

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

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

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

That morning, I decided to tackle the white chocolate dome

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uh-huh.”

“What about Mom? I have to check if the kreplach’s ready.”

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

“She and Dad both want kreplach,” I said.

“Really? Tom’s getting kreplach,” Zippo said, impressed. “And what about Thing One and Thing Two?”

“Plain bagels with cream cheese.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” I said.

Zippo rolled his eyes and then disappeared into the kitchen.

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

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

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

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

Zoe dialed back the wailing to a whimper.

"What happened?" I said.

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

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

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“I wanna go home the other way,” Zoe whimpered.

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

“What do we need the car for?” I said.

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

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

“If you’re asking if they have olive oil, I think it’s unlikely,” she said.

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

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

“Not the same,” I said.

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

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

Mom tasted the soup and made a face. “Kreplach’s cold.”

“Zippo will reheat it,” Dad said.

“It’s busy. I don’t want to bother him.”

Jeanine pushed her untouched bagel across the table.

“What’s wrong with you?” I said through a mouthful of egg.

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

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

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

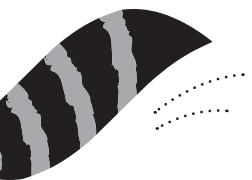
For some reason, when my parents talk to Zoe, it’s always “we.”

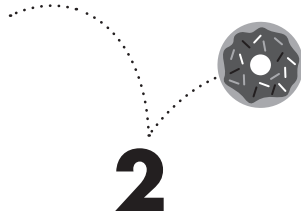
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We use our words. *We* don't blow bubbles in our milk through a straw up our nose. *We* don't scream when we see a bald person.

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“So it’ll be like that place on the Jersey Shore Sam’s family has?”

I said.

“That’s a vacation home,” Mom said.

“So what will this be?” I still didn’t get it.

“A *home* home,” Dad said.

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

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

“I don’t feel good,” Zoe said. I could feel her tugging on my sleeve, but I didn’t do anything.

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

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

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

“I don’t understand. Why do we have to move?” Jeanine said,

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

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

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

This had to be Oscar McFadden’s fault.

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

“We really want something different,” Dad said.

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

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

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

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

“You think *I’m* gonna love the dirt and the grass and the trees?” I said.

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

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

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

“I don’t know how to skate,” Zoe said, the words echoing out of her vomit bucket.

“We’ll teach you,” Mom said.

“I hate skating,” I said.

“Why?” Dad said.

“You just go in circles. It’s boring.”

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

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“No, you can’t. You’re still skating in circles. They’re just bigger circles.”

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

“I swim,” Zoe said.

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

“Can I, Mommy?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"C'mon, guys, don't you want to come check it out?" Mom said. Jeanine, Zoe, and I didn't move.

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

"Why?" Dad said.

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

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

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

"Petersville," Dad said.

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

"About six miles away," Mom said.

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

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“Car or bike,” Dad said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Were they color blind?” Jeanine asked.

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

“Is that code for crazy?” I said.

“They aren’t crazy,” Dad said. “We met them. They’re great.”

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

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

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

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

“Of course not,” Mom said.

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

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

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

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

“He worked for the postal service,” my father said.

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

“Condemned?” Mom said.

“Oh, yeah,” Jeanine nodded. “It’s totally condemned.”

“It’s not condemned,” Dad said. “It’s completely safe. It just needs some work. It’ll be fun.”

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

“We’re smart. We’ll figure it out,” Dad said.

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

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

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

“Easy. I’m not going to get another job.”

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

“Yeah, don’t you eventually need a job that pays you?” Jeanine said.

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

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

“China Palace?” Zoe said, jumping up.

“I don’t think so, Zo Zo. I’m not going to serve Chinese food.”

“But I love Chinese food.”

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

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

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

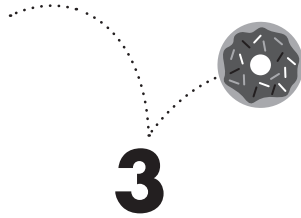
That wasn’t what I was thinking. What I was thinking was: what was wrong with the people who lived here that it had never occurred to anyone to open a restaurant?

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

Us: 1.

Them: everything else.



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

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

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

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“What are you talking about?” I said.

“I know Raul told him the crickets were my idea.”

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

“What did you expect?” I said.

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

“No way. It so wasn’t a big deal. Everybody thought it was funny.”

“Whatever. Stiles still hates me. No way he takes me.”

“He will if the team needs you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The water table. In the Red Room?"

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

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

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He whistled. “Charlotte K. I can’t believe you still remember her name.”

I will never forget Charlotte K.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

THE DOUGHNUT FIX

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

I couldn't believe how fast everything was happening.

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

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

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

JESSIE JANOWITZ

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

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

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

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

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