitchen and heat up some soup for both of us.

"I made you that creamy mushroom soup that you like and added spicy croutons," I tell her, balancing two bowls on a tray. "Do you want some tea too? Or a glass of wine?"

"Just some water," she tells me. "And could you bring me another pill? My new prescription is right next to the sink."

I cover her with a blanket and get her all settled, then sit down on the floor next to the couch, holding my soup bowl on my lap.

“I can’t believe they didn’t find a thing,” she says. “They’re coming back tomorrow with more sophisticated equipment. There is mold growing somewhere in this house and I won’t rest until they find it. I cannot live like this.”

I take a spoonful of my alphabet soup.

“What if they don’t find it? What then?”

“Then we hire somebody else who knows what they’re doing. This house must be crawling with mold spores inside the walls. How else can you explain my allergic rhinitis?”

“What?”

“Dr. King-Fisher said that’s what it must be. A week ago I’m fine, then we have all this wet weather, and I develop allergies to my own house. Not to my car, not to the office, not to anything but my own moldy house.”

She throws her head back against the pillow and lets out a steady stream of sneezes that shake the whole couch. When she recovers, she launches back in to her complaining. “I knew that builder was taking short cuts when he was building this rat-trap. He’ll be sorry he ever worked for us, I can tell you that!” With that, she blows her nose loudly and repositions the washcloth on her forehead, then closes her eyes. Her soup is still untouched.

“Mom?”

She grunts a reply.

“How come I’m not sick? I mean if that mold is making you so sick, how come I’m not sneezing? How come I’m not sick too?”

That question makes her smile, the first smile I’ve seen from her all day. “Ah, my little legal eagle. You think just like a lawyer. I’ve taught you well.” She dabs her eyes with a tissue, then continues. “There’s a disgusting black mold called *stachybotrys chartarum* and it makes some people sick. But not everybody. At least it’s not making you sneeze. Who knows what it could be doing to your lungs, though.”

“My lungs!?”

“Oh, don’t get so excited, Elinor. I’ll be the designated worrier. And I’ll take care of it one way or another. I told your father that builder was an idiot. We’ve got water seeping in somewhere and it’s growing mold like cancer. Can you pass me my soup?”

She sits up and eats her soup like it’s a gourmet meal, then she hands the empty bowl to me and lies back down, my signal that dinner is over. I spread the blanket back over her, and turn the lights down with the dimmer switch. I put her bowl on the tray next to mine and head to the kitchen.

I rinse hers to put it in the dishwasher, but when I go to rinse mine, I see that there’s still a spoonful left. I know it’s not polite to drink your soup out of the bowl,

The Elinormal Saga

but nobody's watching so I lift the bowl to my mouth. I swallow the tomatoey liquid and when I set the bowl in the sink to rinse it, I see three stubborn alphabet noodles still sticking to the side. I turn on the water and rinse a-c-t down the drain.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Penpals, Friends, and Deathly Quiet

*A*fter I'm all settled in bed for the night, I keep going over my day in my head – sneaking out of the house with a kitten in a cooler, hanging out alone in the city, taking care of my sick mother till she fell asleep. I try to close my eyes, but there's too much swirling around inside my head.

Finally, I get up and find the newspaper that's folded up in the pocket of the cooler that's still on my closet floor. Bari has forgiven me, so I scoop him up, and climb back into bed with the paper, my laptop, and my purring sidekick. I read over the carpool column one more time, adjust the kitten on the pillow beside me, and begin.

Dear Carpool Mom,

I read about you in the paper today. We don't get your paper at my house, so I never knew about you before. I just wanted to say you sound very nice. If you were my mom, I wouldn't sleep on the way to school.

Your faithful reader,

E.M.

ps. What's a Daisy Mae Drag? Just wondering because I'm thinking about changing my name to Daisy.

I hit send, close the computer, and snuggle there with Bari until I fall into a deep sleep.



When I come down for school the next morning, my mother is curled on the edge of the couch drinking tea, and scrolling through her phone. Her nose is all red.

“You’ll have to take the bus today. I just cannot move. I was up all night,” she says when she sees me. “Bring me my purse. I’ll get you some lunch money.”

“Do you want your briefcase too?”

“I already called in and told Gaby to hold all my calls. I am not leaving here until they find that awful

mold and get rid of it.”

Her purse is on the table by the front door. I hand it to her and she hands me a twenty. “Thanks, Mom. I hope you feel better soon.”

“You’d better hope I’m better, Elinor. We’re not going to live in a house that’s poisoning us,” she says as I zip up my backpack.

“What do you mean? What if they can’t get rid of the mold?”

“Oh, they’ll get rid of it all right. And if they can’t, we’ll be suing that crooked builder for all he’s worth and you’ll have a new neighborhood to come home to.”

“Wait, what? We have to move?” I shout over a volley of sneezes from my red-nosed mother.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Elinor. Don’t be so dramatic. And hurry up or you’ll miss your bus.”



On the bus ride, I worry about what’s happening at home. But when I get to my classroom, Christine smiles at me when I sit down next to her, and my troubles seem to just disappear.

“I like your sweater,” I say.

“It’s new,” she says. “Thanks. Cool jeans.”

I'm wearing brand new jeans with flowers embroidered on the pocket. Not counting these, I have thirteen pairs of jeans in my closet. My mother is seriously addicted to shopping.

There's a warm-up exercise on the board that we're supposed to work on till the bell rings, but instead I take out my journal and start to sketch a flower. I keep my head down, but I can feel her eyes on me, watching me draw.

"Want to come over?... Someday?... Maybe?" Christine whispers.

It feels like I am lighting up from the inside out. I wonder how red my face is. I clear my throat and then respond in my most Indira-like voice. "Okey-dokey, artichokey."

She doesn't say anything, and I'm sure she's about to laugh and tell me she was only kidding. I wonder if somebody made her invite me over as a joke. When I look up at her, she is smiling at me. "I'll ask my mom if you can come over tomorrow," she whispers just before Ms. Chasten taps her hand on my desk and says, "Page 217, Elinor. Top of the page, first column."

I open my math book and look at the first problem. I know the answer without even having to write the problem down. When the teacher moves to the other side of the room, I slip my journal on top of the open math book, and turn to the next blank page.

Friends, I write across the top of the page. Underneath, in my best calligraphy, I write *Indira Makepeace*.

I turn to the girl sitting next to me and focus on her. She is busily working out a math problem, but she must be able to feel my eyes on her. She lifts her head from her work, gives me a quick smile, and returns to solving the equation.

I take a deep breath. Under Indira's name I write, *Christine Corrales*, before slipping my journal back into my backpack.

All day it feels like I am floating on air.

On the way home from school, reality starts to set back in, and I prepare to be greeted by noisy workmen and lots of commotion. But when I get off the bus, it's quiet, and when I open the door, no one is there. There's no note on the table for me. It is deathly quiet.

I grab a box of crackers and head upstairs to wait. In my room, I toss my backpack on my bed and grab my laptop. When I open Google, there's an unopened email waiting for me, and my heart does a little leap.

Dear E.M.

Thank you for your kind words. I like knowing that I'm touching people's lives with the letters I string together. Let your love light shine!

Peacefully yours,

S. Finkle-Woo, Carpool Mom, Santa Marita Spirit

I hit reply and start to type.

Dear Carpool Mom,

You are the first real writer I've ever talked to and you are so lucky to write for a newspaper. I think I might be a writer too. I love poetry and I write a lot of poems. Do you know why they don't put poems in the newspaper?

I have two more questions for you if you're not too busy to answer. Is there really a writing gene like you said? What's a love light? Oh, and also, did you forget to answer about the Daisy Mae Drag thing? Because I still don't know what it is.

Your faithful reader,

E.M.

After I hit send, I close the laptop and walk towards my closet. I can't wait to tell Bari everything that's happened today. A wave of weirdness comes over me as I grab the handle of the closet door.

Something is just not right. It feels like all the air has been sucked out of my room. I open the closet door and switch on the light. It is way too quiet in there. Deathly quiet.

Where's Bari?

Easy/Messy/
Exciting

*M*y mother always says, when it rains it pours, and at the moment, I am definitely feeling like my life is a monsoon and thunderstorm all rolled up into one big flash flood.

Problem number one: My mother got an allergy shot yesterday and is under doctor's orders to give her system a chance to recover before coming home, so she's holed up in a fancy hotel in the city, ordering room service and resting.

When the doctor told her to stay out of the house for a few days, she said she was going to stay at the Victorian Inn downtown and I could stay with her. I love hotels.

Last night I heard her on the phone with my dad, yelling about the mold. “He said there was no mold anywhere. Told me, this house is sealed tight as a drum – not a bit of moisture anywhere. He must be in cahoots with that builder. He does not know who he’s dealing with though!” Then she started sneezing so much that she had to hang up.

Problem number two: The next thing I knew, my dad cancelled his business trip, and told my mother she should take advantage of the situation and take a little luxury spa-cation at the Hilton in the city. “It’s just you and me, kid!” he told me when he got home. “We can stay up late and order pizza!”

Normally, I’d be all excited, but having a missing pet does things to a person’s mood. I wanted to tell him about Bari, because my dad is the world’s best finder of lost objects, but my heart was really hurting and I stormed out of the room when he said it was just him and me and pizza. I ran upstairs and slammed the door.

My dad knocked a few minutes later, and poked his head in. “What’s the matter, love? How can I help?”

I should have told him then, but instead I just started yelling, “It’s not fair! It’s not fair!” I might have been a little hysterical.

He gave me a surprised look and shook his head. “Sometimes I just don’t understand women!” he said. “I’ll

let you cool off. Come down when you're ready." And with that, he closed my door.

Problem number three: My mother always tells me that calamities come in threes and she is right as rain, because this is the biggest calamity of my entire life. Bari is still missing. His bowl and his food and his toys are all untouched in my closet.

I cry myself to sleep and dream that when I wake up in the morning, he's snuggled in his little cat bed in the closet.



I wake up to the sound of my dad talking on the speaker phone and the sun edging into the room. I get up and check the closet first. Bari is sound asleep in there. He just has to be. But. He. Is. Not.

I keep telling myself that he just got a little spooked with all those workmen banging on the house, and now that it's nice and quiet again he'll show up.

But then the what if's start ringing in my ears. What if he's really lost? What if he's too scared to find his way back? What if he's really hurt?

In third grade we had to do author's chair and read a story to the whole class that we wrote in writers' workshop. This girl named Brianna wrote about how her

new kitten somehow climbed into the wall behind the kitchen cabinets and they heard a meowing that at first she thought was a ghost. They had to remove the cabinet to rescue the kitten and it cost a lot of money. The title of her story was “My Million Dollar Baby.”

What if Bari is trapped inside the wall from when the workmen were here?

I have never cut school before, but then I have never had a missing pet before. I can't sit through a whole day of school knowing he might be scared or lost or hurt in our big old house. I yell bye to my dad as I'm closing the front door. I walk like normal to the corner, then dash across Mrs. Feinstein's back yard, and tiptoe as stealthily as a cat to the side door of our house. I find the fake rock in the garden where we hide a key for emergencies, but the key isn't there. How can I sneak back inside if all the doors are locked and my dad's still in there?

I sit down in a flower bed and lean against house. My heart is pounding and I can't figure out what to do so I take out my journal and make a list of options.

Ring the doorbell and tell Dad I missed the bus and ask him to drive me to school. (easiest)

Sit in the garden all day till school gets out and hope the sprinklers don't come on. (messiest)

Take the train to the city and try to find Indira at her school. (excitingest)

I know before I even finish writing down that third option, that it's the only one that makes sense. This is a job for the Sleuthadelic Detective Agency! Indira will know what to do. I put away my journal, take out my cell phone, and click on the MovingKids app.

Twenty minutes later, I'm on the train to the city. There's no looking back. I feel like a criminal and keep waiting for somebody to ask me why I'm not in school, but nobody does.

I know about the morning crowds now, and I've made sure to stand right next to the door for the entire ride. Even when people push and pull, climbing on and off the train, I plant my feet and stay glued to my spot so that when it finally stops and the loudspeaker shouts, "Theater District," I'm ready. I do not want to wander around aimlessly again.

I step off the train into the bustle of the city. It is always noisy and in motion here, and a feeling like love floods my heart. I walk to the Ballet Academy entrance and run my hand across the sign that says *Santa Marita Ballet Academy: Ring for Entry*. Why is my heart pounding so ferociously?

It feels like there is electricity inside me and I'm wired to this building. I take a step back on the sidewalk and stare at the giant poster, encased in glass, hanging next to the door. There are three girls in tutus and toe

shoes, smiling at the camera, smiling right at me. My heart is beating out of my chest and my throat is dry.

I will not cry. Instead, I turn away and head to the park. I know Indira won't be there yet, but I sit on the bench by the fountain where I first saw her all those months ago. I take out the little bluebird and hold it tight in my hand for a few minutes, concentrating, then slide it back into my pocket. I close my eyes and picture Bari purring in my lap, until I know that he's safe at home.

My journal feels like an old friend in my hands when I take it out of my backpack and start to sketch. I sit there, sketching and writing for a long time. The sun is warm against my neck, and the park is filled with happy sounds. If I were a cat, I'd be purring. This is my favorite place on the planet. I wonder what I'm missing at school.

Searching

How hard can it be to find someone who's not lost? I know if I just concentrate, I can find Indira's school. And if I can find her school, I'm sure I can find her. I just hope her school is not near the Hilton. I would not want to be me if my mom were stepping out for fresh air and ran into me on the sidewalk when I'm an hour away from home in the middle of the morning on a school day. That would not be pretty. I will have to pay really close attention to my surroundings.

First, I walk to the middle of the park and stand as still as a statue. I drop my backpack to the ground and take a deep breath, close my eyes, and push my hands together in front of me until I feel perfectly at peace. I wait there in stillness until it feels like my third eye space is opening up, and there's Indira, smiling at me inside my head.

I open my eyes, pick up my backpack and head out of the park. I cross the street and just start walking, following my nose. Pretty soon I'm walking down a street that looks like a giant sidewalk sale. Every store has a table on the sidewalk in front with boxes of stuff to buy. There are plastic frogs and backscratchers, coffee cups and tee shirts with weird sayings, jewelry boxes and spinning racks of postcards. I want to walk by quickly because I'm on a mission to find Indira, but the stuff on the street slows me down. I want to stop and look at everything.

I pause in front of a display of windchimes playing the softest tinkling music, even though there is no wind. It sounds like pure happiness, so I ask the man standing in the doorway to take one down for me.

“Namaste,” he says, bowing as he hands it to me.

“Merci,” I say back, then go inside the store to buy it from a small wrinkled woman behind the counter who doesn't smile at me or say a word. I slip my purchase into my backpack and head back outside. Every step I take is accompanied by the jingle of a wordless soundtrack that makes me feel like I'm floating through the crowd on my quest to find Indira.

As I walk, the scene begins to change. The shops are set further back from the street, and the sidewalks are wide and flat, shaded by white-blossomed trees. Even the store windows look different here, sparkling clean to

show off elaborate displays. There's an entire miniature farmyard populated with stuffed animals, a fancy table decorated with a three-tiered cake and china plates holding fancy desserts, and a storefront window filled with real sand and little rainbow-colored umbrellas. I know I've landed in the ritzy part of town, and I'm just about to turn around when I spot her.

She is walking along with a whole group of teenagers crossing the street in front of me on the next corner. It's the weirdest thing though. There are all these kids walking together in a clump, and then there's Indira. She's with them, but not, all at the same time. When they get to my side of the street, the clump walks into a café on the corner called Il Fortuna, but Indira keeps walking. She enters another doorway two doors down, and I follow right on her heels.

This is too good to be true. It's my good karma, I think, and I decide to surprise her. I'll just follow her inside and stroll up to her casually like it's no big deal. Maybe she'll even let me walk back to school with her and meet Ms. Fris and all her friends. Or maybe she'll want to skip school this afternoon and head back to my house with me to find Bari. The windchimes in my backpack play a lively little jig as I move.

I can see Indira through the window of this place called Nekktar Bar. I can't believe my luck, standing in

the doorway of this crowded space, filled with the noise of laughter and whirring blenders. Indira is standing in line behind a tall boy who is kind of dancing in time to his own beat. I am scanning the room for an empty table so we can sit and talk. And then it happens.

The tall boy moves up to the counter to order his wheatgrass shake, and Indira inches forward, changing my view of the room.

There is a woman hunched over a laptop at the corner table, madly tapping away. Her back is to me, but she looks out of place in this casual spot where everyone is sipping on their liquid lunch and listening to hip-hop. She's wearing a suit and her hair looks like a spiky helmet. I'd know the back of that head anywhere.

A shiver passes through my whole body and I bolt back out the door with my backpack clanging madly behind me. I run down the street and duck into the nearest doorway.

"Welcome to the Hilton, Miss," says a man in a blood red uniform.

Help!

Dear Carpool Mom,
I'm sorry to bother you again, but I need to talk to someone and I feel like you are a good listener. I don't even know where to start, but here goes. I keep doing all these really dumb things and no one even knows I'm bad. Today I went to the city to meet somebody but I didn't get a chance because I almost got caught being a criminal. I sort of skipped school which I had to do because I actually really just wanted to find my lost cat. And that's another story because nobody even knows I have a cat. I wonder what you would do if you ever found out your daughter was doing all these disappointing things behind your back.

The Elinormal Saga

I don't know why I keep doing bad stuff. It feels like I'm a ping-pong ball or something, do you know what I mean?

Anyway, you don't have to answer this. I just wanted to tell somebody. Actually, I told my cat and he licked my face, but you know, he's not a real person.

Your faithful reader,

E.M.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

A New Leaf

Bari slept on my chest all night, and I could feel his little heart beating in time with mine. I wish I knew where he was all that time when he was missing. That's the thing about cats I guess; you can tell them all your secrets, but they can't tell you anything back. It's like he has his own secret life that I'll never know about. All I know is that when I got home from the city yesterday afternoon, he was curled up asleep in his little cat bed in my closet, just like I had pictured him.

I had a hard time falling asleep with all these mixed up feelings inside me. I had some scary dreams too of running, and being lost, and not being able to find my way home. But the sun is shining this morning, and today will be a different. I am done doing bad things. Today I'm just going to count my blessings.

First of all, I know I am lucky and have good karma. So that's a blessing. I am the best kind of spy because I didn't get caught. Blessing with a capital b. I got to see Indira living her real life and she didn't even sense that I was there. So that was sort of cool. And I was this close to my mother, but she didn't turn around or know that I was right behind her when I was supposed to be in school. That was even cooler. And, I pictured my cat being safe at home and he was. Triple cool. Blessings cubed.

But the best part of this new day is the message I found in my email when I woke up. A real live writer knows who I am and takes the time to answer my questions. That is x-factor cool, blessings to the nth degree.

E.M. Dear,

Everybody makes mistakes. Everybody. But you should not keep secrets. It bottles up the spirit and causes pain. So, here's my advice. Turn over a new leaf starting today. Take charge of your happiness. Be your best self. Don't tell lies or sneak around. And for goodness sake, don't take your education for granted again. You must learn to write your own story.

p.s. Girls ask boys to the Daisy Mae Drag. It's an outdated tradition, but I think of it as a sort of feminist empowerment. I asked Chester

Woo to the Daisy Mae Drag twenty-one years ago and we've lived happily ever after ever since. You never know what happiness might be waiting just around the bend.

Your friend in peace, love, and harmony,

S. Finkle-Woo, Carpool Mom, Santa Marita Spirit

Today I will be my best self. I will start writing my own story because today is the first day of the rest of my life. I repeat it over and over, chanting it like a mantra. I believe it deep inside my bones.

I sit down at my desk and draw a green leaf full of veins and brimming with life-giving chlorophyll. A leaf bursting with life and the promise of springtime. *Today is the first day of the rest of my life* I write on one side. I flip the leaf over and write my name on the other side: *Elinor (Daisy) Malcolm*, then tape it into my journal under today's date. I am turning over a new leaf, starting now.

I open my laptop and read the message from Carpool Mom one more time. Okay, I think, I am not ready for a boyfriend, but I could definitely use a close friend to hang out with at school. I decide to write Christine a haiku.

You asked me over

Yesterday I wasn't here

What about today?

The Elinormal Saga

I decorate the page with squiggles and smiley faces, then put it in my homework folder, put my folder in my backpack, and finish getting ready for school.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Word Nerds

*A*fter lunch today, instead of hanging out in the library, I am walking all around the blacktop with Christine. We are playing this game she invented called Name that Kid. The trick is to use as few words as possible to describe somebody. Like for Stuart Henry, all you have to say is “teeth” and the other person will know who you mean. Or for Andrea Romero, if you say “boobs” everyone will know it’s her. It’s sort of mean, I guess, but I think it’s kind of like poetry too, if you think about it.

“We’re the best kind of nerds,” she tells me. “We’re word nerds.”

I wonder if there’s just one word to describe me. And what would it be? I want to ask Christine that, but I don’t. Instead I make up a rhyming game, which we’re both really good at.

“This is the best time I’ve ever had at recess,” I tell her when the bell rings.

“Yup, we’re just a couple of poemcrazy chicks,” she says.

I wish I could tell her about how I’m turning over a new leaf, but I don’t want to jinx it. It seems like if you talk about it, it won’t count anymore. Kind of like if you tell your wish after you blow out your birthday candles. I wish she could meet Indira or read the messages from Carpool Mom, but I guess everybody has a special part they keep secret.

Yesterday after school I got to go to Christine’s house, which is the coolest house in the whole world if you ask me. Everywhere you look is a reminder that somebody lives there. There are piles of folded laundry on all the beds, stacks of books piled high on bookshelves and on every tabletop, and chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven, cooling on the counter.

Christine has two brothers and two dogs, a turtle named Mildred who lives in an aquarium in the boys’ room, and a noisy miniature parrot named Elbird that lives in a cage in her room. The house is just happy and full of life if you know what I mean.

Outside is just like an extension of the inside with lots of reminders of who lives there. There are bikes and basketballs and skateboards all along the side of the

house, and fruit trees and overflowing wooden flower pots all across the backyard. I wish Indira could see this place. She'd probably say, "This house is alive. It has a heartbeat that you can hear if you listen." I know she'd feel right at home here.

"Let's hang out at your house tomorrow," Christine says as I'm climbing in the back seat of her mother's car to go home.



Miraculously, even though it's my mother's first day back home since her time at the Hilton, she tells me that it's okay if Christine comes over. She even says we can order pizza and watch a movie in the den.

"I can't wait to meet your little friend," she says, and I think she really means it.

Christine is the first friend I've had over since third grade when Candice Kane spilled black ink on the family room carpet. That was like a scene out of a horror movie, with my mother totally losing it and Candice locking herself in the bathroom until her nanny came and took her home.

And Indira doesn't count because she just showed up out of the blue and my parents never even knew she was here. I wish she lived closer so we could hang out,

but she has her life in the city and I have my life here in Maple Meadows. She's still my best friend in the whole world though.

But now Christine is here, eating dinner in the dining room. I think she's my second best friend. My mother bought us soda to have with our pizza and she's trying really hard to be nice and friendly. She hasn't sneezed once since we got home.

Dad is doing his interview routine, making Christine laugh. He says it's important to ask people lots of questions when you first meet them to show you're interested.

"Is it Christine Corrales or Christine Corral-more?"

"Did you say you have two turtles and one brother who lives in an aquarium?"

"What kind of a person can teach a bird to talk but doesn't know how to speak bird?"

See what I mean? We laugh all through dinner and it feels like I have the perfect family. The perfect life. Turning over a new leaf is really working.

After dinner, when I show Christine my room and let her play with my little kitten, I bet it'll seal the deal. We'll be friends for life.

Maybe I'll even tell her some of my secret stuff. I wonder if we'll be able to figure out a way for her to meet Indira. I bet if she did, we'd be like the three amigos, three word-loving, poemcrazy chicks.

Shenanigans

*M*y house is just my house, so it seems perfectly normal to me. But Christine has said “Wow!” a hundred times since she got here. “Wow!” when she walked through the front door, “Wow!” when we walked into the kitchen, “Wow!” when I showed her where the bathroom is, and “Wow!” when I opened the fridge.

But, when I open the door to my room after dinner, she is completely silent. Christine just stands there with her mouth wide open, staring. Finally, she turns to me and says, “You are so lucky, Elinor. This is amazing!”

It’s just my room.

“I have something to show you that really is amazing,” I say. “You won’t believe your eyes!” She follows me into my room and plunks onto my bed. “Can you keep a secret?” I walk to the closet and turn the knob slowly.

“Oh, my gosh!” she says. “This closet is as big as my whole room! Wow!”

“That’s not what I wanted to show you. Come here. Take a look.”

I point to the back of my closet which I’ve transformed into a little kitty hotel. And there, curled up on a blanket is Bari, my little soft orange ball of fluff.

“A kitten!” she shouts.

“Sssh!” I whisper. “It’s a secret. I’m not allowed to have any pets because my mother thinks they’re full of diseases. Nobody else knows I have him. Just you. Oh, and one other person, but she’s a secret too.”

“Awww, can I hold him?” Christine asks, and before I can answer she lunges toward him. Bari wakes with a start, gives a frightened kitty yelp, and speeds right past us into my bedroom.

I see the open door a second after he does, the door that I forgot to close, the door that leads right out into the open hallway. The door that Bari speeds through with Christine in hot pursuit.

“Stop!” I shout. “Don’t chase him. You’ll make it worse!”

The door to my parents’ bedroom flies open, and there stands my mother in her fuzzy white robe and shower cap, her face covered with white goop. “Elinor! What on earth? What is all this racket?”

Christine and I freeze there in our tracks. “Sorry,” I say. “We were just playing a game. We’ll calm down.”

“Well, for pity sake. I have had a trying week and I just need a good long soak. I do not need all these shenanigans in my own home. You can tell your father that it’s time to take your little friend home.” She turns and heads into the bathroom where the tub is nearly overflowing. “Now. Wouldn’t that have just been a perfect end to all our house troubles?” she yells as she reaches for the tap.

“But, Mom!”

She turns off the water and steps out of her slippers.

“Goodnight, Elinor.”

Behind me, Christine is on the floor, looking under the bed and stage-whispering, “Here, kitty kitty. Nice kitty.”

I quickly run through the possibilities in my head. I think about the new leaf I’ve turned over, and the new friend who I don’t want to lose. I swallow hard, and take a deep breath. “Sorry, Mom. We’ll leave you in peace now. Night.”

I reach out to close the door between the bathroom and the bedroom, just as Christine screams and a furry force of nature whizzes past me right into the path of my hysterical, screaming mother.

Morality Play

I never knew Christine was such a fast thinker. After my mother stopped shouting about her fear of cats and her terrible allergies and lice and fleas and all of that, Christine did the most noble thing ever.

“Sorry, Mrs. Malcolm,” she said. “It’s all my fault. Elinor told me you had a no pet rule, but I just wanted her to see my new kitten so I snuck him in here in my backpack. I’m really sorry. I’ll be going now. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

And even with all that, my mother still said in her most embarrassing tone, “You think that’s all it takes, just a half-hearted apology and everything’s hunky-dory? Just an I’m sorry, Mrs. Malcolm and all’s forgiven? Let me tell you a little something about how the world works.” The white goop on her face had hardened and made her look

really scary. But even with all that, Christine stayed loyal and true, keeping her head down and looking remorseful.

I've never had a friend like that.

"We're all very lucky that I had an allergy shot this morning or the paramedics would be on their way. I am severely allergic to cats. Do you understand? Severely!"

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Malcolm. I didn't know. I'm so sorry," she continued as she scooped up Bari and backed toward the doorway. "Could Mr. Malcolm just take me home now?"

So now here I am, sitting on my bed, all cried out, without even a kitten to hold. I'm faced with a decision that might be the biggest decision of my life. I open my journal and touch the leaf that I taped there just a week ago. I keep saying I'm turning over a new leaf, but so far it's just the same old lying, cheating me. I could never be brave like Christine. But I want to try.

I take a deep breath, swallow hard, get myself centered and decide it's time to go knock on my mother's door and come clean. I'm going to tell her everything.

But, just as I climb off my bed and start to cross my bedroom floor, I hear a little tune coming from my backpack in the corner. My cell phone is ringing and it's Christine.

"We need to talk," she tells me. "I have a plan."

Seventeen Syllables

*D*ear Carpool Mom,
I tried to do what you said. I turned
over a new leaf, but it's not working.
What would you do if somebody you
knew was allergic to your cat, but you knew
if they got an allergy shot they wouldn't die?
Would you keep the cat and tell them to please
keep getting the shots, or would you give the
cat to somebody who would love it just as much
as you and would let you visit anytime? If you
don't know, maybe you could ask your daughter
Tiffany what she would do if she had a cat and
you were allergic.

*My mother turns red
She can't breathe because of me
But she gave me life*

*That's a haiku I wrote tonight. Sometimes
poetry helps, but not tonight. Writing to you
helps though. Thank you for listening.*

Your faithful reader,

E.M.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Healing Hearts

This is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me. Christine and I are at this all-day festival in the city. Her mom is here too but she agreed to let us walk around by ourselves. We just had to promise to meet her back in the Centering Room every forty-five minutes.

We're in a big old warehouse that's been transformed into The Healing HeARTs: A Mystical Festival for the Senses. The Carpool Mom has a booth here which is how I found out about it. Her paper, *The Santa Marita Spirit*, is one of the sponsors, and Shoshana Finkle-Woo herself invited me to come check it out.

When she answered my last email she told me about an organization she started called "The Healing HeARTs." She says you're supposed to use art to become

a better person, somebody she calls an enlightened planet-dweller. And she said there's plenty of food for those who hunger for truth. I'm trying to always tell the truth, but it's hard.

The Carpool Mom said she knew I'd like it because of my poetic voice and heart. At first I thought about asking my mother to take me, but she's not crazy about touchy-feely stuff. She thinks it's kind of weird actually. But then when I told Christine, she got all excited and said her mom has an artsy spirit and maybe she could take us. Her mom said it sounded like a cool way to spend a Saturday, so here we are.

We walk by all these booths selling crystals and oils and books. There's an exhibit hall that has different classes throughout the day. We walk by the Art of Music for Massage, Spiritual Endurance, and Yoga for Life. A little further down the hall is Tai Chi for Beginners and Writing: Exercise for a Healthy Heart. Everything sounds so interesting; we can't decide where to go first. Then Christine spots a sign for a dancing poetry performance that starts in fifteen minutes.

"Hey, check this out," she says, pointing to the sign. "Dancing poetry! Sounds like it's tailor-made for two poemcrazy chicks!"

It's amazing how much alike Christine and I are. She used to take ballet too. "Look at this, Elinor," she says.

“It says that the dancers take original poetry and present it through music. We’ll have to pay close attention. I bet we could learn to do something like this for the talent show.”

It feels so good to have a friend who thinks like I do and loves to do all the same things. I tell Christine if it wasn’t for her I’d be sitting all alone in my room feeling sorry for myself. She saved me from a life of crime by adopting Bari for a while. She calls herself his foster mom. He sleeps in her room, right on her bed, and he gets to roam around outside with her brothers and the dogs. She says he is not interested in the bird or the turtle which is kind of unusual for a feline. He’s always been a very special cat.

When she first came up with her plan, I thought I would be so sad without Bari, but it’s a strange thing. As long as I know he’s safe, it’s okay that he has someplace else to live. And now that I have Christine to talk to every day, I don’t need a cat so much. It would be sort of fun to have a bird though. Maybe one day.

I wish I could be brave like Christine though. I really wanted to tell my mother about having a kitten, and how everything that happened was my fault, but I’m so scared of disappointing her and my dad. Turning over as new leaf is harder than it sounds.

Christine is tugging on my arm. “Come on,” she says, “let’s go find where this dance thing is, and get good seats. I don’t want to miss it.”

We turn down another aisle, following the crowd. I'm trying to picture what my mother would think of this place if she was here. She hasn't been one bit tired or sneezy since Bari moved to Christine's house. She just keeps saying stuff like, "You know, that stay at the Hilton really calmed my immune system. That insurance company should thank their lucky stars. After all, a week at the Hilton is a lot cheaper than the alternatives!" I wonder what she'd do if she knew I was the one who was responsible for her getting sick and for her getting better.

We pass by a booth for the Santa Marita Spirit, but it's empty. I have to find the Carpool Mom today so I can thank her in person for changing my life. I want to introduce her to Christine on this perfect day. The only thing that would make it even more perfect would be if Indira was here. This day would be right up her alley.

Christine points to a little room at the very back of the warehouse where the lights are flashing on and off. "Let's go!" she says. "This is it. It must be starting!"

There are about twenty folding chairs set up facing a little wooden stage. We take our seats in the back row. "We can sneak out without disturbing anybody if it's too weird or if it's time to meet my mom," Christine says.

Two small speakers are hanging from the ceiling and a microphone is dangling above the stage. The room grows pitch dark and a woman's voice from the speakers says,

“Welcome friends, to the first ever dance of life presented by the Healing HeARTs. What you’re witnessing today is a unique art form, introduced for your enlightenment and pure enjoyment by the wonderfully creative, one and only, Tiffany Zara Woo. Tiffany has taken four original poems and choreographed them into a living, breathing dance of life. Here now, with no further ado, we present this moment of inspiration for your heart and mind, the dance.”

The lights go on, and there is a small lump in the center of the stage. For nearly five minutes that seem like an eternity, there is no motion, but no one in the audience moves either.

“I don’t get it,” Christine whispers. “Is this part of the dance?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s way too weird for me.”

“Let’s go. It’s almost time to meet my mom anyway.”

Christine and I both start to rise when the music starts and the lights flicker. A screech of violins. The lump on the stage stretches out, arms reaching high above her head, legs stretched out long, toes pointed. The lump is a long, stiff body pinned to the floor, covered with a sheet. Then the arms swoop up, off the ground. The music stops. “Huh-huh-huh-huh,” the stretched out lump on the stage breathes out these four loud, exaggerated breaths.

Christine and I sit back down, transfixed.

“This I gotta see,” Christine whispers to me.

My skin is electrified.

The dancer does a slow-motion somersault backwards, then stands up like she's in a trance. She's wearing a red unitard and her face is a red mask. The violins start again, this time slow and mournful, and the dancer moves slowly, dreamlike.

The voice from the speakers begins to sing.

*My mother, my mother, my mother, my mother
Turns red, yes red, I say red, so red, fire red, blood red
My mother turns red
She can't..."*

The dancer falls to the ground and breathes those four exaggerated breaths again.

"Elinor, this is too weird," Christine says as she starts to stand up again.

"Sssh," I say and push her back into her seat.

The hair on my neck is standing straight up.

"Because of me!" the dancer on the stage roars, making everyone in the audience jump. Then she lies back down in the middle of the stage.

"That's my poem," I whisper to Christine. I am shaking like a leaf.

"What?"

"I wrote it. That's my poem."

"Okay," Christine says but I can tell by the way she says it that she thinks I'm making it up.

We watch the rest of the poetry dance, but I am not paying much attention. I'm lost in my thoughts, trying to figure out how my poem got to the stage in this weird dance. What force brought me here to witness it.

Every time I think I've got life figured out, I'm reminded that there are forces greater than me in the world. Some things are just too complicated and mysterious to understand. I'm thinking about all of this until I hear the audience applauding and see that Christine is standing next to me. The voice through the speakers says, "Thank you for coming, fellow planet-dwellers. Don't forget to stop by our booth today for information on how you can be part of our movement. It's not too soon to find out how you can be part of next year's Healing HeARTs Festival. Go now, in peace and harmony."

We find Christine's mother in the Centering Room and both try to tell her about the strange dance we've just seen. "And Elinor thinks it was her poem they were dancing to," Christine tells her.

"It was. It was my poem. If we can find the lady from the newspaper, she'll tell you. I sent it to her. She'll tell you."

"The lady in the Santa Marita Spirit booth?" asks Christine's mom. "Follow me. I know just where that is."

I AM E.M.

Right away I recognize her from her picture in the newspaper. The Carpool Mom is sitting at a table inside a booth decorated with hearts. She looks up at me and she has the kindest eyes.

“I’m Elinor. Elinor Malcolm. You know, E.M.?”

I put out my hand and she grabs it with both of hers. Her hands are warm and soft. She holds on and looks at me intently.

“I wondered what the E.M. stood for. Elinor. Elinor Malcolm. What a lovely name. Pleased to meet you, Elinor Malcolm.” Her voice sounds so familiar. So do her eyes. She has a smile that lights up her whole face, and crinkly happy eyes. “And this must be your lovely mother.”

“Oh, no,” Christine’s mom says. “Although she’s almost like a daughter to me. I’m Jo. Jo Corrales. And this is my daughter Christine.”

The Carpool Mom shakes their hands too. We all start talking at once, saying what a cool experience this has been. “I don’t think we’ve ever experienced anything like this before,” Christine’s mom says.

“Well, I’m sorry your mom couldn’t be here, Elinor,” she says. “I’d really like to meet the mother of such an extraordinary kid. Did you get to see your poem dance?”

I look at Christine, who nods her head at me and mouths the word “wow!”

“But how?...”

The Carpool Mom laughs. “My daughter. I showed it to her and she said I’ve just got to create a dance to this. And then she told me her idea about a dancing poetry performance here. Let me go get her. You’ve got to meet her. Talk about extraordinary.”

“Wow!” Christine says out loud as the Carpool Mom goes through the brown curtain at the back of her booth. “You’re famous, Elinor. You’re the real deal!”

“Now I’m sorry I missed it, Elinor,” Christine’s mom says. “You girls will have to recite it for me later.”

“Actually, Mom, it’s more like perform instead of recite. But yeah, we’ll do it for you later. It’s wild. We’re

thinking about doing something like that for the spring talent show.”

Carpool Mom is laughing as she pushes her way back through the curtain into the booth. “Here she is ladies. This is my Tiffany, mistress of the dance!”

A tall girl in a red unitard steps through the curtain. She is not wearing a mask now.

Our eyes lock.

“Elinor!”

“Indira!”

“Indira?” Christine, her mom, and the Carpool Mom all exclaim in unison.

“Yipes, stripes, where do I begin?” says Indira as she hugs her mom. “Where do I begin?”

Normal

On the way home in the car I'm in the back seat pretending to be asleep, but my brain has never been more awake. This truly was the first day, the very best first day of the rest of my life.

Christine and her mom are talking quietly in the front seat.

"Promise you'll always tell me the truth," her mom says.

"Promise," Christine whispers. I wonder what she's thinking.

I'm going over every detail of the day in my head.

Indira does not look like somebody named Tiffany Zara Woo. But she is. I wonder why she never told her mom how hard it is to be the daughter of a newspaper columnist who has her whole life told in embarrassing

detail to a bunch of strangers. Her mom cried when she found out she pretended to be someone else.

It's so much better to tell people how you feel. Not easier, just better.

We all went to a little tea room and talked about the mysteries of life. I couldn't believe when we were leaving and her mom called her Indira. "It suits you," she said. "And you have my word, I'll never write about Tiffany's exploits again."

I take my bluebird of happiness out of my pocket and hold it in my palm there in the backseat of Christine's car. I open one eye and look at it. Then I close that eye and open the other. The bird looks like it is moving back and forth, but I know it's not. It's just my perception that's changing. The bird is perfectly still.

That's one of life's little mysteries, I guess.

Indira is a mystery to me too. She knows all these things about the universe, but deep down she's just a weird girl like me who wants to be happy. Maybe everyone's the same deep down. Maybe I really am normal.



Christine's mom said she's going to drive us to the city next month so we can visit with Indira if it's all right

with my mother. We're going to choreograph some more of our poems and see if we can dance them out. We'll be three poem-crazy chicks.

But first things first.

The first thing I'm going to do when I get home tonight is have a heart-to-heart talk with my mom. There's a lot she doesn't know about me. There's probably a lot I don't know about her too.

It's time to change that.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Book 2



New Girl

the Furt or Adventures of Elinormal



NOT FOR SALE

*To the fabulous, inspiring,
always kind Moore Girls ~
Cailin, Meghan, Brianna, and Kerry.*

Nightmare

Run, Elinor. Put some mustard on it!" I was panting alongside my mother as we dashed through the airport from Concourse B to C, my backpack slamming against me with each step along the moving walkway.

Five minutes earlier we'd been dropped at the curb by her car service, only to find our gate had been changed to a whole other part of the airport. And the plane was leaving in twenty-four minutes.

"I'm running in heels for pity's sake. At least you can keep up with me. I'm not missing this flight because of you!"

"Excuse me. Excuse me, coming through," I shouted as I followed her and her rolling suitcase careening past the people standing still on the right.

It wasn't until we were wedged into our seats in coach, my backpack crammed beneath the seat in front

of me, that I could finally breathe. And only then did I start to cry.

Today was supposed to be the first day of seventh grade.

“Now what? We made it. Why are you blubbering?”

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and swallowed hard. “I’m just so sad about Grandma Ruth.”

She patted my hand and said, “Oh, I know, kiddo. Me too, me too.” Then she pulled her eye shade down, popped her earbuds in, and tipped her seat back as far as it could go.

I pulled out my sketchbook and started to draw. First, I sketched me in my first day of seventh grade outfit which I was now wearing on a plane to Oklahoma for my grandma’s funeral. Then I tried to draw Grandma Ruth, but it was hard to remember what she looked like. I hadn’t seen her since I was nine.



Just the night before, I had gone through my closet, trying on each new outfit in front of the mirror, trying to settle on the look I was going for – cool girl, sporty girl, brainy girl – finally landing on an orange minidress, denim jacket, and white sneakers that seemed to say, “just me, Elinor Malcolm, normal girl.” I hung the dress in the

bathroom, draped the jacket over the back of my desk chair, and put the sneakers next to my backpack which I emptied and rearranged fifty times. I checked my vision board and whispered each hope over and over.

- Get straight A's
- Go out for yearbook
- Become vegan
- Learn Spanish
- Make new friends

This was going to be my year. My best friend Christine and I had almost matching schedules and were going to be in three classes together. And her mom signed us both up to take a Saturday yoga class at The Healing HeARTs where my friend Indira works.

But then, just as I was getting ready to head for the bus, my mom let out a blood-curdling scream. I ran into her bedroom to find her on her knees, clutching her cell phone.

I helped her up and had her sit on the bed. Her face was pale and she was shaking.

“Mom, what is it? What happened?”

“It’s Grandma Ruth,” she whispered, “dead.” She handed me the phone. “Call Dad and tell him we’re on the next flight to Tulsa. And bring me an aspirin.”

That set this nightmare in motion. Soon I was unpacking my backpack full of gel pens and labeled

notebooks and a brand-new laptop, and replacing them with toiletries and underwear, and exchanging my first week of seventh grade for a funeral for a woman I barely knew.

By the time we landed and I took my phone off airplane mode, I had sixteen texts from Christine.

Where are you?

Are you sick?

We have science homework already.

Where are you?

The cafeteria smells disgusting.

We have to give speeches in English.

And read 8 books.

Where are you?

There's a new boy from Mexico or Modesto.

I forgot.

Sort of cute.

Tiff Tilton got braces.

Janna Faz got boobs.

Where are you?

Text me.

Are you ok?

My one and only first day of seventh grade was happening without me.

Darkness, Darkness

*T*ulsa was the worst.

We landed in a thunderstorm. My dad's plane from Baltimore got diverted, so he didn't get there till the next day, and then he and my mom both headed to the funeral home to "make arrangements." I had to stay alone at my dead grandmother's house to accept deliveries of vases of flowers and completely inedible-looking brown casseroles.

That evening, after a long grey day alone having to answer the doorbell with a fake smile, my parents returned. As soon as they walked through the door, my mother went straight to bed and my dad headed to the kitchen to microwave one of the brown lumpy "covered dishes" dropped off by one of the many old ladies who lived on Grandma Ruth's street. "This is what's missing in California," he told

me. "This is what it means to be neighborly. These people care about each other, not just themselves."

I thought that was weird. Our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Feinstein, drives me to school when I miss the bus, and she left a basket of lemons from her lemon tree on our front porch just last week. And the man across the street collects our packages when we're not home and makes us homemade pumpkin bread at Thanksgiving. Last year when he handed me a still-warm loaf wrapped in orange foil he told me, "I just love to pay it forward and show my gratitude to the good lord for this life. I bake a prayer and a little kindness into every loaf."

"He's probably just looking for an invite," my mom said when I set the bread on the table, but I think he's just a lonely old man being neighborly. And anyway, it would be nice to share our Thanksgiving with somebody else for a change instead of it being just the three of us. I bet Grandma Ruth shared Thanksgiving with all her neighbors.

I have to say, Grandma Ruth's house weirded me out a little. She had pictures of us everywhere. Stuck to the refrigerator with magnets, taped to her bedroom mirror, framed on the wall up the stairs and down the hall. We did not have one picture of her in our house. Not one.

The first night I passed out exhausted when I climbed into bed, but this second night I lay awake half

the night in my mother's old room with its low ceiling and floral wallpaper that looked like eyes watching me in the dark. The floorboards creaked and it sounded like the walls were breathing. I kept trying to picture my mother at my age, lying in this bed, in this room. I wondered if back then she imagined leaving Oklahoma and becoming a big-shot lawyer and having me. I wondered why she hadn't visited her mom once in the last three years and why she never talked about her. I wondered if she'd ever tell me the truth.

The next day was the funeral. Just as we got to the cemetery, there was a huge clap of thunder and it began to pour. "Hear that?" my dad said, patting my hand in the back seat of the limo. "Your grandma's refusing to go quietly."

With that, my mom rested her head against the fogged-up window and began to cry, whole-body sobs that violently shook the backseat. "It's all right, Mims. Let it all out," my dad whispered, reaching behind me to rub my mom's shoulder.

There were lots of people dressed in black, standing under an awning by the gravesite. Standing and waiting. It was very hot inside the car.

My phone in my pocket vibrated and I sneaked a peek at the screen—a text from Christine.

Day 3 w/out an Elinor sighting. R U still alive?

I'm not sure why, but I started to cry again too. Maybe it was because of the rain. Rain always makes me

cry. Sandwiched between my parents in the back of a long, black limousine, all of us mourning for different reasons, everything just felt so depressingly sad. My mom was now an orphan. My dad was missing an important meeting in Baltimore where he was supposed to be delivering the keynote address. And, I'd never get to have a first day of seventh grade. My whole life was happening back at school without me. Why did I have to be here? I didn't even really know my grandma, and now I never would.

A man carrying an enormous black umbrella appeared at the side of the limo and signaled for us to walk with him, so that's what we did. My mom got out first and walked alongside him under the umbrella while my dad walked behind me, holding his suit coat over my head. It didn't make a very good umbrella, but the rain was warm and I didn't mind. By the time the service was over, the sun was shining again and I didn't feel like crying anymore.

Back at the house filled with people I didn't know, I sat on the stairs and listened.

"Oh, my, that Elinor is the spitting image of her mother, isn't she?"

"Bet she has a wild streak just like her, too."

"Ruth was so proud of that girl."

"Remember that newspaper article she showed us all at Bridge last year?"

“Such a rebel!”

My phone vibrated again and I slipped it out to see the latest Christine text. Should I call the police? Three days and I still hadn't texted her back. What kind of a friend was I? I tucked my phone back into my pocket and made my way into the dining room. The table was covered with a white lace tablecloth, and decorated with tall vases of flowers and platters of little sandwiches and bowls of creamy salads. Someone must have come in and done all this while we were getting drenched at the cemetery.

While I was loading up a plate, a girl about my age sidled up alongside me. “That's my potato salad,” she said, “made with your grandma's recipe. I'm Joelle by the way.”

“Looks good,” I said, pushing it around on my plate with a plastic fork. “How did you know her?”

“Grandma Ruth? Why, everybody knows her. She's everybody's grandma.”

Joelle went on to tell me how Grandma Ruth invited all the neighbors in for Sunday dinner once a month and how she taught all the neighborhood kids how to play Scrabble and Pinochle and she taught a lucky few how to make the world's best potato salad with her secret recipe.

“She talked about you all the time. She'd say, ‘My Elinor is just the same age as you. You'd be fast friends if she lived here. She's a dancer too.’”

“Actually, I’m more into yoga now,” I said as my phone continued to buzz in my pocket. “And I’m going to be on yearbook.”

“Cool,” she said, spearing a pickle with a toothpick and pointing it at me. “Want to hang out sometime?”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I’m leaving tomorrow.” I started to walk away to find a place to finally text Christine back, to tell her I was sorry for making her worry and I’d be back on Saturday. I hoped she wouldn’t have a new best friend by then.

“Well, what about now?” Joelle said as I headed for the back door. “What are you doing right now?”

Another Tree Girl

Joelle and I walked to the end of the block, and she told me about all the people who lived in each house. Mostly old people who'd lived here since my mom was a little girl. "They'd all usually be sitting out on their porches in the afternoon, but everybody's at your grandma's house now, telling stories and hugging your mom." I could not imagine my mom being hugged by anyone. But I couldn't imagine her crying either, and she'd been doing that ever since we got here.

Whenever someone on the street died, Joelle told me, a new young family would move in, paint the shutters and update the kitchen. She and her family had lived there since Joelle was six, and she said she'd kind of adopted my grandma as her own since her one grandma lived in

England, and her other one died before she was born. She called my Grandma Ruth Grandma Ruth, too. “So, it’s sort of like we’re cousins, don’t you think?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure what I thought about that. It seemed like Joelle knew my grandma better than I did. And my grandma knew her better than she knew me, her own flesh and blood. I guess it would be sort of nice to have a cousin, but it was too late for that. My grandma was dead and we were flying home in the morning. I’d probably never see Joelle again.

We walked to the gas station on the next block, and Joelle bought us each a bottle of water. I was going to tell her that we tried not to ever drink bottled water because of plastics and the environment and junk, but the afternoon was sticky hot and I was really thirsty. “I’ll show you my secret spot,” she said as we rounded the corner. Up ahead was a tennis court and a playground that we walked past. An archway to our left announced “Crow Feather Park,” and that’s where we headed.

It was eerily similar to the park where I first met Indira last year. Joelle led me off the walkway to sit against an oak tree. “I’m a tree girl,” Joelle said. “I like to sit here and think about how we need each other, you know, people and trees.” I leaned back and closed my eyes, picturing the first time I saw Indira in the park back home, standing in tree pose. “You don’t have to say

anything if you don't want to," Joelle continued. "It's just nice to have someplace to breathe, you know?"

I did know. I remember walking away from the ballet studio last year and finding that park where I could think and write and draw and be myself. It's where I met Indira, where I discovered the bluebird of happiness, where I started to figure out who I was and what I was good at. I was going to tell Joelle all about that, but somehow, sitting there with her, I didn't need to say it.

"I'm glad I knew your Grandma Ruth," she said. "She loved trees too. She always said they were like spirits we could commune with. I can sort of feel her here now, can't you?"

I could not feel her there. I could not even picture what she looked like except for the black and white photo on the memorial card. And that was taken when she won a writing contest in 1992. She did not look like a grandma in that photo. She was young and beautiful with a big pouf of dark hair and crinkly eyes. I tugged a few blades of grass up and knotted them together into a bracelet, then slipped it on my wrist. "What was she like?"

Joelle looked at me. I took the bracelet off and passed it to her and she slipped it on. Then I started on a new one.

"I mean you probably knew her in a different way than I did," I said.

“I guess. Are you going to see who keeps texting you?”

I was trying to ignore the constant ding in my pocket, but I guess it was hopeless.

“Probably Christine. My best friend. She thinks I’ve died or something ‘cause I’m missing our first week of school.”

Joelle tried to convince me to text her back, but I really didn’t want to. I didn’t want to spoil the afternoon with Joelle by focusing on life back at Valley Middle School. And I wasn’t sure why. Maybe it’s a family trait. One time my mom told me that she had this amazing ability to compartmentalize. “When I’m at work,” she told me, “I don’t think about anything else. Everything else disappears.”

“You think about me though, right?” I said.

“Oh, for goodness sake Elinor,” she’d replied as she continued folding towels, before handing me a warm stack to put away, “the world does not revolve around you.”

I reluctantly pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, but it was not another text from Christine. It was, instead, a string of texts. Like I said, not from Christine.

Hey.

Nerd alert.

Guess what.

Get this.

What kind of Wren is not a bird?

The string-of-texts sender was Indira, aka Tiffany Woo, daughter of Carpool Mom, aka Shoshana Finkle-Woo. Her texts were always a little hard to decipher.

I showed it to Joelle. "Weird! What's that mean?"

The truth is, I had no idea. But I knew it must be important.

I held my phone above us and snapped a selfie of me and Joelle sitting side-by-side underneath the tree. I sent a text back to Indira. Hey, girl. Oklahoma days. Just me. And my cousin Joelle. And Grandma Ruth's spirit. #TulsaTreegirls #Oakiespirit #Birdnerds

Another ding. Oklahoma? What the fudge?!

I texted back about my grandma's funeral and missing the first day, now the first week of seventh grade.

It took Indira a lot of wordcrazy texts back and forth before she explained that the reason for her nerd alert text was that a woman her mom profiled in the Santa Marita Spirit last month wants to meet us. Her name is Liza Wren and she writes novels in verse. Indira wrote that she's a real up-and-comer in the literary world. And now she wants to write a book about the three of us.

My head was spinning. *A book? About us?*

Yuppers! I'm ready for my close up, Mr. Demille, she replied.

I passed the phone to Joelle, and she burst out laughing. “Text her back that you’ll meet her on Sunset Boulevard.”

I felt like I was caught in the middle of some enormous joke and I didn’t know the punchline. When I texted Joelle’s message back, Indira replied with a winking emoji. Then she said she had to run, but she’d let Christine know I was safe and had just been too distraught by my grandma’s death to text her back.

I felt a little pang of guilt when she wrote that. Indira always knew how to make things right. But why hadn’t I texted Christine back this whole time? I hoped she’d forgive me. I guess she’d have to now if we were going to be starring in a book together.

The sun sank lower in the sky and a little breeze came up as I shared the details about last year with Joelle. How I quit ballet and met Indira and then how everything kept connecting in weird ways. I told her about my cat that had to go live with Christine, and about Christine’s mom taking us to The Healing HeARTs, and about Indira performing my poem, and Indira’s mom being the newspaper columnist that I’d been writing to, and how her name was really Tiffany not Indira, and about me and Christine and Indira working on a new poetry dance.

“No wonder Grandma Ruth thought we’d be friends,” Joelle said when I finished. “And no wonder a

big-time author wants to write about you guys. I'd read that story!"

"It's not a story though," I said, my head still spinning. "It's my life."

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

FOUR

Guilty

It's hard to believe how your life can keep making these 180 degree turns, out of your control, and you just keep bouncing along, not sure what's going to happen next. Just a week ago my whole life had been upended by a phone call. How I had hated missing the beginning of seventh grade in California, and now I was just as sad about leaving Oklahoma! Just a week ago, I didn't know Joelle existed, and now it felt like we were cousins, like we'd been friends forever. Life is just a never-ending string of coincidences and surprises.

When I got home from the park, the house was empty except for two ladies in the kitchen putting things in Tupperware.

"I'm glad she decided to stay. It's only right."

“Indeed,” the other one replied. “So glad you talked some sense into her.”

“Not sense. Guilt. Good old-fashioned guilt. Works every time.”

They both nodded and clucked like hens, as they continued scooping leftovers into plastic tubs.

I stood frozen on the other side of the kitchen door.

“Poor Ruth. Shut out of her daughter’s life like that.”

“At least now she’ll have some peace.”

“Indeed.”

“There’s plenty here for her to eat all week. Nice work, Effie.”

“Well, I guess our work here is done then.”

“Let’s call it a day. Will you get the lights?”

“Indeed.”

And that’s how I found out that my mom was planning to stay in Oklahoma to get the house “closed-up” while my dad and I flew back to California without her.



That night, I couldn’t sleep, thinking about all that had happened in the space of a week. My grandmother’s funeral, my friendship with Joelle, and the promise of

our story becoming a book. All these different worlds stretching and colliding and connecting. Sometimes when I can't sleep, I like to sit in my closet and write. I don't know why, but it's something I've done since I was really little. I tiptoed across the room in the dark, the wallpaper eyes staring at me, opened the closet, and flicked on the overhead light. I took my notebook and pencils out of my packed duffel, and leaned against the back wall, where it felt safe and peaceful.

I wrote a poem about oak trees and another one about funeral rain. It felt so good to be getting my feelings down like that. I was already starting to think about ways Indira and Christine could help me combine and choreograph them, when I spotted a box tucked in the very back of the closet. "Don't touch!" it said in big bubble letters. "Fragile." I ran my hand across the top where a piece of the packing tape had come unstuck. I tugged it a little, then a little bit more, until the box was no longer closed.

It was like a treasure chest – filled with things from when my mom was a teenager – her high school yearbook, a plastic bag filled with photographs, and a bunch of t-shirts decorated with pictures of '90s rock stars like Madonna and Gwen Stefani. At first I couldn't believe those things belonged to Marsha Malcolm who used to be Marsha Frisbie. But there it was—undeniable proof. A yearbook with her name written in large loopy

letters inside the front cover, photographs that looked eerily just like me, but sporting a pile of blond hair and puffy bangs, posing with a bunch of people I'd never seen before. And one very handsome dark-haired boy in picture after picture, always standing pressed up close, his arm draped casually around her shoulders, her waist, or clutching her arm as if to say, "mine."

I told myself it wasn't stealing when I decided to take them. I needed to know why my mom and Grandma Ruth were estranged. Maybe it could help me understand her better. That's what I told myself. But if I'm being honest, I was also curious to find out about her and that cute boy. And those amazing t-shirts that she was wearing in the photos were right here in this box, folded in little pink and purple and yellow fabric squares! There was nothing fragile packed away here, unless, I thought, as I lifted them out of the box one by one, and spread them across the floor, she'd meant her memories.

I unzipped my packed duffel, shoved in the yearbook, the photos, and the folded the t-shirts, along with my notebook, and set it by the door for the morning. Then I tiptoed back to bed, across the creaky floorboards, and fell right to sleep.



I waited downstairs with my duffel packed with secrets while my dad called for an Uber. My mom was already up and dressed in a sweatsuit, piling leather-bound books onto the dining room table. She had set up an appointment for later that afternoon with an antiques dealer to come look through the china and assess the ancient wooden furniture that filled every room. “There’s not a thing I want in this house,” she told me when she broke the news that she was staying in Oklahoma to sell the house, something I already knew from the neighbors. “Not a thing.”

I gave her a quick hug as my dad called out, “Car’s here.”

“Wish me luck!” she said as we headed out the door.

I waved at Joelle’s house even though I knew she’d still be fast asleep in her room on the second floor, and I wondered if I’d ever see her again, now that we were selling Grandma Ruth’s house. I took a wistful look at the long stretch of small houses with their bright front doors, all lined up close together like a group of friends, and whispered goodbye to Tulsa as the driver whisked

my duffel bag of secrets out of my hand and tossed it into the trunk with a thud.

On the flight home, I snuggled into my dad's shoulder as he worked on his laptop and did the crossword puzzle in the in-flight magazine. My duffel bag was now stored right above me in the overhead bin and I wanted desperately to write in my journal but I couldn't chance opening it to reveal my mom's secrets which now belonged to me packed inside. What would he say if he saw those photographs, or if a pink Madonna tumbled out? Would he recognize his once-young wife standing on tiptoes next to such a handsome boy? Had he ever seen her wearing Gwen Stefani instead of her velour sweatsuit or her navy business suit? I wanted to ask him, but I knew I couldn't, so I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

Hey, New Girl!

Christine was waiting for me in the front quad, surrounded by people I didn't know. She gave me a big hug and whispered, "Sorry," as I shyly entered the circle. All the girls, including Christine, were wearing yoga pants and boots, and there I stood in my minidress and sneakers, my first day of seventh grade outfit. I felt my face turning pink as all eyes turned to me.

"Hey, who's the new girl?" I shifted to see a boy standing on the edge of our circle. One lone boy in a sea of girls. One curly black-haired boy with an amazing dimple and two brown eyes flecked with gold. Staring right at me.

"She's not new you, doofus," Christine said. "This is Elinor. Remember, I told you about her?"

“Yeah? Well, she’s new to me,” he replied, then took a step closer to me and ran his hand through his dark curls. “Hey, new girl.”

I couldn’t speak. Like literally, opened my mouth and nothing came out. Some of the girls started to giggle, and I stood there turning pinker in my short orange dress which now felt way too short.

Luckily, that’s when the bell rang and everyone headed inside. “See you around, new girl,” he shouted over the din as we made our way inside.

“I should have warned you,” Christine said as we walked to class. “That’s Manuel. Remember I told you about him? The new boy from Modesto?”

“I thought you said Mexico.” I tugged on my dress, trying to make it longer.

“Yeah, well I wasn’t sure. But it’s Modesto. He’s the one that’s new here. And he thinks he’s God’s gift.”

We walked into homeroom, and Christine drifted right to her seat. I stood there awkwardly as the room filled up. School had already been in session for a week. All the seats had been assigned and the groups had been picked. I *was* the new girl.

The teacher looked up when the second bell rang and I was still standing there. It was Ms. Loveless, who had the misfortune of being given a name that surely matched her destiny. Ms. Loveless taught advanced math

and computer science. She had a bit of a mustache and she never smiled although she had an incredibly loud and inappropriate laugh. She was famous at Valley Middle School. I was glad I would only have to see her for ten minutes every morning during homeroom.

“You must be new. I’ll have to get you a chair from next door. Tell me your name.”

She looked back down at her computer screen.

“Elinor,” I croaked. “Elinor Malcolm.” More giggles.

“Elinormal what? Oh, here you are. Malcolm, right? Well, you can just sit on the counter today,” she said pointing to the counter I was leaning against in embarrassment. “I’ll have a chair for you tomorrow.”

If I was wearing yoga pants, I could hop right on up there. But again, my dress was too short for hoisting myself onto a classroom counter. “I’ll just stand,” I said. “I like standing.” And then I stood there, all pastel pink face and orange dress and what I now realized were very pasty white legs, looking like a creamsicle melting into a pool of insignificance. The clock ticked above me, as the giggles subsided and everyone forgot I was there. Welcome to seventh grade, I thought to myself. Welcome to another year of me.

When the final bell rang, I told Christine I was still suffering from jet lag and I’d catch up with her tomorrow,

then made a mad dash for the bus. I leaned my head against the cold glass and closed my eyes, nearly drifting off on the way home, as the jumble of images from the day swirled in my head. Christine and the rest of the seventh-grade girls in their shiny yoga uniforms, Ms. Loveless in her permanent scowl, and the cutest boy I've ever seen following close behind as I scurried down the hall.

Me, painfully aware of my new girl-didn't-get-the-memo look, in a short orange dress amid a sea of cliquey confident yoga girl coolness. Me, Elinormal, not cool once again.

NOT FOR SALE

Whatever Happened to Marsha Frisbie?

The pile of treasures from my mom's closet was waiting for me at home after school. I'd shoved everything under my bed when we got back from Oklahoma, planning to go through it all piece by piece, and now I could. My dad had told me this morning that he'd be at the office late catching up on everything he'd missed while we were away. I had the whole afternoon and evening to myself, so I searched for '90s music on my phone, and got to work.

One thing you should know about me is that I have a whole stash of empty notebooks on my bookshelf. I'm kind of a notebook fiend. I spent a while sorting through

them all to find the perfect one for this project, and chose one with a plain white cover that I could decorate later. For now, I just labeled it *Before She Was Mom*.

I pulled out the t-shirts and lined them up across the floor. Madonna. Gwen. Alanis. Posh. Sheryl. Jewel. Then I searched through the photos matching up the t-shirts on the floor to the photos they appeared in.

I opened my journal to the first page and wrote, "What do I know about her?"

I studied the floor, then went back to the journal. "She liked music."

I piled those pictures on top of the shirts they matched up with. She must have liked Madonna best because there were seven pictures of my mom wearing that same shirt in my Madonna stack.

"Especially Madonna."

I pulled the yearbook for Central High, 1996 out from underneath the bed and ran my hand across the embossed leather cover. Opened it to her signature, Marsha Frisbie, then started flipping through, looking for her picture. There she was, smiling in an off-the-shoulder drapery black gown and pearls, wedged between Jeremy Franks and Lydie Frisk.

"She had style."

I turned the pages slowly, reading all the personal notes written to Marshie and Marshmallow and Frizzy.

The Elinormal Saga

Notes like, *don't ever change and stay as sweet as you are* and *don't do anything I wouldn't do.*

“She had lots of nicknames.”

I flipped through a few more pages.

“And lots of friends.”

I kept slowly turning the pages and reading along in amazement.

Curt is such a lucky duck.

Good luck with Curt next year.

Let's make it a summer to remember, love Curtis.

That last message scribbled next to his picture in a tuxedo, his dark wavy hair covering one eye.

“Whatever happened to Curt(is)?” I jotted.

Below that I wrote, “Whatever happened to Marsha Frisbie?”



That night I had the weirdest dream. I was living in my Grandma Ruth's house in Oklahoma with my glamorous, long-haired mom. She walked around the house smiling and singing all day. I had a pet duck named Marshmallow who lived in my closet. At first my dad was my dad, but then he turned into the handsome dark-haired boy with his arm around my mom in all the pictures. In my dream

he was driving me to school with Joelle and Christine and Indira in the back seat. He kept saying, "Remember to be good, girls. Stay sweet. Don't ever change."

When we pulled up to school, our car had turned into a school bus and the bus driver had turned into Manuel, the new boy from Modesto. We all started running toward a pack of 8th grade girls in '90s music t-shirts blocking the entrance as the school bell rang.

I sat up like a shot. My phone alarm was ringing under my pillow. I was no longer dreaming. Time for school for real.

You know how when you have a weird dream it lingers? There's a sort of cloudy feeling that you can't shake? That's what happened when I got to school for my second day of seventh grade. I'd been home from Oklahoma for three days, and I felt more exhausted than ever. I didn't believe in jet-lag, but I definitely had some-kind-of-lag by the time I entered the quad wearing my pink paisley yoga pants and my mom's old Madonna t-shirt. I saw Christine and for a minute wondered where Joelle was. Oh yeah, Oklahoma. Then, from the behind me, that already familiar voice shouted, "Hey, new girl!" I spun around, half expecting to see him behind the wheel of the school bus parked there. Weird.

When we walked into homeroom. Ms. Loveless said, "Oh look. It's the material girl!" No one laughed,

but she let out a startling snort. Then she said, “Oh drat—can you go next door and ask Mr. Berg if he has an extra chair?”

I just stood there, not realizing at first that she was talking to me as the room filled up and she went back to taking attendance.

“Or you can just lean on the counter again if you’d rather. Up to you.”

I wondered how some people could be so clueless. I wondered if she was different in high school. Did she have long wavy hair and wear pearls for her senior picture? Did she have a favorite singer? Did a dark-haired boy ever casually drape his arm across her shoulder? I couldn’t imagine it.

I leaned against the counter and reached into the pocket of my jacket to rub the little lucky bluebird from Indira that I always carry. I tried to picture happiness as the clock ticked off the minutes till I’d be released from homeroom and could push my way through the crowded corridor with Christine, hoping that today would be better than yesterday. Hoping to sit near Manuel, the new boy from Modesto who appeared in my dreams and called me New Girl.

It's Madonna

The loudspeaker at the front of the room crackled to life, making that familiar staticky sound, and a high-pitched voice filled the classroom. It was seventh period art, one of the only classes I didn't share with Christine. She was in band.

"Hey there, Valley Cats, it's Tuesday, and here are today's announcements."

I doodled in my sketchbook, as the irritating voice droned on.

I stopped mid-doodle at the final announcement.

"Yearbook meets today at 3:00 in the library. Mr. F says all are welcome."

Mr. F was the coolest teacher in the whole school. I felt like I'd been given a shot of adrenaline. I pulled out my phone and sent a quick under-the-desk text to my

dad. Taking the late bus. Yearbook tryouts today. 🙄

Christine was waiting for me outside the library along with two girls. All of them were whispering and swinging their flute cases as I approached. “Oh, hi,” said the tallest one, “you’re the new girl! I’m Sasha.”

“She’s not new,” Christine said. “Remember? She was in your homeroom last year. This is Elinor”

“Okay,” Sasha said, transferring her flute case to her other hand like it was heavy and her hand needed a rest. “You don’t play an instrument?”

Before I could answer, another band girl walked up. She pointed at me and said, “Who’s that?”

“It’s Elinor from last year, Brit,” Sasha told her.

“Duh,” replied Brit, the band girl. “I mean who’s that you’re wearing? Katy Perry?”

“No way!” It was the other flute girl who’d been standing there when I walked up. “That’s Dua Lipa. Right?”

Christine rolled her eyes.

“Actually,” I said, “it’s Madonna.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of her,” Sasha said.

With that, the library door swung open and instead of the wonderful Mr. F standing there, we were greeted by the less than wonderful Ms. Loveless.

It turns out that you don’t actually have to try out for yearbook. You just have to show up and you’re in. I

looked around at the dozen other kids crowded around the long library table. A few eighth graders who worked on it last year, me and Christine and the three other band girls (Sasha, Brit, and Lucy), a couple of other girls who I didn't know but who seemed to know everyone, and one lone sixth grader, McHenry Plouffe—the only boy.

Ms. Loveless sat on the edge of a table facing us, taking a noisy sip through a plastic straw.

“Where's Mr. F?” one of the eighth graders asked. “He's our advisor.”

“Was your advisor, Missy, emphasis on the was.” There was that snorty laugh again. “The basketball team needed a coach, and need I say more?”

“But he knows all about yearbook. He's an English teacher.” Missy's voice cracked, and Ms. Loveless cut her off with look.

“Well, I guess we're lucky to have this crackerjack return squad of eighth graders to show us the ropes then, aren't we?” She took another noisy slurp. “Let's get started.”

The table erupted in not so quiet whispers. One of the eighth-grade girls rose as spokesperson, and cleared her throat. “The announcement said *Mr. F. says all are welcome*. That's false advertising.”

A chorus of *yeahs* and *no fairs* rang out.

Now it was Ms. Loveless who looked like she was about to cry. She scooted back further on the table,

her stockinged feet (where on earth were her shoes?) dangling in mid-air. “Well, then,” she clapped her hands together and then held them clasped awkwardly in front of her before continuing, “who’s ready to get to work on Valley Middle School’s best yearbook ever?” Snort.

The afternoon ended up being okay because 1) Nobody quit, even after the eighth graders threatened to because 2) Ms. Loveless had pizza delivered and because 3) we got to look through a bunch of old yearbooks and comment on the hair and clothes that looked weird and outdated, especially on the “best dressed” page.

McHenry Plouffe, who was wearing a polo shirt with a little puppy stitched near the collar and neon gym shorts said, with a mouthful of pizza, “Do you think someday kids might sit around and make fun of our clothes?” and Ms. Loveless said, in a super sincere tone, “No way. Your style will undoubtedly set the bar for generations to come.” He stood up at that and took a bow, making us all laugh right along with the ear-piercing cackle of our replacement advisor.

Let the Weekend Begin!

Did you ever notice that no matter how your week is going, Friday always feels different? Friday! Exciting! Exhilarating! Extraordinary! Some Fridays are all that, and then some.

Last Friday, I was discovering the lost treasure of Marsha Frisbie in an off-limits box in the back of my mother's childhood closet. Last Friday, I was writing Joelle's name in my book of true friends after Indira and Christine. Last Friday, I was just days away from meeting the boy who called me New Girl, and made my heart pound.

And now it was Friday again. Maybe the best Friday of my entire life. I'm not sure what order to put these events in – it feels like they should all be number one.

The Elinormal Saga

1. Christine invited me to spend the night at her house so we could work on our poems.
1. We're going to meet up with Indira at The Healing HeARTs tomorrow to work on our choreography (I know that's technically Saturday, but the anticipation is all wrapped up in Friday!)
1. Indira's mom is introducing us to the famous writer Liza Wren at lunch tomorrow (again, anticipation is everything. Felt like I could jump right out of my skin when I opened the text this morning.)
1. Manuel, the new boy from Modesto, got a schedule change. He's moving to my 3rd period Spanish class on Monday.
1. There is an empty seat next to me, and guess who's going to fill it?
I love Fridays!

Pink

*S*pending the night at Christine's is like going to Six Flags. There is noise and commotion and laughter everywhere, all the time. And snacks! When we came in from school, her mom was in the kitchen making homemade pizza. I mean, like real pizza with dough from scratch. Christine scooped up the cat that was sitting on the counter and handed him to me. "Bari misses you!" she said as the cat squirmed free and high-tailed it out of the room. I could hardly believe this was Bari, my cat that Christine adopted last spring when I found out how allergic my mom is to cat fur. How do snuggly little kittens turn into fat skittish cats so quickly?

Mrs. Corrales gave us each a big hug and told us to help ourselves to a snack. "Slim pickins since Michael and

Matteo beat you to it, but you're welcome to whatever's there," she said laughing. "Those boys will eat us out of house and home!" The door to the back yard was wide open and Christine's brothers could be seen and heard tossing a frisbee back and forth under the trellis while the two dogs barked and ran back and forth across the lawn, launching themselves into the air with each toss.

"Chrissy, can you shut that door and grab your laundry off the table when you go upstairs? And Elinor, be a love and grab those towels and deposit them in the upstairs bathroom, would you?"

Christine grabbed an open bag of chips from the pantry and her laundry from the kitchen table, while I grabbed the folded towels, and we headed to her room at the top of the stairs. She was so excited to show me that her dad had recently painted one wall bright pink. "You're going to love this, Elinor. Sit down and close your eyes." I plopped down in the beanbag next to her bed.

"Keep them closed," she said. Her bird squawked in its cage in the corner. "Oh, be quiet, Elbird."

"What's the first line of your funeral rain poem again?"

"My grandmother left this world drenched in sky tears," I whispered, the words catching in my throat.

"Chills," said Christine. "Amazing line, Miss Poet. Hold still for another minute. You'll see why."

There was the sound of scratching that I thought was Elbird in his cage, but it turns out it wasn't.

When I opened my eyes, Christine was bouncing on the balls of her feet in place, pointing to the pink wall. "Ta-da!"

My poetry line was written across the wall in beautiful script, under a rain cloud.

"Your mom will kill you!" I blurted.

She started to laugh. "It's chalkboard paint. You're supposed to write on it."

My mouth was wide open as I stood up and ran my hand across my words painted there. I said a few unintelligible things like *wha?* and *buh* before I squeaked out, "I love it."

"Well, good," she said, "cause I thought maybe we could work on putting some lines of poetry on the wall tonight and then Tik-Tok-ing ourselves or something."

My awesome Friday night got a whole lot more awesome. And we hadn't even had the pizza yet.

After dinner, we took leftover pizza and popcorn to Christine's room and decorated her wall with my words and her drawings. Then we filmed each other reciting and posing in front of our mural—Christine had a program on her computer that let us add music and splice our little videos into a cool minifilm that we sent to Indira. She texted back and said she'd have a yoga-ish dance

choreographed to go along with it by the time we met up at The HealingHeARTs in the morning. We could film ourselves doing the dance and then layer that into the video.

The stars are born! Indira texted before we called it a night and finally turned out the light. And I've been thinking—we need a name. Sleep on this one, chickadees. What about PoetryInMotionArts? We could call ourselves PIMA for short.

I wrote it on the wall above my poetry, and took a picture with my phone. When I wrote the word Poetry, it looked like this: PoetRy. That's when I had my genius moment—at least that's what Indira called it when Christine texted her back with my discovery. What if we call ourselves PRIMA instead? I said when it popped out at me. PoetRyInMotionArts.

Yeah, like prima ballerinas except we're prima something else.

PRIMA Yogarinas! The deal is sealed! Indira texted. And that was that. We were officially the three PRIMA Yogarinas.

I settled myself on the air mattress on Christine's floor, the moonlight shining on the mural we had made on her pink wall. I tried closing my eyes but it seemed impossible to fall asleep between the bird noises and the cat scratching at the bedroom door to come in and out,

her brothers running up and down the stairs, and the excitement of having a name for our project. Maybe Liza Wren would even call our book *The Prima Yogarinas*. Our book! We were going to be famous!

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Reunion

*C*hristine and I were both up before the sun, even though we had spent half the night wide awake. We raced down the stairs to find her mom already up making cinnamon rolls, her dad in the yard putting up a new basketball hoop with the boys, the dogs running in circles, and the cat—my old cat—sleeping in the middle of the table. Could you imagine Bari being allowed to have cinnamon dreams on the kitchen table in my house? I know he’s happier here, even though I miss him. I’m happier here too, if you want to know the truth.

While we were eating breakfast, my phone dinged in my pocket. Then it dinged again.

“You can get it,” Mrs. Corrales said as I felt my face turning red. “It might be important.”

I knew it was rude to look at your phone at the table, but I thought maybe it was Indira. Or maybe even Joelle from Oklahoma, so I slid my phone out and took a quick look.

“Oh, it’s my dad,” I said. “I have to call him. May I be excused?”

“Did you say you want to be diffused?” Matteo asked as he and Michael dissolved in laughter. “Diffused, get it?”

“Don’t be rude, boys,” Mr. Corrales said.

“Is everything all right?” Mrs. Corrales and Christine asked at the same time as I raced to the living room. Both dogs were asleep on opposite ends of the sofa. I had to move a pile of books off a chair to sit down. My dad answered on the first ring which meant he was waiting for me to call back – it must be important.

He told me that my mom was on her way home from Tulsa as a surprise so he’d be coming to get me and then we could head to the airport to pick her up. He was making dinner reservations at our favorite restaurant tonight so we could have a little family reunion, just the three of us. I wanted to explain that I had a big day planned in the city with Christine and her mom, but I couldn’t. And I didn’t mention the PRIMA Yogarinas or the meeting with the author, because I knew he wouldn’t understand. Couldn’t understand. I just repeated that this was a really important day for me.

“Don’t you think seeing your mom is important, Ellie-bear? She’s missed you so much.”

I pictured those two Tulsa ladies packing food in Tupperware in Grandma Ruth’s kitchen the week before. *Guilt. Good old-fashioned guilt. Works every time.*

I walked back to the kitchen slowly, listening to the sound of laughter ringing through the house. I stood in the doorway for a few minutes taking it all in.

“Elinor, what’s wrong, sweetie. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I have to go,” I squeaked. “My dad’s on his way to get me.”



Let me just say, you could probably guess how the rest of my day was going to go. My mom’s plane was delayed so we had to circle the airport a million times until I felt like I was going to be sick. I said, “Why don’t we just go home and mom can take the car service when she lands?”

He didn’t answer for a minute, then said in his quiet voice, “Elinor, your mother just lost her mother. Can you imagine how that feels? And then she had to spend another week by herself going through all those memories in the house she grew up in. Have a little compassion.”

In my head I was thinking *the airport is so close to the The HealingHeARTs—you could drop me off there now, come back to pick up Mom, and Christine's mom would have me home in time to go to dinner as a family—just the three of us.* But there it was again, that guilt. So instead, I just took in a big gulp of air (Indira called it a cleansing breath), and said, “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. Ok.”

When we finally saw her standing on the curb, she was dwarfed by a stack of shiny black suitcases. Even though she’d said there was nothing in that house that she wanted, she went ahead and bought and filled two new suitcases with stuff that she said was too good to part with. It couldn’t all fit in the trunk so I had to sit in the back squished beside her regular suitcase, with my legs draped over a stuffed leather duffel on the floor of the car. “It’ll be worth the discomfort, Elinor. Wait till you see what I found in the attic.” So that’s what that musty smell was.

Then she turned around from the front seat and winked at me. “Oh, and remind me when we get home, there’s something from your little friend in there too.”

“Joelle?”

“Well, of course, Joelle. How many friends did you make during your grandmother’s funeral?” The way she said it was so, I don’t know, disappointed, I guess. Like what kind of a person goes off to a park and has fun

while their grandmother is being buried? At least that's how it sounded.

By the time we got home more than an hour later she was too exhausted from her week of getting Grandma Ruth's house ready to sell and her flight being delayed and lugging all those heavy suitcases to the curb because we were circling the airport instead of meeting her at the baggage claim like she'd expected, and then all the Saturday traffic because of whatever, so instead of unpacking, she went straight to bed.

"You know what we can do, Ellie-bear? How about if I order us something from EatUp? You want Chinese? Or Sushi? Thai? What do you feel like?" my dad asked as he dragged the last of the suitcases into the front hallway.

"I thought we were going to La Tratoria? Remember? For our little family reunion? That's what I feel like, if you really want to know." I plunked down on the bottom step and stared at the pile of heavy suitcases waiting to be carried upstairs.

My dad patted the top of the banister and sat down next to me on the stairs.

"Listen, Elinor. This is not how we thought the day would go. But we've got to make the best of it. We can try again tomorrow."

Sometimes I feel like such a wimp. I wanted my present from Joelle. I wanted my special dinner. I wanted

to be at TheHealing HeARTs choreographing my poems with Christine and Indira and meeting the author Liza Wren who was going to write a book about the PRIMA Yogarinas. I wanted my mom to be smiling and swinging her hair like she was doing in those pictures I found in her closet. Where did that person go?

I leaned my head into my dad and whispered, “I was having cinnamon rolls at Christine’s this morning. Her mom made them from scratch.”

He kissed my forehead. “Sounds delicious.”

“And everybody was talking and laughing. Her brothers were having a contest to see who could make the goofiest face.”

He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. “Sounds like a great way to kick off the weekend.”

“And then you called...” I swallowed hard.

“And?”

“I was supposed to go to the city with Christine and her mom. We had it all planned.” I don’t know why I was still whispering, but I was.

I thought maybe he’d get mad or something because I was being selfish and not showing compassion. But he didn’t. He put his hand under my chin so I had to look up at him. His eyes looked watery. “Oh, my girl. I’m so sorry. I completely forgot. Just totally forgot.” At that, he stood up, pushed up his sleeve, and looked at his watch with his

thinking face. “How about we let your mother rest and we keep that reservation, you and me? You can tell me all about the day you almost had, and we can figure out how to not let that happen again. What do you say?”

I nodded, then stood up too, and realized I was smiling.

“And tonight when we get home, how about if we have a little movie marathon? Have you ever seen *West Side Story*?” He started snapping his fingers and doing this weird little dance over to the closet to grab his jacket. That’s the thing about my dad. He always knows how to make things better.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, racing up the stairs to wash my face and brush my teeth. “Wait for me.”

Love Story

We stayed up till almost midnight watching movies in the dark. After *West Side Story* ended, he told me about *Romeo and Juliet* and how that was the original love story. Then he clicked around until he found it on some oldies station, and we watched it in silence and both had a good cry at the end. Juliet was so gorgeous in that white night gown, and Romeo sort of reminded me of Manuel with his beautiful dark eyes and his boldness.

“Can people really fall in love that fast?” I asked, wiping my eyes with a napkin as my dad switched off the TV.

“I asked my mom the same thing when I watched it with her when I was just about your age,” he said. “She and my dad were going through a nasty divorce, and she assured me that people could not. But I’m not so

sure about that.” He set the remote back on the coffee table and picked up our empty glasses and the half-eaten cheesecake wilting in the take-out box from La Tratorria.

“Really?” I gathered up the dessert plates and used napkins and followed him into the kitchen.

“Absolutely! After all, I fell head over heels in love the moment I laid eyes on you, didn’t I? You, with your cone shaped head and your little arms and legs coated in white gunk, screaming like a banshee. You were the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen! So, love at first sight, I’m gonna go with yes.”

The kitchen was dark except for one little lamp glowing on the sideboard, bathing my dad in golden light as he stood at the sink. “I’ll take care of these dishes,” he said, “and you, my dear, had better hightail it up to bed before your mother finds out I let you stay up half the night watching sappy movies and gorging on sugar.”



At first I thought it was bees. The buzz buzz buzz of my phone woke me out of a deep sleep. It was still pitch black outside. Five-thirty am.

Hey girl.

You like?

Oops. Sorry.

Forgot the time difference.



It took a minute to register.

Time difference. Hey girl. Could only be Joelle.

I'm up, I texted back.

Early bird! So, you like?

What?

The thing I made you.

The thing? I yawned, squinting at the screen.

Yeah, the, um, she didn't give it to you, did she?

That's when I remembered. "There's something from your little friend," my mom had said in the car on the way home from the airport. But that was before my day was ruined and she went to bed and my dad hauled the unpacked suitcases into the guest room and we stayed up late and my day was salvaged and I fell asleep and forgot. My head was spinning.

Uh, no. Not yet.

Oh.

What else was there to say?

It's still dark here, I typed. Later. And with that, I shoved my phone back under my pillow and jumped out of bed.

TWELVE

Snark

The hallway was completely dark so I felt my way on tiptoes and gently pushed open the door to the guest room. The suitcases were lined up neatly in the middle of the room, the full moon casting weird shadows that made them look dangerous, like stealthy wild animals ready to pounce. I crept toward them, looking over my shoulder and trying to convince myself that I was just retrieving my gift from Joelle, that's all.

I tipped the tallest suitcase towards me in slow motion until it was lying flat and could be unzipped. I never realized how every little motion reverberates when you're trying to be so quiet. It seemed that the more slowly I unzipped, the louder the sound ricocheted from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall. Finally, after an

excruciatingly long minute, it was open and I was greeted by the unmistakable smell of old.

There didn't seem to be anything of value here – just a bunch of notebooks with their metal spiral bindings all twisted together, and file folders with little plastic thingies for hanging, and lots and lots of yellowed newspapers. I piled everything next to me on the floor and I felt around in the zippered pockets, but there was no present there for me, so I unzipped the next suitcase, only to find more of the same – loose papers, manilla envelopes, crinkled newspaper clippings which I piled neatly on the other side of me.

Reaching for the furthest suitcase, I smelled the unmistakable smell of something else—my mother's perfume. The room grew quieter, an almost deathly quiet. I craned my head around to where the smell was coming from and there she stood in the open doorway, arms crossed stiffly in the flowered bathrobe me and my dad bought her last Mother's Day. I froze.

“You've got a lot of nerve,” my mother hissed. “Do you want to tell me what you think you're doing, going through my personal belongings in the middle of the night?”

“It's actually morning,” I said in the snarky voice that comes out at the most inappropriate times, especially when I'm scared. I tried to recover as quickly as I could.

“I was awake and I was just looking for my gift. I didn’t look at anything of yours.”

She took a step towards me as I shrank against the empty open suitcase. “Your gift! Why on earth would I have a gift for you in here, Elinor? These are special things that mean the world to me. They’re all I have left of my mother. And look at them strewn all over the room!”

I caught myself before the snark came out. I didn’t say, “Strewn? Look at these nice neat piles I made.” Instead I whispered, “I didn’t know.”

“That’s just it,” she said. “You didn’t think. You never think about the consequences, do you?”

“I’m sorry.” The room felt like it was closing in. The smell of old papers mixed with her perfume was making me dizzy.

“You should be sorry, young lady. I suggest you go to your room and stay there until I calm down.”

Everything seemed out of focus as I scooped up a pile of papers.

“What are you doing now? Just leave it.”

I dropped what was in my hands into the open suitcase in front of me and as I moved to stand up, an image caught my eye. The newspaper that landed there on top featured a half page photo of a guy in a wheelchair. And the woman in the background looked just like Grandma Ruth.

Hide-and-Seek

I pushed past my mom in the doorway, making sure not to make eye contact, and made a blurry-eyed run to my room. Panting more heavily than necessary, I climbed into bed and pulled the covers over my head, willing myself not to cry.

Twenty-four hours ago I was waking up in Christine's room, excited about the day ahead. Now here I was lying in my own bed, head and heart filled with dread. Ah! I pulled my cell phone back out from under the pillow, sat up against the headboard, and pulled up my notes app, where I could turn my dark thoughts into a poem. My thumbs flew as I typed.

Waking up beside a friend

Sunshine bright for the day ahead

A sudden tear in the universe

*Hurls me home, sends me to bed
Heart and head replaced with rain
My day now filled with dread*

And just like that, my gloom lifted. Ever since I had found poetry, I've been better at dealing with life. Well, at least most of the time. As soon as I type *my day now filled with dread*, it isn't.

I copy paste my poem into a text to Christine.

Way to make lemonade out of ☹ Miss Poet! she texted back immediately.

I'm probably grounded, I texted. But can you call me later? I'm dying to hear how it went yesterday.



I could hear the dishes clanking in the kitchen below, then the shower running, then voices in the hallway, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. A few minutes later, I heard the mechanical whine of the garage door opening, the revving of the car engine, then silence.

Utter silence.

Under my bed I had stored my stash of t-shirts from my mom's past life. I tossed on the one with the famous Spice Girl wearing her little black dress glam look, then I went tiptoeing through the house in my swirly yoga

pants and '90's shirt, a PRIMA Yogarina on a mission. It ended up being Mission Impossible.

There was no sign of my parents anywhere. The car was gone and the house was empty. No note.

No sign of the suitcases either. The guest room was back to its usual sterile look – pillows fluffed and displayed like artwork on the bed, a book that's never opened on the little table next to the overstuffed chair that no one sits in, a basket of unopened toiletries and rolled up hand towels on the dresser for the guests who never visit. It was like I was seeing the room for the first time in all its loneliness.

I slowly pushed the door open to my parents' off-limits bedroom to make sure she wasn't in there lying down, but the bed was made and the blinds fully open, letting the sunshine fall across the polished floorboards. No suitcases standing beside the bed. No suitcases in the closet.

I didn't know how much time I had before they came back, so I started going room to room, looking in all the closets, behind couches, in the bathtubs, under beds. Not a suitcase to be found. It was like a one-sided game of hide-and-go-seek, and they were *not it*.

It didn't make sense. She said they were all she had left of her mother. These were her special things—was that what she said? *They mean the world to me*. Old newspapers

and tattered notebooks? I couldn't stop wondering if that was really my grandmother on the front page of that paper behind the man in the wheelchair. And if it was, what was the significance? I had to find out. I headed to the garage.

When they came through the back door into the kitchen a little later, I was sitting at the table, drinking a cup of chamomile tea with honey. Indira told me that it works as a meditation enhancer, opening up your third eye. I was sipping slowly, with my eyes closed, trying to imagine where three large suitcases could be stashed. I had scoured every inch of the house and the garage.

"Well, there's our sleepyhead!" my dad announced as he plopped a box of donuts in front of me. "Let's toast the hour with some glazed goodness."

My mom handed me a juice from Nektar of the Gawds. "Pineapple passion," she said, knowing it was my absolute favorite. That's the thing with her. No I'm sorry in words, but she gets the point across. I doubt she'd even told my dad about the catastrophe in the guest room earlier.

"Is that one of the Spice Girls?" she asked eyeing my shirt. "How cute! I used to listen to them."

I thought I should tell her that I know that—that in fact this was actually her shirt, one of many hidden under my bed, but I was afraid to spoil the mood. And besides, then she might figure out that I had her high

school yearbook and all those pictures of her with a boy named Curtis who looked like Manuel, the boy from Modesto who called me New Girl. Better to innocently reach into the pink box for a chocolate cake donut with sprinkles, and just nod in agreement.

“Your mom and I were at the nursery when it opened this morning,” my dad said as he took a bite of a jelly donut, powdered sugar dusting his shirt. “We were thinking maybe we could have a little family bonding in the garden today. What do you say, kiddo? You in?”

Then before I could answer, he started to sing,
*Yo, I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want,
So tell me what you want, what you really really want,
I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna
really really really wanna eat another donut here with
my two best girls!*

My mom did this funny little dance move that I've never seen her do before, then bumped her hip into him before pouring herself a cup of coffee in her travel mug. “Meet you both outside in ten,” she said as she headed out the back door. “Just need a few minutes to center.”

Sometimes I just don't get the way the world works. Adults can be so weird!

Glue

*S*o, we spent most of the day in the garden which my mom says is good for the soul, and I guess it sort of is. When your hands are digging around in the dirt and you're helping things grow, you can't help but feel happy and calm. Our garden is huge, and we have a gardener who keeps it looking perfect, but there was still a lot to keep us busy. My dad had filled the whole back of his car with flats of bright flowers, and a delivery van from the nursery brought the rest: a little copper bird bath with a happy green frog sitting in the middle, four heart-shaped garden stones, and a beautiful blooming magnolia tree.

It took us most of the morning to transform a corner of the yard with all the new plants and things. We laid the four heart-shaped stones in a line from the

gate to the new tree, then planted the flowers in a kind of heart-shape around the tree and set the birdbath off to the side.

“Time to admire our handiwork,” my dad said as he stood and brushed the dirt from his knees. He had little brown rivulets of dirt running down his face, and his shirt was a filthy mess. He was humming as he stood there, waiting for me and my mom to join him. My mom brushed some of the dirt off his shirt, and said, “Are all men such little boys? Honestly, look at you!”

But she didn’t say it like she usually said stuff like that. In fact, she laughed a little and then grabbed his hand.

My dad’s humming turned into a melody as he sang,
And then one day you came back home. You were a creature all in rapture.

You had the key to your soul. Oh yeah, that day you came back to the garden.

I just stood there in a trance for a minute. It seemed like something important was happening. Then she reached out and grabbed my hand, too.

“You were right,” she said then. “It’s just perfect. And I’m sure she loves it!”

At the time I thought they meant me, but I see now that they weren’t talking about me. We did all that work for Grandma Ruth. This was her garden. I just didn’t know it yet.



Later that day, when Christine called me and I sat on my bed listening to her talk excitedly about meeting Liza Wren, I started to freak out a little. Well, actually more than a little. She said she was coming back to The Healing HeARTs next Saturday to watch us perform my poems. Christine and Indira had already told her all about the PRIMA Yogarinas and she told them they'd already done the hard work of coming up with the title of her next book—she loves our name. Christine said that the famous author was really cool, putting everyone at ease, and doodling little sketches in her notebook the whole time she was interviewing them.

“I can see it all so clearly,” Liza Wren told Christine’s mom when she was leaving. “This story is practically going to write itself. We’ve already got enough drama with the ballet school dropout and the carpool mom connection.”

I felt my stomach drop. “What did you guys tell her about me? That sounds like I’m a weirdo or something.”

Christine laughed, “Oh you are a weirdo, Elinor!”

The phone went silent. I sank back into my pillows and reached for my bluebird.

“Kidding! Geez, don’t worry so much. We told her you were the reason we all came together. You’re the glue. She can’t wait to meet you. There’s no story without you.”

After we hung up, I couldn’t stop thinking about what she said. *There’s no story without you.*

Was that true? What if I didn’t want to be in a story that told all the embarrassing details about my ballet fiasco and my obsession with writing letters to some lady in the newspaper because I was too weak to figure things out on my own? *There’s no story without you.* What if I decided not to be interviewed? What if I didn’t want to be a PRIMA Yogarina anymore?

What if the price of fame wasn’t worth it?

Tree of Life

Sunday nights are my least favorite night of the week. I always get a little sad, knowing that the weekend is over, and a little anxious—worried that I'm not prepared for the week ahead. I usually pack and unpack my backpack a few times, try on what I'm going to wear the next day, and reread my notes from the week before, adding sticky notes to the sticky notes I've already added and highlighted.

When I finished double and triple checking everything, I decided to put on some quiet music and read through my mom's high school yearbook again, looking for clues. Today I thought I saw maybe just a little glimpse of the Marsha who used to be. I scrounged around under my bed for the yearbook, flung it onto my bed, then crawled further under there to grab a t-shirt for tomorrow. Just then, a quiet rap on my door. Before

I could say, *come in*, the door swung open, and my mom and dad stood there, side-by-side, grinning. *Please, oh, please, don't tell me I'm going to be a big sister*, I thought.

As I clumsily got to my feet, I managed to toss a pillow onto the yearbook before they saw it there in all its leathery glory.

"Um, hi," I managed to squeak. "What's up?"

"We just wanted to thank you for all the help today," my mom said. "Dad told me about you missing your special day with your friend yesterday." She held out a little wrapped box. "Anyway, this is from your new little friend in Tulsa. From Grandma Ruth's funeral."

This was highly unusual. *Oh, no*, I thought. *Please don't start blubbing again*. She sniffled a little, but no tears fell.

As they both stepped all the way into the room, she handed the gift to me and pulled me into a hug, in one swift motion, something she hadn't done for a very long time. Instead of being grateful, I just felt weird. She held on for what seemed like a long time, long enough for me to glance over her shoulder and see my dad beaming like he was about to burst or something.

"Aren't you going to open it?" my dad asked, swaying back and forth to the music.

"Oh, yeah, sure," I said. I undid the wrapping. The box held a bunch of miniature rosebuds and tiny petals,

pink and red, shimmery and beautiful. I thought for a minute that that was the gift, and honestly, that would have been enough. But beneath all those flowery blooms I noticed something shiny poking through. I pulled out a little bracelet made of a grass-green silky cord attached to a beautiful silver charm with a tree in the center. A shower of rose petals drifted to the floor.

“How pretty,” my mom said as I slipped it on. “That’s the tree of life.”

“No note?” asked my dad.

“Guess not,” I said, but then I noticed the teeny tiny handwritten note written inside the lid in pink gel pen.

“Returning the favor—a friendship bracelet made by hand for my *cousin*, Elinor. Twin branches of the Grandma Ruth tree.”

“Cousin?” my mom stammered. “What...” But before she could say any more and ruin the moment, my dad swept in like a hero, and waltzed her toward the open door to the swelling music of the ballet coming from the speaker on my desk.

“What has gotten into you, Leo Malcolm? You’re acting like a teenage boy with a crush!” She swatted at his arm, but she was smiling again. For a minute she looked like that girl wearing the Madonna t-shirt in the photos. She looked happy.

“We’ve kept our girl up long enough,” he said to her. Then to me, “Sweet dreams, love. School tomorrow.” He winked at me as he gently closed the door.

As soon as they left, I did five things.

1. I googled “tree of life” and discovered that it represented wisdom, individuality, and personal growth. I wondered if that was the message Joelle was trying to convey, or if she just liked the design and the fact that my Grandma Ruth was, as Joelle told me, a tree person. I remembered how she told me that my grandma said trees were like spirits we could commune with.
2. Next, I texted a quick message to Joelle, even though it was already late in Oklahoma, and it was a school night. Thanks, cuz. Got it. Wearing it. Love it. Within ten seconds my phone dinged back a heart emoji.
3. I opened the notes app and started a new poem. In the morning, I’d send it to Joelle.
4. And then I rescued the yearbook from beneath my pillow, climbed under the covers and studied each page from cover to cover, adding sticky notes wherever I found a possible clue to Marsha Frisbie, Class of ’96.

5. I fell asleep replaying my dad's words as he left my room tonight—*sweet dreams, love* and remembering that Manuel who called me New Girl was transferring to my Spanish class tomorrow. Sweet dreams.

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It's All in How You Say It

Manuel was waiting by the door to the Spanish classroom when I walked up. “Hola, Chica nueva. ¿Qué pasa?”
Swoon.

I was still just learning Spanish, but I knew enough to figure out what he said, and I could feel my face turning red. My heart did a little flip. Be cool. Be cool. Be cool, I thought.

It would be especially cool to answer in Spanish.

I quickly translated in my head, *Oh yeah? I think you're the new one! (¿Oh sí? Creo que tu eres el nuevo!)* That's what I meant to say in my best Spanish. I really did. But what came out, too loud, and right in front of

the whole class as we walked through the door together was, “¿Oh sí? Creo que tu eres mi novio!” (*Oh yeah? I think you're my boyfriend!*)

Only I didn't know that's what I said. And luckily most of the other seventh graders in Spanish 1A didn't either. But Manuel must have, because then it was his turn to have his face turn red. And it was no-nonsense Ms. Lopez, who looked right at me, and said, “You may want to take the advice you're wearing and apply it to yourself. ¿Comprendes?”

With that, everyone laughed. Everyone except me. And Manuel.

As I slunk into my seat, I felt totally confused by what had just happened. Manuel slid into the desk next to me, but he didn't say one word all class, even though he's a native Spanish speaker, and probably knew all the answers.

And he never looked at me once, even when we had to pass our papers to the left for Ms. Lopez to collect. When the bell rang at the end of class, he raced out the door before I had even packed up my backpack. It wasn't until I relayed the whole thing to Christine at lunch that I understood what I'd done.

“Well, first,” Christine said, “what were you trying to say? Because you just announced in front of everyone that Manuel's your boyfriend.”

I nearly choked on my tater tot. “No, I didn’t. He called me New Girl again so I just said he’s the new one. And he is. I’ve been here my whole life and he just moved here.”

“Well, I think you were trying to say *nuevo*, but it sounds like you said *novio* instead. Boyfriend.”

My lunch suddenly felt like lead inside me.

“So, I guess Lopez was trying to be funny when she told you to take the advice you’re wearing.”

“I don’t get it.”

Christine sounded exasperated. “Maybe if she’d said *who* you’re wearing, you’d have caught on quicker.”

And then all the puzzle pieces came together at once, in one big embarrassing jolt. Gwen Stefani. My mom’s ‘90s t-shirt that she wore in high school. It looked so cool this morning when I put it on, and sort of ironic. I thought it would be like a conversation piece, with girls asking me where I got it, and what it meant.



But Ms. Lopez was right. Good advice, just a little late. Now I'd ruined everything. Manuel would probably hate me forever. I'll never have a boyfriend. Not cool. Eli-not-normal strikes again.

Tea and Sympathy

*A*fter school, Christine and I were supposed to have a google hangout session, but I texted and said I didn't feel well. That was not a lie. And the next morning I told my mom that I had a pounding headache and would have to stay home.

She felt my head, and said, "No fever. No glassy eyes. No runny nose. I'd say you're fine."

"I don't feel fine though," I said. "And you know I never miss school. But my head is killing me. Really."

She must have still been in a good mood from our Sunday bonding session in the garden though, because she immediately relented. "Try to go back to sleep and I'll call the school. And I'll bring you up a cup of tea and some crackers in a little bit. Tea and sleep are the best medicine there is—you'll be as good as new by

this afternoon. Guaranteed.” Then she kissed me on the forehead.

A cup of tea and a kiss on the forehead is something my dad would do. It’s probably something Mrs. Corrales would do. It’s definitely something Indira’s mom would do. But my mother? This was way out of character. I pulled the covers over my head and tried to sort things out.

Instead of falling back to sleep, I just lay there imagining what was going on at school. Had the news gotten out that I’d made a fool of myself over the first boy I’ve ever had a crush on? I kept picturing how red his face had gotten and how quickly he’d dashed out of the classroom yesterday. He looked so embarrassed, thinking that someone as dorky as me could be his girlfriend. I’d ruined everything. From now on I’d be Weird Girl instead of New Girl.

Last year I would have written to Carpool Mom to pour out my troubles and ask her advice. But I had a mom. And she was right downstairs, making me tea. She’d kissed me on the forehead. She’d planted a garden with me. She was a different mom than the one who’d dragged me through the airport a few weeks ago.

I got out of bed, and headed downstairs. In the kitchen, a mug of no-longer hot tea in my special *brew-tea-ful* mug sat on a tray on the counter alongside a bowl of those little oyster crackers. Mom’s miracle cure for

headaches and heartaches. But my mom was nowhere to be found.

The house was silent. I looked in all the downstairs rooms, then I followed a muddy trail from the backdoor up the back steps to my mom's office. The door was cracked open a little bit, so I pushed it in all the way. At first I thought her office was empty too, then I saw her foot sticking out from behind her thinking sofa.

"Mom?" I took a hesitant step further into the room.

Her head popped up. "Elinor? What on earth?"

"I didn't know where you were. I thought maybe something..."

"Oh, for pity's sake!" She stood up, brushing herself off, and came around to face me. "You and that imagination of yours. What on earth could have happened to me in my own house?"

I didn't tell her all the awful things that had run through my head in the course of just a few minutes. Coyote attack. Heart attack. Abduction. Murder. She's right—I do have an unhealthy imagination sometimes.

"Well, I said, "it's just that my tea was cold and I couldn't find you and the stairs were all muddy and..." I stepped forward in relief to give her a hug, but she backed up at the same time, then looked down at her muddy feet.

"Oh dear." As she bent down to inspect her slippers, I made a startling discovery.

On the floor behind the sofa was an open suitcase, its contents spilled all over the carpet. Photographs. Newspapers. Folders. Letters. And staring right up at me was that front page article starring a man in a wheelchair and what looked like the ghost of my Grandma Ruth.

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EIGHTEEN

Lovemore

*S*o there I was in limbo. Forever to be known as the weird girl at school and the drama queen at home. I just wanted to be normal. And now on top of everything, I realized I was missing the most important day of yearbook, the day when all the assignments and offices were going to be up for grabs. I'd be stuck with whatever the worst job was. My partner would probably end up being that little sixth grader, McHenry Plouffe and Christine would get partnered up with one of the band girls. My weirdness cemented for the rest of my life.

I had two choices, it seemed. I could either climb back into bed and continue pretending to be sick, or I could get dressed and ask my mother to drive me to school so I wouldn't miss the whole day, now that my headache had "miraculously" disappeared.

But option B was not to be. “I am up to my eyeballs in work,” she told me. “And headaches don’t just go poof like that. Go heat up your tea and then get back in that bed. And close the door on the way out.”

I pulled out my *Before She Was Mom* journal, and started a new page. At the top I wrote: Unanswered Questions, News, and Clues.

Where’s she been hiding that suitcase full of old junk?

Why is my meticulous mom wearing muddy slippers?

What kind of “work” is she up to her eyeballs in?

Who is that man in the wheelchair?

Was that my grandma’s ghost?

What is my mother up to?

Who is Marsha Frisbie?

And then I developed a headache for real. I pulled the covers back over my head and fell into a fitful sleep.



The next day I wore my tree of life bracelet and my bravest face. When I got off the bus, I headed straight to my group, holding my head up high. Brit spoke first. “How was your date?”

Then Sasha chimed in, singing, “Ellie and Manny sitting in a tree.” I looked around at everyone winking at me and making kissy faces. Even Christine said, “Details, details. Give us the scoop.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I tried to say it in my calmest voice.

Lucy, the other band girl said, “You and Manny. Both absent on the same day. Like did you meet up?”

I sputtered.

“Or did you just spend the whole day texting with an S if you get my drift?”

This was too much! I couldn’t even answer, just stormed off into the building and ran straight into Ms. Loveless carrying a jumble of papers that spilled haphazardly onto the floor as I skidded to a stop.

“Good grief! Where are you going in such a hurry? You almost trampled me to death!”

I bent over to help her pick up the scattered quizzes. “Good, you can help me re-alphabetize these,” she said as she headed toward homeroom, me trailing behind with a messy stack. “Okay, partner?”

Partner?

She unlocked the door and flicked on the lights as more papers drifted to the linoleum. I rescued the rest and then helped her spread them out across the front counter.

“Actually,” she said as I began gathering up the A’s and B’s, “can you take care of this while I go pick up the mail from my mailbox? I didn’t have a chance to run by the office yet today. Oh, and it’s last name first.” She was out the door before I could even answer, and a minute later the bell rang.

So, there I was, standing front and center in the teacher’s spot when my noisy classmates entered the room.

There are times when you want everybody to notice you. And then there are times like this. All eyes were on me. I wished I could just disappear.

“Are you going to take attendance?” someone called out. “Oh, never mind. I thought you were Loveless.”

And then from the back of the room, “Nope. I think that must be Lovemore!” A cascade of laughter followed, as Ms. Loveless re-entered the room and restored order. I slunk into my seat and waited for the bell.



I hung out in the library during lunch and I was going to text Indira to share my troubles with her, but I knew she’d say, “You know what to do.” She always says if you look inside, you can find the answers. But I really didn’t know what to do. My insides were all jumbled up. Even

Christine thought I had skipped school with Manuel.
How could she think that?

I thought maybe I could text Joelle since she didn't know any of the people involved and could be objective. I hid my phone inside a book I pulled from the nearest shelf, and composed a message.

Sitting alone in the library.

Stuck inside my own head.

The boy I like thinks I'm a weird new girl.

My best friend...

But then I couldn't think what else to say. Was Christine still my best friend? What about Indira?

I twirled my tree of life bracelet and thought about Grandma Ruth. She was my connection to Joelle and Joelle was my connection to my mother's past. Maybe.

I copied what I'd written so far and pasted it in my future poems file. Then I started over.

Hey, Joelle.

What do you know about a guy in a wheelchair?

Just wondering.

Loveless

In Spanish class, when Manuel slid into the desk next to me, somebody said, “Oooh!” but Ms. Lopez shot one of those killer teacher’s looks and the room fell silent. I scribbled a quick “sorry” on my notebook page and turned it towards Manuel. He didn’t say anything, but his pencil started moving feverishly across his notebook. I was trying to pay attention to the teacher, but I kept stealing looks at his desk trying to see what he was working on so furiously.

Then Ms. Lopez announced that we’d be working on our dialogues, and I got paired up with the girl who sits in front of me. Manuel moved to the back of the room to work with somebody else, taking his notebook with him.

When the bell rang, as I was gathering up my notes, I heard a little cough behind me—one of those little

throat-clearing coughs you do when you're trying to get someone's attention. A piece of notebook paper folded up into a tiny little square landed on my desk. Probably a cease-and-desist letter. I shoved it in my pocket and headed for the restroom so I could cry in peace.

I locked myself in a stall and slowly unfolded the paper, taking deep cleansing breaths like Indira taught me. I could hear Indira's voice in my head whispering, *center, center*. There was no note. No writing. Just a very, very detailed drawing. Of me.



Heading toward the parking lot, Christine ran up beside me, breathless. "Guess what? I got picked to stay after for band rehearsal. I get a solo!"

She acted like everything was normal between us.

I kept walking toward the bus.

"So, I can't come over today." I had forgotten that I had invited her. "But tomorrow, okay?" She had to kind of shout that last part as a swarm of sixth graders came flying out of the multi-purpose room.

We got separated by the rush of kids pushing their way past me onto the bus. This is something I will never understand. The bus won't leave without us. There's

enough room for everyone. But, like, everybody wants to be first. Every day. Especially the sixth graders who all move together in one big clump.

I had to stand on my tiptoes to see Christine while managing to not get trampled. She was still grinning from ear to ear.

We must still be friends. “Okay, I guess,” I shouted over the crowd. “Tomorrow!”

As I was stepping onto the noisy bus, I turned around to say, “Oh, and congratulations!” but Christine had disappeared back into the building. I was the last one onto the bus and there was only one empty seat. McHenry Plouffe.

He patted the seat next to him. I had no choice.

“Your lucky day!” he said. He’s very sure of himself for a weird little sixth grader.

I readjusted my backpack on my lap and pulled out a book. This is my go-to on public transportation. Nose in a book usually means that no one engages you in pointless conversation. But he was not no one.

“What are you reading?” I turned the book towards him so he could see, then flipped to the page with my bookmark.

“Oh cool! I’m a big reader too. I’ve read all the Peak Marcello books and Maze Runner and Divergent and...” He listed another dozen series titles, as I tried to tune

him out and figure out the meaning behind the picture Manuel drew of me. I kept my eyes glued to the open book balanced on my backpack. McHenry did not take the hint.

“So, you missed yearbook yesterday.”

Oh, no. In all the Manuel drama I forgot to ask Christine if we chose partners.

“Guess who your partner is!”

I closed my book. This day could not get any stranger. Dating rumors. Lovemore label. Pencil portrait. I let out a long sigh. McHenry was sitting beside me in his neon shorts and puppy polo shirt. I noticed his scraped knees and mismatched socks. He was drumming with two pencils on his orange camo backpack.

“You’ll never guess, Elinor. In a million years.”

I was so annoyed by this time. “I think it’s pretty obvious it’s you.” I shoved my book back into my backpack as the bus screeched to a stop. “And isn’t this your neighborhood?”

“I can get off at the next stop,” he said, then resumed his drumming. “And, nope, not me. Drumroll, please!”

Well then who on earth could it be? Who would I be stuck with? Surely not one of the other band girls. They would definitely all be partnered up.

“It’s Loveless.”

The bus fell silent just at the moment he said it, the words hanging in the air. I fell completely silent too,

my mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. Why did partnering with McHenry Plouffe now seem like it would have been the best option after all?

He stood up then and pushed/climbed his way over me. “There was an odd number, so she said ‘Well, I guess I’m on New Girl’s team.’” With that he tried to high five me but missed and smacked my shoulder when the bus lurched. “Sorry, Elinor. Gotta go!”

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Puzzle Pieces

As soon as I got home, I unfolded Manuel's drawing again. I smoothed out the wrinkles with my hand and studied it. The girl in the sketch was not smiling, but it was definitely me. She was even wearing my butterfly earrings. And something I hadn't noticed before. A skinny little bracelet circling her left wrist. It's hard to see the detail because it's so small, but I think the tree of life is in the center.

So, Manuel is more than just a cute boy with a killer dimple and dark eyes flecked with gold.

He's an observer.

He's an artist.

He's a mystery.

Was this drawing his answer to my hastily scribbled
I'm sorry?

Does this mean he forgives me for embarrassing him?

Does this mean he likes me back?

I took out my phone to take a photo of the sketch. Maybe Indira would be able to read between the lines and tell me what it meant. She's had way more experience with love than I have, especially since I've had exactly zero experience.

My phone was dead. That would explain why Joelle hadn't texted me back yet. I plugged in the charger and the screen sprang to life.

Nope. But I'm on it. Joelle.

Working late. Don't wait up. Mom

Yogarina Update. Indira

Wren interview. Indira

Knock, knock. Indira

You there? Indira

I texted Joelle back first. I told her about the picture in the newspaper. She said that was a great clue and she'd start digging. I told her I missed her and she texted back a smiley face. I wish people would say what they mean instead of sharing emojis or hashtags. Or instead of drawing mysterious pictures that keep you guessing.

I texted Indira to get an actual translation of her message. Turns out Liza Wren got the go-ahead from her publisher and is working on an outline for the book.

Indira told her I'd be available for an in-depth in-person interview on Saturday. I didn't tell Indira that I didn't want to be part of the story anymore. I never can say no to her but I still had a few days to think of a way to get out of it. I didn't send her the photo of my Manuel sketch like I'd planned to either. Maybe it was time to keep a special secret of my very own.

And last I texted my mom. She texted back that she was driving my dad to the airport, then heading back to the office for a late-night session with the legal team. I didn't even know my dad was off on another business trip. This time he was going to Japan for two weeks. How did I not know that? I didn't even give him a hug goodbye this time. "He didn't want to wake you," she texted. "He left you a note."

I changed into my running shoes and headed out for a long walk to clear my head. It felt like all the weird stuff happening around me were clues to be solved, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle dumped at my feet by the universe. I just had to put them all together to figure it out. "You know what to do." Indira's voice in my head again. I wished I did.

I walked for a long time, but my head was not any clearer. Thoughts and memories were swirling around faster and faster, bumping and colliding. Prima Yogarinas. The Healing HeARTs. Lovemore.

Loveless. Grandma Ruth. Missing suitcases. Muddy slippers. Wheelchair man. Tree of Life. Everything was connected. But how?

When I got home from my walk, I searched the house again for those suitcases that could be the key to solving the mystery that was Marsha Frisbie Malcolm. They had to be here somewhere.

My mother always says, “a place for everything and everything in its place,” and she’s not kidding. My house is the most organized place you’ve ever seen. I started my search in her office. That’s where I had seen the open suitcase behind the thinking sofa yesterday, but there was no trace of it now. Gone. The muddy tracks were gone. The top of her desk was completely cleared off, the books and files all lined up by height and color along the shelves. Every room throughout the house was the same. Neat and clean and organized—nothing out of place, nothing out of order.

I needed a place to think. I grabbed my journal and headed for the garden, to the spot where we had all worked together on Sunday. Here we were a normal, happy family weeding and digging and laughing and singing. Just the three of us.

I sat under the little magnolia tree that I had helped plant, and started a sketch. Then a poem came to me. A tribute to my Grandma Ruth.

*In the garden
We notice life
A tree, a blossom, a buzzing bee
We are all connected
to each other, across the days,
across the years, across forever*

And then I had a brilliant idea. This peaceful spot should have a poetry walk. I could make it as a surprise for my mom. A memorial garden for remembering Grandma Ruth.

When Christine came over after school tomorrow, I'd share my idea with her and she could help me design and build it. Just the kind of creative project we loved to collaborate on. Art. Nature. Words. Just the kind of creative outlet I needed to help me deal with the chaos in my life. Words. Nature. Art. And the perfect way to tell her that I had changed my mind—I can't be part of a story that shows the world what a weirdo I am.

The temperature dropped as the sun started to set, so I stood up and brushed the dirt from my yoga pants. Yoga. That's when it hit me. Could I still be one of the Prima Yogarinas if I wasn't part of Liza Wren's book? Why did everything have to be so complicated?

As I headed back to the house, I heard a blast from the past coming from the very back of the yard. I hadn't heard that sound in forever, but it was unmistakable.

Woodpecker. Flashback to the first time I heard one in the trees at Grandma Ruth's house. I must have been five or six. I was with my mom and dad, sitting in these painted wooden chairs on her deck while Grandma Ruth was inside cooking. I remember being scared at first and asking my dad what that sound was. "That, my dear, is the sound of opportunity knocking!"

Tap tap tap. I followed the sound. It was coming from behind the shed. Tap. Tap. Tap. I looked up in the treetops, but it was not coming from that direction. It was coming from the shed! A red-headed bird was pounding away where the back wall met the roof. Weird, I thought. Weird but cool.

I stood watching for a minute longer. It felt like the woodpecker resented my presence, as he stopped tapping and just stayed silent, attached to the side of the shed, defying gravity. "Okay," I said out loud. "I'll give you your privacy, bird!" I turned around, and there on the path behind me, sticking out from underneath the bushes, a red handle. I bent down to pick it up, only to discover it was one of my dad's hammers. *Hmmm...that's weird*, I thought. My dad is so particular about his tools. I couldn't imagine him ever leaving one outside on the ground. Maybe it was the gardener.

My dad would probably understand, but I knew if my mom found out, Martin would be fired for sure. I

picked it up and walked around to the front of the shed. There was a shiny new padlock on the door. How strange. Another puzzle piece dropped from the sky.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Sayonara

The next morning, the house was empty when I got up, but my mom had obviously been home because there were two notes waiting for me on the kitchen table when I came downstairs for breakfast. The one on top was from my mom on her Marsha Malcolm, Attorney at Law notepaper. *Trial starting. Long day. Home late again. Mom.* Underneath that was a sealed envelope addressed to Ellie-Bear in my dad's familiar handwriting. There was a heart over the i, like always. I opened it slowly.

So sorry I missed you, bug, but I had to catch an early flight. Two weeks will fly by. Let's have a movie marathon when I get back—there's a cool Japanese love story about a girl in middle school who turns into a cat that I want to share with you. Don't worry—there are subtitles so you won't have

to listen to my sorry translation! Anyway, big time difference but I'll set up a FaceTime session or two with you, and then I'll be home. Take good care of your mom for me. Love you to a galaxy far, far away and back. Daddy-o.

I folded the note back neatly and tucked it inside the envelope, before transferring it to the pocket of my backpack so I could read it again and again. Then I grabbed a breakfast bar, made sure I had enough money for lunch, turned off the lights, and headed for the bus.



I couldn't wait till the next yearbook day to find out what was up with Ms. Loveless being my partner. I couldn't even imagine what that meant. Who ever heard of a kid having to partner up with a teacher on a project? I hopped off the bus and went around the back of the building to avoid Christine and the band girls standing in their usual spot under the gym overhang.

It had never occurred to me that other people would be hanging out back waiting for the bell, too. As I rounded the side of the building, I had to skirt around a group of boys who must have been in 8th grade and they were all wearing ties which if you ask me, is pretty weird in middle school. There was another small clump

of kids all working in their notebooks together, and along the back wall there was one kid sitting all alone on the blacktop, nose buried in a book. McHenry Plouffe. He didn't look up as I hurried by.

I opened the back door quickly and darted inside before anyone saw me. I had five minutes before the bell rang, and I hoped that I'd find Ms. Loveless in homeroom, getting ready for the day. She was sitting on top of the front counter with her headphones on, humming. She had her eyes closed and didn't feel my presence there, so I gently tapped her arm.

"Good gravy! You nearly gave me a coronary!"

I backed away a little. "I'm sorry, I..."

She didn't even let me get the rest out. "Never mind. Here to sort papers for me again?"

"No, I..."

She handed me a stack from beside her. "Last name first."

I didn't have much time before the crush of kids entered and the school day started. "No, I wasn't in yearbook the other day. I was sick, and..."

She jumped off the counter and slipped into her ugly shoes that were under a front row desk as she stuffed her headphones into a drawer. "Ah, yearbook. And your point is?" She tapped the top sheet of the stack of papers in front of me where *Erik Acosta* was printed in the top-

right hand corner above the date. “Pay attention, partner. Start with Aboudi.”

Partner? There it was again. Partner. It proved to be nearly impossible to alphabetize and think and talk all at the same time. I flipped through the stack until I found Mary Aboudi, then moved her paper to the top. At this rate, I’d never finish.

“Sit at my desk and finish up while I take roll,” she said as the bell rang. In another few seconds, homeroom would start. I had missed my chance.



At lunch Christine could talk about nothing but her solo coming up in the fall band concert next month. She was so excited that I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Then she said that she’d probably have to skip going to The Healing HeARTs for the next several Saturdays since she was going to have extra band practices until her debut as a solo artist. “But you can go without me and work on the choreography with Indira, right? We can still be the Prima Yogarinas and you can just teach me what I miss.”

“What about our book deal?” I felt a sense of impending doom kick in.

Now that Christine wouldn't be going, that meant her mom wouldn't be driving us there which meant I wouldn't be meeting Liza Wren. And even though I said I didn't want to be in a book before, and I was trying to figure out a way to get out of it, now that it looked like that option was gone, I desperately wanted to get there. I desperately wanted to tell my story to someone in my own words.

Christine looked shocked. "Why do you look so mad? We already gave her plenty of material to get started." She broke her chocolate bar in half and passed me a piece without missing a beat. "And Indira and I worked on our performance when you weren't there, so I don't see what the big deal is if I miss a few. You guys are the creative geniuses anyway. You've got all those cool poems, and she's got all those amazing yoga dance moves. You guys can collaborate and then loop me in." She zipped her reusable containers and bamboo fork back into her lunch bag and stood up. "Gotta get my flute out of my locker before the bell rings. I'll catch you later."

And with that she was gone. She hadn't given me a chance to tell her there was no way I could get there Saturday if her mom didn't drive me. She didn't give me a chance to find out how I got stuck with *Loveless* on yearbook and what that meant. And worst of all, she was so wrapped up in her solo that she forgot she was supposed to be coming over after school today. On my own again.

Eureka!

*T*his day will go down in the annals of Elinor Malcolm's history as a human being. I made about a million discoveries in the space of one amazing afternoon. First of all, Christine, came chasing after me, swinging her flute by her side as I left the cafeteria alone. "Oh, my gosh, Elinor, I completely forgot! I have to watch the boys after school today." She grabbed my arm and we both stood there looking at each other. "I'm such a dodo bird," she said in apology. I felt a wave of calm pass over me, as she continued to hold onto my arm. "Still besties?"

I have to stop jumping to conclusions. I have to start having more faith in people. "Absolutely!" I said. "My bestie is a famous musician." And then it hit me—the perfect way to up our game and make us all equal partners in the PRIMA Yogarinas. "Can you maybe play your flute for our performance?"

“Wow, you are brilliant, Elinor. Simply brilliant. The poet, the dancer, and the flutist!”

And then we both shouted, “Three Prima Yogarinas!” at the same time just as the bell rang and we dashed down the hall laughing, oblivious to all those kids looking at us like we were crazy.

Discovery number two happened when I skidded into Spanish and Manuel was already at his desk next to mine. “Ola, Chica,” he said out loud, flashing that impressive dimpled smile. I thought my heart would explode. And then as I slid, red-faced, into my seat, he whispered, in English, “Cool shirt.” I looked down at what I was wearing. Just a plain white top. No ‘90’s rock stars. No naughty sayings. Just me. Plain old me.

When I looked back up, he was staring at me with those gold-flecked movie star eyes. He pointed at me then and said nearly under his breath, but not quite, “*bonita*.” That was one of this week’s vocabulary words. *Pretty*. Did he mean my shirt?

Or me?

Or was he just practicing his vocab?

Doesn’t matter any way, I’ll take it!

Manuel Garcia said *bonita*. To me.

Discovery number three happened on the bus going home today. I actually chose to sit next to McHenry. I guess I felt sort of sorry for him when I saw him sitting all alone

reading against the building this morning before school. A weird little friendless sixth grader. I could definitely relate. Before I had a chance to start up a conversation and maybe find out more about the yearbook assignments he blurted, “Why were you going in the back door this morning?”

“No reason,” I said. “Just checking out the scenery. I didn’t see you.” (Little white lie). I was trying to save him from the embarrassment of being discovered all alone like that, sitting along the wall like I used to do.

“I always go in that way,” he announced cheerily. I guess he didn’t mind being a loner. “I like to read before school. Well, read and people-watch.”

He told me that he hangs out there during lunch too. He said one of the guidance counselors called his parents about it but he told them that he’s not anti-social, he’s just a reader. And then he told me about the 8th grade boys in their ties. “You know how Mr. F is the basketball coach, right?” I nodded. “Well, you know how he always wears a tie?” Another nod. “So, I guess he told his team that he’d give them all extra scrimmage time if they dressed like gentlemen. I’m going to interview them for the school newspaper.”

“You’re on newspaper, too? Not just yearbook?” I had to grab the seat in front of me as the bus lurched forward.

“Just for my Language Arts class. We don’t have a school newspaper, you know.” He turned to me with the

most serious face, then broke into a huge grin. “Yet!”

This kid was just full of surprises and ideas for a little sixth grader. A school newspaper!

I’m sure he could sense my excitement at the prospect. “And, Elinor, I bet we could get old Loveless to help us get it started.”

This time when he high-fived me, he didn’t miss.



You would think that would be enough discoveries for one person for one day, but the biggest, most surprising discovery of all awaited me when I got home.

One of my mom’s Marsha Malcolm, Attorney at Law notes was attached by a magnet to the side of the refrigerator. It had only one thing written on it: 10-13-78. My mother’s birthday. *That’s weird*, I thought. *Why would my mom have to write down her own birthday? It’s not like that’s something a person ever forgets.*

I stood there, transfixed for a moment, thinking. Indira’s voice in my head again. *The answer is inside you.* And suddenly it was. I left my backpack on the floor and rushed outside into the back yard.

Click

I *darted across the lawn, still wet from the sprinklers,* and dashed behind the shed, retrieving the red-handled hammer that I'd re-hidden beneath the bushes. It felt heavier in my hand than yesterday. Maybe because of what I was about to do.

Swinging it by my side, I scurried along the back of the shed, peered around the corner to make sure I was alone, then skidded to a stop at the padlocked door. I told myself I was just going to open the door, hang the hammer in its proper place along my dad's workbench, and then go back in the house and start my homework. But all the while I knew that wasn't true. That's not why I was there.

I dropped the hammer to the ground. Then, hands shaking, turned the dial. 10-13-78. Nothing happened.

Once more. Nothing. *Center, center*, I told myself. This time I took a deep cleansing breath and concentrated, turning it clockwise, slowly past the zero. Ten. Back the other way, slowly. Thirteen. Then clockwise again, so slowly. Painfully slowly, my eyes focused like lasers on the dial, my ears cocked and listening for the magic click. Seventy-eight. Click. The shackle slid out. The lock was unlocked. The door swung open.

It took a minute for my eyes to adjust. The windowless shed was eerily dark inside and had an overpowering smell of something gross. Death? That was my first thought and it almost made me lose my nerve. “This is just my dad’s tool shed,” I said out loud to the lawnmower, gripping the handle to steady myself. I took some more centering breaths, waited for my eyes to adjust, and then, of course, there they were—two brand new black suitcases from my mom’s trip home from Tulsa.

My heart was flip-flopping in my chest. Why were the suitcases out here? What secrets must they be hiding? I was about to find out. I tiptoed back to the door and closed it tight, felt my way across the shed, and knelt in front of the closest suitcase. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. *Breathe. Breathe.* I turned it on its side to unzip it, telling myself that I was just looking for mementos from my Grandma Ruth. That’s all.

The zipper was closed with a little lock that you open with a key. I grabbed the other suitcase and laid it on its side beside the first one. Another lock. Another challenge. Another piece of the still unsolved puzzle.

I spent the rest of the afternoon searching for the keys—a spy in my own home—tiptoeing from room to room, silently sliding open off-limits drawers and cabinets. The combination had been hidden in plain sight. So where could the missing keys be?

And then I remembered something. In science, we were studying the engineering standards and Janna Faz was my partner for the simple machines' unit. She told me how she picked the lock on her older sister's diary, and then she showed me the tool she used which was just a bent paper clip. At the time I remember thinking, why would anyone still keep a diary when you could just use the notes app on your phone, but I didn't say that. She tried to explain the science behind it, but to tell you the truth, I wasn't really listening to her. I was picturing what it would be like to have an older sister. Kind of like Indira.

I pulled out my phone and googled *how to pick a lock with a paperclip*, and there, just like Janna described, was a step-by-step tutorial. I opened the junk drawer in the kitchen and dug around through the ketchup packets and batteries and rubber bands and matches and receipts. Not one paper clip. But something even better! There,

taped to the inside of the drawer, hiding in plain sight, a little silver ring with two tiny silver keys attached.

I slipped the keys into my pocket and opened the back door just I heard the garage door going up.

“Surprise! We recessed early after all so I picked up dinner!” My mom came bounding through the back door. She dropped a takeout bag on the counter. “Homework all finished?”

“Yup. Almost. Just came in here for a drink.” I filled a glass with water from the fridge and guzzled it so I could make the lie be true.

“Well, I must say,” she said, “this was an exceptionally good day. I’m planning to have a nice hot soak, watch some reality TV and just hang out. Care to join me?”

I refilled the glass and took another long swig. All I could think about were the keys in my pocket, the unlocked shed, and those mysterious suitcases calling my name.



The evening dragged on and I must say I wasn’t very good company. Here I was, finally getting a chance to have some together time with my always too-busy mom, and all I could think about was how to escape. I hadn’t done

any homework, I had a poem running through my head that I was dying to write, and I had to get back outside to the shed before it was too late. But here I was watching some lame show about a model who wants to marry the wrong guy. “She’s going to regret that,” my mom said. “Believe me. That guy is a rake.”

I had no idea what she meant, but that made me wonder. Was there a wrong guy in her life? She couldn’t possibly mean my dad! I wished I could ask her. I shifted closer to her on the sofa and took a stab at it. “What do you mean? Like how do you know who’s the wrong guy?”

“Trust me, Elinor. The pretty boys are just the worst. They break your heart.”

The guy in her yearbook? Was he a pretty boy? Did he break her heart?

Did you ever want to ask somebody a question but you were afraid of what the answer might be?

We watched the rest of the show in silence, then I finally feigned a yawn and said I was going to get ready for bed. She stood up at the same time and gave me a hug. A real hug. “This was nice, Elinor,” she said with her arms wrapped around me tight. “Thanks for hanging out. And goodness, gracious—you’re almost as tall as me now.” She kissed the top of my head and looked into my eyes before letting go. “And remember, beware of those pretty boys.”

I walked upstairs in a daze, picturing Manuel with his dimple and his gold-flecked eyes, and the way he whispered *bonita*. I still had to do my math homework, I had to read that chapter on traveling to the moon in the engineering section of my science textbook, I had to write that poem that was dancing in my heart, and I had to head back out to the shed once my mom's light went off and at least lock the door. I didn't think I was brave enough to work out there in the pitch dark. Then I had to tape these keys back in the kitchen drawer without anyone being the wiser.

But all I wanted to do was fall asleep and dream about Manuel. I took the picture he drew of me out of my backpack and stared into my own eyes. Bonita. New Girl. Elinormal. It was going to be a very long night.

All the News That's Fit to Print

I woke up the next morning to a text from Joelle.
Serendipity-do-da!
Call me.
ASAP

She answered on the first ring, and didn't even say hello, just launched right into her news.

"So, you know how I love to sit under that tree at the park and listen to the wind?" I was nodding and picturing that beautiful old oak where we first shared a friendship bracelet made from blades of grass.

"Well, yesterday I went there after school to decompress and I could have sworn I heard your

Grandma Ruth's voice. It sounded like she was calling my name. I got goosebumps."

Something told me this news was going to be a big deal. Definitely one of those messages from the universe. My arms were covered in goosebumps too. I sat up straighter, twirled my tree of life bracelet, and pressed the phone closer.

"And there," she continued, "right in front of me on the path was a guy in a wheelchair."

Serious goosebumps. "Was it him?"

"That's what I'm getting at," she said. "I said 'Excuse me, sir. I'm a student reporter for my school newspaper' and asked him if he'd be willing to answer a few questions."

"Oh my gosh, Joelle. You're amazing. What did he say?"

"Well, he was a talker, that's for sure. He practically told me his whole life story."

"And was it him?"

It was taking her a very long time to get to the point. She told me how she ended up talking to him for a half an hour and finally managed to get around to asking if he knew a lady named Ruth Frisbie who had just died. "Hmmm," he said. "Sort of sounds familiar, so might've heard of her, but never met the lady. She famous?"

My head was spinning by that time so I might have

missed some of what she said next, but then she told me that he said he plays wheelchair basketball with a bunch of guys every weekend. He said he could ask around.

“So maybe he knows him then? But how will he let you know?” I had a million questions racing through my head.

Joelle said he told her that if she was at the park next week to look for him and he could tell her if any of the guys knew a Miss Frisbie. He also said, “I’m kind of easy to spot, and I’m here every day at this time getting my exercise.”

Every day. That means that he’s been there every time Joelle goes there after school to sit under the tree. He was probably there when I was there with Joelle last month too. This is the kind of stuff that just kills me. Somebody tells you the meaning of a word you’ve never heard before, and then you see and hear it everywhere. Someone tells you they’re looking for a guy in a wheelchair, and there he is, right in front of you. The strange thing is, he’s always been there. You just couldn’t see him before. Weird.

By the time we hung up, I was running late for school. I threw my hair up into a messy bun, pulled on a denim skirt, and didn’t even change the shirt I’d slept in last night. I guess a wrinkled *Isn’t it Ironic* t-shirt would have to do.

Irony

It was hard to concentrate in school with all the drama playing out in my life. Joelle was on the trail of the wheelchair guy. There were two locked suitcases in the shed and two silver keys to open them taped inside a kitchen drawer. My mom said to beware of pretty boys who break girls' hearts. My hair was a mess and I was wearing my pajama shirt. That unwritten poem was still jangling around in my head and even though I had read the science chapter I hadn't *really* read it because I couldn't remember any of the details. Like I said, drama!

Then, to top it all off, Loveless called me partner again, so I hung around after homeroom and asked her what I was supposed to be doing for yearbook. "Well, isn't that ironic?" she said and then launched into one of her laughing snorts.

I didn't think it was funny.

"You've actually been doing it already," she said. "Your yearbook assignment is to help keep me organized. The paper sorting's been super helpful."

"I don't get it," I said. "What does alphabetizing math homework and quizzes have to do with working on the yearbook?" I might have sounded a little snippy.

"Oh, my dear girl, it has everything to do with it. That's a real time saver for me—with your help I can just enter grades one-two-three, lickety split. You know the advanced math parents want to know what their kid's grade is every day. If I don't post those grades by the end of day, they'll have my head."

I was trying to follow.

"And if that happens, no more yearbook. It's all connected, see?"

"But I want to work on the actual yearbook. Like, for real."

"Tell you what," she said as her first period brainiacs came through the door. "Think about what kind of changes you think we could make to this year's book to make it unique. Really think about it. And at next Tuesday's meeting you and I can work out a plan to do just that and present it to the team. Deal?"

I was still not convinced or very happy about teaming up with the most unpopular teacher at school,

but I didn't want to have the yearbook disappear either. "Deal," I said as I headed out the door to the sound of the late bell.

The hallway was eerily quiet and completely empty and I realized there was no way Mr. Hoy would let me come into history even one minute late without a pass, even if I'd been with a teacher. I headed to the office.

The lady standing at the counter seemed a bit grumpy when I walked in, and gave me a look. "Late pass?"

"Yeah," I said. "I was talking to my homeroom teacher."

"Well, you should have asked them for a pass then."

I hate when people have to go and make things so complicated.

When I didn't answer, she slapped a pack of late passes on the counter, and ripped off the top one. "Name?"

"Ms. Loveless."

"Oh, my word," she said sounding completely frustrated at this intrusion on her time doing whatever the ladies in the office do when they're not writing out late passes. "Not her name. Yours!"

I told her my name but she reacted the same way Indira did the first time she heard it. "Elinormal what?"

And before I could repeat it and correct her, she looked up with a smirk. The office door had opened

behind me with a whoosh. “Ah, late again, Mr. Garcia. And what’s the excuse this time?”

That’s when the air in the room shifted, and like magic, Manuel Garcia was standing next to me at the counter.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

The Plot Thickens

Christine couldn't believe it when I found her at lunch. I told her everything that was happening in my life, starting with the fact that Manuel winked at me and said, "Hey, Chica" when he looked up and realized we were both late for school except I really wasn't, I just was talking to Ms. Loveless for too long and then the late bell rang. He was actually late because he missed the bus which sounded like something that happened a lot.

"I think he's trouble," Christine said. "He just can get away with things 'cause he's so cute. Let's just hope nobody saw the two of you coming out of the office together with those late passes."

"He is cute," I said, my face turning red. "And I think, maybe, he likes me."

“Well, watch out, that’s all I’m saying.”

We sat in silence for a bit while I sucked on my water bottle. Then Christine passed me a homemade chocolate chip cookie and said, “Well, what else? You said you had a lot to tell me.”

So, I rattled off all the other things going on—the suitcases, and the hidden keys, and the wheelchair guy for starters.

“Wowzers,” she said. “You’re going to be the main character in Liza Wren’s book, for sure. Your whole life is one big drama.”

Maybe so, but at least I had Indira, and Joelle, and Christine that I could share it with. And maybe one of these days I could share it with Manuel too.

She jumped up and passed me her last cookie as the bell rang. “Wait for me at the bus after school,” she said. “I’m going to help you solve that mystery or my name isn’t Crystal Coral.”

I said, “What are you talking about?” with a mouth full of cookie, just as she burst out laughing. “Oh, and for the record, I forgot to tell you. You’re Luna LeFleur. Later!” Then she melted into the crowd pushing through the cafeteria doors into the noisy, teeming hallway.



I told Christine about the mystery of the locked suitcases as we walked from the bus stop to my house. “That’s super weird and creepy,” she said. “What do you think she’s hiding?”

That’s exactly what I’d been trying to figure out. “I’m not sure,” I said. “The only thing I know for sure is she’s acting really weird. She even stayed up and watched tv with me last night.”

Christine didn’t say anything then and I realized that she probably sat around and did all sorts of things like that with her mom. They probably even did each other’s hair and gave each other pedicures. I swallowed hard as we walked up the long driveway to my house in silence.

I pushed the code on the garage door so we could go in the back door to the kitchen. “Wow!” she whispered as we entered the house. “I always forget how big and shiny your house is! You could fit a hundred people in here.”

Maybe, I thought, but there’s hardly ever been more than just the three of us in here. I set a bunch of snacks on the counter while I told her about the guy in the wheelchair from the newspaper and Joelle’s discovery of her wheelchair guy at the park.

“I think we should tell Indira about this,” Christine said, mixing granola into a big bowl of frozen yogurt. “Didn’t she track you down before when you disappeared? Doesn’t she love mysteries?”

“Ok,” I agreed. “You’re right. I just wanted to try figuring some of it out on my own.” I explained about the boy in the yearbook and all the photographs hidden under my bed. “I think it’s all connected somehow.”

“This is just like *Dateline!*” Christine replied. “Let’s get those suitcases open and see what’s in there!” She kept talking more excitedly as she rinsed out her bowl and opened the dishwasher. “Oh, and I’ll video you opening them and we can send it to Indira. Giving myself goosebumps just picturing it!”

She turned back around just in time to see me, standing next to the open kitchen drawer with my mouth in a big wide O and my eyes bulging, my arms covered in goosebumps too.

“What’s up, Elinor? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“The keys,” I croaked. “They’re gone!”

Luna

When I recovered from the shock, I told Christine about Janna Faz opening her sister's diary with a paperclip. "We shall not be deterred from our mission!" I said as I rummaged through the drawer for a paper clip to use as a suitcase key. I found one clipping a bunch of receipts together and twisted it open. "Let's go!" I said hoisting it in the air in triumph. "Grab your phone, Christine, and prepare to document the evidence."

Seconds later we were at the door to the locked shed. I used the birthday code and it opened on the first try, the door swinging open with a whoosh of musty air. We stepped inside. I thought at first it must be a trick of the light, but soon enough realized the mystery had just deepened. The suitcases were no longer there. The corner of the shed where I'd seen them yesterday was empty.

I turned to Christine and said, “You can put your phone away. Somebody stole all our clues.”

“Somebody doesn’t want you to discover their secret,” Christine replied. “Somebody is running scared.”

I guess she didn’t know that I was the one who was scared. What was in those suitcases and what didn’t my mother want anyone to find out?

As we were dejectedly heading back into the house, our gardener’s truck pulled up the drive to the side gate. “It’s Martin,” I told Christine. “Maybe he knows what happened.”

It turns out he did. Sort of. “Miss Malcolm told me to keep the shed door locked in case of burglars. She told me Mr. Malcolm had invested in some expensive new tools and he didn’t want them to go missing.” He lifted a big white flowery plant from the bed of his truck as he spoke. “I don’t question it, but I don’t see any new tools either, you know. I just say, ok.”

“Did you ever see anything weird in there? Like a suitcase or something?”

“In the shed? No, nothing weird. Just the usual stuff. Now if you’ll excuse me Miss Elinor and friend, I’ve got to get this planted for your mamacita.”

Christine turned back as he walked away. “Excuse me,” she called to Martin. “I’ve never seen a plant like that before. What’s it called?”

“This beauty here? Why this is what you call in English a moonflower. A flor de Luna.”

Christine grabbed my arm as Martin entered the garden. “We’ve got to call Indira now!” she said. “She’s the one who suggested Liza Wren change your name to Luna LaFleur in the book.” She squeezed my arm tighter. “Moonflower!”



Indira didn’t think it was weird at all. “It’s just what I always tell you,” she explained. “You’ve just got to stay open. That universe of ours lives inside us too – it’s not just the part you can see. There are a million little miracles happening every day if you just pay attention. Everything is connected. Everything.”

She explained how Liza Wren said she had to fictionalize our names since she was just basing her new novel on us – not writing a non-fiction book. So, she changed Christine Corrales to Crystal Coral (*a sparkly gem!*) and Indira to Athena because she’s so wise and beautiful and she fights for her friends. Indira told me that she knew I’d want to be Daisy but that was just too ordinary for someone magical like me. That’s the word she used – magical. She said I pulled people together like the

moon pulls the tides. “You have powerful karma, Elinor who we adore. You *are* a moon flower, most definitely. Hence, you shall be called Luna LaFleur forevermore.

And as for that suitcase mystery, let’s lay out all the clues you have so far and get to work. No way we can’t figure it out if we put our minds to it. When is your friend from Oklahoma meeting with the wheelchair guy again? I’d bet the farm he holds the missing key.”

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Rescued

By the time we laid out all the clues, including the 1996 yearbook with the message from a boy named Curtis who signed it *love*, the pictures in the box in my mom's childhood closet with that same handsome boy holding her close, the newspaper clippings and folders stuffed with pages in the mysterious disappearing suitcases, the muddy tracks up the back stairs into my mom's office, and the padlocked shed, my head was spinning.

"I wonder why your grandma stopped visiting," Christine said. "I mean if your mom was so upset when she died, I wonder what they were fighting over."

"A-ha!" Indira shouted. "That's it! Add that to the list of clues. You're on to something, Sherlock!"

And before I had time to process Christine's question, which stunned me, I admit, she said her mom

was on her way to pick her up and we'd have to continue the conversation later.

“No problem-o,” Indira said. “Elinor and I can work on it tomorrow after we work on our poetry dance. In fact, our dance energy will help open up our heartspace for enlightenment. Once we get lost in the breath of movement, the puzzle pieces will pick up the vibration and just click together like magic. I can feel it.”

We hung up before I told her there was no way I could get to The Healing HeARTs tomorrow without Christine.



I was awakened at 5:00 am by the buzzing of my phone. Joelle. She always forgets how early it is here.

Today's the day! she texted. Wheelchair basketball.



As if I could forget. Maybe now one major part of the mystery would finally be solved.

I rolled over and tried to fall back to sleep, but I just kept picturing my mom in her muddy slippers crouched next to that newspaper on her office floor, that mystery guy in the wheelchair staring up at me next to an old lady who could be my Grandma Ruth.

My phone buzzed again. OOWS!

OOWS?

It was Indira. She must have rolled over in her sleep and texted by mistake.

A few minutes later, CM 2 #rescu-u. ETA 7:30 AM 4 EM.

Was she sleep-texting? A confusing exchange followed where I figured out that *OOWS* was not a mistake – it simply meant *on our way shortly* in Indira speak. And CM was Carpool Mom, and ETA means exactly what everyone knows it means. EM, of course, is me, Elinor Malcolm. A puzzling message from Indira Makepeace, AKA Tiffany Woo, that I finally deciphered. That girl was the master of the cryptic clue!

She and her mom were driving all the way from the city to my house to take me to TheHealing HeARTs today since Christine had band practice for her solo. When Christine called Indira last night, unbeknownst to me, and told her I couldn't make it to the city because I didn't have a ride, Indira said that was unacceptable, so she and her mom were setting out early, armed with coffee shakes and organic donuts to rescue me from suburban captivity and deliver me to my zenspace. At least that's what I concluded.

It felt like the universe was leading me somewhere that I wasn't sure I was ready for, but I never can say no to Indira. Or her mom, for that matter. So, I took a quick

shower, threw on my yoga clothes, grabbed my mat and my notebook full of poems, and headed downstairs.

The sun was just getting up, and my mom would probably be asleep for another hour or so. I dashed off a quick note telling her not to worry – I had a ride to The Healing HeARTs and I'd be home in time for dinner. I added a *have a nice day* and a smiley-faced heart, then left the note next to the coffee pot where she'd be sure to find it, long after I'd gone. Then I went outside and crept down the driveway to wait on the stone wall for Indira and her mom. I felt like a character in my own story, dutifully following the author's plotline.

At 7:30 on the dot, a dusty minivan came slowly rolling up the street. The side door slid open, loud music came pouring out, and I hopped inside. Indira reached around from the front seat, passed me a shake and said, "Bonjour, Miss LaFleur." As the minivan pulled away from my house, Indira handed me a bag holding a still warm donut; her mom winked at me in the rear-view mirror and sang, "A body in motion stays in motion. That's a natural fact! We three ladies are definitely on the move! Getting our groove in an all-star act! Getting ready for a booty-shaking, memory-making day of sunshine, funshine and love."

The whole ride to the city was like that, filled with singing and wordplay between Indira and her mom, with

The Elinormal Saga

me just sitting in the back smiling and singing along quietly, happy and grateful to be a passenger in their magical orbit.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Courage

This was one of the best mornings of my life. First, that car ride. Then Indira leafing through my notebook to lift danceable lines for our performance.

Sunlight was streaming through the skylight, bathing the whole lobby in gold as we sat together in the corner. Everything just felt so warm and natural, like this is where I'm supposed to be. This is what I'm meant to be doing at this moment in my life.

"We're making a poem collage, a barrage of feelings, a true heart massage built with soul-searching courage by the queen of the spoken word," Indira said, pronouncing it *cour-aj* with a French accent. "It comes, of course, *chère*, from *coeur*, the French word for heart." She patted my arm and then pulled a clump of rubber-banded markers from her bag.

“Remember,” she said as she began jotting lines on separate pieces of lined cardstock paper that looked like those sentence strips from first grade, “you are a celestial body. We’d be nothing without your brilliant words to move us.”

I admit, I felt a little bit like I was floating, watching her write out my words in blue, and purple, and orange ink. “*My grandmother left this world drenched in sky tears,*” and “*We are all connected to each other, across the days, across the years,*” and “*Your words, born in blood and anger, cut me to the quick*” and “*A dusty photograph is a faded dream to make you homesick for what you never knew.*”

Once she had a whole stack on the table she said, “Now we wait for the magic.”

She stood up, waved her hands across the pieces of the poetry puzzle, said “Namaste,” and headed into the hallway. I jumped up and followed her into one of the small rehearsal spaces. “So,” she said, “Let me show you the movement Christine and I have worked out so far.”

We spread our yoga mats on the floor and she taught me the poses as she hummed a familiar melody. I told her about Christine playing the flute as part of our performance and she said, “Ah, that will add just the right measure of mellow to our Longfellow.”

After what seemed like no time at all, the door opened and Indira’s mom poked her head inside.

“Looking good, ladies. Time to finish up though. My Tai Chi class has this room booked next.” We wiped down our mats and rolled them up while Mrs. Finkle-Woo stood there smiling at the two of us. She has the warmest smile, just like Indira. “And Liza Wren is waiting for you in the lobby.”

My heart did a flip-flop. I hadn’t exactly forgotten that I was going to meet her today, but in all the excitement of the morning, that idea got pushed to the back of my mind. I was definitely sweating then, and it wasn’t from exercise. “You two will definitely hit it off,” Indira said as we headed to the lobby. “She’s a Cancer too.”

There at our corner table covered with sentence strips filled with my poetry, sat the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Time seemed to stop as I stood there, rooted to one spot, unable to move. She had long red hair that fell in waves, brushing across the table top as she sorted the sentence strips in what felt like a slow motion movie scene.

“Liza!” Indira’s voice boomed in my ear, startling me into motion. She thrust out her hand. “So good to see you again.”

Liza Wren stood up. “And you must be...” she clasped both hands to her heart. “You must be my Luna.”

Indira explained to her how she’d lifted lines of my poems to make a collage poem that we could dance to and

how Christine was going to layer in some beautiful flute music and how we were planning to film it and upload it and how I was the one who made it all happen. “This girl here is the main character in our clever endeavors.” Then she said she had to check people in and it would be the perfect time for the two of us to get to know one another.

I had never talked to a best-selling author before but she was just like a regular person. She told me how she got started as a writer in middle school by working on the yearbook and starting a school newspaper with her twin brother. She explained the process of writing novels in verse and how she starts every morning reading poetry and writing in her journal. And then she told me about how inspiration happens and how incredibly inspiring my story was.

“It’s not really a story, though,” I said. “It’s just my life.”

“Ah, but it’s an extraordinary life, Elinor. You must know that. Your story is inspiring, to say the least. You follow your heart and everyone wants to follow along with you.”

And just like that, the best morning of my life came to a screeching halt. There, standing in the doorway, looking very much out of place was the last person I expected to see at The Healing HeARTs.

My mother.

The Taming of the Shrew

Thank goodness for Indira's mother, the magical Mrs. Shoshana Finkle-Woo. She came rushing into the lobby to see what all the commotion was, and she immediately disarmed my irate mother. "You must be Elinor's mum – she's your spitting image!" My mother stood there puffed up like a grizzly, stomping her foot, all red-faced and sweaty, her finger pointed accusingly at me sitting in the far corner with Liza Wren.

Mrs. Finkle-Woo continued, "It's so wonderful to finally meet you. We just adore this wonderchild of yours!" She grabbed my mother's outstretched hand. "Come, have a seat. You look like you could use some refreshment."

My mother sputtered, but then dropped into a chair at the nearest table. It was like she was under a spell, her mood suddenly tamed. “I was so worried! I woke up and she was gone,” she whispered in a still quaking voice.

Mrs. Finkle-Woo slipped into the chair next to her and patted her hand while Indira dropped off a cup of steaming jasmine tea and a plate of chocolate chip zucchini bread. The speakers crackled — the awkward silence replaced by that soothing spa music that Indira uses in her yoga classes. Liza Wren squeezed my arm but I kept my eyes focused straight ahead, afraid to meet her eyes, embarrassed by what she must think of me now.

I strained to hear what they were saying to each other – there were lots more hand pats and head nods, but the piped in music blocked the sound. Finally, Indira’s mom turned and looked at me, calling across the lobby filling with people stopping for brunch. “Elinor Malcolm, is it true you left the house without asking permission or telling your mom who was bringing you here today?”

“Well, I...”

“No excuses – just the truth. Yes or no?”

I could feel my face growing red, all eyes in the room now focused on me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t. I just wanted. Christine couldn’t.”
I was not making any sense.

She stood then and rested her hand on my mom's shoulder. "Take a cleansing breath, dear. I believe you owe this wonderful woman who raised you your deepest, most sincere apology." And then, Indira's mom winked at me, a quick wink, a secret signal that no one else saw, but I suddenly understood.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"And?" Indira's mom flicked her head toward my silent mom sitting there beside me, and I heard Indira's voice in my head. *You know what to do.*

I walked over, and put my arms around my mom's neck and kissed the top of her head. "I'm really, truly sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to worry you. I'm sorry."

I looked up just in time to catch Liza Wren madly scribbling away in her little notebook.

Heat of the Moment

By the time we left TheHealing HeARTs later that day, several miracles had occurred. My mom agreed to come back next week to try a yoga class after Indira's mom told her how learning to breathe *with* your body is the number one trick of successful attorneys and celebrities. "I can't guarantee you'll win every case, but you'll definitely up your chances of making the cover of the National Law Journal!" was the statement that sealed the deal.

Liza Wren had complimented and charmed my mother too — finally getting her to agree to sit for an interview. "I'm thinking of publishing a series of essays about successful women, and it sounds like you've carved

out quite an impressive career,” she told her. Blushing, my mom ran a hand through her blonde spikes as the writer followed up with “I’ll pitch it to my editor this afternoon!” Another deal sealed.

And miracle of miracles, my mom told me that Indira seems like a lovely girl and she can’t wait to see the performance that we’re working on with our other friend Christine. In fact, she said it sounds like we just might be the perfect act to book for a small reception she was planning in our garden next month. “Just an intimate gathering to celebrate the future, and, well I can’t think of anything more fitting,” is how she put it.

So instead of riding home in stony silence, we talked and laughed like a regular mother-daughter duo. I kept hearing Indira’s voice in my head saying, *There’s no story without you. You are the glue.* And for once, it didn’t feel like I’d turned everything into a sticky mess. My mom and I were finally bonding.

I wished I could ask her about what was in those suitcases and what she was hiding but I really didn’t want to ruin things. Her secret was safe with her for a little while longer.



Joelle went to the park after school Monday afternoon, but her wheelchair guy wasn't there, and she can't go today after school because she has an orthodontist appointment. "Pray for me," she texted, "I may be getting these stupid braces off in time for school pictures."

I don't like to waste my prayers so I added, "and please let her find out who my wheelchair guy is soon. The suspense is killing me! Amen."

Manuel passed me a note during Spanish that said, *I heard you're a poet. Me too.*

Be still my heart.

I wonder if he knew I had a whole notebook in my backpack devoted to him.

I felt my face growing hot. Before I could stop myself, I quickly jotted *Write one for me?* below his message. I pushed the note back across the desk while Ms. Lopez was writing the homework on the board.

We were packing up our notebooks as the bell rang and he dropped a folded note into my open backpack. Ms. Lopez was looking right at us then. I couldn't risk her asking me to hand it over, so I quickly pulled the zipper closed and said, a little too loudly, "Oh thanks, I didn't see that I'd dropped that."

I'd have to wait till we were out of there to retrieve it and see what he wrote. I made a mad dash for the bathroom and locked the stall door.

Roses are red

Violets are not

Elinor Malcolm

I think UR hot!

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Inspiration

I couldn't concentrate the rest of the day. By the time I got to yearbook after school, I was a total mess. I didn't know whether to give one of the poems I'd written about Manuel to him tomorrow or write him a whole new one about the stars aligning and poets' hearts entwining or something. I kept running all sorts of poetic phrases through my mind about those dark eyes, and that artist's heart, and that dimple that deepened whenever he smiled at me.

Christine wanted to know what was up, but I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Nothing. Why?"

"Well, you just seem so distracted. Are you worried about that science test tomorrow?"

McHenry, who doesn't seem to get boundaries, interrupted, wanting to know if I thought today was a good day to talk to Loveless about helping us start a

school newspaper. Christine rolled her eyes. How could I tell him that was the furthest thing from my mind at the moment? He's as impulsive and sincere as that puppy dog logo on his shirt.

Ms. Loveless flicked the lights and told us she had an announcement. "Listen up all you ace reporters and rock-star editors. My partner in crime, Elinor slash Editor, has been hard at work all week coming up with a theme for this year's book." She gave me a knowing look, then burst into one of her annoying snorty laughs. "Good times!"

Yikes. I had completely forgotten Why me?

"We'll announce the theme at the end of today's meeting. But for now, grab a piece of pizza, grab your partner, and get to work on your assignments. Chop, chop. Let's go!"

Theme I pictured my mother's 1996 yearbook – nothing seemed memorable except for the things people wrote about her and that boy named Curtis who wanted to make the summer one to remember. I tried visualizing all the old yearbooks we'd looked at in here the first day where all we did was laugh at people's clothes and hair. Not cool.

What would be memorable? Everybody was counting on me. I set my backpack in the corner, and pulled out my poem from Manuel one more time.

Roses are red, Violets are not...

Where does inspiration come from? What did Liza Wren tell me?

Sometimes it's born of a deadline. Like now!

Sometimes it comes from thinking about a special person. Like Manuel.

Sometimes it comes from your own heart's desire. Like poetry.

Elinor Malcolm. I think UR hot

"I've got it!" I told Ms. Loveless as I joined her behind the library counter where she was typing her grades into the library computer.

She lifted a finger to signal *just a minute*, then said, "Ta-da. Done!" and closed the gradeloop app. She swiveled around on the librarian's stool to look at me standing there wearing a triumphant smile. "So, what have you got?"

"Ok," I ventured. "This might be a little bit much, but what if," I swept the hair out of my eyes, took a deep breath, and continued, "what if we called it the Valley Poetry Collection?"

"I'm listening," she said, straightening her stack of papers before stuffing them into the briefcase on the counter beside her. "I'm all ears."

"Well, what if we spelled it "Poetree" and the cover was a tree and the branches were made up of the names of every student at Valley Middle School?"

“Go on.” She hopped off the stool and shoved her feet into those incredibly ugly shoes with the smashed down heels.

“And then we could have sections like *Poetry in Motion* for sports, and *Love Poems* for pictures of couples doing fun things like bowling and stuff, and, well that’s all I’ve got so far, but what do you think?”

“What do I think Miss Malcolm? I’ll tell you what I think. I think I definitely picked the right kid to be the Editor of the Valley Poetree Collection.”

NOT FOR SALE

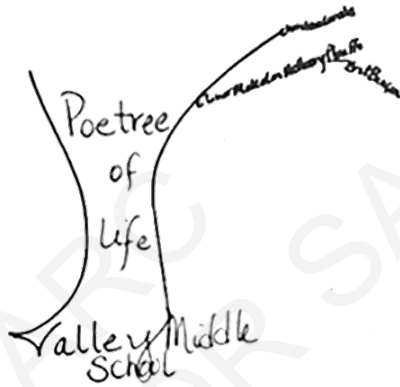
Teamwork

It was a little harder to convince the rest of the yearbook staff that doing something different would be a good thing until McHenry spoke. He can be very convincing for a little sixth grader. “The easy thing would be to do what’s always been done. Just your typical ho-hum yearbook.”

Brit, one of the usually clueless band girls, interrupted, “But what if everybody likes the same old-same old? What if they think ours is stupid?”

McHenry moved to the front of the room, his voice growing louder as he held up last year’s yearbook. “I mean you’ve got to admit, this is pretty boring with a capital B! But we,” he aimed his pointer finger at all of us in one big sweeping motion, “we have a chance to leave a lasting legacy. We can change the course of history.”

“Yes!” Christine rose to her feet, shouting, “I get it now. Everybody wants to be famous. Everybody wants to see their name in lights, right?” She grabbed a dry erase marker off the counter and started a sketch on the whiteboard. “I think,” she said, “this is what Elinor was picturing. Something like this!”



The energy in the room shifted as she stepped away from the board, *cools* and *wows* filling the charged air.

“And like poems have lots of rhyme and rhythm so like the band pages could be like *The Rhythm Section*,” said Brit, jumping to her feet.

“This section with everybody’s class picture in it could be called *Poetic Images*!” Sasha said before hi-fiving Brit.

“I have an idea,” one of the eighth graders from last year added. “What if we made everyone’s information under their picture into a haiku? I’m really good at that!”

I was sitting in the middle of it all, watching everyone get all excited about my idea. My idea! By the time the bell rang to signal it was time for all after-school clubs to end, we were a real team, focused on one goal – to make the coolest, most poetic yearbook that’s ever been made.

Ms. Loveless stood by the door clapping her hands together like a little kid as we packed up our stuff.

I told Christine I’d text her later, and asked McHenry to save me a seat on the late bus. Once everybody was gone, I picked up the empty pizza boxes from the counter and dumped them in the trashcan while Ms. Loveless got the lights. “Thanks, kid,” she said as we walked out together.

“Ok, partner,” I said. “See you tomorrow!” Then I ran to catch the bus.

Issues

By the end of the week, I had managed to write seven more poems about Manuel that I didn't give to him. I had exchanged a dozen text messages with Joelle who still hadn't heard from the wheelchair guy. I'd helped my mom learn how to do downward dog and warrior so she wouldn't embarrass herself in her first yoga class at the TheHealing HeARTs on Saturday. I still couldn't believe she was going there with me and afterwards we'd be grabbing lunch with Christine and her mom and Indira and hers. The Three Prima Yogarinas and their cool moms taking the city by storm. Or at least being treated to a fancy lunch by my mom, the newest member of the bunch.

I hadn't worked up the nerve to ask her about her high school boyfriend and the mysterious suitcases that

had been locked in the shed and if there was a connection. There were still too many missing puzzle pieces. I waited till we were in the car headed to dinner Friday night to broach the subject. "I'm so glad Dad will be home next week. I've really missed him, haven't you?" I began.

"I'll be happy he's back," she said, "but I try not to miss him too much when he's gone. I just put my energy in other places."

I turned up the air conditioning and turned down the music so I could concentrate. "Like where?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, Elinor. Like in my work, and paying the bills, and ordering the groceries, and taking care of you. You can't miss somebody so much when you're busy living your actual life."

Was that true? Didn't I miss him even when I was studying for science, or writing in my journal? Didn't I miss him even when I was watching tv or doing the dishes?

"You should try to compartmentalize a little more," she said. Could she read my mind? "It will save you a lot of heartache in life."

I tried again. "I forgot to tell him about my yearbook idea when we FaceTimed last night. Yearbooks are so cool, don't you think?"

She turned the car from First Street into the parking lot. "Yearbooks are completely overrated. They're like gossip

magazines if you want to know the truth. Everybody crafts an image and then everybody says stuff like *stay as sweet as you are* when they really don't think you're sweet at all. When they'd rather stab you in the back."

I was staring at her with my mouth hanging open a little bit. She turned off the car and put her hand on the armrest. "Oh, sorry," she said, before reaching into the backseat for her purse. "I guess I still have a few unresolved issues!" She let out an uncomfortable laugh and opened the car door. "I'm sure your yearbook will be different though. It's got poems in it, right?"



"So, tell me all about poetry walk idea of yours," my mom said as the waiter put a basket of warm bread in front of us in the corner booth. "You want to display poems throughout the garden, am I getting it right?"

I could feel my phone vibrating in my pocket as I reached for the dipping sauce but I knew enough not to sneak a look. Phones during dinner were absolutely out of the question in my house even though my mom had no problem disregarding the rule when she was working on a big case. I tried to stay focused on the conversation at hand but I was wondering who kept texting me. Joelle?

Christine? Indira? It felt urgent and I was stuck here in the dark.

“Just one poem. But forget it. You probably won’t like it.” *Bzzz. Bzzz.*

“Now, why wouldn’t I like something you dreamed up? Honestly, Elinor, you have to have more confidence in yourself.”

“Ok, well it’s actually really cool. Christine said she’d help me design it.” *Bzzz. Bzzz.* “She’s a really good artist.”

“What is that awful buzzing sound, Elinor? Your phone?”

“Hmm, maybe, I guess so.” I stared at the menu. “I didn’t notice. Can I order a salad?” *Bzzz. Bzzz.*

“For goodness sake, please turn that all the way off so we can enjoy our dinner.”

I reached into my pocket, and pulled out my phone to turn it off. Before the screen went dark, I saw the text that was from Joelle. OMG. Call me!!!

Signs

*A*fter dinner my mom wanted to go shopping in that fancy athletic store that sells yoga pants for about a million dollars a pair. “We’ve got to get outfitted for our big day tomorrow. You don’t want to be embarrassed by your old mom wearing last year’s number now, do you?”

“Nobody cares, Mom.” She was not making this easy. “The Healing HeARTs isn’t like that. You can just be yourself. Can’t we just go home?”

“I do not understand you, Elinor. You’re always craving time with me and then when I try to make it fun, you’re an old stick in the mud,” she said as we pulled into the mall. “You hardly said a word through dinner, you didn’t want to order dessert, and now you don’t want to hang out at the mall and do some serious damage in LotusBlossom.”

“I just have a lot of homework, and it’s late.” I was hyper aware of the turned off phone in my pocket and the weight of the unread message from Joelle.

“Oh, for crying out loud, it’s eight o’clock on a Friday night, Elinor. So, I suggest you put a smile on your face and prepare to enjoy an evening on the town with your mother. Let’s go!”



One of the things I’ll never be able to understand is how you can be thinking about somebody and then there they are coming around the corner. Indira always says it’s because our brains are so powerful. “You send out signals, like invisible waves,” she once told me. “Think of it like this – you pick up the remote and point it at the tv, and the tv goes on. Well, your brain is like the remote – if your spirit is in sync with the universe, you point your thoughts at somebody and voila!”

I was thinking about that because as I was looking through the racks and stacks in LotusBlossom, I was imaging what Manuel might say if he saw me wearing a top like this hot pink one, or these yoga capris. And then I started thinking about that poem he wrote for me that said *Elinor Malcolm, I think U R hot*, and then I started

picturing the first time he said, *Hey, New Girl* and then I was picturing that dimpled smile of his and...

"I said, do you want to try those on? Can I start a room for you?" A tall blonde girl was taking the pile of clothes out of my arms.

"Oh, sorry," I said, "I didn't hear you. I was just..."

"No worries," she said. "Happens all the time. We call it the trance. Picturing how your life will change once you're wearing LotusBlossom."

I started following her to the dressing room when I got that weird goose-bumpy feeling that I get sometimes when I'm about to freak out. I stopped dead in my tracks. Standing at the checkout counter with a tall, beautiful dark-haired girl, there he was, the boy of my dreams.

Manuel didn't see me as he put his arm around her and left the store.



I couldn't sleep. When we finally got home and I called Joelle, she had that *unavailable* message on her phone that her mother makes her put on after 11:00 pm and it was way later than that in Oklahoma. I couldn't even leave a message. Then I texted Christine to tell her that I saw Manuel with another girl at the mall and she texted back, What did I tell you? Trouble! I didn't respond.

My mother's words came back to haunt me. *Beware of those pretty boys. They'll break your heart.*

I climbed out of bed, put on some soft music, and tried to do some stretches in the dark to get into my calm space. Everything was swirling around in my head – all these questions with no answers. A quiet knock brought me back to the present. The door opened slightly and my mom poked her head in. “Ah, couldn't sleep?” she whispered. I nodded. “Me neither. I guess I'm more excited about tomorrow than I knew,” she said as she lowered herself next to me on my mat.

We sat there in silence for a long time.

“This is nice,” she said. “I can see why you're so into this.”

I almost asked her then. I knew she had the key to all my unanswered questions, but I didn't want to spoil the mood.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry about tonight.”

She put her arm around me and pulled me close. “All's well that ends well,” she said. “Now let's say we both get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

Luck Be A Lady

When I got through to Joelle first thing this morning, her *OMG* news was on the disappointing side. She didn't have any real news yet, but she thought she might have a lead. A pretty weak one if you ask me. The wheelchair guy finally showed up at the park and apologized for not coming back sooner. He got sort of injured in his basketball game and had to rest up for a little while but he was better now. He never got around to asking if anybody there knew an old lady named Mrs. Frisbie, but he told her there's an interesting picture of some old lady at the place where they play their games. "She looks important," he said. "Maybe it's who you're looking for."

"That's hardly news," I told her. "Do you know how many old ladies live in Tulsa?"

"I know, I know," she said. "But I got goosebumps when he said it, so it just felt like a lead worth following. Anyway, I'm gonna check it out today. Wish me luck!"

Maybe if I focused my thoughts on Grandma Ruth instead of on Manuel and that pretty girl he was with at the mall I could change the course of history. Or at least maybe I wouldn't feel so crummy.

I put on the bright pink top I'd bought the night before with Manuel in mind, and headed downstairs. "Fake it till you make it, fake it till you make it," was a song playing over and over in my head.

There was music coming from the kitchen along with something that smelled really delicious and homemade. I have never seen my mom like this. She was singing along to the music coming from her phone. She was wearing one of her new yoga outfits and drinking some greenish shake while she sliced into a loaf cooling on the counter. "Thought we'd better have a hearty breakfast before our big day." She passed me a huge slice on a plate. "It's blueberry drizzle. And there's more shake in the blender. *Bon Appétit!*"

"How?" I stammered. "Why? I mean you must have been up for hours already!"

She handed me a fork and took a sip of her shake. "Talked to Dad early, early, and then thought since I'm already awake, I might as well make myself useful. I know how you love coffee cake."

I think the last time she baked anything for me was my ninth birthday. That was also the last time my Grandma Ruth stepped foot in our house.

On our way to TheHealing HeARTs she asked me all about Christine and Indira and asked me to tell her again how we came to be the Prima Yogarinas. She asked me to fill in the details about my plans for making a poetry walk in the garden and said she thought it would be lovely to include the moms in the little garden party she was planning next month. I recited the lines of the garden poem for her and she said, “My word, Elinor. You really are a poet. My word!”

At the studio she took three classes in a row. “Marsha, girl, you are a natural!” Indira’s mom said as we were heading to lunch. “I see where Elinor gets it.” And at the restaurant my mom announced, “The tea leaf salad here is to die for, but order anything you like. It’s on me.” Mrs. Corrales and Mrs. Finkle-Woo tried to protest, but my mom raised her hand and said, “No, no. I won’t hear of it. You are all so special to my daughter and so you’re special to me too.” Then she tapped on her water class with her knife and said, “A toast! To friendship!”

This was not the Marsha Malcolm that I was used to seeing. She was smiling and laughing and she looked like the girl in the photographs stashed under my bed. She looked like the girl in the yearbook with a boyfriend

named Curtis. I didn't know what had changed, but I did not want to chance ruining it all. I decided then and there to forget about the mysterious suitcases and the yellowed newspapers. I didn't need to go digging into the past. I wanted to stay right here in this present with this mother and these friends.

We stayed there talking and swapping stories until we were the only people left in the restaurant and the waiter asked for the third time, "Will there be anything else?"

My mom said, "Actually, yes, if you don't mind. Can you take our photo? I think we need to memorialize this occasion."

Indira raised her hand like we were in school. "Actually, factually," she said, standing and handing him her phone. "Make it post-able. We're about to hit it big!"

He moved back a few steps and held the phone at eye level. "Smile ladies!"

"Wait, wait!" Indira said, "We need to offer our gratitude to the unstoppable force that brought us here today. On the count of three, say it loud and proud with me.

To love!

To amor!

To our fierce and feisty, Elinor!"

The waiter took a few more photos, then passed Indira's phone back to her. "Good day then, ladies. Thank

you for dining with us,” he said, giving a slight bow in our direction. “And good luck with whatever.”

“We,” I said, “don’t need luck. We’ve got each other.”

It turns out a little more luck might have been helpful. Or actually, maybe a little less.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

THIRTY-SEVEN

Exhibit A

Are you sitting down?

The text was from Joelle.

I shifted on the bench out in the garden where I'd been listening to the birds and picturing my poetry walk and dreaming about a little garden party with my friends and their moms.

When I called her cell, she answered excitedly, "It's your lucky day!" Joelle said she found the place where the wheelchair athletes play their basketball games and it's right next to the park.

"We passed it when we went there this summer when you were here," she said, "but you probably didn't notice it." She told me that it's just an old, ugly cinderblock building that used to be a jail. Inside it's all colorful and modern though, with a cool reception area and some

glassed-in offices and a small gym. That's where the guys play, but it was pretty empty when she got there except for a custodian who was waxing the gym floor. Now it's called the Path2Peace Center.

"Is that why I'm sitting down?" I asked. "To hear about some old building by the park?"

"Sorry," Joelle said. "No, here's the thing. I looked all around but I didn't see anybody or anything that would help solve your mystery. But then when I was leaving, it was right there, staring down at me." She paused dramatically. "Over the door," she added conspiratorially.

"What?" I was sweating then. I felt my happy Saturday afternoon melting away.

"A giant copper plaque over the entrance that said, *Path2Peace made possible due to our generous benefactor.* And Elinor, maybe I should just show you."

There on my screen, the newspaper photograph that had been haunting me for weeks appeared, except now it was in the form of a huge framed photograph hanging on a wall next to a giant copper plaque in a transformed jail in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

No matter how much I try to be content living in the moment, the past just keeps pulling me back.

I couldn't stop thinking about how Indira would say *You know what to do*, but this time I really didn't. I wanted things to stay perfect, just the way they were

earlier today. I didn't want to solve the mystery anymore. I didn't want to know who he was and what he had to do with my Grandma Ruth, and what that had to do with my mom, but I also didn't want to not know. I wished I'd never opened that box in my mom's childhood closet. I wished I'd never opened those suitcases. I wished I'd never unlocked the shed. I wished I'd never set this whole unraveling of the past in motion.

The rest of the weekend I fought the urge to mention my discovery to my mom and wreck our new bond. I fought the urge to google Path2Peace and dive deeper into the abyss. I concentrated on the here and now. I practiced yoga poses in the den with my mom. I FaceTimed with my dad who'll be home in just a few days. I worked on a design for the poetry walk with Christine. I worked on more poems for our yogarina performance, and I sketched out more ideas for the yearbook. I stayed busy and concentrated on the present and it actually worked.



In school on Monday, I avoided all the places Manuel usually hangs out, and I made sure not to make eye contact when he came into Spanish class. I stared

straight ahead when he tried to pass me a note and got caught by Ms. Lopez who said, "I'll take that, Mr. Garcia. Thank you." Instead of handing it over though, he did something I wouldn't have believed if I didn't see it with my own eyes. He popped the whole note into his mouth and began chewing.

Ms. Lopez lost control of the class for a minute while she stood there, mouth agape, but she quickly regained composure and quieted everyone by announcing, "You, sir, can head to the office. They'll be expecting you!"

Manuel stood up slowly and sauntered across the room while everyone stared and Ms. Lopez called down to the office to let them know he was on his way. After he left, everyone turned their attention to me, but Ms. Lopez didn't seem to notice. "Now then, where were we?" she asked before continuing the vocabulary drill while my mind drifted back to the mall. Instead of following along, I ignored my classmates' stares. I slid my journal of poems dedicated to Manuel into my open textbook, and started another one.

Be careful what you do in the dark

When you think no one is watching

Be careful you don't break a heart

When you're trying to play it so cool

I couldn't help wondering what that chewed up note to me said. I was still wondering when the bell rang.

From the Heart

When I got home from school, my mom's car was parked in the garage. She called to me from her office as I came through the back door. "Elinor, I'm so glad you're home. Come here. You'll never believe it!"

It turns out she'd spent the better part of the day with Liza Wren. "It was more like a therapy session," she said. "She's going to use my photo on the cover of *Evolution*, her new book about successful women. Can you believe it?"

"Evolution? Like Darwin?"

"No," she laughed. "It's *Evolution: Ten Remarkable Stories of Growth and Resilience*. And I get the cover." My mom was sitting at her desk in front of her laptop, and she was glowing with pride and happiness. She told me

how Liza had her she trace her history from small town nobody to successful prosecutor and it was like a heavy weight had been lifted as she recounted her complicated journey from then to now. “Telling your story is cathartic,” she said. “All this guilt and shame I’d kept buried, all finally made sense when it played out in my story arc.”

I sat down at that point. “What were you ashamed of?” I asked. I sort of didn’t want to know. My brain kept saying, *don’t open that box, don’t unlock that door*, but I couldn’t tame my curiosity. “You’re so successful, why would you be guilty about that?” The picture Joelle sent me from Path2Peace flashed before my eyes.

“Oh, Elinor,” she said, as she closed the laptop, “not about being successful, but about all the wreckage strewn along the way.” She stood up and walked over to where I was sitting on the sofa and plopped down next to me. “But here’s the thing, Elinor.” She put her arm around me and pulled me in close. She smelled like roses. “Liza made me realize all my success in life is not about money, or this house, or the international travel, or the law. You’re my big success. You and Dad. You’re my everything.”

I closed my eyes and snuggled into her, settling into the moment, wishing it could last.



I was still floating when I got to the bus stop in the morning. My dad would be getting home late tonight. He said tomorrow we could have our Japanese movie marathon, even though it was a school night. “One groggy morning will not spoil your GPA,” he said from the airport lounge in Osaka. “And don’t forget to order the sushi. I’m bringing you wagashi. Remember the first time we shared it?”

I missed him so much, and now he’d be home. I couldn’t believe how much had happened in the short time he’d been away. I wonder if he’d notice the change in my mom. The change in me?

I daydreamed all the way to school and thought I must still be dreaming when I stepped off the bus. There was Manuel, standing right there on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, mega-watt smile, waiting for me.

“Hey, Chica. This one hasn’t been chewed,” he said, holding out a folded note as I walked toward the entrance.

I kept walking, and he fell in right beside me. “From the heart. El corazón.”

“I thought you were always late to school,” I said as I got to my locker.

“My sister got up early to drive me. So I could see you. So I could give this to you.”

“Too bad,” I said as I began turning the lock. I really wanted to see what he wrote, but I couldn’t let him know that. He already had a girlfriend, obviously.

“Okay,” he said. “I can take a hint. Just thought you were different.” He walked away as the first bell rang, then turned back around quickly as the hallway filled with noise. And then he was gone.

When I got to homeroom, Ms. Loveless said, “Some boy just asked me to give this to you. He said you dropped it.” Then she dropped a very wrinkled note on my desk with a wink. “And, you’re welcome.”

I quickly shoved it into my pocket and pretended to read my book until the bell rang and I could escape her curious stare.

Exhibit B

At home I reread the poem from Manuel a dozen times.
*Like the pull of the moon on the ocean tides
I'm swept into your eyes so deep,
your heart so open, your smile so wide
I didn't want to move, but now I'm glad
You took away the pain inside
Ever since my papa died*

How phony could one boy be? He was a pretty good poet though, that's for sure.

Beware of the pretty boys. They'll break your heart.

I grabbed my laptop out of my backpack and tried to start my homework, but it was so hard to concentrate. I needed to finish up my lab report today so I could watch that movie with my dad tomorrow. As I was typing, a

message came across the top of my screen alerting me to a new email message. From Joelle. I never use email and neither does she. I ignored it.

A few minutes later, a text. Just sent you an email. Urgent.

I really wish I hadn't opened it. But I did, and now there was nothing I could do to erase what I saw. There was no turning back.

"Duh! Why didn't we do this before?" Joelle wrote. "I did a little google search and *ay carumba!* We hit the jackpot here. Call me if you want to talk."

There were four attachments to her email, one worse than the other.

The first one was a fairly recent article about the founding of the Path2Peace and the anonymous donor who purchased the building that now houses the organization. It said in part, "Path2Peace was begun by a victims' rights group to teach non-violence in the schools and raise money for educational programs. They promote the need for communities to rebuild hope and trust and to show that the human spirit is made to triumph over tragedy."

Another article was an interview with Grandma Ruth, who said she first became aware of the organization when she read an article about the 20th anniversary of a brutal incident that happened at ConcertCity when a

young man was nearly beaten to death for making a pass at a girl. “That article just dredged up all sorts of feelings in me,” she’s quoted as saying. “The good lord spoke to my heart, and I just knew I had to do something.”

Next was a very brief article about high school sweethearts and class officers Marsha Frisbie and Curtis Crowe both being accepted at Oklahoma State where they hoped to major in social work in the fall of 1996.

And finally, there was an article with that picture that I’d already seen too many times – a guy in a wheelchair and Grandma Ruth standing behind him with her hand on his shoulder. The article detailed how happy she was to help get him back on his feet after learning he’d been in a nursing home for the past two decades with a brain and spinal cord injury.

I felt like my heart was breaking, and I wasn’t even sure for who. For my Grandma Ruth? My mom? Some guy I didn’t know? Myself?

This is not the kind of information that’s easy to take in. I felt like I was going to be sick.

I closed my laptop and pulled the covers up over my head. Maybe this was all a bad dream. If I fell asleep, maybe I could wake up later and there’d be no text from Joelle. No urgent email. No googled articles. No puzzle pieces that I’d have to sort and process. What was I supposed to do with this unsettling information now that I had it?

Treachery

*I*t's so comforting sitting here in the dark, watching this movie with my dad tonight while he's telling me all about his trip. We're kind of watching and talking at the same time. The movie has subtitles so I kind of miss what's happening on the screen when he's talking, but I don't mind. I'm so glad he's home.

I haven't been able to look my mom in the eye since I read those articles Joelle found. I feel like I don't even really know her. My dad asked her to watch the movie with us tonight but she said she had some important research to do and we should just enjoy getting reconnected.

"Elinor and I have had lots of special times together while you've been away," she said. I couldn't help wondering what it was she was researching, and wishing I had not been so interested in uncovering her

packed away secrets which now felt like my burden to bear. Alone. Wasn't it my mom who always told me, be careful what you wish for?

As the credits were rolling, my dad said, "Ok, Ellie-bear, it's late, you better just head up to bed. I'll take care of the clean-up."

I snuggled in closer. "Dad?" I whispered, afraid I'd lose my nerve. "Can I ask you something?"

"You, my dear, can ask me anything. Unless it's if you can stay up later." He kissed the top of my head.

"I was wondering about why Mom came to college here, in California. Why didn't she go to like Oklahoma State College or something?"

He started to laugh. "Are you thinking about college already? Planning to up and go thousands of miles away like your mom?"

"No, just wondering." I had to squeeze my eyes shut tight so I wouldn't start crying.

"Well," he said, clicking off the TV, "you could probably ask her yourself, but if you want to know what I think, I'd say it was so she could find me, and have you, and live out her destiny. Here with us is where she's meant to be." He stood up then. "And upstairs in bed dreaming about algebra or cute boys is where you need to be, right now."



I tried to push the darkness out of my mind, but it kept pushing its way back in. I thought being in school would help, but it was making it worse.

First, in homeroom Ms. Loveless says, “You look like you got hit by a truck or something, partner. Boy trouble?” Next, period, I’m stung by the list of vocabulary words at the end of the chapter in my history book I’m supposed to be reading: *betrayal*, *perfidy*, *scandalous*, *treachery*, *combatant*. Mr. Hoy says, “Make sure you understand what the founders were trying to convey when they wrote these words. They’re very specific.”

Then in science, my lab partner hands me the directions for our simple machines experiment and the bolded words on the page jump out at me and lodge there in my brain: *inquiry*, *wedge*, *screw*, *force*, *result*. It’s like everything is connected to the trauma in my life. I can’t do this, I think.

I raise my hand and ask if I can go to the nurse.

Lying on the cot in the darkened space there, I keep repeating my mother’s trick. *Compartmentalize. Compartmentalize. Compartmentalize.*

I try picturing the performance Indira and

Christine and I are almost finished polishing, but in my mind's eye, I keep messing up my part. I forget the words. I don't remember the moves. My feet feel like they're stuck in quicksand and I'm moving in slow motion while Christine and Indira signal for me to stop and take it from the top. That's when I hear Indira's familiar voice. It sounds like she's right here next to me. *You know what to do*, she says. *You've got this*.

When the nurse comes in to take my temperature, I tell her I'm feeling better, and I do. I know what to do.

First, I get to Spanish early and give the poem I wrote to Manuel. He studies it for a long time, and then says, "I don't get it. What did I do in the dark?"

"You're a poet," I say. "It's a metaphor. Figure it out." I'm remembering Indira's words from the other day, *our fierce and feisty, Elinor* but I'm actually shaking a little bit when I say it.

"That's not helpful," he says as the bell rings.

"You're a big phony-baloney," I say quickly as Ms. Lopez begins taking roll.

He doesn't answer, just turns away and opens his Spanish book. He doesn't look at me once all period, and that's just fine with me.

When I get home, I read through my mother's yearbook one more time and check to make sure. Yup, that handsome boy who wrote *Let's make it a summer*

to remember, love Curtis is the same guy who's in that photograph with Grandma Ruth. Except that he's twenty years older. And no longer smiling. Or wearing a tuxedo. Or able to stand up.

I gather all the old photographs and stack them neatly on top of the yearbook, and I refold all the '90's t-shirts that I've been wearing. I change into the one that says *Strong Enough*, and then I print out the articles that Joelle sent me. I know what I have to do.

I stay in my room until I hear my parents talking in the kitchen, and then I practice a few yoga moves. Warrior. Tree. Mountain. I take a few deep cleansing breaths, and then I head downstairs.

They are sitting at the kitchen table. They are leaning towards each other, their heads nearly touching. The kitchen feels so warm and inviting. For a minute I start to lose my nerve, but then I push ahead. They both look up in surprise as I deposit it all on the table – the t-shirts, the photographs, the yearbook, the articles.

“We need to talk,” I say in my strongest voice. “It’s urgent.”

Sound Sleep

Things are not always as simple as they seem. It's a lesson I keep learning over and over. I didn't know what to expect, but my mom and dad actually didn't get mad at me for taking all the things out of my mother's old closet in Tulsa. They didn't get mad at me for spying, and breaking into the shed, and trying to track down the whereabouts of the locked suitcases. They told me they were proud of me for being brave and initiating this conversation.

"Curiosity is actually a very good trait to have," my dad told me. "We want you to always stay curious about the world. Be an observer. Wonder. Question. Research." I breathed a sigh of relief. Like a giant, quivering sigh. My eyes were filled with tears that didn't fall. "But," he continued solemnly, "just make sure you don't jump to

conclusions. Be a critical thinker. Check your resources. Ask for confirmation.”

And then they took me step by step through my mom’s journey from the summer of 1996 to today. They filled in all the details about Curtis Crowe who she almost married, but didn’t. To the fight that changed everything. To a boyfriend in a nursing home who no longer knew who she was and to an unexpected change in plans that changed the trajectory of her life. Together, they told me about my mom’s serendipitous decision to move to California, and their good luck at getting assigned to the same physics class at Berkeley. They talked about my mom’s social work degree and her passionate interest in the law and her career focused on prosecuting victims of violent crime.

They answered all my questions and helped me understand how my Grandma Ruth made my mom feel ashamed when she started appearing in public and in newspaper articles with Curtis, dredging up the past. “If I had stayed,” my mom said through her tears, “you wouldn’t be here. That’s what I couldn’t make your grandma understand,” she said. “I wanted her to just let the past stay in the past. But she couldn’t.”

“Your grandma was a very stubborn woman,” my dad said. Then he winked and said, “sort of like you know who,” he pointed at my mom, “and you know who.” That

gesture was to me. All three of us burst out laughing at that. He always knows how to lighten the mood.

We spent the rest of the evening huddled together on the couch, eating Chinese takeout and looking through all our old family albums. And I got to stay up late for the second night in a row. But this time, when I climbed into bed, I fell sound asleep.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Tuesday Newsday

My dad drove me to school the next morning after they let me sleep in a little bit. He made me a Saturday breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes even though it was only Tuesday. My mom was on the phone with Liza Wren when we left, talking about an idea she had for writing a book of her own.

We pulled up to school behind a rusty pickup truck. “That is a heap and a half,” my dad said. “I wonder who drives that old thing?” But I didn’t have to wonder long, as the passenger door opened and Manuel Garcia hopped out. I wanted to wait till he was gone so I wouldn’t have to talk to him, but my dad said, “Time’s a-wastin,’ Ellie-bear. You’re already late enough as it is.” He pushed the button to unlock my door. “See you tonight for a family

Scrabble match?”

“Ok,” I said. “And thanks again for being such a cool dad.” I jumped out. “Have a splendiferous day!”

He beeped good bye and called out, “Fair warning, that is not a Scrabble word! So don’t even think about trying it!” He waved as he pulled away from the curb, and I headed to the office.

And once again, Manuel and I were standing together at the counter, asking for a late pass. “Wait for me after school today,” he whispered to me while the office lady was on the phone. “I need to talk to you.”



After school was yearbook, so I didn’t wait for him, I just bee-lined it to the library where everybody was still all excited about our *Poetree of Life at Valley Middle School* yearbook project. While I was showing Ms. Loveless my latest ideas for section headings, McHenry plopped down all excited. “Did Elinor tell you about our idea for starting a school newspaper? Could you help us get it started?”

Ms. Loveless looked like someone had just told her she looked like a million bucks or something. She got all puffed up and had this goofy smile that twitched a little

bit, like she was trying not to show how flattered she was. I guess everybody needs to be needed.

McHenry enumerated all the reasons it was a good idea, but she said it wasn't possible because there was no budget for it, and she already could hardly keep up with her workload and all the extra duties teachers have to sign up for. "Let's get this yearbook of ours launched and make it the best darned yearbook this school has ever seen, and then we can talk about stretching our journalistic muscles next year. Okay?"

It looked sort of like the wind got knocked out of McHenry. His typically upbeat personality deflated and he shrank even smaller in his seat.

"But, how about this?" she added. "What if I give you a little leeway and let you make a sort of newspaper inside the yearbook? You could be the editor of the Poetry Beat section and you could spotlight some interesting 8th graders like the Tie Brigade and the Environmental Club. And then next year, Mr. Plouffe, who knows?" Snort. "Who knows?"

And just like that he was jumping out of his seat and dancing across the room again. "Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!" For a little sixth grader he sure doesn't care how goofy he looks in front of a bunch of seventh and eighth graders. I guess you've got to admire that confidence.

An hour later, we were all walking out of the meeting together—me, McHenry, Christine, the other band girls, the eighth graders, even Ms. Loveless. We felt like a real team. Our yearbook was going to rock and we all knew it.

As we came around the corner, I saw him standing there waiting. Manuel Garcia, with the amber-flecked eyes and the dimpled smile, and the poet's heart, and the won't-take-no for an answer personality was standing by the late bus waiting for me.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Wonder. Question.
Research.

He rode home with me even though this is not his bus and his neighborhood is on the other side of town. We didn't talk the whole ride, but then when he got off at my stop, I finally spoke up.

"What do you want from me? Why are you following me?"

"Can we talk?" he asked so quietly that I could hardly hear what he said. "Just five minutes?"

I sat down on the wall at the end of my driveway and he sat next to me. We ended up staying there hearing each other's stories for more than an hour, till my mom pulled into the driveway. She ended up driving him home.

I shared Manuel's whole story with my mom and dad during dinner. His life was so different than mine. So very different. His father died last year, after somebody stabbed him at work. His mom moved them here to get away from that environment, and she had been working two jobs till she got sick. His sister is a senior in high school and wants to go to college but life is tough right now. He showed me a picture on his phone of his mom, his dad, and his sister. I recognized her right away. She works after school at the mall. At LotusBlossom. The girl he was with the night I saw him and thought he had a girlfriend.

The more we talked, the more I understood. Manuel wanted a friend he could talk to and he thought from the very first day he saw me and called me New Girl that I could be that friend. He said there was something different about me. A kind heart. An open mind. A poet's perspective.

Then he handed the poem I had written back to me, and said, "I really tried but I just don't get it. What does this poem have to do with me?"

I read it out loud.

*Be careful what you do in the dark
When you think no one is watching
Be careful you don't break a heart
When you're trying to play it so cool*

“I made a big mistake,” I said. “I think I actually wrote this poem for me. I’ll write you a new one tomorrow.”

That’s when my mom pulled up and volunteered to drive him home. That’s when my mom, Marsha Malcolm, Attorney at Law, began her quest to represent the Garcia family in their wrongful death lawsuit and put a criminal behind bars. And that’s when Manuel Garcia and Elinor Malcolm, two poets and classmates, became actual friends.

ARC
NOT FOR SALE

Namaste

In the week leading up to the garden party, Martin had been busy planting white hydrangeas and calla lilies and sweet alyssum between the magnolia tree and the beautiful moonflower vine that Christine and I saw him delivering the day we discovered the suitcases missing from the shed. He hung strings of lights along the fence and across the garden trellis, and filled the birdbath and all the birdfeeders. Christine came over and helped me install the poetry walk along the path that Martin had decorated with tiny white pebbles.

We had built the poetry walk with the scrap wood Christine's dad had stored in his garage. He helped us sand and paint six wooden posts, one for each line of my poem. Then I painstakingly wrote out each line with a thin paintbrush and Christine added perfect swirls

and flourishes and illustrations to enhance the words. Christine's dad made a heart shaped sign that said *Grandma Ruth's Memorial Garden*, that Martin hung from the garden gate while we kept my mom busy in the kitchen arranging the food on wooden trays.

Before the guests arrived, we made my mom close her eyes and my dad led her out the back door. She stood there in silence with her hand pressed to her heart when she saw what we had done. "Oh, she would be so pleased," my mom said, squeezing me in a bear hug. "So very pleased."

My dad hugged me next and whispered in my ear, "You did good, kid. Real good."

We stood there admiring the garden, the three of us locked in a family hug, and then the guests started arriving.

The party had grown from a little afternoon gathering to a full-fledged celebration. In addition to Christine and her mom and Indira and hers, there was Liza Wren and her boyfriend who's a videographer, the entire yearbook team including Ms. Loveless who was wearing shoes and makeup, and Manuel plus his mother and sister. Oh, and our neighbors Mrs. Feinstein from next door and the guy across the street who I found out today is named Mr. Peabody. My mother had always just called him Old Mr. Crabby Apple. "It's about time that I got invited," he told me when I rang his doorbell

to tell him we were having a little gathering. “About damn time.”

When the sun went down, Christine, Indira, and I stood in the center of the crowd. Liza grabbed her notebook, her boyfriend grabbed his camera, my dad turned on the music, and we did our performance for an audience for the first time. My mom held her phone steady so Joelle could watch from her front porch in Tulsa, right across from the house my mom grew up in. A little poetry, a little yoga, a little spoken word, a little drumming, a little magical flute, a little singing. We had it timed and choreographed down to the second and when we were finished, we asked everyone to form a single line and take a little poetry walk with us through the garden.

Martin had even installed a little solar light at the base of each poetry post, lighting up my words. As we walked along, we recited my poem together.

In the garden

We notice life

A tree, a blossom, a buzzing bee

We are all connected

to each other, across the days,

across the years, across forever

“Here! Here!” my mom shouted as we came to a stop at the last post.

“Namaste!” Indira replied, making a deep bow with

her hands pressed together in front of her like a prayer.

“To Elinor,” Manuel blurted out, “The girl who brought us all together. The poet of my heart!”

There was an awkward silence, and then Liza Wren’s boyfriend whistled and everyone clapped and the party was over.



After everyone went home and we cleaned up, I went back out to the garden. I sat on the bench under the magnolia tree and thought over this extraordinary day and everything that led up to it.

Liza Wren had announced at the end of the night that *Prima Yogarinas Take L.A. By Storm: A Liza Wren Mystery in Verse* was edited and slated for a spring release. So was *Evolution: Ten Remarkable Stories of Growth and Resilience*. My mom now has an agent for her memoir, and is working on a huge settlement for the Garcias. My dad is looking for a new job where he doesn’t have to travel so much. I have real friends and a happy family who gathered in our garden together to celebrate life. And, the boy I like is a poet.

The moon was just an autumn crescent but it still lit up the night. The flowers were glowing in our moon garden. The leaves on the trees were whispering a tree

song and I could feel my Grandma Ruth's stubborn spirit there beside me. Everyone tells me that I'm the one who made all this happen. I brought everyone together. I'm not so sure though. I think there are other forces at work, pulling us together like the tides.

I stood up, following the scent of the moonflower vine releasing its nighttime perfume. "To the future," I said out loud as I bent down and picked one white blossom. "To the glorious, exciting, unpredictable future." I tucked it behind my ear, and breathed in the magical night while I stood beneath Grandma Ruth's Memorial Garden heart, dancing in the breeze.

"Thank you," I whispered. "For everything."

Namaste.

ABOUT THE

Author



Kate McCarroll Moore has been writing since she was a little girl. When she grew up, she became a teacher and a librarian and a poet and a mom. She never grows tired of people-watching and eavesdropping, using her writer's imagination to turn ordinary events into unique characters with interesting stories to tell.

When Kate's daughters were young, she spent countless hours dreaming up stories in the back of dance studios and recital halls while they practiced and performed. This story began, as many stories do, as an overheard conversation and a scribble across a convenient page. That's how Elinor Malcolm came to life. This is her story.

Kate grew up in upstate New York and now lives with her family in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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