

Midnight Sun

A novel by Samuel McPherson

Black Cat Press

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Midnight Sun

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*Ah, London! London! our delight,
Great flower that opens but at night,
Great City of the midnight sun,
Whose day begins when day is done.*

--Richard le Gallienne, A Ballad for London

“I am just a little deaf; [the fairy] said, mumbling a laugh with her toothless gums. ‘Will your reverence tell me the baby’s name again?’

‘Certainly, my good woman,’ said the bishop; ‘the infant is little Daylight.’

And little Daylight it shall be, forsooth,’ cried the bad fairy. ‘I decree that she shall sleep all day.’ Then she laughed a horrid shrieking laugh, ‘He, he, hi, hi!’ Everyone looked at everyone else in despair, but out stepped the sixth good fairy, who by arrangement with her sisters had remained in the background to undo what she could of any evil that the swamp fairy might decree. ‘Then at least she shall wake all night,’ she said, sadly.”

--George Macdonald, Little Daylight

What follows is a transcript of several tape recordings found in the rubble of Spoon Valley. From the recordings we can tell that the recorder's name is "Lydia Pasternack" and it was recorded in 1991, decades ago, around the period of the fire. The tapes have some strange noises that we have not been able to identify. For convenience, the transcript has been divided into irregularly sized "chapters" by the compiler. Remember, this is not a story. If the subject is to be believed, then both WORM and the Ink Sun Society were much more dangerous than we thought. Take it with a grain of salt (perhaps more than one) and remember: this is the account of a twelve-year-old. Never forget these facts. What follows is for your eyes only. Unless you are not part of the Salvaged Sun Society. In that case—

Hello there. This is a blank file which you shouldn't read.

CASSETTE 01
Self-labeled *Audio Journal*, Vol. 1
**In which some very strange happenings pepper
the life of our intrepid narrator**
TDK SA-90 tape

Side One

[Chapter One]

Everything is Amazing, Nobody's Happy. Ha, ha, just kidding. Nothing is Amazing, Nobody's Happy.

June 13, 1991

5:28 PM

[There's some clicking here as the subject tries to press the right button on the cassette recorder. Then there is some banging that we assume is her trying to get it to work. It is already working, this being evident since we can hear all of this.] Hello, are you there? Testing, one, two, three... [There's some silence here, and then some more banging.] Okay, it should be working now... My name is Lydia Pasternack, and this—[subject laughs slightly] —is my audio journal. I'm recording this in the hopes that my life will become interesting. It's been boring so far. Do you want a recap? If you know me, and you probably do, then you would just be bored by it. So I'm not going to try to explain my family's history. Here's a brief recap. My mom and dad met when they were about nineteen, or twenty, I can't remember which, then they fell in love, got married, and well, had kids, so here I am. [Subject once again laughs slightly] My sisters are in that other room over there, but they're not important. They're just extras, like the scared

people in a horror movie. *[There's a whoosh of air here and we suspect the subject was waving the thought of her siblings away.]* They're never nice to me. I wish they would le-

Hey Lydia, what are you doing?

[This is a different voice, slightly higher and extremely annoying. We suspect it is the subject's younger sister.]

Go away, Amanda! I'm... busy!

With what?

Go away already!

[There's a pouting noise here, and then stomping footsteps. We assume the pesky sibling has left the room.]

Aaaaanyway, I am moving tomorrow. My parents have packed up the house. It looks like a soulless rat without our belongings in it.

I hate soulless rats.

Our house is being sold to the real estate company, which is named Morris, or something like that. *[The real estate company that bought the subject's previous dwelling is named Morris & Sons, Incorporated. Subject was correct.]* I'm not sure what 'real estate' is. What's 'fake estate', if only 'real' estate is real?

Whenever I think too much my head hurts. So if you know what real estate is, don't tell me. I don't want to know. It's another boring grown-up thing that no one really *needs* to know until they've grown up and become boring. I don't want to become boring. If anyone finds this in the far-off future, maybe I'll be interesting by then. Or I'll just be another boring grown-up. I guess there's no real way to tell... *[This*

information is confidential, reader. Don't go snooping around in our files] I guess I can't even really be sure if I'm alive in the future. Maybe I'll *die* before I stop recording this audio journal. I don't want that. *[There's a slight pause here. Subject is mulling over what to say next.]* Let's... steer the conversation away from death. Assuming this is a conversation...? I don't know if anyone is actually going to find and listen to this, and if they do, I hope they at least make a few funny sarcastic remarks. My sister is good at those, though she rarely talks to me anymore. She's very absorbed with this new 'Sega Genesis' thing my parents got her for Christmas. She's very protective of it and whenever *I* ask to play it, she blatantly refuses. I think she's just jealous I read so much. I guess I'm the least expensive child in our family, what with my little sister's dance lessons and all of that. Going to the library costs us nothing. Except for that one time my little sister, Amanda, "accidentally" ripped the cover of *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*. Goodbye, four dollars from my allowance last month. I barely knew you... I don't usually spend my money much. This cassette recorder was my dad's, but he told me I could have it because it was old, and he didn't need it anymore. It still works fine, though sometimes it doesn't stop recording when you press the "stop" button. So sometimes, I'm listening to a song and recording it when my mother bursts my door open and tells me to fold my laundry. So you can hear that in the recording. I like it for its quirks, though, and I never did hear "Video Killed the Radio Star" on the radio again. I like listening to it. My father

says that it was the first song on MTV and that he would watch it with me whenever it came on when I was younger. He told me it reached a culmination when I was six, when I would dance around like the characters from that comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes”. He said that I actually banged my head on an armchair once and had to be taken to the hospital. I don’t remember much about that. He said I was four when that happened, so that mustn’t’ve deterred me from further dancing. I was four years old. When you’re four years old, you tend to do some strange things.

So. This is how this journal’s gonna work. I’ll come home at the end of each day and report back on what I did that day. And whoever is listening is going to listen. As they usually do. DO NOT damage this tape. This is the first part of the audio journal and I don’t want to lose it. Even if no one listens to it, I can listen to it in 2031, forty years from now, or something. Hmm... will they have any Walkmans then... Walkmen... Walkmans... Walkmen...? I hope so. It’s too interesting an invention to drop. *[subject sighs]* Boy, do I wish I had one.

[There’s some scuffling here as the subject tries to turn off the tape recorder. A voice can be heard here, faintly calling, “Lydia! Time for supper!”]

Coming Mom!

[Click. Whirr. The tape is silent for several seconds.]

June 15, 1991

1:28 AM

Okay. Remember when I said that my life was going to be interesting?

Well, I was right. And in an... *interesting* way. Here, I'll tell you. This might take several tapes, so listen carefully.

The day started out the same as every other, although we all knew that things were going to be *different*. I woke to the ringing of my alarm clock, and shoved it off my nightstand into my "little junky items" box. I won't be needing it now. I groped around groggily, finding a roll of tape. As my fingers closed around it, I closed the box. I looked around my room, savoring the sights. Slowly... slowly...

"Lyds, are you awake?" Amanda flipped the doorknob upwards instead of down and pushed it open with her newfound five-year-old strength. "Please, don't!" I told her, dropping the tape with a groan. "No. Poopy sister," she responded, sticking her tongue out at me. *Little jerk!* I thought but didn't say. If I had, she would have grown ever more impertinent. She walked into my room, knocking over my small plant (in her defense, it had been precariously balanced on a box). "Hey!" I cried.

"What's going on here?" my father, snapped, bursting into the room. His coffee-stained brown mustache bristled as he spoke. He was wearing a suit and tie. "Lydia, are you yelling at your sister again?"

That's exactly what you do to me... I thought but didn't say. Dad took Amanda's hand. "Let's leave your sister alone, Amanda," he told her. I scowled as they left the room.

But that's really beside the point. I should get to the interesting part, the part where my life as I knew it changed forever.

I got out of my bed, which wasn't much anymore. I was sleeping on a series of stitched-together pillows, sewed together by my loving Aunt Jennifer. I had been sleeping on it for the past few nights because my bed had already been dismantled and placed inside the moving truck. I couldn't help but marvel at how big the truck was as we placed most all of our belongings inside the day before yesterday. The truck left and is now most likely cruising along the highway, going to our new house. Wherever that is. Mom said it was somewhere in Oregon.

I'm not looking forward to it, but my life might become exciting there. *[subject seems to drift away from the tape recorder.]* Hence this recording. I hope you can still hear me. HERE. IS THIS BETTER? *[Yes.]* GREAT. Okay I won't do it so loud.

I went down to the kitchen, which was full of boxes and annoying things we had forgotten to put away. There was a big hole in the wall where my mother's magnificent crane painting had been. She's a painter who is somewhat famous and we have, or I guess *had*, her paintings all over the house. It gets annoying. Before the moving scuffle which she got very so involved in, she mostly hid in her art studio. All of her things are packed up, now. As I walk down the stairs I can see her silhouette through the crack in the door which Dad has forgotten to fix time and time again. She's holding something, pressing her face very close to it, and I know without looking that it's a photograph of Daniel.

Daniel was sixteen years old when the accident occurred. He was driving to high school when a Lay's

chips truck driver rammed into his bumper. Daniel was violently jerked to the side and suffered a concussion and mass internal bleeding. He didn't make it to the hospital. Mom and Dad said their goodbyes at the funeral. That was 1985, a year before Amanda was born. I was six when he died and I don't remember much about him. I remember that he had always had a fierce interest in novels; frequently when I came downstairs for dinner, he would be reading a book. He intended to make that into his career; his first novel had already been written. It was a collection of short stories called *Arpeggio of Life and Death*. I'm not allowed to read it. Mom keeps the notebook which holds the manuscript on the top of the bookshelf, wrapped in rubber bands. Daniel had been sending it to publishers ever since he finished it when he was fifteen, but he never had any success, Dad tells me. So it just sits on our shelf, forgotten, gathering dust. I'm sure this isn't the way Daniel would have wanted it, but I'm too wary to tell Mom or Dad. I can't risk them falling apart again. They've already built hard candy shells around their grief – at first glance it's sweet, but when you break it it's sharp as steel.

They're doing better now, as well as you can when you're moving. They seem to have put the tragedy behind them. And yet... there are still nights where I hear quiet sobs coming from the laundry room. I'll creep out of my room to find that the *Arpeggio* isn't there. It's happened enough times that I know what Mom is doing: kneeling down in a corner sobbing.

I guess in that way, kids and grown-ups are a lot alike.

I passed my mother's surrogate residence and made my way to the kitchen, where a faint whiff of Honey Nut O's tickled my nose. Amanda was standing in the kitchen, looking at me and blinking her unnaturally big eyes, as if waiting for me to make the first move. She looked forlornly at the kitchen counter, where she had placed the Cheerios. "Lydia?" she said in a tone I wasn't sure I liked. "Will you pour a bowl of Cheerios for me?" She dragged out the last word, making it sound more like *meeeeeeee*, and then smiled up at me. "Amanda, stop bothering me. Ask Victoria if she can do it."

"I did!" Amanda whined. "She said to go away. It's my room!" She looked at me, jutting out her lower lip in what I was sure was a fake pouting face. "Please, Lyds?"

"Stop it," I told her, trying hard to keep my hands where they were balled up into fists at my sides. "I told you to stop calling me that!"

"Okay, Lyds. I'll keep calling you that until you pour me a bowl of Cher-chers." She smiled infuriatingly. Amanda likes to make up little nicknames for things that only she thinks are cute. Whenever someone gives her, say, a picture of a unicorn, she'll cry in delight, "Uni! Uni!" Whenever my father offers to read her the new bedtime favorite, "Winnie-the-Pooh", she'll cry out, "Winnie! Winnie!" and suchlike. It was very annoying. No one liked it. But the phase has been going on for so long now that everyone knows that

telling her to stop would do no good, so we just cringe and wait for the phase to end.

“Fine, *fine!* I’ll pour you a bowl of Cheerios,” I said, taking the cereal box in one hand and opening the Dishware moving box in the other. “Sheepies, sheepies!” cried Amanda, for she knew, in that younger-sibling way, that I was at her beck-and-call until my task was finished. I fished around in the box until I found her pink bowl with a sheep’s face painted white inside of it and the dancing sheep all around the rim on both sides. I grimaced as the contented sheep smiled at me from the comfort of its bowl, happy to cover it up with the brown crunchy cereal. Amanda grabbed a spoon from the box in delight and stuck it in the Cheerios, licking her lips and not even bothering to say ‘thank you’. She sat down on the bare living room floor and began to eat. Her chomp-smack, chomp-smack noises must have woken up Victoria, because a minute later she came bumping down the stairs. “Lydia,” she said, looking at me. *I* looked at her, too; more specifically, I looked at her pierced eyebrow. “Get me the cereal. I’m *hungry.*”

“Which one would you like?” I asked hurriedly, inching towards the nearly empty cabinet.

“Rice Krispies. And bring the milk. And the bowl. And the spoon. Don’t forget the spoon.”

Now, I don’t want to make the impression that my sister is a mean person. She’s nice. ... when she’s not in the basement playing on her Sega Genesis, or as Amanda calls it, Gesenis, which she does ever more frequently ever since her boyfriend Duncan dumped her. She stays up too late and wakes up too early,

because the high school starts later than the junior high. I'm in the seventh grade. Today was the last day. Nevertheless, she's always cranky like this when she wakes up. She doesn't usually order me around like this, though. Maybe she's stressed out or something? Who can fathom, the mind of an older sister... I try to keep that in mind when Amanda annoys me, but sometimes I forget...

I brought the cereal to Victoria. She frowned and sat down, right there on the stairs! I almost stopped her, then I remembered that our house was all packed up. That included the table. As a result, all furniture was fair game.

I picked up the Frosted Flakes and made myself breakfast. After my first bite, Victoria started smacking her lips. She likes to do this to annoy me; it also serves as a signal for me to know if my chewing is too loud. I glared at her from my spot on the floor, then kept eating, making very careful to keep my mouth closed. Victoria rinsed her bowl in the sink while I finished eating. I packed up my bag for school and said goodbye to Mom, who was still saying goodbye to her studio. Dad had already left for work at that point.

The walk to the bus stop was hot and suffocating. I trudged along the sidewalk, trying to find *something* to cool me down, but found nothing, as was to be expected. In retrospect, I wonder what I was doing looking. I'd known that I wouldn't find anything.

The bus driver stopped, brakes hissing, and the doors to the bus creaked open to let me in. I stepped on the precariously placed rusty steps and took a seat

in the third row on the left. I then set my backpack next to me (for no one was going to sit next to me, I repel people like an overflowing trash can, only better) and took out the book I was reading, *Half Magic* by Edward Eager. I'd bought it in the sixth grade and I hadn't read it yet, so the spine wasn't broken in and I sighed as it stubbornly refused to open past seventy degrees. I then began to read. It is a favorite of mine all the way from third grade, where I first picked it up at the library. I sat back and let myself be pulled away, both literally and figuratively, as the words on the page entered my brain and transformed themselves into magic.

Upper Norkina County Junior High School isn't an appealing place to spend a day. The paint is already peeling from when it was built in the sixties, the mascot is Nordeen the Smiling Gnat, and the principal is a gray-haired man that's at least sixty years old and is a veteran of World War Two. And don't get me started on the social—or learning— atmosphere. It's unpleasant to say the least. And five hundred cranky teenagers are forced to spend over six hours trapped there. Which makes them even more cranky.

I turn thirteen later this month. It's a wonder I've survived these last nine months; gym almost killed me several times. I got a concussion that one time when a ball hit me in the face hard, I got a broken knee when I slammed it accidentally into the locker room bench and I got a broken spirit when I was forced to do planks. Every. Dang. Day. *[Subject makes*



**PICTURED:
NORDEEN
THE
SMILING
GNAT.**

a loud, anguished noise that cannot be easily translated into onomatopoeia.] At least I have my friend, Trillian. She's in my first and fourth periods since the same teacher teaches those classes.

I hopped off the bus and made my way there.

As I walked in, somebody shoved me. They usually do, but I still squealed in indignation. *Last day, last day.* I passed some gossipy girls in the halls: "Oh my gosh, Jennifer, you should *so* drop him," one gushed. "He's such a jerk!" another reminded Jennifer, who was in the middle of the gaggle. I made a face as I passed a banana peel lying on the ground. No one cared if there was trash on the ground in Upper Norkina County Junior High School; you just made sure to avoid it and got on with your life. I moved past it and turned right, just as someone placed a hand on my head.

There are no bullies at Upper Norkina County Junior High School. Being a bully would mean you would have to actually pay attention to someone other than yourself. And that, for most of the students, is not something they consider. They are content to get through the school day with as little attention as possible. Which means that sometimes, you can get shoved or kicked without anyone noticing. The person who put the hand on my head probably thought I was the top of an unusually tall table. Then again, I am quite short for my age.

The person left and I began to walk again. It wasn't long before Mrs. Efferin's room was in sight. I took a seat next to Trillian.

Did I mention that Trillian is a chair?

“All right,” Mrs. Efferin called out, smacking a long bamboo pole that we were all convinced she had gotten at the big district cookout the other year against the blackboard. “I’m not going to let you play games all day, even if it is the last day of your prestigious English education with me!”

We weren’t frightened that she would let us play games. In fact, she usually had us do quite the opposite. “Today,” said Mrs. Efferin, “we are going to do a short story writing!” We all groaned. Though it was to be expected, we still had hope every day that the district would instruct her to leave and never return. “All right,” she said, taking a bundle of papers from the cabinet over the blackboard, “get to work!” That was the end of that. Mrs. Efferin took out a crossword puzzle and ignored us.

Mrs. Efferin is not the kind to let in questions. She puts a dam over our curiosity and stamps it out. This year she tried to read us *Candide* before the principal came in to check on the class and found it. “This book,” he’d said. “This book! What a great book! Still,” he said, looking at Mrs. Efferin sternly, “You should be teaching according to the curriculum.”

“All right,” Mrs. Efferin said in apparent compliance; however, she had somehow acquired the money to buy a copy of *Candide* for each and every one of us. “Read it,” she’d said as she passed out the copies, thumping her chest in pride. “It’ll do you a world of good.” A *world of good* didn’t exactly seem to be Mrs. Efferin’s intention, but we didn’t quite have the heart to tell her that. Her room smelled so strongly of air freshener that it made us all cough at

the beginning of the year, and she would never let a student go to the nurse's office. Ever. "Not in my classroom!" she'd said the one time a student had dared to ask. "Get over it!" The student had groaned and thrown up on the floor. After that, you'd think she'd learned her lesson, but no. She never allowed anyone to go to the nurse's office. We'd managed. Somehow.

Once I had a sore throat and I could barely talk when she called on me. "Uh," I'd said, "Thorry, I can't." "Speak up," Mrs. Efferin ordered. "I can't hear you."

"I ave a sorr troat," I tried to say. "A sore trout?" Mrs. Efferin asked, mishearing. "You have a trout in your jacket? Well, then it's your fault that it's so sore! Don't whine to me, young lady! All right, Carolyn," she said, turning to another person, "do you think you can tell me?"

Needless to say, I stopped by the nurse's office during second period when Mr. Shimdal noticed how sore my throat was. "Ee-iths m-nus fore-iths ekuls neguhtiv un-ith," I'd told him... [*The equation the subject seems to be dictating is $3/5 - 4/5 = -1/5$.*] I was sent home, the only time I ever have been this year. It took me the rest of the day and a lot of Earl Grey tea to recover. I won't be glad to say goodbye to Shindaisy, but at least I'll be glad to say goodbye to Mrs. Efferin. Oh... How could I have forgotten?! [*There's a noise here as the subject groans in what we assume is exasperation.*] We live in the town of Shindaisy, Idaho. Everyone knows the story of the town's founding: when the great explorer Benjamin McCormack accidentally hit his wife in the shins with a daisy he

was carrying while trying to bring it up to her nose for her to smell it. Being an explorer, he claimed the land where he fell as his own and Shindaisy was built, named in honor of that fateful day. Ironically, the daisy was supposed to be in lieu of a ring and McCormack was asking his wife to marry him at the time. So here we are in an unfortunately named town. I like Shindaisy enough, though I can't think of any reason why I wouldn't want to leave it. I suppose it's because I feel a strange sort of attachment to it, since my family moved here after Daniel's passing. I barely remember our old home. I remember rough edges and peeling red paint, a gray armchair where Daniel would sit and read his novels. But other than that there isn't much I can tell you. I remember the Christian school where I went to kindergarten, a chorus of voices rising up and singing "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring". I remember finger paint and kind adults, and I remember the smell of our old car. It smelled faintly of peaches, but *warm* peaches, as if someone placed a peach pie in there and never took it out. I don't remember what model it was, but Dad talks about it fondly. It was the car Daniel was driving when he died.

Shindaisy is part of Norkina County, which is made up of the towns of Mursmak, Ninny and Sliddleton. The names all sound ridiculous, as the founders of the county weren't very creative; of course, Shindaisy came first. But the town council, apparently, thought that it was strange that there would be a town in the middle of a plain, or as we like to call it here in the '90s, "the middle of nowhere". The council ruled that

they would build more towns around Shindaisy. They built Sliddleton first. Ninny and Mursmak came later, when Mursmak's new housing developments wouldn't fit inside the town's limits. All that to say, Shindaisy has a long and varied history. And I'm about ready to be rid of it.

Mrs. Efferin paced around the room, staring at each and every one of our worksheets. "Lydia," she said, staring at my paper. "Lydia, Lydia, Lydia."

"Yes, Mrs. Efferin, Mrs. Efferin, Mrs. Efferin?" I asked.

"You know that *Around the World in Eighty Days* isn't part of a series! Why did you answer true?"

"I—well, I—" This is the kind of thing Mrs. Efferin quizzes us on. Who wrote what, what was written by who... Whenever we have a half-day of school, she quizzes us on her literary knowledge. Not that I'm complaining; when it comes to this I'm the best student in the class. Not to brag. No, actually, *to* brag. I can brag as much as I want. No one's going to reprimand me!

[Quit bragging!]

I continued stuttering. "I—I—I don't know, Mrs. Efferin. Must've slipped my mind.

"Make sure it doesn't happen again." Mrs. Efferin frowned at me, her crooked front tooth sticking out from over her lip "Oh—of course, Mrs. Efferin." I sat in my desk, cheeks burning, and fixed my mistake. *True or false: Around the World in Eighty Days by Jules Verne is the first book in a series.* I thought that *Around the World in Eighty Days*, along with *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Centre of the*

Earth, was in a series! Apparently, I was wrong! [*The subject seems scorned.*] The bell rang as my pencil filled in the small circle that was “False”. I snatched the paper and almost shoved it in Mrs. Efferin’s hands. “Here you go!” I nearly screamed and dashed out the door. *My math textbook!* Looker 856 was across the hall from Mrs. Efferin’s room. As I dashed there, someone called out, “No running in the halls!” It was one of the annoying athletic boys, trying his hand at being a hall monitor. Upper Norkina County Junior High School doesn’t have a hall monitor. The district is short enough on money already. I entered my locker combination – 35-17-4 – and retrieved my history textbook. PRE-ALGEBRA AND YOU, it said in large letters. STUDENT EDITION GRADE SEVEN. Grunting, I took it from the locker and repositioned the lock back to zero, then dashed to Mr. Shimdal’s classroom.

Mr. Shimdal is a middle-aged man, but he could pass for younger. He has an infectiously enthusiastic demeanor except when students were misbehaving, and he teaches what he knows with gusto. He’ll sometimes tell us jokes when we’re sitting in the classroom, tired, and when we perk up he teaches math with such great enthusiasm for the subject you can’t help but pay attention. His classroom smells like the McDonald’s burgers he eats for lunch nearly every day and a strange kind of stillness fills it whenever we’re doing independent work. He’ll stroll around the room and if anyone looks flustered, in a flash—he’s there. He’ll explain the problem if they were having trouble with one, and if they’re just having a bad day

he'll comfort them. It's barely been a day since I saw him last, but I still miss him already.

I scooped my chair out from where it was squeezed into my desk, accidentally bumping Carmela Michaels' seat. Carmela is a popular girl at Upper Norkina County Junior High School and I am unfortunate enough to share second period with her. "Hey," she said in an annoyingly high-pitched voice, "have some respect!" She had undoubtedly learned this term from the many times Mrs. Efferin uses it; she is one of two English teachers in the school and so her services are constantly needed—she works seven periods tirelessly. Sometimes this means she doesn't get to have lunch. Maybe this is why she's so cranky all the time. I gave up trying to understand why she was so cranky months ago.

Mr. Shimdal walked up to the front of the room. "Today," he announced in a great booming voice, "is the last day of school!"

Some people threw their hats in the air. Some cheered. Some clapped. I just sat and smiled.

"You can do whatever you want today, as long as it's *quiet*," Mr. Shimdal said, accenting the *quiet* and saying it in a whisper to add emphasis. "Remember, keep calm, keep earnest, and keep learning. That's the Norkina County way!"

The annoying motto is ingrained into all of our minds by now; indeed, the school board in the sixth grade commissioned an author-illustrator to create a picture book to show to every elementary school in the district about appropriate behavior, which likely factored into this year's monetary crunch. I sat

through it as Principal Dalton read us the entire thing, cringing. A formulaic page of this insipid cruelty to children went something like this: *Samantha tries to always be kind at school. Whenever her friend falls in the halls, she's there to pick her up.* The illustration showed a girl with long, curly, hair holding a hand to a girl with similarly styled hair who was red in the cheeks, perhaps from embarrassment. But enough about that.

Second period passed harmlessly enough. But I was dreading third.

[Chapter Two]

Fact of Life: Gas Stations Smell Terrible

All right, kids! Mr. Banter's voice rang out in my mind, strained and coughing as always. *Go take a shower! You played good.* The day I was remembering, he'd called me over. *Pasternack.* He'd gestured with his finger (it quivered slightly as he did so) and I'd gone over. *You were slow. Let's see some hustle tomorrow. Okay?* Sure, Mr. Banter was nice enough, to other adults at least. But to children, especially athletically inept ones, he was strict as heck. I'd replied with compliance that day. That was last week. Now he's expecting something really excellent today. The lackadaisical tone of my physical performance has disappointed him.

"All right, kids!" he squawked when I came in, right on schedule. Mr. Banter is a corpulent man who always wears the same green plaid jacket every day. Once I got close enough to smell it and was surprised to discover he was weird enough to actually buy several jackets with the exact same pattern and wear one every single day.

The bell rang, and instantly Mr. Banter scanned the dusty gym floor, which had disgusting particles of who-knows-what all over it and yet we were expected to sit on it. A few seconds later, he frowned. "Go change," he said, making a shooin' motion with his hand. "Shoo!"

We filed into the locker room. I didn't know about the boys' locker room, but the girls' smelled like soap and perfume, as if a murderer had tried to cover up the terrible scent of rigor mortis with something

more pleasing. It hadn't worked. The scent of lilies was intoxicating. I opened my locker, gagging at the smell—*last day, last day—16-32-5...* But it wouldn't open. I groaned in frustration and my fingers slipped off of the lock, slick with sweat. The locks in the locker room are not a whole lot bigger than your palm, and they are a pain to open. Some days you have to enter the number five times before it opens. I entered the number again, my hands shaking from fear as I swiveled the dial around. *What if I can't open it? I remember thinking, very clearly. What if I can't get it open and I get detention?* Mr. Banter doesn't shy away from detention. If you don't have your uniform on, he's handing you the slip so fast you barely realize you're not wearing what you're supposed to.

"Like, I saw him yesterday," giggled a girl, coming along with her friends in a cluster of perfume and superficial interests. It was Camille Anders and her friends. Sometimes I think that girl is made of nothing more than makeup and if she washes her face, there will be nothing left except lies. "He was, like, eating! At McDonald's!" She turned to her friends. "Guys, he is, like, *so* disgusting. He opens his mouth and you can see the hamburger meat!" This elicited a flurry of high-pitched laughter. Then they grinned as they realized who was behind them. "Lydia," they said in sugary-sweet voices, one after the other. "Hi!" They'd been doing this to me ever since I'd made a bad basketball pass to Suzanne Milton in the winter. They wouldn't leave me alone. *Last day.* "How are you doing today?" they asked mockingly, a girl named Avery sticking her makeup-laden face in front of

mine. I sneezed. It's a wonder her face didn't fall off from all that makeup. "Being a meanie, huh?" asked Avery, whose lipstick was beginning to look a whole lot like blood. She smiled. I gulped. "I can shove you into a locker anytime!" Camille added. And it was true. At only four feet eleven inches, I can fit into a locker easily. No one's ever shoved me into one, but many have dared. Thankfully, no one cares enough to actually do anything more than annoy me.

Camille, Avery and the third girl, named Jennifer, left. I made another attempt to open my locker. *16-32-5... Come on, come on, come on...* The lock clicked and I sighed in relief.

The Physical Education uniforms at Upper Norkina County Junior High School aren't exactly top-drawer. They are made of a loose, scratchy fabric that scratches your back like a small but sharp fingernail as you run. They are very dark gray, as the school district thought that black would be more appropriate for a funeral and light gray is used for the elementary school uniform, and of course any other color would be too bright, so dark gray it is. There is a small rectangle under the main attraction of the shirt, white words reading "UPPER NORKINA COUNTY JH PE", where you are expected to write your family name ONE TIME. ONE. Under that there is a small outline of Nordeen the Smiling Gnat.

The shirt that I wore every day was Daniel's. Mom saved it for a long time until one of us was old enough to wear it. Victoria wore it until she got too big for it. She is in the tenth grade, now, and at the high school. She gets to sleep in later 'cause the bus comes later

and her school starts much later. [*subject sighs forlornly.*] I wish *my* school started earlier. Then I could sleep in.

So anyways. Yeah. I took the shirt out of the locker and put it on, glancing around the cramped locker room every five seconds to see if anyone was staring at me. There was someone, briefly, but when I fixed her with a stern glare she immediately looked away.

“All right,” called Mr. Banter from the doorway of the locker room. “Time to come out, girlies! Let’s see some hustle!”

We all ran to the door before he could even return to his seat at the back of the gym.

He greeted us with his usual frown. I would see many more frowns before the end of the day, but this was at least one I was used to. With the others, I wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Four laps around the gym!” he ordered. “Go!” In a fraction of a second the room went from silent to the thundering cacophony of a thousand elephants passing by as the middle schoolers streaked across the gym. I joined them before Mr. Banter could notice my hesitation, but a second too slow—where I had done two laps the rest of them had already completed their three. Perhaps this was because of my lower athletic ability, but Mr. Banter always expected everyone to be at the same level. Perhaps because he thought we were easier to manage that way.

My shoes were dusty and I was shaking like mad, but I still managed to do my last minute-long plank. My chest felt like an elephant had sat on it, only adding more evidence to the idea that there was at

least one in the gym. I nearly wheezed with exhaustion. I could feel my heart thumping wildly in my chest like a boxer striking a punching bag. No sooner had my hands stopped holding my body upright, however, than Mr. Banter started giving his next orders. “Today,” he announced, spreading his arms out wide like he was going to give us all a hug, even though he is quite possibly the least huggable person in the world, “we will be running the TRACK.” Some people groaned. “It’s not that bad,” Mr. Banter snapped, hushing them instantly. “Back in my day, we ran a mile in five minutes whether we liked it or not.”

We all found his stories about *back in his day* tedious, but we didn’t complain. He’d give you a hundred push-ups if you complained.

Mr. Banter sipped a paper cup of coffee—no doubt from the teacher’s lounge, where—when passing by it—I’ve heard water being poured several times. “Nine minutes,” he said, surveying the class with his calculating blue gaze, “you get ten minutes to go ten around the gym. Plenty of time.”

No one groaned. If they did, it would be a hundred push-ups.

Mr. Banter took out his electric timer, a vivid shade of green. “Get in position,” he told us, not looking up from the watch. “You got one minute!” He punched in the one minute in the handheld electric machine, and the race was on. “MOVE!” someone shouted at me. Someone stepped on my foot. Someone kicked me in the thigh. By the time the one minute was up and Mr. Banter’s little timer was vibrating crazily, I was panting, bruised, at the back of the line.

“All right,” Mr. Banter said finally, after punching some more numbers into the timer, “GO!” He gave a frown and the herd of elephants sounded again. Once again, I was left in the back of the line. Sweat was already pouring down my forehead, but there would only be more. I was one of the youngest people in my physical education class, but I was still held to the same standard as everyone else. Seventh, eighth and ninth graders all ran together, no matter what, and you didn’t go more than ten minutes. *Last day*, I reminded myself as I put one foot in front of the other, the other foot in front of the first. *Last day*.

After five laps, I could feel my pulse thundering in my ears. My breath came in heavy gasps and tears clouded my vision. I shook my head, but they refused to leave. I gulped, throat dry, but the instant I swallowed it demanded more air, and then more water. I nearly wheezed with exhaustion. I was almost waddling along at one point. Six laps. Some people were already done, talking in little clusters. My hair bounced behind me like a bowling ball going off into the wrong lane. My forehead was so hot one could have cooked an egg on it. And I felt like a furnace burning like mad in a very cold person’s home.

Seven laps.

My feet felt like lead—no, heavier than lead.
STONE.

I stumbled onto the last lap as Mr. Banter screamed, “TEN MINUTES! TEN MINUTES! TIME’S UP!” I collapsed onto the floor, gasping and panting, reaching for something that wasn’t there. My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to leap out

of my chest. I ran to the water fountain, waiting in the line of teenagers, hunched over and gripping my knees with my hands like my life depended on it. When they came away the knees of my pants were damp. Like someone had poured water on them. But it was just my sweat.

When it was finally my turn at the water fountain, I splashed water on my face, my mouth. I gulped it down, ravenously thirsty. "It's my turn now," said a high voice. Suzanne Milton. I didn't even have the strength to mutter a sarcastic reply.

After the race, we played the harmless-enough game of ELIMINATION, where people threw balls at each other until only one person was left. I was out before a minute had passed and sat down on the dusty gym floor until the end of class, contemplating the Move.

Oregon isn't that long a ways from Idaho. The plan was that after I got out of school at two-thirty, we would wait till my sisters came home (Amanda at three, Victoria at three-fifteen) then embark on our cross-state "adventure" (what Mom and Dad called the long drive to Oregon). Once we got there, we would start unpacking. But we all worried that we were going to be a little late. The drive from Idaho to Oregon was quite a while, even though Shindaisy was practically on the edge of Idaho and our "new town", that's what we called it because Mom and Dad never gave any specifics, was *two hundred and fifty* miles. It was supposed to take *four hours!* *Four hours* stuck with my sisters! It would take us into the night and through parts of Idaho. Amanda was nothing but

thrilled, Victoria was nothing but contradictory and I was nothing but suspicious. Why wouldn't Mom and Dad say anything more about this town than why we were moving there (Dad got a job at the local judicial branch) or encouraging comments (it'll be FUN!)? But grown-ups always say this kind of thing. I was pretty sure it was going to be a GHOST TOWN. You know those kinds of things that happen in the movies? Where they move to a new house, but it turns out to be haunted? Then someone always goes "hey, where are all the neighbors?" Soon after, they're dead and come back to haunt the town too.

Mr. Banter's voice cut through my thoughts like a knife. "All right, it's time to leave. Go to the changing room."

We complied. It was three minutes before the bell rang. I got back into my normal clothes, stuffing Nordeen the Smiling Gnat's silhouette into my backpack. Halfway through, the bell rang. I groaned in contempt and swung my backpack over my shoulder, making my way to fourth period. Social studies.

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of activity and hands pushing past me. Everyone was just SO IMPATIENT to get out of school that they had no regard for anyone around them, not that they had any regard for me anyway. I just usually ignored it.

In fourth period, history, Mrs. Efferin made us watch an animated cartoon from a projector she'd brought in from the library, usually used for assemblies, about some children cavorting (Dad taught me that word. This is the first time I've used it.

I *love* it, it sounds *so official* and grown-up!) around during the time of the Revolutionary War, playing reporter and little lady and such. The voice actors were all clearly adults and had annoying accents. I didn't care for it one bit.

After fourth period, we had lunch. I ate in silence, as always. I'd made myself a Saran wrapped sandwich.

In fifth period we played SET (Mrs. Sanders was extremely apathetic about the subject she taught and couldn't care less what we learned).

In sixth period (art, taught by Mr. Brooks) we folded origami frogs. I placed one on Camille's head (she was in that class as well) and she swatted it off like it was some sort of bug. After that, the bell rang for the last period. Seventh period. Community service.

This is a new elective that Upper Norkina County Junior High School has just begun offering, and of course my parents had me sign up for it almost immediately (they love the idea of me doing good in the world, even if they wouldn't notice a thing if I was doing something such as smoking a cigarette) after I informed them of its existence. I shouldn't have told them it was there. They have been asking me about it every day when they get the time. "How's community service going, Lydia?" It's the only time they think to interact with me specifically, other than "DINNER!"

The elective involved picking up trash around the schoolyard, clapping erasers and the like. I got good grades, but I wasn't enough of a goody-goody to enjoy doing such a menial task just for the "fun" of it.

Unfortunately, I had no say in the matter.

Last day.

Today, we picked up plastic cups in the cafeteria that were STILL there after last month's "Spring has sprung!" dance. Well, it was supposed to say "Spring has sprung", but someone removed the "R"s. We found one of them, lying in crimson solitude on the floor. "We" being me, Campbell Jackson, Harley Woolsworth and Avery Hipbren. Yes, THAT Avery. She wants so badly to keep up the façade of being a good student that she signed up for this elective. No one else had any desire to sign up. That's why there are only four children in it. However, it was still funded by the district because "community service is so important". At the time, they didn't know how much of a failure the program would be. In the course of a year, we'd done the following:

[What follows is a sort of list. It has been arranged for your reading convenience in the order Lydia Pasternack dictated it.]

Dust the library. (It was a terribly dull task and took us from the beginning of the year to mid-October, all while the school librarian, "Call-Me-Lois", read several books on physics.)

Mop the floors. (None of us could see why the custodian, Mr. Rogers, couldn't do this himself. Nevertheless, we were all handed mops with ends looking like dirty, shaggy dogs dipped in a rusty bucket of water and told to get to work.)

Dust the display cases for all the trophies Upper Norkina County Junior High School students had racked up over the years. (There were three, one for a

district science fair, one for a reading competition, and one for a Mathletes challenge. All were at least ten years old and covered in spiderwebs.)

By this time it was the end of November and we were all bored out of our minds. Everything else we did we did sluggishly. No one thought the class held any promise. Not even the supervisor.

For the rest of the year, we did things that the custodian would normally do. Wiping the cafeteria tables and suchlike. Today was no different. We were all complaining; if not out loud, at least in our minds, an internal monologue like someone from a Poirot novel. My dad loves those. Though junior high schoolers don't usually talk like they do. I can't imagine any of them saying "My goodness! I do believe, Miss Bell, that your brooch has gone missing!" No one would be so gentlemanly as to do that.

Or gentlewomanly, I guess. Is that a word? I think so.

Anyway, it was BORING. Mr. Rogers shook hands with us and gave us stickers that read THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR HARD WORK! They looked like something a six-year-old would wear. Not someone who was long overdue to enter teen-hood.

Then we left the school. I left my old life behind as I knew it. I left behind my dear best friend, Trillian (who was a chair). I left behind Mr. Shimdal, who I liked, and Mrs. Efferin and Mr. Banter, who I didn't. I left behind Suzanne Milton. I left behind Camille. And I left behind the seventh grade for the glorious, glorious summer.

It was two-thirty in the afternoon when I boarded the bus for home. I opened up Half Magic and, as before, let the words carry me away... but something was different. Something *felt* different.

I didn't realize how right I was until we got to our new town.

Victoria arrived back from school at three fifteen and we all piled into the car. Dad slid in one of his REM tapes (he had purchased it for the drive, he'd said with a twinkle in his eye when he saw it at the store last month) in the tape deck. Mom rolled her eyes. "Fred, do we really have to listen to this again?" she complained. "But Maisie," Dad smiled, pressing "play" on the tape deck. "It's good music. It'll give Victoria some pep. Hey, Victoria, having fun?" he called to my older sister, who was in the seat next to me. I was in the middle seat of our Honda Accord (I always was). Amanda's car seat was digging into my rib, as was Victoria's small bag of makeup that she insisted she have next to her. At that point she was laying on ever more eyeliner (she bought it with her allowance, so I didn't complain, but sometimes I wished she would just be Regular-Face Victoria again). "Pep?" she moaned. "What's the point of pep? Pep isn't as important as my existential quandary."

"Oho, you have an existential quandary?" quipped Dad. "What could that be about?"

"I told Jared," Victoria whined, "that we were moving. He shoved me away at the lunch table." She said this emotionlessly, which somehow made it slightly unsettling. Jared was her boyfriend of three

weeks, her first boyfriend after Duncan dumped her. They had gone out one time last week. Apparently, Victoria hadn't told him we were moving. "UGH! Why did we have to move? It's not that I liked him that much; he was kind of a jerk, but..." She rambled on. I tried to focus on the music.

I looked out the window and waved goodbye to Shindaisy, just as Dad pressed the gas pedal. Just for a moment.

Then we were off.

After an hour or so, Amanda whined that she needed to use the bathroom. "Hold it in, dear," Mom scolded. "We're on the highway." But five-year-olds can never hold in anything, and soon we were at a gas station (Dad would later claim we needed some gas anyway, even though the car never got close to the nozzles), and suddenly we all felt the need to relieve ourselves. A particularly interesting debacle occurred there; someone was already in the gas station's bathroom and wouldn't come out. For ten minutes. Of course, this was a convenience store, and pretty soon Amanda started begging for Haribo gummy bears. I have never liked them, personally. Or any kind of gummy candy. I like chocolate much better. If Haribo gummy bears are malevolent beings that wish to take over the world (or the sucrose market), chocolate is the noble resistance that fights back against them. If it is noble. I read somewhere that chocolate is sometimes produced by child labor. Oh well, only sometimes, I suppose. I hope.

Amanda gets pretty much everything she asks for ("Harry! Harry!" she'd cried), and soon we had three

bags of candy for the car: Two bags of Haribo gummy bears and one bag of M&Ms. Just as Mom was checking out, Amanda remembered her bladder problem. The guy still hadn't come out of the bathroom, so Amanda ran a circle around Mom; "Orbit Planet Mommy!" she'd called it. Mom did not seem fond of this game but nevertheless put up with it, for it was the only way that Amanda wasn't going to whine or complain for the rest of our hopefully short time at the gas station.

As I looked at Amanda in exasperation, a small puddle began to form near her midsection. Mom didn't notice for a minute or two, as she had found the phone and was calling, she said, the movers, though I think she was just stalling until the man came out of the bathroom.

Pretty soon, Amanda's pants were dripping. I gulped. Mom still didn't notice. Until the man FINALLY came out of the bathroom, chugging a Mountain Dew. "All right, Amanda," Mom said, placing an arm on my kid sister's shoulder, "The nice man came out of the bathroom, so it's time to go to the toilet, okay?"

But Amanda was staring at her pants in dismay. Tears began to well up in her eyes. "Mommy..." she started. "Mommy..." Her lower lip trembled.

Amanda always cries when she pees her pants. I have no idea why.

Mom rushed into the bathroom, dropping the candy bags and carrying Amanda by her short pink sleeves. I picked up the sucrose. Victoria pulled out three quarters and bought Reese's Peanut Butter

Cups®. I watched, scowling, as she grinned and ate them. I'd left my money in the car, and besides, I'd only brought three dimes. Not nearly enough for anything.

After a minute or two, the man approached us. I looked at him from the side, studying him. He had a stubbly chin and bushy brown hair, and his arms looked like there were Daddy Longlegs all over them, there were so many hairs. He was reaching for the phone when he caught my eye at the corner of his. He swiveled his head around to look at me. "Well hello, little girl," he cackled. It was a cackle, of that I was sure.

"I'm not a little girl," I told him. "I'm almost thirteen."

"You're still—" he reached out a finger as if to touch me on the nose— "a little girl."

I stared at the finger and became cross-eyed.

"Now, do you like playing games, little girl?"

"Get away from me," I commanded, feeling annoyed and slightly (okay, maybe more than slightly) terrified.

"I don't think so."

"Creep."

"I'm a creep, am I?" He smiled toothily. He had three golden teeth and two chipped ones. As he smiled, one of the golden teeth fell out. "Ah—!" he cried, then began hopping around looking for it. "I knew I should have had that sewn in," he muttered.

I made a run for it. I ran to Victoria. When I got to her, I reported, breathless, "The man from the bathroom is REALLY CREEPY."

“Well, okay,” said Victoria, and took another bite out of her last peanut butter cup. “He—”

[With that, the first side ends. What Victoria said after the bite is lost to time.]

Side Two

[Chapter Three]

We trade our beautiful house for a condominium with rats and my parents expect me to be happy about it

[Click. Whirr. The tape starts up again.]

After Amanda went, Victoria had a strange and sudden need to visit the lavatory, so off she went, leaving me in the candy aisle alone. Amanda continued begging Mom for stuff, but by now she had seen sense and refused all of her requests. Eventually she broke into a temper tantrum (“Why can’t you ever give me what I want?!”), completely forgetting that Mom had just bought the gummy bears she had begged for.

When Victoria finally came out of the bathroom, it had been fifteen minutes since we’d first entered the store. Dad had been reading a Poirot novel (I think it was “The Hollow”, though I am not quite sure) and immediately eyed the candy as we entered. “Have some sense,” Mom scolded him as he reached for the sucrose. “Don’t act like a child, Fred. Set a good example.”

“Maisie...” Dad groaned, but restrained himself. Mom held out fistfuls of candy to us from the front seat as Dad turned the key. Mom smiled at us, but

none of us had seen, or perhaps remembered, her full smile; maybe Victoria did, but I don't know. She doesn't talk to me much anymore. We used to have late-night conversations, back in fourth grade. We would giggle about the stupid things that people did at school, we would giggle about the stupid things that people did in books. But those days are over. Now I go to bed before her, and she will stay up all night if she feels like it.

Mom looked back to the road.

After around an hour, Amanda's stomach audibly growled. I had just finished with *Half Magic* and put the paperback in my bag, retrieving my copy of *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and beginning to read. But my family had other ideas. "Fred," Mom said, "Amanda's hungry."

"I'm hungry," supplemented Amanda.

"I'm hungry," supplemented Victoria, who was listening to her black Walkman. I could hear the music faintly issuing from her headphones. It was loud and screamy, with lots of drums and electric guitars crashing and thrashing about. She must have purchased it at the mall with her friends.

Inadvertently, my own stomach gave a growl of hunger. "...I'm hungry too," I admitted.

"All right then," said Dad, "We'll take the next exit. We're almost in Oregon anyways."

"Fred," fretted Mom, "don't you think we should prepare them for—"

"They're hungry, Maisie," Dad said. "I am not going to let any child of mine go without a dinner, even if it is to—" He glanced at us, then stopped talking.

“All right,” Mom agreed. “But where will we go?”
“McDONALDS!” cried Amanda. “McDONALDS!”
“I want to go to a Mexican restaurant,” Victoria put in.

I wanted to go to a seafood place, but I said nothing; instead, I stuck my nose in my book and tried to block out the fight that had begun between my two sisters. “Miks,” Amanda said firmly. “MIKS!”
“Is there even a McDonalds in the exit?” Victoria queried. I love that word, “queried”. So I’m going to use it as often as I can. I hope you don’t get bored of it.

Alice was glad she wasn’t Mabel, a girl from her school. I was glad I wasn’t Amanda or Victoria.

Pretty soon, just as Alice was doing the Caucus-Race, there was the highway exit. FOOD NEXT LEFT read the blue sign. MCDONALDS.

“Amanda!” Dad singsonged. “There’s a McDonalds!”

“MIKS!” Amanda cried. “MIKS!”

“Sorry, Victoria.” Dad smiled and threw a glance at her. She was bobbing her head to her loud and screamy music. I’m not even sure she heard him.

I think it says in the Walkman manual not to turn it up too loud. I think it says it causes permanent ear damage.

Dad drove into the McDonalds parking lot. I stared scornfully at the Hamburglar who was smiling at me from the mural painted on the window. His red hair poked out of his striped cap, and he was waving excitedly from his black-and-white striped sleeves. Smiling and laughing.

That is something our family sorely needs.

Our shoes mournfully clacked on the checkered linoleum as we tried to find a seat. Dad waited at the counter while Mom ushered us towards a stunningly white table with four plastic chairs around it. “This looks nice!” she exclaimed, but it was strained. “Why don’t we sit here, girls?”

None of us had the heart to argue with Mom. She tried her best.

I retrieved a plastic chair from another nearby table (for Dad) and placed it at the front of the table. Then I sat down next to Amanda. “Lyds!” she cried happily. “Lyds!” I’m not proud to say I scowled.

Soon our food came. I received my Filet-o-Fish and ate it slowly. Amanda got her chicken nuggets and devoured them with great vigor. Victoria got her cheeseburger and took off the top. An “open-face cheeseburger”: an original invention.

I could tell she missed her Sega Genesis. But it was in the moving truck along with the rest of our stuff.

We ate in almost complete silence. Dad had brought Uno in an attempt to brighten the mood; however, his enthusiasm was immediately squashed when he saw how somber and quiet we had all become. He tucked the bright red box away in his coat pocket and tucked into his hamburger, sighing. Amanda unwrapped the plastic surrounding her McDino Changeable and drove it around the table. Victoria finished first with her open-face cheeseburger and sipped her Coca-Cola. I had gotten Sprite (“You can have Coke when you’re thirteen”, Mom had said, to which I had replied “But I’ll be thirteen in a week or two! Doesn’t that count?” She

had responded in the negative), as had Amanda. Dad and Mom had opted for water, being grown-ups.

After everyone had finished their dinners, we piled in the car again. Dad popped in a Michael Jackson tape and nodded his head to the music slightly. Mom read a romance novel. Amanda did a Little Mermaid sticker book. Victoria stared out the window and listened to her loud, screamy music. And I read Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. It reminded me of the old man in Shindaisy who had given it to me at a garage sale Dad had dragged us down to. He had been eagerly eyeing a Poirot paperback that the public library didn't carry when the old man had said, "I'll give this one to ya free of charge. Make sure to love it, all right?" with a sad smile. I'd accepted eagerly; ten-year-old me, and me now, will and would do anything for a new book. I had heard about the book but had not yet read it. And he had graciously given it to me.

Now that I think about it, I never caught the man's name.

I finished the book fairly quickly, when it was still around seven-thirty. One hour after we were *supposed* to get to—oh, no. Wrong. We were, like, three hours into the drive since we left at three-fifteen and spent a good half-hour at McDonald's. Seven-thirty is Amanda's bedtime, though she hated it. I picked up yet another favorite from my bag: *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. I first read it in third grade and became enraptured in the mystery. Mom and Dad bought it for Victoria for her eighth birthday, but she eventually transferred ownership of the book

to me because of how many times I'd read it (every time her copy) in the fifth grade.

Suddenly, Dad yelled, "THERE IT IS! WELCOME TO OREGON!"

"Woo-hoo!" added Mom halfheartedly, raising her hands and waving them over her head.

I looked at the sign, disinterested. Amanda was looking out the window, invigorated. Victoria didn't see a thing.

Just as Jamie and Claudia were typing up their "Friends of the Museum" letter, I sensed the car slowing down. I looked out the window again. There was another small sign. It was eight-thirty, which is an important detail—only eight-thirty. The sign read:

WELCOME TO SPOON VALLEY
HOME OF THE ETERNALLY INKED SKY

I stared at it. It was made of rough brown wood and there was some lichen on the lower right side of it.

It almost seemed to stare back at me.

Behind the sign was a cobblestone street, golden in the nearly-setting sun. It snaked down a road of deteriorating brick buildings, with neon signs which had yet to light, which led to a large building at the end of it, all white. I squinted to see the inscription over the doorway as we drove by:

TOWN HALL OF SPOON VALLEY
ERECTED BY THE INK SUN SOCIETY

But there was something off about it all.
Something dangerous.

"Drat!" Mom muttered as I stared at the town hall.
"We came too early!"

Eight-thirty is too early? I was appalled. Mom, who enforced bedtimes so strictly, thinking eight-thirty was early? Who was this woman?

My parents drove on. I saw a candy store, OLD JUNE'S. I stared at the licorice bootlaces through two windows, mouth watering at the thought of them. Everyone hates licorice in my family but me, so I get all of theirs at Halloween.

I didn't pay much attention to any of the other buildings. But there was this strange symbol that kept showing up every few minutes. It was a circle, within which was a fountain pen, inking in the circle and making it black. Around the oncoming darkness it read:

INK SUN SOCIETY

When I tried to ask Mom, she said, "What symbol? You must be seeing things." I'm pretty sure she was avoiding the subject.

The sun sank lower in the sky.

Pretty soon, Dad opened the car door. "Well, here we are," he proclaimed. "Home sweet home."

There was a large orange sign, embossed with orange neon lights. It read, in cheerful bubble letters:

CHIROPTERAN HEIGHTS

CONDOMINIUMS

My first reaction was incredulous. "Dad, we left our house for a CONDOMINIUM?" I nearly shrieked in



PICTURE:
THE
EMBLEM.

dismay. “Well, what did you expect?” he replied. “I—I—I—well—” I struggled for an answer. “I—I kind of expected—a house!” I squeezed out at last.

Victoria did nothing but groan in anguish. Amanda did nothing but nod her head further into her chest. She had fallen asleep.

“Dad—” I started another query—*yes!* I got to use that word again! “Dad, why are all the lights—why is nothing open?”

Dad stopped dead in his tracks on the way to the trunk to get our suitcases. He turned to me, very slowly, with an eerie expression on his face that I had never seen on him before.

“Uh, Dad?” I tried again. “Dad, why—”

“Get your trunk,” he responded gruffly. I was taken aback. Dad was always upbeat. He wasn’t usually like this, except for a few weeks after Daniel died. That I remember.

I got my trunk without complaint, slinging my pale blue book bag over my shoulder. My suitcase is long and black; I had begged and begged for something that looked “professional” for my birthday when I turned twelve and that was what my parents had gifted me. It has all sorts of secret compartments where you could hide mass market paperback books, or perhaps cassettes. I love it. Now, it’s all filled up with my clothes for the next few days, until the movers come. They have a few more stops before they got to our new “house”.

Mom carried Amanda into the lobby of our new condominium building. I will NEVER use the word “condo” EVER because it sounds very unprofessional.

I like “condominium” much better. So “condominium” it shall be. Dad held the key and his and Victoria’s luggage whilst (that makes me sound British, doesn’t it) Victoria zoned out to her music.

“Which unit do we have?” I asked Dad. He had to consult the laminated tag on the key. “Uh... Unit C10,” he finally answered. “Okay,” I answered uncertainly. I still wasn’t sure how the whole condominium thing worked. So... it was like an apartment... but you could buy it? I wasn’t so sure about this. “Dad?” I tugged on his elbow nervously. “Why did we move here?”

To this he gave no reply.

When we got to our door (“C10”, it blared in golden numbers), there was a note on the door, tacked on with a bright red thumbtack.

GO TO THE TOWN HALL AT 9:15

I looked at Dad suspiciously. He ripped it off the door almost immediately after reading it, leaving the thumbtack sitting sadly there, still holding up a small scrap of paper.

I took it. It is always a good idea, as I had learned when I tried to plot a mystery novel in the sixth grade, to have a thumbtack or two handy.

A rat darted from the corner of the room, making us all jump. It was only then that I thought to look around.

It was a somewhat cozy kitchen, with an old stove and an analog clock hovering above it. There was a refrigerator next to it, humming quietly. It had a forgotten magnet from the last people who lived here. It was one which bore the same emblem that kept

appearing throughout the town. But the strangest part about the refrigerator was that it was black.

Across from the refrigerator there was a sink, and then under the sink and around it were several cabinets and drawers. Then at the very far back of the room there was the dining table, which looked out onto the living room. The kitchen wall ended where the refrigerator was.

I heard Victoria stepping inside. Suddenly loud squeaking issued from the floor. As soon as it started, it was over.

She picked up her foot. On her shoe was a dead rat.

“Home sweet home,” she deadpanned.

I almost wanted to stay the same but I remained optimistic. “Maybe,” I suggested, “it belongs to the neighbors. Maybe it’s a pet.” Then I realized that this wasn’t a very good suggestion because if it had been a neighbor’s pet they would have become very cross with us, leading to a feeling of mutual dislike between our two families. That would not have been a good first impression. I regretted saying the words as soon as they came out of my mouth.

“Homie! Homie!” cried Amanda, rushing in behind Victoria and accidentally hitting her with Rabbit Bunny, her favorite stuffed animal (my parents had tried to convince her many, many times that it was ‘bunny rabbit’ and not ‘rabbit bunny’ but Amanda liked her name and adamantly stuck with it, and the ratty old stuffed animal which she had teathed on when she was an infant). “Ugh, stop it!” groaned

Victoria. "You're making me sick with your happiness."

"Victoria, don't whine like that," scolded Mom, coming up from behind Amanda. "Just because you're not happy about the move doesn't mean Amanda can't be. Isn't that right, dear?" She said the last sentence in a strained sort of tone that was a poor attempt, I surmised, at a cordial one. Amanda looked up at Mom and smiled as she indulgently patted her head.

I couldn't bring myself to scowl. Cute little Amanda, who always got all the attention, and horrid little Victoria, who was so contradictory her behavior was always worth mentioning. And shy little Me, who never did an interesting thing in her life.

Well. That's going to change soon. So keep listening.

...I hope...

We claimed rooms. Well, at least we tried to. Amanda, Victoria and I would all share a room (Victoria on the top bunk of a bunk bed and I on the bottom while Amanda slept in a bed of her own) and Mom and Dad would share the master bedroom. None of us particularly liked this arrangement; in the past Victoria and Amanda had shared a room while I had gotten my own, which no one had seemed to mind; when I was eight and Amanda was born, I resented the very thought of a little grub such as her taking up residence in my room. She is now still a grub, albeit a slightly bigger one. Mrs. Efferin would have reminded me to say "albeit" instead of "though" because it is more grammatically correct and sounds

more professional; in fact, that was what many of her comments on my book reports read.

We lugged our luggage (I guess that's where the word comes from) into our rooms and then made for the town hall, because just getting everything out of the car took my family half an hour. And we only had four bags.

There was a spider in our new room. In the corner right next to my bunk. Mom and Dad always say that spiders are "our friends" but Amanda and I get freaked out by them. Victoria loves them: she even had a pet tarantula once, but it died from lack of food. She didn't cry, though. She didn't ever cry. At least, I had never heard her cry since Daniel.

I named the spider Ronald and watched as it slowly creeped down the grey wall. I looked around at our room. As I did so, I heard something that sounded like a scratching. *Another rat*, I thought to myself.

Darn it.

Just as I opened up *From the Mixed-Up Files* again, the clock struck nine. Golden light streamed through the sole window of our dingy room. There was grime on the carpeted floor, and there was a closet, but it was so small it technically didn't count for anything. There was a small bin in the corner for who-knows-what, but other than that, and the bed that Victoria and I now shared, there wasn't anything else in the room.

Amanda had her own space; Mom and Dad had apparently known this would happen and brought her stitched-together pillows from Aunt Jennifer, which she loved and brought every year on our

annual camping trip to Frog Falls every summer instead of a sleeping bag. It always gets dirty, but she doesn't mind. Victoria hates camping, but I like getting the fresh air in my lungs and trying to catch frogs by the waterfall. My eyes clouded at the thought that we might never go there again. Maybe, though. It's not *that* far away from Oregon.

Dad opened the door. "How's it going in there?" he asked jovially. He was wearing a black top hat, the one he used when he was settling matters in court. "We're going to leave for the town hall now, so hustle—if you want to come along." He raised his eyebrows. He always made this joke of pretending that it was our choice to come to important events. Only he and Amanda thought it was funny.

I got up out of the bed, leaving *From the Mixed-Up Files*, and came out with my family onto the street.

The sun was drowning in a sea of clouds.

A series of densely leaved (is that a word? Do you use it that way??) trees surrounded the condominium building. In it there was a small bench. As we walked by, I noticed that there was someone there, scribbling a thin piece of coal onto a pad of paper. I peeked to see what he was drawing; I was curious to see what people in this town were like. Perhaps, I thought this would give me some clue.

It was a picture of a cat in a suit, its eyes dark and hollow. It was saying:

WE'RE ALL MONSTERS HERE

I shivered involuntarily.

We walked past the candy store. We walked past a supermarket, THE JUMPING

JEHOSHAPHAT. We walked past a bookstore, SIMPERING OAK BOOKS. We

walked past a school, SNICKET JUNIOR HIGH. We walked past ANOTHER school, BOSCH ELEMENTARY. We walked past some homes situated near the schools. *Why, oh why couldn't my parents have bought one of those?*

We walked through the cobblestone streets, past ivy-covered brick buildings and dingy alleys, to the town hall—near the entrance of Spoon Valley—just as the clock on the top of the building clicked to 9:15.

It was a terrifyingly large building; it looked like something you'd see in a history textbook, only it wasn't, it was here and it was SO BIG. There were grey stone pillars that held up an extravagant, sloping black granite roof. That connected to a tall tower with a large clock and a bell. I had heard its chimes—*[here the subject makes a sound that we can assume is her mimicking the sound the bell makes]*—when I was reading.

The interior of the building, as we walked in, was notably as dark as the exteriors. A single lightbulb wound down from the sloped roof, but that was the only light.

Suddenly a face appeared out of the darkness, holding a small candle. "HI!" she said in a far too



cheerful tone to belong to anyone human. "I'm Amy. Welcome to Spoon Valley!"

"Thank you," said Dad, holding out his hand for her to shake. "I'm Fred Pasternack."

"Nice to meet you!" she giggled. Her mouth opened and closed animatedly, like a Muppet. I suppressed a giggle myself as I imagined her as Kermit the Frog. "You guys can go right up to see Gladys. But she'll only take one of you at a time," she warned. Here I noticed that she was clutching a small clipboard, but as soon as the image appeared, it vanished as she leaned forward to show us the way to the quarters of whoever Gladys was.

We went up hollow stairs that complained loudly as our feet smacked against it. Amanda looked about ready to fall asleep from fatigue; she was clutching the beloved Rabbit Bunny in one hand and Mom's in the other. Victoria was groaning very quietly behind me. I didn't look behind me.

As we ascended, it grew darker and darker, until we could barely see each other. "Mommy, I'm scared," Amanda whimpered. She was afraid of the dark. I wasn't. I was afraid of what might be *in* the dark, such as a serial killer or other type of murderer.

"Here it is!" announced Amy suddenly, who had been in front of all of us, leading the way up the stairs. "I'll have to close the door behind you. I'm sorry. She doesn't like the light."

I couldn't see what she was talking about. There was a long, dark hallway, void of any light, beginning at a balcony looking down at the room we had stepped into.

“It’s—it’s the balcony. Sorry!” She smiled and then dived into the darkness. It was the last time I saw her face.

Amanda’s lower lip trembled. Mom hoisted her onto her back. “OOF!” she exclaimed. “Amanda, you’re getting a little old for this.” She sighed as Amanda squeezed her, holding out Rabbit Bunny for her to hold. “I’m not going to hold your rabbit for you. You’re old enough to do that yourself.”

Amanda tried to hand it to Victoria, who recoiled, and to Dad, who said the same thing as Mom. I got stuck with holding the thing.

We ventured down the long, dark hallway. It was silent as a grave, and just as dark besides. I wanted to hold someone’s hand, because honestly, I was a little scared too, but I was too old for that and besides, Dad wasn’t really someone who liked doing that. So we all walked on in silence and foreboding, fear clouding around us.

A cheerful voice cut through the darkness. “She’s ready to see you now. But only the adults,” she said, and then there was a noise that sounded like the patting of a head. “And you, of course.” I’m pretty sure Amy touched Amanda’s nose right then. “All right, thank you, Amy...?”

“Amy Mullinger,” she responded, upbeat as ever. They shook hands. And then Dad, Mom and Amanda entered the room.

I couldn’t tell where it was if not for the slight creaking that sounded when Amy opened the door for Dad.

I leaned against what I was pretty sure was a wall of the hallway, closing my eyes. It made no difference. *What a strange town!* I thought. *The mayor, or whoever lives in here, hates light? And no one at all is up?*

What is going on?

Pretty soon Victoria got called in and I got to hand Rabbit Bunny back over to Amanda. I'd tried to listen in to the conversation between my parents and the odd person that lay inside the door but found that the wall was too thick to do so. I was ever more intrigued by this strange whoever who was inside. Why did they hate light so much?

I twiddled with my thumbs (actually, it's somewhat difficult if it's in the dark) and tried to think about something like... kittens. I like kittens. For years I've begged Mom and Dad for one, but unfortunately, they'd always replied "maybe when Amanda's a bit older". Of course, that was when they *did* respond at all. That's the problem with Mom and Dad. Sometimes they forget I even exist, or at least seem to. I am the expendable, the ordinary, the middle child who can always be depended on to try things out for the younger one and stitch up the rips of mistakes made by the older one. The one who can always be relied upon to get good grades and do whatever they asked. To never take any chances.

This was a pretty big chance Mom and Dad had taken here. Of course, maybe they hadn't known how weird it was going to be when Dad was offered the job. Maybe they were just as confused as I was.

But a twisted feeling inside me told me that they were both in on the whole thing.

Whatever that was.

After about a thousand repetitions of thumb-twiddling, Victoria emerged from the room (I could hear her footsteps). Amy put a cold hand on my shoulder and ushered me into the room, then closed the door behind me. *Thump*.

There was complete darkness. Again.

Then two glinting emeralds appeared out of the darkness, shimmering moons in the night sky. I was tempted to reach out and touch them, but then I realized that they were eyes—the eyes of whoever resided behind the door. I shivered.

A nasal voice cut the silence. “Which one are you?” It was a woman’s voice, I could tell.

“Um, what?” I said intelligently.

“Which Pasternack. I’ve seen most of them already. Which one are you, and will there be more?”

“Um—no more, ma’am, I’m the last one. My name’s Lydia, Lydia Pasternack. Nice to meet you, ma’am!” I thrust out my hand and then immediately retracted it when I realized that she couldn’t see it. Mid-withdrawal, however, she reached out and shook it. Her hand was calloused and worn, with more than one pimple peppering the palm. “I’m Gladys,” she said, “Gladys Hatcher. I’m the mayor, though—” here she gave a coarse laugh like I had heard Mr. Banter squeeze out so many times before—“I’m sure you knew that already.”

“No, ma’am, I didn’t.”

“Well, why?”

“My parents didn’t tell me.”

“Well, your parents must have a penchant for keeping secrets, because everyone around here knows my name and why I’m here. Now. Do you know what’s special about our town, Lydia? The thing that separates it from every other small Oregon town out there?”

“No,” I responded, though I had a sinking feeling that I already knew, somewhere in my brain.

“Our town is special, Lydia Pasternack, because we are all nocturnal whether we like it or not. Now, do I need to go through the rules, or did your parents already tell you...” The rest of her words didn’t reach me. Thoughts were racing through my mind as fast as my heart. Most of them were questions about my parents:

Why didn’t they tell me?

How did Dad get a job here?

Had they known?

Mrs. Hatcher’s voice cut through my thoughts. “If you are found out in the sunlight... well, suffice to say, no one in this town has ever seen the sun, since they moved here, that is, and lived to tell the tale. If you are found in the sunlight...” she paused here dramatically. “If you are found, you will be dealt with. Now, how old are you?”

“What?” I wasn’t expecting such a question after the unexpected subject matter of nary a few seconds ago. “Uh, twelve. I’ll be thirteen in two weeks.” I made an effort to compose myself. Even though this lady couldn’t see me, I should still probably be conscientious.

“All right. You may go.” And with that, Amy opened the door again and Gladys Hatcher’s glinting emerald eyes disappeared once more into the darkness.

[Chapter Four]

Why Can't It Be a Normal Town?

We walked back to the condominium after that. By then it was nine forty-five, and it was *pitch dark*. But all of the shops were open, oddly enough; I could see lights glowing pallidly in the windows. "Mom!" I looked up lovingly at my all-too-often absent maternal figure (doesn't that sound cool?). "I want to go to the bookstore!"

"Ask your father," she replied vacantly.

"Dad!" I looked up lovingly at my all-too-often absent paternal figure (that sounds cool too!). "I want to go to the bookstore!"

"Ask your mother," he replied vacantly.

"I already did," I told him.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Bedtime is five."

"Thank you!" I cried and rushed off to where I remembered the brick-and-mortar bookshop was. I checked my watch: still only nine-fifty. I had a long time.

There was a sign hanging from the bricks, covered with ivy, drooping from a chain that had rusted long ago. It read SIMPERING OAK BOOKS. I peeked inside enthusiastically.

There was a person with a long black robe hoisting a big pile of books to the corner. There was a customer there, looking at one of those self-help books that people buy for themselves but never actually read. And sitting in the window was a small black cat.

I eagerly stepped into the store. A small bell nailed to the top of the cold metal door rang slightly as I

pushed it open. With a grunt of effort, I was able to get inside the treasure trove of titles.

The cloaked person turned to look at me. It was a boy around my age with large glasses and a warm smile. "Hello!" he greeted me, and attempted to wave. In doing so, he almost dropped the pile of books he was carrying. One or two fell off the top. I dashed over to help, hoisting two tomes onto the top of a wooden bookshelf. "Here. Sorry about the trouble."

"No, no, it's nothing!" the boy replied, and smiled at me again. He set down the books very carefully by the shelf and stuck out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Kovalchuk."

How was I supposed to react to this? I've never had someone greet me like this before. I'm always invisible, always the background noise in a piece of music, always the boring part in a book. And now someone was actually greeting me? Like I've seen people do with Mom, or Dad, or Victoria? I still can't believe it!

I did what they would have done: I stuck out my hand for him to shake. "I'm Lydia. Lydia Pasternack."

We shook. His hand was slightly dusty from carrying all those books around. "Lydia," he said, trying out the word in his mouth. "Lydia. It smells like a creamsicle. I like it." He nodded. "Right then! I have to shelve these books. Every day there's more. Grandfather's arthritis makes it hard for him to shelve them, so I have to do it on the weekends. He does it on weeknights because I have to go to school." He sighed. "Are you new here?"

"Yeah, I just moved in," I nodded. "Why?"

“Because I’ve never seen you before at Snicket Junior High! And I know everyone there! Or at least I know their faces. They all think I’m annoying, but I try anyways. Maybe they’ll warm to me someday.” He put a book called “STUDYING THE MIRACLE OF EVOLUTION” on the bookshelf. It was all organized, I noticed, by the Dewey decimal system. There were small removable stickers on the spine of each title.

“Do you have... any books you might recommend?” I asked tentatively, trying not to sound *too* interested. You have to be careful with those types.

“Yes!” He snapped his fingers. “Of course! I’ll take you to the children’s section as soon as I’m done with these books... In the meantime, why don’t you meet Milo? He could always use someone to play with him.” He pointed to the wall near the checkout stand (in fact, right next to the cash register and the renovated brown bookshelf it sat on) to a stick sitting near it with three strips from a book on it. “That’s his toy,” he said. “She loves it. We made it out of a book we found in the street that someone ripped up. It’s a real shame, the way people do that sometimes.”

I had often felt the same way and gave a nod of agreement, not too vigorous (as I said, you have to be careful with those types). Then I went over to the cash register and picked up the toy. It was very lightweight and was made of, upon closer inspection, a wire that bounced when I shook it. Then I journeyed back to the window to see Milo.

He meowed when I came close and stared up at me. I blinked, slowly... slowly... s... l... o... w... l... y...

Then I wiggled the toy in front of him.

In an instant his paw shot out from the window and he was leaping, his elastic body twisting and turning to get the ruined scraps on the top of the wire. It was amazing how his body could bend in that way, but I was glad. I couldn't help but laugh as she swiped at it.

Minutes later (much faster than I would have been able to manage it) Kovalchuk emerged from the shelves. He held out a robed arm. The robe was so long it nearly obscured his pointing finger. "The children's section is that way." He began to walk towards where he was pointing. I followed him to a bookshelf decorated with light green construction paper and cut-out black cats. Above someone had carefully cut out and taped the word CHILDREN'S out of white construction paper. "Wow!" I exclaimed. "Did you make this?"

He nodded, his cheeks flaming red.

"What about that book recommendation?" I reminded him. His head snapped up from where he had been lowering it. "Yes! Those! Um... what kind of book do you like?"

I answered cautiously. "I like mystery books, where the kids have to find something out before the grown-ups do or because the grown-ups can't, or won't. I also like fantasy books with dragons and magic..."

"I have just the thing," he said. He handed me a small brown volume. There were several people on it, holding binoculars or something of the like. "It's called *The Westing Game*. It's one of my favorites. It won a Newbery!"

I examined it. “These are grown-ups on the cover,” I said skeptically. “Are you sure you didn’t...” I loathed to bring up the question. “...shelve it wrong?”

Kovalchuk made a fake-surprised face. “I’m hurt. Yes, it’s a children’s book. But most of the main characters are grown-ups. There is a kid or two though. Turtle is the best part. You’ll be glancing anxiously at your shins after reading about her!”

“You’re really good at making books sound appealing,” I said, amazed.

“It’s basically my job,” he replied.

“But you’re... how old? Thirteen?”

“Yep. Just three months ago.”

“Isn’t that a bit too young to be managing a shop by yourself?”

“I’m not alone. Grandfather does it too. Here, I’ll take you to our apartment.” He gestured to a fleet of stairs going up to a second floor of the shop which I hadn’t noticed behind the children’s shelf until now. He unhooked the small chain, which had a sign that read DO NOT MOVE PAST THIS POINT—THANK YOU taped onto it, that was blocking customers’ way into their apartment. We raced up the wooden stairs, more than one of them creaking, as Kovalchuk told me, “Grandfather has really bad arthritis in his thighs, so it hurts when he moves. He has to come down here every day, but sometimes it hurts more than other times, so I’ll end up doing all of it. It’s the only bookshop in town, so it gets good business, and rent is never in danger, but sometimes I worry about him. He’s been really sad ever since Grandmother died a few years ago. But I’m getting ahead of myself...” We

arrived at a large wooden door crudely cut out of the wall and framed by three irregularly-sized boards. Kovalchuk turned the golden doorknob and revealed a small room. There was a refrigerator to the right of where I was standing (all black, same as our own) with a magnet with the weird INK SUN SOCIETY emblem on it (also same as our own). There was also a small picture of a woman I assumed was Kovalchuk's grandmother, an old woman with curly white hair, a red shirt and a small smile. Not too big. Never too big. She had lost something in life, I could tell. But she kept smiling. Unlike my mother.

A groan came from in front of us. Kovalchuk raced further inside the room. "Grandfather! Are you all right?" He rushed towards the source of the noise. I followed him.

Sitting in a plush blue chair was a pale old man. Everything about him was pale—his eyes a cloudy grey, the hair at the sides of his head white as a sheet, his skin deathly tan. He croaked out a greeting. "Kovalchuk."

Kovalchuk nodded. "Are you all right?" he asked (no, "queried" is better. Let's try it again.) "Are you all right?" he *queried*. The old man gave a small grunt of assent. (Assent means you're saying 'yes', by the way. If you didn't know. Which you probably do.)

Kovalchuk stepped back and held out his hand in front of me, fixing his gaze on the old man.

"Grandfather, this is Lydia. She's a customer."

"Why did you bring a customer up here?" rasped the old man. "Isn't there a chain in front of the stairs?"

Kovalchuk sighed. "Grandfather, I took her up here to meet you. We're going to go now."

"She'd better," his grandfather said.

Kovalchuk rolled his eyes and then made his way back to the door, motioning for me to follow. I did. We made our way back to the bookstore's main floor.

I looked at the large clock sitting up near the beginning of the stairs. The smaller hand indicated that it was around ten-fifteen.

"How much for the book?" I asked Kovalchuk.

"Um, 3.59," he responded haltingly. "Want to make a purchase?"

"I would like to," I reassured him, "but I can't right now. I don't have my money on hand."

"All right," Kovalchuk nodded. "Do you need anything else?"

"Do you have any more book recommendations?"

"Oh, of course!" He led me back to the children's bookshelf and ran his finger against the spines of the books. *Charlotte's Web*. *The Cricket in Times Square*. *The BFG*. I had read and loved each of them.

Eventually he slid out a slim book from the shelf. "Have you read this?" He held it up. On the front was a picture of a young girl sitting and reading. In red font on the top it said: MATILDA.

"I don't believe so," I responded cautiously, recalling the protocols used around these types. There are certain protocols that you can implement (that's a fancy word for "use", but you probably already knew that) when in contact with certain types of people.

[Here the subject makes another list. We have compiled it in the way it was originally intended.]

POPULAR GIRLS. Scream and run away. They'll laugh, but they won't do anything else.

POPULAR BOYS. Make a snide comment. They'll scoff, but they won't do anything else.

OVEREXUBERANT TYPES. Act interested, but not too interested; once they're through with you in a minute or two, they'll forage for another victim.

UNDEREXUBERANT TYPES (WAIT, IS "UNDEREXUBERANT" A WORD?) *[It is not]*. Quietly creep away. They won't really care.

LOUD TYPES. Purse your lips so your mouth is a thin line of disapproval. Then, run away.

[The list ends here.]

Kovalchuk is simply overexuberant; the terrible thing is that he *wasn't losing interest*. He genuinely seems to want to spend time with me. And that's... good? Bad? I don't think I've ever had a real acquaintance. And I don't think I want one.

"It's the new book by Roald Dahl," Kovalchuk told me. "I can't believe you haven't read it. I think it's one of his best. It came out three years ago."

"Hm." I gave a small nod. "All right." I started making for the exit.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" asked Kovalchuk as I left.

"No thanks!" I called over my shoulder.

The little bell rang sadly as I opened the door to the cool night wind.

I looked out at the night sky, the stars covered by layers of clouds, like someone in a thick wool sweater. Even stars have their cold days.

Suddenly, I remembered something. *It was night.* I didn't have a flashlight! Despite the neon lights all over the town advertising various business establishments, I still felt gripped by the black. I was tempted to step back inside the bookstore and ask Kovalchuk for a flashlight, but then thought better of it. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

And so I walked back home (or at least as close to home as we were going to get in this crazy town). The CHIROPTERAN HEIGHTS sign blinked orange bubble letters cheerfully at me. I turned my head away. I was in no mood for that.

The man who had been drawing earlier on the solitary bench was still at it. I tried to look at what he was drawing as I walked through the garden leading up to the building. But he was hunched over too closely to the sketchbook for me to see.

I knocked on the wooden door of condominium C10. Mom opened it. "Hi, Lydia," she said, her voice already layered with fatigue little more than an hour into the night. Amanda soon bounded up beside her, clutching Rabbit Bunny. "Lyds! Lyds!" she cried. I pressed my lips together in a thin line and store past her into the kitchen, where Dad was reading a Poirot novel. I think it's still *The Hollow*, but... was he reading *Five Little Pigs* then, or was it during the trip? I can't remember.

"Lydia!" he greeted me, putting his finger in his book to temporarily hold his place. "I forgot to ask—

how was community service today?” Of course, that’s what my dad always asks me, loving man that he is.

“Oh, um... it was fine.”

“What did you do?” he asked—no, *queried*.

“We cleaned up after the Sping—no, the *Spring* has Sprung dance.”

“I see.” He put his finger back onto the back of the book. That’s my dad: Always interested in what I have to say.

I sighed and went back to the room, where Victoria was on the top bunk, listening to her screamy music and looking at some sort of magazine that screamed TEEN in loud pink block letters. (You know. That fluorescent pink that people love nowadays, the pink that really *screams* pink. A loud pink. You know.) I didn’t wish to disturb her so instead I quietly finished off *From the Mixed-Up Files*. No sooner had Claudia and Jamie paid for bus fare to Mrs. Frankweiler’s mansion than Mom peeked her head in through the door. “Come here,” she said. “I’ll teach you how to take out the trash here.”

I sighed. Trash is my job. Recycling and compost is Victoria’s, though I usually do it anyways. Mom and Dad never know the difference. I also do the dishwasher in the morning, and all our laundry. Victoria sometimes washes the dishes after dinner, but sometimes Dad did that. It is Amanda’s job to “cheer us up,” as Mom had put it when Victoria complained. Not that *she* does half the things she’s asked.

I followed Mom to a window that is next to the sink and behind the table. The table has carpet under it

and feeds into the living room. "This," she told me, gesturing to a large green plastic box with a lot of trash bags and flies inside of it, "is the dumpster. Throw out the trash here. Understand?" I nodded. "The trash in the kitchen is full," she said then, and left me to do what was expected. I sighed and followed her to the trash (under the sink), tying the black bag closed. Then I tossed it in the dumpster. Easier than hauling it out to the trash bags in Shindaisy.

I was suddenly very tired. The realization that I had stayed up over an hour past my bedtime was finally getting to me. It was only ten forty-five. I looked at the large black clock that hung over the refrigerator, white Roman numerals and hands contrasting with the dark surface.

How am I ever going to survive this place?

Amanda, it turned out, had seen an arcade, and Mom and Dad decided that was a PERFECT way to spend the day (they said they would sign me up for school some other time, whatever *that* means). So there we were, shuffling down the brick road, to the arcade. Amanda *claimed* she knew where it was, and we all believed her... just kidding. Mom and Dad believed her because Mom and Dad always believe her. She's their little angel-never-tell-a-lie. Soon, though, Amanda stopped skipping in front of us, her blond braids coming to rest on her pink-adorned back. "Where-where!" she whined, looking around. "My don't know where-where!" Again, no one thinks it's cute.

Oh, excuse me a minute. I got water before, but I don't really feel like stopping it now... [*The subject is almost croaking this out.*] I'm going to go.

[*We hear an owl's hoot in the distance, and the subject's footsteps vanishing. Then she returns.*]

Ah, sorry. Here we go... Amanda was always very annoying, yes, but Mom and Dad never cared. They thought she was a darling.

Victoria rolled her eyes and chewed on some gum. She never lets anyone have her gum, but she always leaves it out on the table. She went to the shopping mall with her friends in Shindaisy a lot, often bringing back boxes of gum which she never shared (and it was always, *always* spearmint—the one time Amanda asked her about it she said it had an “adult flavor for adult tastes”.) I think Victoria can't wait to be an adult. She was working on getting her driver's license, but she hadn't been able to take the driver's test again (she had flunked five times) before we left Shindaisy. [*Subject yawns.*] Maybe—maybe there's a driving school here. But I doubt it, it being such a small town and all.

Eventually Mom and Dad found the arcade for Amanda (turns out we had been going in the exact wrong direction). A flashy blue sign hooked over the top of a fabric awning, on a concrete wall, read MR. VASQUEZ'S VIDEO GAMES. Victoria tried to look the part of the disinterested teen she always played, but I could tell her interest was as strong as Amanda's to enter the arcade. I could see several kids inside, playing Space Invaders or Mrs. Pac-Man.

Amanda burst open the doors, then held one for everyone else with her newfound strength. She likes to do this and thinks it's courteous, but she gets mad at you if you don't thank her. "Thank you," I grumbled, not giving her the satisfaction of an annoyed glance. "Lydia!" Mom scolded. "Thank your sister." Apparently she hadn't heard me. I looked down at—just between you and me—the *little brat*. She beamed. "Thank you, Miss Amanda," I said in a fake-posh voice, and strode past her, steaming, to a Pac-Man machine on my left. Amanda ran after me. "Lyds! Lyds! Where-where you go?" she asked. Sometimes I wonder if she *can* say things properly and just *won't*. "I'm going to the Pac-Man machine," I said. "Ask Mom or Dad if they have a quarter, will you?"

"Do it yourself," Amanda quipped. "My won't."

"Mom?" I called to my all-too-absent parental figure (that sounds cool, so I'll use it again). "Do you have a quarter?"

"No," Mom said, "but I thought this would happen. I brought your wallet—" she dug through her purse—"since I noticed you forgot it." She placed it into my waiting hands. "What do you say to your mother?" Dad admonished me as I tried to walk away across the carpeted floor. "Uh—thank you, Mom!" I managed, gazing up at her sharp blue eyes, pointed nose and stern face. Then I ran back to Pac-Man.

I got very good at Pac-Man in elementary school, especially in fifth grade because my parents finally allowed me to walk to the Shindaisy arcade after school. Alone. Victoria sometimes went with her friends (or, by that time, varying boyfriends on dates),

but I loathed going with her because she never paid me much attention. Much like my parents, she is either reprimanding me or doesn't remember I exist.

I played Pac-Man for most of the time, before getting bored, going back home and reading a book (I think it was "The Castle in the Attic", but it could also have been "The Magician's Nephew". I don't remember).

In that short time I accumulated some degree of skill and I went to the arcade again in the beginning of sixth grade, around three times, but never for very long; arcades make me dizzy with all their flashing lights. Goodness, this *town* makes me dizzy with all its flashing lights.

But I am now reasonably good at Pac-Man. So when we went to the MR. VASQUEZ'S VIDEO GAMES, I naturally made straight for the Pac-Man machine. Admittedly, it is also the only video game I know how to play. I've heard of people going over to their friends' houses to play video games if they have a console, but Mom and Dad bought one for Victoria and not for anyone else (not that I'm complaining, I don't like video games all that much), and so that is our video game console.

Now, as this tape comes to an end, I have to tell you a little something about my memory. It's a weird memory. It remembers what it wants to remember. I can remember the entire conversation I had with Kovalchuk, but I can't remember what the drawing guy was sketching when we were walking back from the arcade. I can tell you who wrote *A Ring of Endless*

Light, but I'm stumped when you ask me my high score on Pac-Man. It's strange.

After we got back from the arcade, Mom took out some sandwich bread from her bag (she had clearly been expecting this) and went to the store to pick up lunch meat and whatever we would need to eat for the next nights. We were left to our own devices; Victoria listened to her loud and screamy music, Amanda did a coloring book with a unicorn on the front that Uncle Robbie gave her for her fourth birthday and she is only just now doing, and I read. Of course.

I finished *From the Mixed-Up Files* quickly and took out my last book before the moving truck arrived with all my others: *The Rescuers*. I got it at the library before eventually buying it at nine, and I still like the story of three mice trying to save a poet from the Black Castle. I won't tell you the details in case you want to read it and haven't yet.

While Bernard was trying to recruit Miss Bianca to perform the risky rescue the MPAS proposed, Mom came back with the meat. It was around twelve. I was starving, and I hadn't even noticed it. I fixed myself a sandwich and ate it forlornly at the dining table. Amanda smacked next to me, and Victoria had me make one for her (with, of course, the complimentary mayonnaise that we found in our refrigerator). After this meal, Victoria continued reading her TEEN! magazine and listening to her loud, screamy music per the usual. I read a bit more of my book and then remembered this. The audio journal. And I decided I'd better record it now rather than later.

Right now, I'm in my room, speaking more quietly than you'd think. Victoria can't hear me over her loud and screamy music, and Amanda is coloring in the unicorn book again. So that's all of it for today I guess. Is it Friday? Saturday? I'll have to ask Mom and Dad... Oh and now, haha, there's barely any tape on—
[The first cassette ends here.]

CASSETTE 02
Self-labeled Audio Journal, Vol. 2
In which our narrator must endure the horrors
of EVEN MORE SEVENTH GRADE
TDK SA-90 tape

Side One

[Chapter Five]

*Just When I Thought I Was Done With Seventh
Grade*

June 16, 1991

12:45 AM

Well, it was really weird sleeping last night, I can tell you that. Last... *day*? Last... *morning*? I don't know.

Mom and Dad brought out these black eye masks (they were basically cut strips of felt) with that INK SUN SOCIETY emblem on them at around four thirty, about an hour or two after I finished recording the first cassette (remember that?). Then they told us that we had to go to bed now.

Amanda was nothing but thrilled.

Victoria was nothing but contradictory.

And I was nothing but suspicious.

We all complied, regardless of what we felt; we took the masks and went to bed. But here's the weird thing. As soon as I put on the mask and closed my eyes, I instantly went to sleep. But just before that, I smelled a sickly sweet scent.

It was probably nothing. Maybe it was the lilacs in the garden outside the condominium building. Maybe whoever made these masks took the time to put a smell inside them. Whichever.

Oh yeah—I asked Mom and Dad. They said it was Sunday today. So yesterday was Saturday. Sorry.

When I woke up, I could still smell whatever I had smelled earlier, sickly sweet, but it was only a trace amount. I put my eye mask to the side and looked out the window. It was dark.

My breath hitched in my throat. How long had I been asleep? I looked across the room and saw that Amanda's stitched-up pillows were lying on the floor, vacant. Worried, I rose from my quilt (Mom and Dad had brought two extras, apparently anticipating, like so many other things, that we wouldn't have comforters on our beds) and looked at the top bunk. Victoria wasn't there.

How long had I been asleep? I didn't know.

I wandered to the kitchen to find a clock, squinting in the bright lights above, and was surprised to learn that it was NINE FORTY-FIVE. Already! I had been asleep for over twelve hours! I began to panic. Where was everyone? And then, I looked next to me and there they were, all four of them, sitting on the couch, which was under another large window glimpsing the outside. "We're going to enroll you in school," explained Dad. "Come on, be quick and get your clothes on."

I did so, everything coming rushing back. The nocturnal town... the encounters with Kovalchuk and Mrs. Hatcher... the craziness of the day... It was like remembering a bad dream, only this was worse. This was REAL. It's something that can only happen in my beloved novels, except...

...this isn't a novel. This is REAL.

After getting dressed and brushing my teeth (where are we going to go to the dentist here?), I

went to join my family, who were by this time putting on their shoes to leave. I sat down and did the same.

Then we left at last. The night air filled my lungs with—well, now I'd like to say cheese, that would sound cool: *The night air filled my lungs with cheese.* But it really didn't fill my lungs with anything but itself, the night air, so the night air filled my lungs. There you go. Here it is. *The night air filled my lungs.*

The night air filled my lungs.

The night air filled my lungs.

The night air filled my lungs.

ARE YOU HAPPY NOW? [*Yes.*]

Okay, so... um... we walked back to the town hall. I was apprehensive of another meeting with Mrs. Gladys Hatcher, but I said nothing and looked around instead at all the shops. Dad had brought a flashlight (foresight, again) and was moving it in front of us, looking for something perhaps.

When we finally got to the town hall, Amy greeted us (again) and led us to an office, where her name was monogrammed on the door in block letters, and then sat down at a large desk with a very fancy computer, motioning us to sit on wood chairs in front of it. She was more intimidating than ever when she was towering in front of us with her tall desk. "We are digitizing our school records," she said. "Sorry for the delay. What is the name of the children you wish to enroll?" She sounded like a business form brought to life, or maybe an advertisement lady, like Vanna White would sound like if she ever spoke. But she doesn't. She just stands there and taps letters on a board.

Dad cleared his throat. “Victoria Egleen Pasternack, Lydia Ronald Pasternack and Amanda Rose Pasternack.” Yep, that’s right. My middle name is Ronald. I hate it. I absolutely DESPISE it. And the worst thing is whenever teachers call attendance for the first time, sometimes they’ll mistake me for a boy sitting near me, on account of the “Ronald”. It’s not even that good of a name! Dad says it was his father’s name, and a very good name, young lady, and not to question it. Dad’s parents are dead from a plane crash. They were going to visit me just after I was born. So in a way, it’s my fault that they’re dead. I don’t think about it that much. But it still lingers.

Amy tapped the keys. “All right; and what are the ages of the enrollees?” She was speaking in a strangely robotic voice. Dad glanced at us. “Victoria here is sixteen—” “Sixteen, great—” “Amanda is five—” “Five, an excellent age—” “And Lydia will be thirteen on the twenty-first of this month.”

“Mmm... thirteen, eh?” This time she didn’t smile, or speak her approval. She just nodded, slowly.

“No, no. She will *be* thirteen in a week. Or two. But for now, she’s still twelve.”

Yep, that’s me. The twelve-year-old scab. That’s the way he said it. Scornful. As if he couldn’t wait for me to grow up.

Now I feel it time to tell you something about my dad. He is sometimes a goofy person, but never to me, not since I was six; he’ll make funny faces for Amanda, and he’ll tease Victoria, but never for me. It’s strange.

“All right then!” Amy said cheerfully, pulling out a flimsy paper from a slot in her boxy computer. It was all dotted, but it said:

VICTORIA PASTERNAK. TENTH GRADE. COLFER HIGH.

LYDIA PASTERNAK. SEVENTH GRADE. SNICKET JUNIOR HIGH.

AMANDA PASTERNAK. KINDERGARTEN. BOSCH ELEMENTARY.

Tomorrow, I have to face MORE junior high. Just when a glorious summer lay before me.

As we walked back from the town hall, Amanda asked, “Mom? Churchie?”

And she was right; we do go to church in the mornings usually. But seeing as there was no *morning* here, at least not in the normal sense, perhaps we wouldn’t be at church?

Mom and Dad are both Christians—well, so are we—the family; and took us to church in Shindaisy. I first went to school at a church we went to before we moved there; they were holding a preschool. I remember oddly a lot about it. There was another small girl my age there, called Daphne; against all odds, we became friends. I had learned to read at around that age (around three or four) and would just sit in the corner, reading a Curious George book. I remember very clearly it was the first book I was reading when she first came up to me.

We were both younger than Amanda is now, and didn’t quite know how to speak to other people our age, and so she had tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Um, hello? Do you wanna be my friend?”

I remember blinking at her and taking over a minute to process the incredible information that someone wanted to be my friend. We were halfway through preschool and I had already kind of given up on ever finding a friend. I said, “Um, yes!” Back then, we all began all of our questions with “um” because it sounded more “questioning” (at least, that was what we told the adults). In reality, though, we just didn’t know how to pose a question without the “um”. Our minds couldn’t comprehend it.

Ahaha, I’m getting *way* off on a tangent. We were... what did I say... something about... ah, yes! Amanda was asking Mom about church.

Mom patted her on the head, as usual, and she gazed up at her with a wide, contented smile. “We’ll find a way,” she told Amanda, but her voice was absent, lacking emotion. “It’s going to be fine.”

Whenever grown-ups tell you such a thing, it’s usually a lie. The mere fact that they need to tell you this should indicate that, in fact, everything is *not* fine and you should probably scream and panic. But Amanda believed it. She’s five years old.

This is the kind of gullibility we all had at that age.

We walked home in silence, except for Victoria’s occasional moaning noises. We, of course, walked past the bookshop, but I didn’t have cash on my person and anyways wouldn’t have returned so early, so I didn’t ask. We have yet to catch another glimpse of OLD JUNE’S, but I’m pretty sure it just wasn’t on the road from Chiropteran Heights to the town hall. But on the other hand, I haven’t seen any schools, either.

I'm dreading the return of my academic career. I was looking forward to a pleasant summer! In a new town with a sprawling library. The Upper Norkina County library was cozy, but it was small and I read all the books that were in the children's section that appealed to me by the time I was eleven years old. I was looking forward to having a nice big library full of new books for me when I came here. But I haven't seen a single one.

Even our school library in Upper Norkina County Junior High School was lackluster. "Call-Me-Lois" was very nitpicky about what kind of books went into children's "impressionable minds" (in her opinion, books on introductory trigonometry were "salubrious to young minds", at least that's what *she* said). I disagree. Nonfiction is very thick. It's the one genre I won't read, aside from science fiction. I don't like science fiction because it's very complicated and it is very boring sometimes. But maybe *The War of the Worlds* wasn't the best introduction to the genre. I read it in January and was nearly bored to death.

When we were nearing the condominium, I noticed the man sketching in the gardens wasn't there.

"Our dear old home!" Dad said when he entered the condominium. I didn't feel the same way and instead stared at a nail which someone had stuck into the plaster wall. Victoria chewed her gum. Amanda reciprocated Dad's sentiment, saying "What a lovely housie, sweetie". Mom stared at the ground mournfully and said nothing, but she was gripping

Amanda's hand so tightly that the tips of her knuckles had white creeping over them, like frost.

She strode almost immediately into the bathroom, grabbing a very familiar notebook with rubber bands all round it. *Arpeggio of Life and Death*. The sacred ritual of going into a quiet space and reading Daniel's book.

I had hoped, amid the kerfuffle of trying to organize our move, that she would forget all about that.

The moving van will come in the morning—or evening, or whatever, but I won't be there to see it. I'll be sleeping.

After this, I read. Of course. I finally finished off *The Rescuers*.

Then I took out a Sherlock Holmes tape. Grand script underneath the reels told me the recording was from the BALLYMOTE TAPE LIBRARY. I got out the tape deck from the back of the car and popped it in. I listened to another boring advertisement about Petri Wine (the family that took time to bring you good wine) and then the adventure began: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band". I'd found these tapes at that garage sale when I was ten years old, the one with the old man who had given me *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for seventy-five cents each. There were three of them, there were. But I've only taken this one on the way to Spoon Valley, the adventure about a mysterious murder and a woman who is afraid she will befall the same fate. (The second side's mystery isn't as clever; it's simply a short mystery about a ship voyage they had once taken.)

Then I listened to the recording from a time past about a time further past. *Transmitted to our men and women overseas by...* It is a product of its time, the recording was, and its time was World War Two: a time when people were in a constant state of insecurity and familiar voices on the family radio every week brought them some degree of comfort and security. For an instant, their troubles vanished.

You can do all this with a book, of course. But no great actor has ever written a book except if it is his memoirs.

Before I could get to the actual story, I was called for some meal—Dad said it was lunch, I asked where was breakfast, then, he said that there hadn't been time for lunch, what do you mean, and so I shut my mouth.

I made myself a turkey sandwich, like yesterday, and ate it in silence. Then I went back to our room and listened to Basil Rathbone solve a baffling crime.

That brings us to about here. This is rather early but I don't think I can record any more for the rest of the day. Mom and Dad want to go Somewhere for dinner, and you know what that means. That means something they like but no one else does.

So goodbye, for now—[*Click. Whirr. The tape is silent for a fraction of a second.*]

June 16, 1991

3:16 AM

I'm back... earlier than I thought. Tonight, Mom and Dad dragged us to dinner. It was a small diner,

and maggots were slowly eating it. Maybe it was termites. I couldn't figure it out.

There were candles on the tables, and paper children's menus with a yellow plastic cup of stubby crayons next to them. I am not yet thirteen (just a week more), so I had to color the meatballs depicted on the flimsy menu cerulean blue and choose between a stringy grilled cheese, a miniscule portion of spaghetti or a plate of meatballs. I didn't want any of this. I hate Italian food (if this even counts as that).

Dad tried to make conversation by suggesting we play the perennial favorite "Guess What Kind of Trash Receptacle I'm Thinking Of" (or so he always said, but no one ever wanted to play with him, excepting of course himself, and people don't play games with themselves unless it's with their stuffed animals. True story). So he just pulled out one of his pocket Poirot novels and read in silence. Amanda scribbled aggressively and Victoria chewed her gum. Mom stared out the window forlornly. I drew small murky green frogs on the side of my menu. Finally, someone came. "Hi, Rita's Roarin' Restaurant! Can I take your order?"

Dad fired off our orders and the man who had appeared at our chocolate-brown table scribbled them hastily on a yellow notepad. He was very tall and had a flamboyant red bowtie on his neck. The nerve.

Then he scurried off behind a wooden door, his shoes clacking on the checkered linoleum—out of sync, too.

Dad watched him go, then turned to us, attempting to start up another game of “Guess What Kind of Trash Receptacle I’m Thinking Of”. He was unsuccessful.

Amanda showed her “masterwork” off to us a few minutes later, having finished scribbling. Victoria side-eyed it, then moaned “Wow. A real Monet, you are.” Dad nudged Mom, who was still staring out the window, and said, “Maisie, look at what a beautiful picture our darling Amanda has drawn.” Mom looked at it. I looked up from my mentally challenging testament to my artistic skills (the frogs were really ugly) and stared at it. It was a dog, the same dog I had been drawing frogs all over, with a checkered vest and a large nose sniffing the air, as if its affairs were much more important than ours, thank you very much. It was scribbled in with yellow and red all over, so that it looked like the bloody murder scene of a canary. It didn’t look like a masterpiece in the slightest. I said nothing.

I wrote a speech bubble on one of the frogs: *It’s not easy being green*. But what I really meant was: *It’s not easy being Lydia Pasternack*.

Our food came after about thirty minutes, during which I completely covered my paper in frogs, Amanda drew a “magical unicorn” on the other side of her paper, Victoria twiddled her thumbs and tried to look disinterested, and Mom and Dad talked about our move. They were being all whispery about it, so I eavesdropped. Here’s what I heard: First, Mom said “...Fred, the cost is dramatically cheaper than what we had in Idaho. We can certainly afford a house.” To

which Dad responded, "Maisie, we don't need a house. Look how much the girls love it." By "the girls" he meant Amanda, who had basically spent the entire time doodling in various coloring books. Mom and Dad were both convinced she was the next Jack... what was his name? Jack Prelutsky? No, that's the poet... Jack... Polansky? No, that was the annoying boy in fifth grade who shoved a paper plane up my nose, then said I did it myself... Jack... Pollock? I'm pretty sure it was Jack Pollock. No. Jackson Pollock. Yes, that's right. *[subject snaps fingers]* It was definitely Jackson Pollock.

Mom said, "But I'm not asking how the girls feel, Fred. I'm asking how *you* feel." Dad said, "I don't care one way or the other." Mom said, "I don't feel any way either, Fred, so it's up to you to decide." Dad said, "Let's just stay in the apartment." Then he said something *really* weird. "We're close to friends there."

What friends could my parents possibly have in this creepy little town?

You could tell Mom was about to respond, but before she could, our waiter arrived at last with our food. We all tucked in.

Then we left, and, well, here we are now. There's all the interesting parts of it.

Tomorrow is the first day of school. Oh boy.
Am I ever *excited*.

[Chapter Six]

More Junior High! Yippee Skip!

June 17, 1991

3:28 AM

I hate school. That's the truth. Today was no better than I expected it to be.

That said, it wasn't all that terrible, either.

We were sent to bed early last night (only four fifty! Why?) and I, again, smelled that sickly sweet scent. I still can't figure out what it is, but I—again—slept until around nine. Then Amanda yelled into my ear and I was shaken from an unsettling and bizarre dream about being a cockroach and hiding under the bed, unable to do anything but gibber about. Breakfast was cereal, and Dad, not having left yet, ate with us. Mom was in her room, having “a little time to herself”, though we all know what that means: *Arpeggio*. Amanda crunched her “Cheeries” and I ate my Frosted Flakes quietly while Dad read the paper. Which was surprising. I hadn't known there was a newspaper in this town.

It was called the PAPER + INK. In the upper left corner of the paper there was the emblem. Again.

I couldn't read the headline, because Dad was covering it with his hand (the other one was on his stark white coffee cup), but I could see a comic strip poking out. Once Amanda noticed that, I figured, she'd be occupied for the day.

After breakfast, I had to pack a sack lunch. I chose a turkey sandwich, like I have the past few days, and smuggled *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* inside the bag as well. I thought I might need a friend.

Then I played a game of chess against my favorite stuffed animal. Dad teaches us all how to play chess when we're seven years old. He says it's "the sport of the intellectual". I said it wasn't a sport at all, but that was when I was seven. Now, I kind of understand what he meant.

Amanda hasn't been taught how to play chess yet, and Victoria wouldn't want to play with me. Dad had just left for work, and I can't recall a time in the last five years that Mom played a game with me. So I had to play it with a duck.

Sir Gilbert is a small duck, but he's really good at chess. So much so that I took him along on this journey, because I was pretty sure I was going to need his company. But I forgot he existed, quite frankly, because Mom gave away all my toys to Amanda when I was eight (I thought I was a big girl for giving them away and Mom subsequently didn't have to buy Amanda new toys). He was the only one I kept. And he's very good at chess.

So I played chess with Sir Gilbert for around half an hour. Then I had to leave for school.

Mom gave me my schoolbooks (very thick and all pitch-black) and a flashlight (which was bright orange, the theme—apparently—of this town). I walked out the door with some degree of apprehension.

With Victoria. And Amanda.

There are three schools in Spoon Valley: Bosch Elementary, Snicket Junior High and Colfer High, all on the same street. And they all start at the same time. Which is convenient for families, but not so

great for us. I liked it better when I was on the bus to Upper Norkina County Junior High School. Or—wait, no, I don't. How could I ever choose that over *anything*?

That strange emblem was on a banner over the front doors of all three of the schools. My first impression of them was that they looked quite a bit more like prisons than schools. The windows were tinted, so that one could see out of them but had no way at all of seeing *in*, which really made me wonder what the heck they taught.

The apprehension that I'd taken out the door still rooted firmly rooted in my gut, I walked Amanda into her school—Bosch Elementary—and tried not to think about what awaited me. I had tried to walk her into the school, but a lady with long black hair and a black T-shirt that was so big on her it draped over her pants like a dress was waiting outside the door for this sort of thing and said, "We'll take the child from here." At least she could tell I was a junior high schooler and not one of them. I missed Sir Gilbert already.

The door to Snicket Junior High was ajar, as if someone was planning a surprise attack on me, their worst enemy, and there was a bucket of water teetering to keep its balance on the top of the door. The stairs were made of slabs of concrete, and they had small holes in them, which I rubbed my finger in. They felt brittle, in the strong concrete, and alien. Like the craters on the surface of the moon. It only contributed further to my sense that it was a different world here, vastly different than what I was used to in

Shindaisy—good grades, no friends, Mrs. Efferin, Camille Anders, Community Service elective... It's difficult to explain, but I felt a sense of *otherness* there in the entryway of Snicket Junior High.

I swung my flashlight around the school. The building was made of bricks, and shaped like an oddly proportioned square. Bricks stuck out from the sides of it, as if they were stubbornly refusing to attach themselves to the school building, and it was so alike to the building in "Peanuts" that I reminded myself of Sally talking to that school wall. I sighed, realizing that I was only fooling myself by delaying it any longer, and opened the door to...

Total silence.

Another thing foreign to me.

Then I heard footsteps echoing down the long hallway. A man approached me. He too was wearing a dark T-shirt. His jeans were darkest gray and he loomed over me disapprovingly. He must have been more than six feet tall. "New student," he said in a condescending tone. I hate it when people do this. "The principal will see you now."

At least the lights were on.

I followed the man through the dark hallway, clutching my flashlight with white knuckles in one hand and carrying my new schoolbooks under my other arm. They were quite heavy, but I was able to carry them without an immense degree of effort.

I didn't dare ask where the man was leading me, but the hallway was *really* long—maybe on purpose. I saw the first corner after thirty seconds. All the lockers were on the left side of the hallway, and the

corners were on the right. When we got close to the third hallway, I could hear kids chorusing, “Photosynthesis, Mrs. Gruber”. I didn’t know who Mrs. Gruber was and I hoped I didn’t have her for as my Science teacher.

I lost count of corners after a while, partly because of how many there were and partly because I simply wasn’t paying attention anymore to my surroundings. I was deep in thought about the *Arpeggio*. What can it mean? What’s even inside that elasticity-bound book? Why can’t I read it? Why, oh why, is Mom so very mopey all the time?

Torturous questions, far too many—but really, what kid has less than enough questions? I could imagine them following me in a trail as I walked, holding my hands as close to my mouth as was possible and breathing on them—the school is very cold despite the summer heat outside.

Eventually, the man stopped in front of a large yellow door and gestured for me to go inside. He didn’t touch the doorknob.

It was golden, and scuffed with rust, or age, or just fingernails, or all three. I touched it. It was warm, despite the cool atmosphere of the building. *Too* warm.

I am not ashamed to say that I yelped loudly and jumped back from the door. I could hear a man with a Scottish accent grumbling from behind the door. First, “Not a bright one, this,” then the nature of the speech altered entirely and he said brightly: “Do come in.”

He opened the door. He had no hair, but he was wearing a top hat, which gave his face a cast-off,

shadowy look to it; I couldn't tell what color his eyes were. He had a thin white mustache on his upper lip and was wearing a black kilt and a white shirt with flecks of gray and black. Maybe that was just paint. Or—no. The placement was too perfect. He was smiling, but the smile seemed strained, as if he had met a hundred other kids today and he didn't want to waste time with me.

I ducked my head in a slight bow. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

He laughed, but it sounded strained, too. "Sir! That's a good one, lassie!"

Lassie? How old is this guy?

"What's this about?" I said, trying to shake off my feeling of unease. "Why do you want me here?"

"You're a new student," he said. "New students need cataloguing."

Cataloguing? I didn't like the sound of that. No, I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"What grade are you in?" he asked, peering at me and ushering me into the room. There was a large desk with a red record book splayed out over it. There were three red plastic chairs in front of said desk. He motioned me to sit in one of them. They were uncomfortable, because there were nine large holes in the backs of them and they seemed to have been made for children Amanda's age and not junior high schoolers. It was a tight fit—even for me, who is small for my age—but I was able to take a seat at last.

He sat down at his desk chair. It was black with wheels and an adjusting lever, as well as a spinning mechanism. He then leafed through a stack of files

sitting next to the book, trying to find what he was looking for. I could hear him muttering “overdue water bill... maths essay from ninth grade... drat, where are you...” before he finally plucked a pink manila folder from the messy pile. “Here we are. Let’s see... Lydia Pasternack, is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Twelve years old?”

“Er—I’ll be thirteen in a week or two, sir.”

“All right.” He handed me a yellow paper with a grid on it and scribbled something on a paper he snatched from under the record book. “Go to class.” He pointed to the first name on the list on the yellow paper.

PERIOD 1. MRS. GRUBER. SCIENCE 7. CORNER 11, ROOM 9 $\frac{1}{2}$.

Oh, no.

I wanted to ask if there had been some mistake, but I didn’t, and instead thanked him as I walked out of the room. As I did so, I noticed that the other side of the doorknob had a fire-poker on it.

Suspicious.

I headed to “Corner 11, Room 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”. Upon closer inspection, I realized that the corners were numbered with small golden plates next to the ways in. I was at Corner 23 $\frac{7}{8}$, and I needed to get to Corner 11.

Then began a confusing journey. For the corners of Snicket Junior High are numbered erratically; the corner after Corner 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ is Corner 22 $\frac{8}{12}$, and the fractions don’t even seem to mean anything, they’re simply *there*. If they do have a purpose, it must be to confuse us.

At last the fractions got smaller near Corner 14 1/17, leading me to the only corner that doesn't have a fraction: Corner 11. But as I looked beyond it, I realized something else: the room numbers are also fractions. They were in halves. I was looking for Room 9 1/2, and what was staring me in the face was Room 8. Next to that was Room 8 1/2. The doors were all painted lacquer black, but the job was shoddy and bits of white shone through. On the door of Room 9 there was actually a blob of paint right there in the middle. I rubbed it. It felt like paint. Which, I guess, is obvious. Paint feels like paint. Paint is paint. What is paint? Paint!

The door of Room 9 1/2 had a sticker drooping on the top left. It was of a dog, something you would find in a sticker book, and it was smiling cheerily, its tongue lolling out of the left side of its mouth.

I want to smack it.

Still, however, I touched the black doorknob and went inside.

I could hear, before I went inside the room, Mrs. Gruber teaching some sort of annoying lesson. But when I entered, the teaching—and chattering of disinterested kids—came to an abrupt end.

Mrs. Gruber studied me. She has piercing blue eyes and white hair that falls down to her shoulders. She's dreadfully skinny, and her shirt today was striped mauve, pink, and white.

She said "You're the new student" after a small eternity. I nodded timidly.

She pointed to a desk in the second row. "Sit down."

I complied, looking around the room anxiously. The white plaster ceiling was cracked and worn, and the carpet on the floor had blobs of white paint on it spattered throughout. The desks were painted lacquer black like the doors, and also like the doors, someone had done a subpar job of it. Tan showed through.

It wasn't until I was done looking around that I realized who—or rather, *what*—was sitting next to me.

A large pink cowboy hat.

On the head of a sneering girl with red hair, freckles and excess lipstick.

"I'm Bethany Sanders," she said in a high voice. She spoke just slightly too slow, as if I was deaf in one ear. "What's your name, *friend*?" She said "friend" like it was an insult.

I looked from one side of the room to the other, and then back to the first side. Anywhere, as long as this girl wasn't there.

"Welcome to Snicket Junior High, where everyone has a good time whether they like it or not! I'm the head of the art club!" She giggled, like this was some grand joke.

Art club? They have an art club at Snicket Junior High. I was tempted to ask more about it, not because I was all that interested in art—I only signed up for art last year because I didn't have much else to choose from—but because I wanted to know what it was like, being in a club. I stopped myself, biting my tongue before this question could escape it. I could not—and still cannot—afford to give this girl the satisfaction.

BETHANY SANDERS, IF YOU ARE LISTENING TO THIS, YOUR COWBOY HAT IS ANNOYING. NOBODY LIKES IT. AND BE NICER TO OTHER PEOPLE, DANG IT! MY GOODNESS, WHAT AN ORDEAL THIS IS TURNING OUT TO BE! *[subject gasps]* Sorry. You're probably not Bethany Sanders. There are five billion other people it could be.

But if you are Bethany Sanders...

You can't see me, but I'm making a fist right now. Okay? Okay. Just—if you're Bethany Sanders, imagine I'm making a fist. The rest of you, I bear no grudge against you. For now. Maybe I do, in the future, and you've stolen these tapes. At any rate. I wish I had made a fist at Bethany Sanders when I first met her, because she **WOULD NOT LEAVE ME ALONE**. It's Camille Anders all over again. I couldn't even focus on the lesson Mrs. Gruber was trying to teach, and now I'll have to do the passage we read in the book *and* the usual worksheet as homework. Oh, my gosh, I still haven't done my homework. I'll be back la—*[Click!]*

June 17, 1991

4:32 AM

Maybe this is cutting it a bit close before—well, before the meal that happens before we go to sleep. But I had to finish my homework. Stupid homework. So all of it's done now, and I can finish the story.

After the class was finished, Bethany smiled at me sweetly and strode out. I looked at my schedule, trying to find where my next class was. *Mr. Petersen*, it said. *Corner 22 8/12, Room 26/7*. I gulped. I was going to have to navigate those hallways again.

It's not so difficult, really, once you have already been wandering them for quite some time trying to find your first class. I remembered where the corner was right away. I was so confident in my memory, in fact, that I began to run, gripping my books. I shot right past Bethany Sanders, right through a group of popular girls who were fanning themselves, for some reason, with Victorian-style hand fans, and straight into the stomach of a boy who was wearing a grey cardigan.

Kovalchuk.

He exhaled alarmingly loudly and I jumped back. "Are you all right?" I shrieked. (I was alarmed, all right? I have a right to my shrieking.) "I..." said Kovalchuk, winded. "I'll be... fine..."

He was clutching his stomach. He sure didn't look like he would be fine. His brow was scrunched in pain.

I nodded courteously and made my way to my next class, slower this time.

But Kovalchuk followed me.

When we went down the same corner, I had to ask him: "Are you stalking me?"

"No," he assured me, "of course not. My class is just down this way." He pointed.

He pointed to Room 26/7.

My eyes bugged out, and my fists curled at my sides. What a day this had been already, and I was barely starting out.

"What a coincidence," I said in an attempt to sound affable (one that likely failed). "That's my class!"

“Oh! We have it together! That’s great!” He smiled. “Mr. Petersen’s voice smells like oranges in the rain. He isn’t usually cross with us, which is great because there are lots of things the teachers get cross with me for. The desks smell like old gum, but I guess that’s fine because the oranges in the rain overpower it.”

“Oranges in the rain?” I blinked. “What are you talking about?”

He shook his head. “It’s—it’s nothing.”

“No, really, what does it mean?” I confess I was curious.

“Oh, it’s—I—that is—well—” He clearly looked uncomfortable. “Just forget I said anything.” His face was bright red, and he ran off to the class, forgetting the notion of oranges in the rain and the small fact that I was going to class with him anyways, so there was no use running away from me.

I walked inside the classroom just before the bell rang. It was small and angry, and I’m sure that if the walls could talk, like the old saying, their voices would be shrill and disdainful. The bell at Snicket Junior High is a loud clang, and it echoed inside the small room.

Mr. Petersen cleared his throat. Then he took a sip of coffee from a white mug he was holding. Then he cleared his throat again. *Ahem*. Then he took another sip of coffee. *Slurp. Ahem. Slurp*. After the umpteenth clearing of the throat, he began. “Class.”

“Class.” *Slurp*. “Did you know—” *Slurp*. “—that *David Copperfield*—” *Slurp*. “—is the one of the—” *Slurp*. “—most well-known—” *Slurp*. “—Dickens novels?” *Slurp*.

I did. Kind of.

“The novel is about—” *Slurp*. “—an orphan named David—” *Slurp*. “Copperfield.”

Well, yes. I could have guessed that. It’s always orphans with Dickens.

Kovalchuk, thankfully, didn’t give me any more trouble for the rest of the period—which isn’t worth recounting here because all Mr. Petersen did was explain what David Copperfield was about, for no apparent reason. I think he’s trying to do a unit on Dickens.

My third period is something called “Orientation”. I was pretty sure what that meant before I even got to class. They were going to tell us how junior high school went, for the kids who were confused. It was offered as an elective, in Shindaisy, though I can’t understand who on Earth—or at least, who in their right mind—would want to trade something fun for “Orientation”.

However, I was forced to take it. In my defense. I didn’t even get a choice of other electives.

The teacher, Mrs. Pear, is small, but she is strong-willed. She is around my mom’s age, but unlike my mom, she wastes no time moping. Her walls were painted black, and she was wearing thick glasses.

It was in that room that I was taught the main rules of living here.

The first rule: You can’t go out in the sunlight. Ever. Just don’t.

The second rule: Don’t cross the Ink Sun Society. Not ever. Just don’t.

The third rule: You can't dig holes. This is a sensitive environment here. Just don't.

This is a lot of "just-don't"s. But I didn't question it.

Mrs. Pear, when she was done, gave me a small orientation packet, which was clearly meant for smaller children than I. She also gave me some more of those plastic-wrapped crayons.

I placidly colored until the end of the period, upon which I rushed out of the room. Mrs. Pear is an alright teacher, but I was eager for the next class: Social Studies.

But first... whatever meal it is. Maybe lunch?

I sat at a table in the corner of the lunchroom where no one was sitting and tried to eat my sandwich in peace, but I had no such luck. Bethany Sanders came. She taunted me and tried to force her hat onto my own head ("Blonde is such a good contrast for pink!" she'd said). I said I would tell. She said, "Tell who? They all love me." She then snatched her hat from the table, where she had slammed it down (don't ask), and left.

Then, of course, Kovalchuk appeared, seemingly forgetting the "oranges in the rain" incident. He asked...

Well, he asked if I needed a book recommendation. He said to come by his shop over the weekend and he would show me some good books.

I politely declined. I was in no mood to deal with him. And besides, I'd already indulged him enough. I was hoping he would move on to another victim, like my chart says. But no. He stayed. He stayed and ate

his lunch like it was the most normal thing in the world.

What I didn't mention to him—don't mention to *anyone*—is that no one has ever deigned to eat lunch with me before.

And I felt oddly happy in that moment, chewing on that disgusting seedy bread that my mom had bought and staring at the smiling face of Kovalchuk.

I can't understand my own self sometimes.

After that was Social Studies, which Kovalchuk has for third period. After another confusing conversation (he claimed the teacher's voice smelled like plaster), we parted ways in silence. I wanted to say *something* to him, something that would assure him, but I'm very, very bad at reassurance.

Mrs. Morales, the social studies teacher, introduced to us Lewis and Clark. We all already know Lewis and Clark. Her classroom is tan, and there was a screen in the back leading to another classroom, which she kept mentioning while telling us to "keep it down". That's one of her favorite phrases.

The period passed fairly painlessly. Next, however, wasn't gym, much to my surprise. It was a "Special Lecture" class.

On the way there, I asked Kovalchuk about it. "We get them fifth period," he said. "They're about whatever..." He waved his hand around, as if indicating the space around us was "whatever". "A few of them are taught by the principal herself! And once, the mayor's assistant even came, to teach us how to be cordial! Her voice is like lemons on a hot sidewalk."

He smiled, not noticing that he had once again described a sound with a scent.

I wondered what we were going to be learning. It turned out I had nothing to worry about. The lesson was taught by Mr. Petersen, so I headed to his room, and it was about lizard anatomy. I suppose they really do want us to be prepared for the future, because he really went into detail. He was sipping his coffee less and less. It was much later in the night.

Sixth period was math. Math I had with Bethany Sanders. I barely heard the lesson, partly because I was too preoccupied with my own thoughts and partly because the teacher is extremely soft-spoken. Her name is Ms. Granger, and she has a slight lisp—*[here the subject mispronounces the word “lisp” as if a person with a lisp were saying it]*—and so she’s very hard to hear. She is the only teacher all day that has posters all over her room. It was very small. The room, I mean.

Well, anyways, after sixth period—as this school only has six periods—I got to go home with Victoria and Amanda, if you can call this home. I didn’t really have time to do anything before I rushed up here and I think we’re having the meal that I think is dinner soon and so I have to go.

[Click. Whirr. The tape is silent for several seconds.]

Side Two

[Chapter Seven]

Abnormal Is the New Normal

June 18, 1991

3:21 AM

Well, the moving truck came and brought all our stuff today. It woke me up. It was around eight, and the driver was yawning and looked very tired. “Lady,” he said to Mom as he handed our boxes over, “you must be crazy!”

Mom nodded and said nothing.

We all had to help carry the boxes into the house—before school, of course. Then I had to take out the trash, then I had—well—it was dinnertime, later than dinnertime, but it was breakfast anyways, I guess. I had cold cereal, after being “granted the privilege” of pouring Victoria and Amanda’s bowls as well. WOW! SUCH AN HONOR!

Then I had to walk to school.

I guess I should clarify some things about the periods of time here. We wake up around nine at night, whenever it gets dark. I don’t know if there’s someone standing sentinel to tell us, or if the grown-ups are using some sort of weather technology, or what, but they know. And then we eat “breakfast” either immediately after we wake up or an hour after; in any case, it has to be before ten, because at ten forty-five, we go to school, which starts at eleven. We then sit in school for a mere six periods, until it ends at three o’clock. I *just* got home. We have around half an hour for each period, and a half hour for lunch as

well. That means the teachers don't get to teach much, as I think there's some law against shortening lunch. We get around an hour to do homework before dinner at four. Then, we go to sleep at five. Never later than five.

And always, always, Mom and Dad make us wear those sleep masks. And this evening, when I woke up, it was wet. Wet with what, I wonder? With what?

Come to think of it, that sickly-sweet scent *was* stronger when I woke up...

Well, never mind. Maybe one of our neighbors was watering the lavender bush outside the complex. That poor plant. It's so emaciated it hasn't a hope of survival.

First period, this time, was kind of harmless, except for the small fact that is Bethany Sanders. She kept poking me, trying to get a reaction out. When she didn't get one, she reported me to Mrs. Gruber and claimed that I had been poking her, not the other way round. "Why, Pasternack," she said, "I didn't think you one to be trouble!"

I wasn't. But I didn't say anything.

Second period was more harmless, but Kovalchuk kept trying to talk to me. I was hoping very much that he'd move on to another victim by now, but a small part of my brain... a very tiny one... the one that always strives to be different, the one with the unpopular opinion—the party crasher, in essence—says otherwise. This part of my brain says that he wants to be my friend. And it suggests I let him.

I'm sorry this bit is in less detail than usual. I don't remember these things as well as I can some others.

The things on—was it Friday, or Saturday? I remember those much better. But I don't tend to remember school stuff as well. So, yeah. You won't get as much now.

Second period, we were taught about... well... Mr. Petersen wasn't quite clear. He went on about extensive bodies of work, all very vague.

He was trying his best, I know, but he was taking a slurp of coffee with every syllable, and it was kind of difficult to understand him sometimes. He sounds like Eeyore from those Winnie-the-Pooh movies. I can imagine him now: *SLURP!*—"Bother."

Then it was third period. It was strange. I went to Mrs. Pear's classroom, because I didn't know where else to go and was getting sort of panicked anyways and so just decided to go there. Because, really, where else would I go? I don't even know what half of the teachers teach! There's only seventeen teachers, anyways. I don't really have a lot of options. From what I'm told (from Kovalchuk, really) they mostly all work in two grades. That sounds difficult. But at least their work periods are shorter.

As soon as I entered Mrs. Pear's classroom, she began staring at me. I stared back. She continued staring. I sat down in the back of the room, where she'd told me to sit yesterday. She continued to stare at me. I tried to read a math textbook. I don't know if she was staring at me after that because my brain was too busy trying to wrap itself around what a systematic random sample really was. Why is there so many different kinds of sample? Why can't they just have *biased* and *unbiased* sample?

Well, at the end of the period, Mrs. Pear thanked me for coming to study hall, so I guess that's what her room is used for. Come to think of it, there was a sign taped on her door saying *Study Hall is closed third period*. I didn't take the time to do any more than skim it, though.

In fourth period, Mrs. Morales made somewhat of an effort to try to teach us about Lewis and Clark again. Ah, the great American educational system. Ain't it swell?

Then, in fifth period, we all stayed in her class to learn about the feeding habits of wild owls. Goodness knows why anyone would want to know that, but several kids were taking meticulous notes, as if this was the most interesting thing the school has ever taught ever. Which I guess it was, what with the owl pellets and all. But that was really the only interesting thing of the day.

I've completely skipped over lunch, which I remember quite well, but somehow as separate from the rest of the school day. So here you are: lunch. Enjoy this window into my life.

I tried to find a table without anyone. When my search was unsuccessful, I made do with sitting next to a gabbing group of eighth-grade girls. I know they were eighth graders because they told me so as they were kicking me out. I wonder if they live in the real houses, instead of the condominiums.

Then I tried to find a corner to hide in and just eat, but that too proved unsuccessful, as I bumped into Kovalchuk. Well, not bumped like yesterday, more like... Well, here's the strange thing: it seemed as if he

was *deliberately trying* to find me. Why would he be doing that?

He tried to tell me something that happened earlier in the year with a dollop of peanut butter and a student band, but I wasn't listening. I was trying to eat mu sandwich.

I didn't end up finishing it. Kovalchuk eventually stopped, then I walked to my next class.

Where does that leave me now? Mmm, sixth period. Math. Oh, boy. I *just couldn't wait* to see Bethany Sanders again, because I had some things to say to her, not all of them nice. I stormed into the math classroom with a fierce look of contempt on my face, but as soon as I entered, I could hear Bethany laughing in her seat, and though I did not look, I knew she was pointing at me. "Look at her!" she exclaimed. "Who does she think she is, some kind of serial killer? Oh, I'm so scared!" she said to the girl next to her, whose name escapes me. I clenched my fists at my sides and tried desperately not to hurl them at Bethany. I do not want to get in trouble here in this town. I can only imagine what kind of punishment the principal will think up.

I'm not really the kind to get in trouble—well, I certainly don't *try* to—so I'm sure I can stay clear of whatever the principal has for us. I've never even heard a teacher give out a detention in the two days I've been at Snicket Junior High.

I'll have to add that to the ever-growing list of mysteries.

In science, Ms. Granger lithped her way through a lesson about flower anatomy. I wasn't really listening;

I admit I had taken out *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to read again—I was so bored, and I *had* brought the book again today, just in case.

Pretty soon, the bell rang and Ms. Granger gave out worksheets, for homework. I took mine without a sound and rushed out the door, anxious to... well, to record this.

[There's a sound here that sounds like a knock on a piece of wood.] Lydia! The laundry basket is full! *[This voice sounds suspiciously like the sarcastic one the subject uses for her sister.]* Why are you sitting under your covers?

I'm—I'm—Where is the laundromat here? *[This is the subject again.]*

Mom said it was downstairs. Come on, get out of there!

[Subject turns off the tape recorder, as is noted by a slight click in the tape.]

June 19, 1991

4:02 AM

Well, I'm back from the laundromat—yep, that was where I was. And—and—well, guess who's in charge of it. *[Subject pauses for a moment, likely to be dramatic.]*

Mr. and Mrs. Sanders. Yep. And Bethany.

You see, I was walking down to the ground floor (Mom said that was where I'd find the laundromat), carrying the shared laundry basket, and I found that guy again in the middle of the hallway, drawing the same cat saying the same thing over and over again on a single page. I tried to ignore it, but it was

difficult. What on Earth do those cats even mean?
Why does he keep drawing them?

I will have to add that, too, to the list of mysteries.

If I haven't mentioned it before (maybe I have), we are on the third floor of the four-floor building that is Chiropteran Heights. So I had to walk down two flights of stairs.

The hallways are all very tan, as in the color, and the walls are made of plaster. There's a popcorn ceiling in the hallways as well. The building feels like it could fall apart at any moment. And so I felt slightly uneasy walking there. But I feel slightly uneasy walking *anywhere* in this town, so I guess it's no different from any of that.

Enough about that, though. There were laminated signs with large blue arrows taped to the plaster walls, reading LAUNDROMAT: THIS WAY. I followed them all the way to the sound of thrumming machines in condominium A3. There was a laminated sign on it that said: LAUNDROMAT. I knocked on the door tentatively.

I got a splinter.

Almost immediately, I could hear a woman's voice calling, "Bethany, get the door! I'm trying to dry these sheets over here!"

Bethany? I flinched at the mere mention of the name. *The name is fairly common*, I reminded myself. *There's no reason why it would be—*

And there my thoughts stopped, for standing in the doorway of apartment A3 was a girl, smirking under the shade of a large pink cowboy hat.

“Welcome to Laundromat! If you clean your clothes here, they will be clean! Can I take your—” here she smirked ever wider—“*clothing?*”

I looked around trying to find *someone* other than Bethany who ran this place, but found no one.

“Here,” said Bethany, “come inside.”

I didn’t want to, but I did anyways. The whole place smells very strongly of lavender, even the linoleum tiles in the kitchen, which the Sanders family has converted into a laundromat. There was eight washing machines in all, making loud noises. I gaped.

Bethany had apparently noticed me gaping, because she said, “We got a special grant from the Society. We have a refrigerator and a kitchen table in the guest room.”

She nodded like this was the most obvious thing in the world. “Now, I’ll take your money.”

I’d forgotten the money that Mom had sent me with. “Oh—all right,” I said, handing it to her.

When I’d done so, she continued to stare at me.

“It’s five dollars,” she said, “for the laundry.”

“But look at the machine,” I said. “It only takes *one* dollar.”

“Yes,” said Bethany, “but you also have to pay the Friendly Tax. Or else I get *mean*. Do you want me to get mean, *Pasternack?*” She was all up in my face, scrunching her nose up and speaking in a high, mocking tone.

“Um—no, but—”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t brought any more money.”

Well, actually, I'd brought a bit more than I thought was necessary, but she didn't have to know that.

"Um—no, but—"

"I see that *slight bulge* in your pocket. That means *money-money-money!*" She reached into my pocket and retrieved a crinkled five-dollar bill, then waved it in front of my face. "I'll take this! Thanks for paying the *Friendly Tax!*" She smiled smugly, then took the basket of laundry from me. "Will that be all?"

"Y-yes, that's all."

"Come back tomorrow!" she said, then shooed me out the door. "Thanks for paying the *Friendly Tax!*"

Her parents must wonder why their laundromat stays afloat.

I headed back here. And, well, it's almost morning, and I want to get in a few more minutes of unpacking my books. So bye now!

Oh, and I'm being called for... which meal is that? Dinner? So there.

June 20, 1991

3:42 AM

Well, my sister got out the Sega Genesis this evening. And she's been playing it nonstop. Except for school, of course.

We have been having dry toast for breakfast a lot this week. I am making breakfast a lot this week. That is why it is dry toast, because I am inept at cooking.

Today at school Mrs. Gruber tried to teach us more about photosynthesis, but none of us were really listening. Bethany Sanders kept waving a crumpled-up, then smoothed a piece of paper that was shaped suspiciously like my five-dollar bill in front of my face

and I couldn't see Mrs. Gruber, nor hear her for Bethany's relentless laughing.

And then, in second period, Mr. Petersen once again attempted to teach us about classic literature, without much success. Today he was going over the novels of Jules Verne, which I am not well versed in, if you'll recall.

In third period, my every action was under the eternally scrutinous eye of Mrs. Pear. I worked on some English homework Mr. Petersen had given us, which was basically a quiz about what he said—like *which year was Jules Verne born in?*—and wasn't all that interesting.

In fourth period, Mrs. Morales gave us what she promised would be the last lecture about Lewis and Clark. (She probably shouldn't have done that.)

During lunch, I scrunched up in a corner and ate my sandwich in silence, my eyes watching Kovalchuk and my feet immediately on the move whenever I saw him heading in my general direction. That kid is really annoying.

Then, in fifth period, I went to a lecture about moles. Why did we need to learn about moles? Beats me. But we did. We were taught by an eighth-grade teacher, Mrs. Williams, all about the different kinds of moles, how to identify them, their main diets, etc. But the strangest thing she did was—*she brought in a mole stuffed animal and began to pretend-cook it, then asked us if any of us would like to try.* "It's an important life skill," she said, trying to sell it. "Soon, you can eat just like the poor saps over on the other

side of the world.” This was clearly not the right way to sell it because someone in the front row gagged.

In sixth period, we were taught of the different kinds of data samples. One of the examples Mrs. Granger showed us was of how many people in our town read the newspaper every night. I wonder how they collect this information. I’d prefer not to know, actually.

Tomorrow is Friday, and so we’ll be having, I’m told, a School Spirit assembly. I can’t wait to see what kind of torture they’ll dream up. But for now, I have to finish my homework, so that’s all.

June 21, 1991

4:15 A. M.

Well, as it turns out, assemblies at Snicket Junior High aren’t all that exciting after all. In fact, it was really, really weird. I’ll tell you about it. But first, I’ll have to tell you about the other weird thing that happened today. You see, I was walking to school and I heard this noise; it sounded like a *skreeeeee...* and I couldn’t tell where the heck it was coming from, so I looked around, swinging my flashlight around like it was a spotlight—which I guess it was—and I saw, on the roof of the candy store, one of those stone owls—you know, the ones that people use to keep smaller animals from going near their property?—except it was turning its head to stare at *me*. I’d looked, remember? There was no one else on the street. So the question is—why was it staring at *me*? The other question is why can it even turn its head in the first place, but I guess that’s less important.

I kept my flashlight trained on its figure as I walked around and eventually bumped into a streetlight, making it flicker. For a second I was alarmed that it would go out. But it didn't, and I continued walking.

At school, things went as they usually do. Mrs. Gruber brought us some petal samples and gave us dissecting materials, but not before naming each flower's Latin name—a habit of hers. Then, in second period, we had to learn about the novels of Lewis Carroll, facts that would have been quite interesting if not for the delivery, which was abysmal. When the class was over, Kovalchuk ran over to me and began talking to me about this “amazing” new book he read yesterday. And I admit, it did sound kind of interesting, but I ran away to Mrs. Pear's class anyways, trying not to think about it. He'll move over to another victim soon, I'm sure of it.

When I entered Mrs. Pear's class, she was putting up bright pink posters. I looked at them, trying to process why this could have happened. They all said things like IF YOU BELIEVE IN YOURSELF, THEN YOU WILL BELIEVE IN YOURSELF! and IN A WORLD WHERE YOU CAN BE ANYTHING, BE A GOAT WEARING A SMALL HAT. I didn't understand how these were going to aid our learning at all, and so I asked Mrs. Pear. She said, “Oh, these were new from the Oriental Trading catalog this week, so the School Board decided we needed some pizzazz.” She said that last word, “pizzazz”, like it was part of a song. I don't think Mrs. Pear is the singing type, but I could be wrong. I put my head down and tried to focus.

“Oh, yes,” she said as soon as I started working on my essay about Lewis Carroll’s life, “we have a new student in our class today. I think he’s lost.” She poked her head out the doorway, then called, “Jack! This is your class!”

I craned my neck to see in the doorway, where a boy wearing red shorts and a long black shirt was standing there, looking stricken. Mrs. Pear called to him again, and finally he entered the class, sitting down right next to me. Of all the places he could sit. Of course.

I didn’t talk to him. He didn’t talk to me. But he did keep muttering under his breath, quiet enough that I couldn’t make any sense of what he was saying.

So, that was third period. Fourth period, Mrs. Morales went back on her promise (see? I told you) and gave us ANOTHER lecture about Lewis and Clark, and then a quiz, which was homework if we didn’t finish it (no one did). At lunch, I sat by myself and tried to eat my turkey sandwich. Kovalchuk found me after a while, though. In fifth period, we were taught about how people eat snails in different countries. I’m sensing a theme here. Weird creatures. Maybe they’ll have a different one on Monday. And in sixth period... Well, sixth period was cut short because of the assembly. Everything was cut three minutes short *except* for sixth period, which was ten minutes short, which meant we only had a small time slot, and Mrs. Granger was determined to use it. She taught us all about... what was that thing, the thing where you... oh, never mind. Then the principal’s voice came on over the announcements, saying it was time to go to

the assembly, and we marched from our respective corners to the hallway and stood outside a door right outside some corner—I forget the name. Or, number, I guess? Um... well, anyways, we were all just standing there, in a line outside that door. There were some guys behind me tossing a jet-black football to each other, and once they hit me on the head. I rubbed my head where it had hit it, feeling an awful sting. Several seconds after that, the door creaked open and not even Mrs. Gruber, standing guard by the door (her sixth period got to go first) could control the stream of teenagers that rushed into the room. I had no idea where it was that the door opened to, and so I just stood there, which turned out to be a bad decision because I got kicked more than once. Someone told me I was “ACTUALLY slow”, and then another did. I don’t know why. Maybe I was just *pretending* to be slow before, but now I’m *actually* slow. Yes, a change came over me today. I made the transition from *kind of* slow to *actually* slow.

When I finally filed myself into the room, I was surprised to find that I was standing in an auditorium. The walls were dusty black, but speckled with white; there were over three hundred seats on either side of the room gathered in front of a wooden podium in the center of the room. Standing on the podium was a man in a hat, pulled down so far we couldn’t see his face, and a black suit with a black tie and black slacks.

We sat down on the chairs and watched as he took out a microphone.

“Students of Snicket Junior High!” he said, and I recognized his voice—it was the principal.

He paused for a minute, maybe for dramatic emphasis, then said: “April fool!”

No one bothered to remind him that April Fools’ Day had been, as the name so clearly stated, in April.

He then went on to explain why people who celebrate April Fools’ Day are fools, because they celebrate the day of fools, and I quickly lost interest.

After the assembly, I trudged home in relative silence—excluding Amanda’s constant chatter.

June 22, 1991

2:25 AM

When I woke up today, I could smell it—that sickly sweet scent I’ve been smelling for over a week now. Sometimes it’s less strong, sometimes it’s really strong. When that happens, sometimes my eye mask is very slightly damp. Maybe it’s that the grown-ups are scenting them for us with some sort of oil. That would be nice of them.

As I was pouring my Frosted Flakes into a bowl, Victoria announced her plans for the day: “I,” she said, “am going to the arcade with Desmond.”

I was too perplexed to reply because I didn’t know who Desmond was.

She promptly left, perhaps to escape a conversation with me. Like I’d want to get into one.

While eating breakfast, I couldn’t help but notice the headline on Dad’s newspaper today: NEW REGULATIONS IN PLACE REGARDING HOLES. I suspected it had something to do with what I’d been told the first day of school, that I wasn’t to dig holes, but I didn’t tell Dad that. I like knowing some things that he doesn’t, because he knows ever so much.

After breakfast, I announced my plans, and Dad said, “Sure. Great. Say goodbye to your mother,” which meant “I don’t care, I’m reading the newspaper, just go already.”

I did, in fact, “say goodbye to my mother”. She gave no reply, perhaps partly because she was behind a locked door and taking a shower. I could smell her shampoo from the hall.

I gathered up my money and my flashlight and walked out the door. While leaving the apartment complex, I couldn’t help but notice that the man who always drew that cat wasn’t there today. I didn’t know what to make of that. So I just stared at the bench where he usually sits for a few seconds, then shrugged and moved on with the walk.

When I arrived at the bookstore, I immediately began searching for something, wanting to be done as soon as possible. I knew I couldn’t avoid Kovalchuk, but at least I could see him for as little time as possible.

I was just reaching the children’s section when Kovalchuk came down from the stairs. “Lydia! Hi!” he called as he came down. His shoes were very loud. “Do you need a book recommendation?”

“Well, I—I was just looking for a book—”

“Can I help you find it?”

“Sure, I guess—well—you see, I—” He was doing the exact opposite of what I’d hoped.

“By *looking for a book* do you mean you need a book recommendation, or there’s a specific book you need to find?” he probed. I was at a loss for words at

this point. I'm not exactly used to people wanting to talk to me, so what was I supposed to do?

Before I could say anything, Kovalchuk took a book from the top of the shelf. On the cover, a girl silhouetted in green looked out from the side of a ship. The title read *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*.

"This book is really good. Remember I was telling you about it earlier?" Kovalchuk started, and I let him talk as I continued perusing the shelves. "It's about a girl who gets trapped on a ship where the crew are planning to murder the captain. And, and at first, she likes the captain, but then she realizes—well, I probably shouldn't spoil it for you, but—"

I had only been half listening, but still, I was intrigued. "How much?" I was wary, since it was a hardcover book.

"Oh, only ten dollars. You get a discount since it's your first time shopping."

"Ten dollars—" I don't know what I was hoping for, but this wasn't it. I took the book from his hands and studied it. But as I read the front flap, I became more and more interested in the fate of this girl who sounded so much like me, even though she lived over three hundred years in the past. "All right," I nodded. "I'll take it."

"Great!" Kovalchuk looked like he was ready to burst from joy. "I can check you out now, if you'd like, and then you can meet Grandfather—he's still technically the owner of this place, and he'll want to know there's a new customer."

“I think he’s quite aware of my existence,” I muttered, blushing. I was recalling the unfortunate incident of last week, when Kovalchuk’s grandfather had shooed us out of the upstairs apartment.

“I think he was just grumpy that time. He was reading the newspaper. No one can interrupt the newspaper.”

“My dad does that too,” I said, and I almost laughed.

I parted with ten of my sixty dollars and Kovalchuk parted with the copy of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. He told me it had been a pleasure doing business with me, something he had no doubt heard grown-ups say sometimes when making a transaction, and I nodded politely. “Well, I’ll be on my way.”

“Hey,” he called to me as I was turning away, “wait! I have to show you something!”

“What is it?” I half-groaned, turning back.

“I—well—just come upstairs, okay?” He started walking towards the stairs, motioning for me to follow.

Against my better judgement, I did so.

Kovalchuk’s grandfather was, as I’d predicted, not so happy to see me. He told Kovalchuk that he should get himself a prettier girl. Kovalchuk groaned and waved it away. “He’s only teasing,” he told me.

If it’s possible, Kovalchuk’s apartment is even smaller than our condominium: other than the kitchen and the living room, which you walk into off the stairs, there is nothing except two bedrooms: one

for Kovalchuk and one for his grandfather. "It's not much," he said, "but it's ours. Want some Kool-Aid?"

"I don't like Kool-Aid," I informed him. We'd had it once at Frog Falls; mixed it in with bottles of water. Immediately after tasting it, I'd wanted the plain water back.

"Want some tea, then?" he offered.

"What kind do you have?"

"We have green tea, chamomile... oh, what else..."

He headed to a drawer near the refrigerator and rifled through it. "Aha!" he cried in triumph after several seconds, holding up a grey tea bag. "Our last bag of Earl Grey. I'll put on a pot, if you'd like."

"You really don't have to do this," I stammered, flustered. "You're our guest," he said. "Not by *choice!*" I explained. "It—I—You invited me!"

"You came into the shop."

I couldn't argue with that, and so I shut my mouth.

"While the teapot is busy, do you want to see my room?" Kovalchuk asked. "It's messy, but we can read in there if you want."

"Well..." The last room belonging to someone I am not related to that I was in is Daphne's, and that was years ago. "I'm not really..."

"Come on, then! What are you waiting for?" He was clearly excited to have a friend at last.

I think, maybe, he thinks I'm his friend.

I think, maybe, he isn't so terrible after all.

But we are NOT friends. To be friends with a boy is social suicide. And I've already committed social suicide once, when I started reading books for fun. I can't afford to do it again. What if people bully me?

It's small enough of a town that they might. It's not like they have anyone else to pick on, other than Kovalchuk. I'm already Bethany Sanders's target, for goodness' sake! Why should I give other people a reason to—to—to be mean to me?

Why *do* people have friends, anyways?

I don't know, but what I do know is that there's something about Kovalchuk. He's affable and easy to talk to, and the more I do the more I risk—the more I risk becoming his friend, and—can I risk that? Can I—can I become his friend, and face that?

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. There are too many things in this world I don't know and this—this is—I can't—who would have ever expected that I'd make my first acquaintance in this town, in this strange place where it's always night and we're asleep before dawn? Why?

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know

But I do know one thing.

Kovalchuk wants me as his friend.

In Kovalchuk's room, there was a pile of blankets in the corner, strewn with three books: *Superfudge* by Judy Blume, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. Don't ask me why I can remember this. I just can.

There was a boom box plugged in next to this pile of blankets, a button on which Kovalchuk pressed and music began streaming out of. It was kind of electronic, or something, and I asked him what it was. He held up a cassette with a very strange cover: eggshells filled with clouds, floating in the sky and

pouring water into a river. “What?” I blinked in confusion.

“It’s called Yanni,” he said. “That’s the artist. I found it in the music store. It’s really good.”

And as we read, I had to admit: it was pretty good.

Kovalchuk sent me home at around twelve, after I’d drained my teacup. He also loaned me the Yanni cassette, saying he didn’t mind as long as I gave it back tomorrow. I thanked him, and walked back home, reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* with my flashlight. Boy, is that book gripping! It’s about a girl named Charlotte, see? And she’s going back to America after half her life in England, and the other passengers on the ship don’t arrive... she’s forced to make friends with some of the people on the ship—either the captain, or the rest of the crew...

I guess, in a sense, that parallels my life situation in a way. Although Spoon Valley is a pretty steady ship.

When I arrived home, someone else was there. Someone unfamiliar. Someone with a shock of red hair atop his sixteen-year-old scalp, a red T-shirt advertising a band called *Desiccated Spleen* on his sixteen-year-old torso, and ragged jeans on his sixteen-year-old legs. Oh, and untied sneakers on his sixteen-year-old feet.

“Oh,” I heard Victoria say, “there’s the little brat now!” Upon seeing me, her face contorted from an annoyed frown to a sugar-sweet smile. “Oh, there you are! We were just talking about you, Desmond and I!”

I ran away to the room. Victoria continued badmouthing me: “Really, she’s such an introvert! Like, grow up!”

I'm twelve years old. I'll be thirteen on Friday.

I am certainly not a baby.

Well, I want to keep reading *Charlotte Doyle*, and Mom is calling me for lunch, so that's that for today.

June 23, 1991

4:24 AM

Today, we took a "fun family trip!" to the candy shop. Dad announced as such over breakfast: bacon and eggs, a rare treat for us (Mom's a thrifty shopper and often doesn't buy bacon, because of the high price tag; Dad wholeheartedly supports this). "Your mother and I have decided," he said, "to go on a fun family trip!"

Victoria scowled. "Fun family trip, my foot."

Amanda beamed, and began chanting "fun family trip! Fun family trip!" till Victoria smacked her in the thigh and she shut up, to which Dad said: "Victoria! Be kind!" Victoria, for her part, simply rolled her eyes and continued eating bacon.

"As I was saying," continued Dad after the kerfuffle was over, "we are going to the sweet shop today!"

I don't know what I'd been expecting when we walked in—certainly not Wonka's chocolate factory—but OLD JUNE'S wasn't it. It was rather dilapidated, now that I think about it. The peeling white wallpaper did not look appealing in contrast to the multicolored jars of sweets up against it. Gummy candies, all... which, of course, Amanda was all over. I did not wish to spend one of my two parent-sponsored sweets on one of these and so turned to the Chocolate Wall, where you could fill a small plastic bag with any chocolate displayed and conveniently labeled in scratchy

handwriting. I got what I'm pretty sure was a caramel and a peppermint crème, then spent the rest of the time (while Amanda was complaining about how hard it was to choose) trying to make out the scratchy handwriting on the boxes. Did I *really* choose what I thought I'd chosen? I couldn't tell... I could never tell... bahahahahaha... it was all part of the cashier's plan to make you buy THE WRONG CHOCOLATE. She certainly looked evil as she checked us out; her chin had a smudge of lipstick on it that looked suspiciously like blood, and she wore a sour expression, which I suppose is better than the fake smiles grown-up sometimes give, but it's not much of an improvement.

We ate on the way home. It turned out my peppermint crème was a vanilla crème.

Then we retreated into our respective areas: Amanda simply begged to be taken to the park, I read nigh one hundred pages of *Charlotte Doyle* and Victoria played Sega Genesis. Then I had to take out the trash, which was when I decided I'd better give that cassette Kovalchuk loaned me a listen.

It sounded kind of like the soundtrack for *Top Gun* (which we rented on VHS in Shindaisy), but better—there was a lot of techno-sounding bits in it. I think I like the second song the best.

Amanda whined to go to the playground, and Dad had to choose that *exact* time to start a Poirot novel, so of course I had to take her. It was fine... I guess... I just read the whole time and Amanda ran around in the dark.

I wonder if it's good for us, being in this dark all the time. Maybe it stunts our growth or something.

Uh oh. Maybe the mayor's growth is stunted and that's why she never turns the lights on in her office. That would be interesting. Come to think of it, I wonder if the mayor ever comes *out* of her office.

We got back to the condominium in time for dinner—spaghetti with canned tomato sauce.

Spaghetti with canned tomato sauce... it's a dinner our family has fairly often, since Dad works all the time and Mom is either busy with Amanda or busy with memories in her room. Sometimes, she's not even up in the evenings, which is why I sometimes make burnt toast. Amanda and Victoria love burnt toast, or at least they don't put up a fuss about it, which is perhaps in part because it's better than being starved before school.

Over dinner, Amanda explained that she'd made a new friend called "Ellen". I was instantly suspicious. No one named "Ellen" can be all that nice, I figure. She then proceeded to explain to us Ellen's favorite game (Candy Land), her favorite restaurant (that diner we went to the first day), her favorite book ("The Monster At The End of This Book"), and more which I didn't care to listen to, because I left the table. Then I recorded this, and... well... here we are.

I'm going to try to get in some reading before bedtime. So, that's the end of this.

June 24, 1991

4:00 AM

On the way to school today, Amanda wouldn't stop jabbering about Ellen, and Victoria wouldn't stop smacking her and telling her to "shut up!", a retort

which was followed by a word I can't say. You know. That one.

I arrived at school in a sort of daze, which turned out to be unfortunate because I was tripped by three different people. Now I have an unpleasant green bruise on my elbow, and I don't think it's going away anytime soon.

As I walked into first period, Mrs. Gruber motioned to talk to me. "Lydia."

"Yes?" I said uncertainly. I've never been a problem student.

"About your homework." She held up something we did last week. I don't remember what it was about.

"This is below standard."

"I'll try to do better next time."

"See to it that you will," she said, and pointed to a spot on the paper. "Fix this."

Yes, ma'am." I plodded back to my seat.

And then Bethany Sanders proceeded to interrogate me. "Hey, why'd the teacher call you to her desk, huh? Huh?"

"Stop it, Bethany," I muttered under my breath.

"Hmm? What's that? Couldn't hear you," Bethany said loudly. "Could you repeat that?"

"Bethany, is there a problem?" Mrs. Gruber asked, appearing at the side of Bethany's desk that wasn't facing me.

"Oh—no, Mrs. Gruber," Bethany stammered hurriedly.

"Good. I'm glad," the teacher said. She nodded, then walked back to her desk.

Mrs. Gruber’s desk has five purple pieces of gum stuck to it. They stick out from the black wood like sore thumbs. Sore thumbs don’t really stick out, though. Whenever I get a sore thumb, I keep it in my fist to keep it from throbbing. I stare at those five purple pieces of gum when I’m trying not to stare at Bethany Sanders. This was one of those times.

During passing period, I found Kovalchuk and returned the Yanni cassette to him. “Thank you,” I said as I handed it over. “No,” he said, “thank *you*.” “For what?” I asked quizzically.

“For returning it.”

“Oh.” I was more than a little surprised. No one has thanked me for this sort of thing before.

As we neared Mr. Petersen’s classroom, Kovalchuk asked, “So, what do you think of *Charlotte Doyle*?”

“Of what?”

“Of the book, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. What do you think of it?”

“It’s—well—it’s as good as you said it would be,” I admitted. “Very riveting, to use the words of the grown-up reviewers.”

“Ah,” Kovalchuk said, sighing, “those.” He nodded sagely. “Those are always very posh, but in the end they say one thing: you should buy this book. It’s a subtle form of advertising.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But it’s usually only on hardcover books.”

“That’s because they’re more expensive,” he explained.

At that point, we’d arrived in the classroom. We went to our respective seats.

Mr. Petersen drank an excessive amount of coffee while reading us *The Raven. Nevermore, nevermore! Now let's have some more coffee... Quoth the raven... just another slurp...* It was kind of funny.

Then in third period, Mrs. Pear announced something that was meant to be “very special”. In fact, those were her exact words. “We have been allowed to head to the computer lab to play a game!”

Computer games were for other people, people who had money enough to buy a computer. I'd never played. Jack, however, pumped his fist.

Jack turned out to be somewhat of an annoyance while we walked to the computer lab (Corner 1 3/6): “Hey, bet you can't do a headstand!” or “Hey, bet you can't kick a soccer ball all the way across the field!” I tried to ignore him, but it was difficult when he was suggesting that I couldn't do things! I hate it when people do that, but I try not to care.

When we arrived at the computer lab, there was a line of three other people waiting to use a single computer. And they were all playing the same game: *Oregon Trail*. The game looked quite simple: either you made it to Oregon, or you died of dysentery. It turned out that it was quite simple.

I died of dysentery.

Jack, however, survived, and bragged about it the whole way back to class.

When I got to fourth period, Mrs. Morales was arranging notes for a new lesson, which, surprisingly, was not about Lewis and Clark. It was about the Oregon Trail. She announced that we would be playing the game on the computer at the end of the

unit. I can't wait to die of dysentery again... oh, boy...
[in a Mickey Mouse voice] oh boy oh boy oh boy!

Amanda likes seeing *Mickey Mouse* reruns on *The Magical World of Disney*, so that's how I know the voice. I used to speak it to her a lot when she was younger and she found it greatly amusing.

At lunch, Kovalchuk sat next to me, and this time I didn't fight it. At least he wasn't as annoying as he was before. He waited when I didn't give an immediate response to his questions before pelting me with more. He asked me about my favorite book, and I said I couldn't choose. He agreed. He also asked me about my life before this town, if I'd gone anywhere. And I told him about the plane.

The plane. I don't think I've told you about the plane, have I?

The plane happened when I was four years old. We were on a flight going to California when, suddenly, one of the wings broke off on the plane. I had the window seat, so of course I was screaming along with the woman in the window seat in front of us. One of my clearest memories of that day is the shock of red hair. Daniel looked up from his book at that point and squeezed my hand in comfort. He was fifteen, then. He smiled, and said, "It's going to be okay." I stopped screaming and looked at him. "I'm scared," I said, with all the conviction of a four-year-old mind. "I don't want to get into a plane crash."

"Look at Victoria, she's okay. Are you really more scared than her?"

"No!" I cried. The last thing I wanted was to lose to Victoria. "I can be brave!"

“Sounds good,” said Daniel, and he went back to reading his book.

Victoria, in the seat next to him, was listening to an audiobook on her Walkman (she got it for her seventh birthday! Where’s *my* Walkman?) and could barely hear anything.

The plane was forced to make an emergency landing in Tennessee. Mom and Dad, in the seats across from us, didn’t seem too shaken up. Victoria certainly wasn’t; I don’t think she realized the event had taken place until we got off the plane. But that was the last—and only—day I ever went on a plane. Mom and Dad didn’t want to risk it.

So we go to Frog Falls every summer. And it’s fun. Sometimes we go to other camping sites. But we never, ever, go very far out of state.

When I told a variation of this to Kovalchuk, he said, “I didn’t know you had siblings! What’s it like?”

“Well,” I said, then hesitated. “Well—Daniel is—”

“What? He must be, like, in college now, right? Or have his own job?”

“Well, I’d like to think so, but—”

“But what?”

“The thing is, when I was six—he—I—” I was trying to explain his death in a way that didn’t feel ham-handed. I love that expression, *ham-handed*, don’t you? [*Not really.*]

“He what? Did he die?”

“Y—yeah—”

“How?”

“Well, it was a car accident—”

“Is that why you moved? So your parents could get away from the past? I read a book once where that happened.”

“In a way, I guess...” And as the words left my mouth I realized it was true.

“Sorry, sorry—” Kovalchuk shrank back from where he had been leaning in to hear my words.

“Why?”

“For being so intrusive.”

“No, no, it’s fine, I—”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I smiled and nodded. “Really.”

“I’m not allowed to travel,” Kovalchuk said after a brief silence. “None of us are, in this town. That’s why I asked.”

“Oh, yeah—what are the stone owls doing everywhere?” I asked. “Those are kind of creepy.”

“I don’t actually know,” said Kovalchuk. “Maybe to scare off mice?”

“But why would they be able to turn their heads? Why was one looking at *me*?”

“One was looking at you?” Kovalchuk seemed surprised.

“Yeah, when I was walking to school the other night. It was looking straight at me!”

“Come to think of it, why *is* this town nocturnal, anyways?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but now—now, I kind of want to find out.”

“Then let’s,” he suggested. “We’ll meet. At each other’s houses. And we can find out what this town is hiding. I have a LOT of questions.”

“That sounds—” I started. “That sounds... really good, actually. I’d like that.”

The bell rang for passing period at that moment.

Fifth and sixth period... I was barely thinking about what was being taught then, so I don’t remember a lot about it. I do remember thinking about the strange emblem that keeps showing up everywhere. *Ink Sun Society*. What does it mean? What does it mean?

I’ll ask Kovalchuk. Maybe he’ll know.

I want to finish the first ‘part’ of my book before bed, so goodbye... I guess...

CASSETTE 03
Self-titled *Audio Journal*, Vol. 3
In which investigation into the self-dubbed
“creepy little town” begins
Maxell UR 90 tape

Side One

[Chapter Eight]

Thirteen!

June 25, 1991

3:56 AM

Well, today wasn't all that interesting, but I suppose I've still sort of a duty to tell about it. So here we go.

Burnt toast was for breakfast again, since Mom was Out with some of her friends. I didn't even know she had friends, since she's usually so introverted. I know because we were told shortly after we woke up and Dad had to leave for work.

Oh, yeah, Dad's work. That's another mystery. He says he works at the Town Hall, record-keeping and doing "judicial assist"—which I take to mean, he helps make decisions. But I'm not really sure. He's really vague about it. He does always bring a suitcase to work, though, and I wonder what he has inside...

So many mysteries, and I've solved exactly zero percent of them.

When I woke up, I smelled that dratted smell again. I wonder why. I wonder, I wonder. I wonder so much.

When I got to the school, guess who was waiting for me. That's right, it was Bethany Sanders.

"What was that yesterday?" she practically shrieked, smiling viciously. "Why were you ignoring me, *Pasternack?*"

"That's my last name," I said, "not my first name."

“Guess what, Pasternack,” she replied, looking at her pink nails, “I don’t care.”

“Well, I—then, well—”

“Then *what*, Pasternack?” She smiled broader, but it was a cold smile, void of warmth. How Victoria smiled on Saturday, when Desmond was over.

“I—” I am, you might have noticed, very bad at words.

I turned away, and tried to read *Charlotte Doyle*. I brought it to school because I thought I’d need a friend. I was right. I’m usually right about this kind of thing.

But the bell rang at the moment I sat down on the steps to the school, so I had to shove the book back into the crook of my arm and head to first period.

Bethany, of course, wouldn’t leave me alone. She quietly followed me through the hallway to Mrs. Gruber’s class, trying very hard not to laugh and failing. When we arrived, she said, “You know, Pasternack, your footsteps are really loud.”

“I know,” I said, “and I told you. Pasternack is my last name, not my first name, Sanders.”

“Don’t be a meanie, Pasternack, or you’ll have to pay the *Friendly Tax!*” she warned, still in that high-pitched tone she always uses when she talks to me.

“I don’t want to,” I said quite possibly more loudly than I should have, staring at the purple pieces of gum and counting them over and over again, and then there was silence for a few minutes while Mrs. Gruber taught about something having to do with plants—I’ve forgotten exactly what, because as soon as she actually started the teaching (she’d been relating a

particularly dull anecdote of hers), Bethany began whispering to me. “Pasternack. Wanna see what I’ve got for lunch?”

“Not particularly, no,” I whispered back. “And I don’t appreciate your halfhearted attempts to bully me. Honestly, you should just move on.”

“That’s what everyone says at first, Pasternack.”

“How many people have you got paying the Friendly Tax?” Our voices were slowly getting louder, though we didn’t notice.

“E—enough. Now, this is how you be cool,” Bethany whispered, taking out a sandwich from her lunch sack. “It’s a Fluffernutter sandwich.”

“Yippeee skip,” I said sarcastically. Mom never buys us marshmallows except for those toasted on that yearly trip to Frog Falls, so we rarely have them on hand to make Fluffernutters.

“Be happy for me, Pasternack. It’s not my fault your parents are too poor to buy you such things.”

“Stop it!” I whisper-screamed. “You don’t know anything about me! You don’t know anything about my family!”

“Yes I do,” she said. “I know that I can take this book, and that you won’t do anything about it.” She reached towards my desk to take *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*.

I put up a good fight, but in the end, I ended up with the dust jacket and Bethany ended up with the *stuff* of the book.

At that point, Mrs. Gruber wrapped up her lecture, announcing a lack of homework for the day. I sighed

in relief and hoped whatever she'd been talking about wouldn't come up in her class again.

I was happy to run away from her room.

Second period breezed by, giving way to third period, in which Mrs. Pear did nothing but complete a crossword and we did nothing but silently complete our work. The rest of the day was sort of dull except for the investigations we initiated at lunch. By 'we' I mean me and Kovalchuk—Kovalchuk and I? I don't know. Grammar am weird.

What we did over lunch was: Kovalchuk had Cheez-Its, first, so that was the beginning of it all. We ate some Cheez-Its. Secondly, I asked him questions to see if he knew the answer, as I'm still new to this town.

"Why can't we dig holes?"

He shrugged. "Dunno."

"Why are those stone owls everywhere?"

He shrugged again. "Dunno."

Why do we have to go to school during the summer?"

"To allow for the time changes," he explained. "And also, our days are shorter in the summer because the sun is up longer. School is longer in the winter."

"Ah. Why can't we be up at sunrise?"

Shrug. "Dunno."

"Why does the mayor live in a perpetually dark room?"

Shrug. "Dunno."

"Why does the principal of our school have a fire-poker on his doorknob?"

Shrug. "Dunno."

“Why is there a computer lab with only one computer?”

Shrug. “Dunno.”

“Why is Bethany Sanders so mean to me?”

“You’re an easy target? I dunno!”

“Why is there no library in this town?”

Shrug. “Dunno.”

“Why does my condominium have the only laundromat in town, and it’s operated by Bethany Sanders?”

Shrug. “Dunno.”

“What DO you know?!” I nearly shouted.

“Um, well... I know that the Earth is spherical. I know that I’m not a dancing, giant pickle. I know that books are good. I know that I’ve lived here my whole life. I know that... er... well, in the end, that’s all I really know about the world at large,” Kovalchuk admitted.

“So you’ve *never* been out of this town?”

“Never. I told you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah... so you’ve *never* seen the sun?”

“Not as far as I recall!” he said chirpily.

“You’ve *never* been awake in the daytime?”

“Nope.”

“This town is crazy! The mayor is quite clearly—er, what’s that fancy term for crazy...”

“Mentally unstable?” suggested Kovalchuk.

“That, yes! The entire town is quite clearly caught up in some kind of conspiracy—”

“Actually,” Kovalchuk broke in, “we’re part of the entire town, aren’t we?”

“Well, yes, but if they haven’t told a couple of kids, I don’t think it’d be terribly consequential for them.”

“I’m not a kid. I’m thirteen,” protested Kovalchuk.

“And I’ll be thirteen on Friday,” I said, “but I don’t think that’s going to stop anyone thinking of us as kids.”

“So it’s to be a detective agency. What will we call our investigative services?”

“Well, no—it’s not really a detective agency,” I attempted to explain. “We should just try to figure out what’s going on in this crazy town.”

“I don’t think it’s crazy,” Kovalchuk offered ‘helpfully’.

“Of course you don’t. You’ve lived here your whole life.”

“That’s right,” he said, grinning widely. “We’re all mad here.”

“This isn’t the time to go about quoting *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*! This is serious!”

“You don’t have to say the full title, you know. You can just say *Alice in Wonderland* and people will know what you’re talking about.”

“But that’s the low-budget, low-quality Disney production! I need to distinguish the two in my mind! Especially because the Alice in Disney’s version doesn’t have any real ‘adventures’. She just wanders around.”

“Well, Carroll’s Alice does that too.”

“No, no, Carroll’s Alice—especially in *Through the Looking-Glass*—is capable! She doesn’t muck about singing songs—”

“*Muck about?* What books have you been reading that taught you such an expression?”

I sighed. “This has gone on for far too long.”

“You’re right, it has,” Kovalchuk conceded. “And we’re about to leave for fifth period anyhow.”

“Yeah. Bethany Sanders stole my book, so I’ll have to get it back.”

Kovalchuk’s expression immediately darkened, and he began muttering, “How dare she rob a valued customer of her rightfully-owned book... How *dare* she...”

“Are you quite all right?” I asked, concerned.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine,” he said, waving a hand in front of his face as if to dismiss the matter.

Then we left for fifth period.

In fifth period, we were given a “passage”—really just a page of writing—about how amphibians lick their eyes instead of blinking. It was kind of weird.

While walking to sixth period, I waited in the master hallway until I could spot Bethany Sanders and demanded that she give my book back. She had it in the crook of her arm.

“Pasternack, you’re insane if you think I’m going to give up what’s mine,” she said smugly, smiling and holding the book close to her chest.

“You’re the one who’s insane,” I snapped.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” she retorted, “and you know what insane people do?”

“What?” I dreaded the answer.

“They tear pages out of books, one by one! Hmm... maybe I am insane after all!”

By this time we had reached the class and Mrs. Granger was beginning a lesson. “What?!” I nearly screamed as Bethany—very slowly—began to open the book.

“Girllth, girllth,” I heard a voice from my right say. Mrs. Granger had appeared at our sides. “Ith there a problem?”

“No, Mrs. Granger,” said Bethany. “I was just—er—reading this book.”

Mrs. Granger shook her head. “Ith that your book?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bethany said, tipping her cowboy hat and placing a hand threateningly on the first page of *Charlotte Doyle*.

“No, it’s not!” I burst out, unable to bear this any longer. “It’s mine, and she—”

“Well, Bethany,” Mrs. Granger said, “ith thith true?”

“No! She’s lying—”

“Give it back to Lydia.”

“Fine,” grumbled Bethany at last, handing over the book.

But when I opened the book after replacing the dust jacket, I found a note:

You’ll be sorry, Pasternack! I’ll make sure you are!

I sighed and closed it.

I just got home a half an hour ago, so now I have to do my homework. I’ll have to save that paper, though—as evidence that Bethany Sanders is out to get me.

June 26, 1991

3:56 AM

I—well—I can’t even begin to describe what this has turned into. I knew I’d signed up for *something*

when I agreed to investigate this town's idiosyncrasies, but I didn't think I'd get a friendship too. But that's what it's become, I guess. A friendship. *[subject laughs slightly]* I guess—I guess—I don't know what to guess anymore. I don't have anything certain in my life anymore. It's all I can do to guess, and I can't do that very well. After all, it's only a guess.

I want something to be certain, darn it. I want something to be certain in this stupid town of ours, in this stupid life of mine.

Oh, wait, something is certain. I'll always have to take out the trash.

That's how today started, actually. I was told to take out the trash as I left the bedroom sleepily, followed by Amanda (Victoria had not woken up yet).

Still in my pajamas, I took the trash from our receptacle and threw it into the dumpster, then lining the can with a new bag. Then I got dressed and made some undercooked toast, reading *Charlotte Doyle* while I did so. It's getting very exciting—one of the shipmates has been murdered, and tension is building—and I want to read as fast as I can before the end of the day. Gosh, after I record this and finish my homework, I'm gonna read some more.

When I arrived at school after surviving a stream of sarcasm concerning how *annoying* Amanda and I were supposedly being (set off by Amanda's endless babbling about Ellen), Bethany Sanders was waiting for me at the steps again, lining her lips with a crimson-hued tube of lipstick. "Pasternack," she said, putting the cap back onto the tube. "I want my book back."

“I didn’t bring it today,” I said. “I forgot.”

“Of course,” tittered Bethany, “you forgot. Now, where is it?” She had never shown her vicious side before, and now she was packed to the gills with malice. She brandished her lipstick like it was a weapon. “Give it here, Pasternack, as part of your Friendly Tax.”

“If you’re acting like this,” I defended, “then evidently I haven’t paid. And you kept acting like this even after I paid your so-called Friendly Tax!”

“It’s called a swindle, Pasternack, and I’ll do it as many times as I want to as many people as I want. We own the only laundromat in town.” She smiled. “Some people? They don’t even realize they’re paying it.”

I clenched my fists at my sides, feeling them shake angrily, wanting to punch Bethany in the face. I envisioned it for a brief second, imagined my fist colliding with Bethany’s cheek, imagined a bloody tooth tumbling out of her mouth like it happens in movies. I was so caught up in the daydream that I didn’t notice Kovalchuk coming up from behind me. “What,” he asked Bethany, “are you doing?”

“Oh, just a little friendly banter,” she said, and uncapped her lipstick. “Nothing for you to worry your dear heart about.” She began applying it again. Her lips were now the color of a Twizzler.

I hate Twizzlers.

“Are you sure about that?” said Kovalchuk. “Because I’m pretty sure I heard you threatening Lydia.”

“No, no, not me! Never!” Bethany placed a hand on her chest, apparently shocked. A silver ring on her

index finger that I hadn't noticed before glinted briefly as she did so.

"It's fine," I hissed in Kovalchuk's ear. "I'm fine. I can handle her on my own."

"Oh." Bethany's voice cut through mine. "I get it." She grinned broadly. "Gee, you two are so cute together."

My face went beet red. So did Kovalchuk's. "WE'RE NOT DATING!" we chorused, quite possibly louder than we should have. "WE'RE JUST FRIENDS!"

Just friends... when was the last time someone considered me a friend?

Funny, that. I can't remember.

Eventually, Kovalchuk and I had to part ways (we'd shook Bethany Sanders after having a long talk about the fifth period lecture yesterday), and I was subject to the wrath of Bethany Sanders.

"You," she said as soon as I entered the classroom (she wasn't cavorting about with her friends as per the usual). "Pasternack." Her eyes narrowed and her brow furrowed into a glare. "Pasternack, Pasternack, Pasternack."

"Sanders, Sanders, Sanders," I said, sitting down next to her.

"Pasternack, you should really work on that attitude of yours," she said annoyingly.

"So should you," I said, trying to match her level of annoyingness. Is annoyingness a word? [*Yes.*]

"Meanie!" Bethany cried, pointing a glossy-red finger at me. "Pasternack, you're such a big meanie!"

"Use proper grammar," I said sarcastically. "It's 'Lydia, you're being unkind'."

“Meanie! Meanie! Pasternack’s a meanie!
Pasternack’s a meanie!” she singsonged. Then she
started singing another song.

That song, oh—that song... that awful song... it’s
just a shame, that song. [*subject chuckles*] Get it?

“Dawes and Pasternack, sittin’ in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-
N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage—”

“SHUT UP—”

“—then comes the baby in the baby carriage!”

“—THAT’S NOT—”

“—That’s not all, that’s not all, give the baby
alcohol!”

I’ve never heard *that* verse before.

Bethany then began reciting another famous
rhyme: “Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her mother
forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she
gave her mother forty-one! Andrew Borden now is
dead—Lizzie hit him on the head. Up in heaven he
will sing, on the gallows she will swing.”

I said nothing, trying to avoid her. Unfortunately,
she seemed to take this as a cue to begin singing
ANOTHER rhyme: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall! All the king’s horses
and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together
again!”

“Stop it. Mrs. Gruber is going to hear you. You’re
going to get detention.”

“Detention?” scoffed Bethany. “I’m not going to get
detention. Everybody loves me.”

“Like who?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. “Give an
example.”

“Like Dylan Kingsley,” she said. “Oh, that’s right—you’re *new*! Dylan Kingsley is my boyfriend! He thinks I’m, like, *so dreamy*.”

I blinked once, twice. “You? Dreamy?”

“Yes!” She put her palms under her chin like people do sometimes when they’re posing for photos. “Not that it’s any of *your* business, Pasternack.”

“For the last time, it’s *Lydia*—”

“For the last time, Pasternack, stop interrupting me while I’m trying to talk!”

“You’d already finished your sentence!”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean I wasn’t going to start another one!”

At that point I tried to stay silent and actually listen to the lecture, but it was far too late.

In second period, Mr. Petersen assigned us a book of what promised on the cover to be *Great Poetry*. I don’t really like poetry—people are always reading too much into it—and I’m not excited to read it. Of course, it doth contain *The Raven*, which I think is a forgivably good poem, but nobody asked me, so I just shut up and read the first poem, *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, which was direly tedious, and answered some Comprehension Questions. Then the bell rang.

In Study Hall, Jack was going on with his sports buddies when he arrived about something *they* found somewhere. I didn’t know who *they* was, but I was pretty sure I didn’t care. Not exactly sure. Maybe this would have helped with my investigation, come to think of it. Ah well. Too late now.

I finished my science homework—stating the functions of each part of the photosynthesis cycle—and twiddled my thumbs at my desk. I didn't bring *Charlotte Doyle* to school today due to the incident yesterday, and so was quite bored. I decided to read *Great Poetry* eventually, figuring that it would be easier later if I'd already given most of the poems a once-over.

I really can't tell you what most of them were about, to be honest. They were painfully dull, all of them—Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson and the lot weren't very ornate writers. Maybe there was a lower standard for entertainment in their day, I dunno.

Nevertheless, I read—make that, *braved through* most of the poems until fourth period, when we simulated making preparations for actually going on the trail as if we were living in that time (Mrs. Morales said it was practice for when we got to play the Oregon Trail game at the end of the unit). I stocked myself up on bacon, of course. I remember from when we learned about this in fourth grade, that's important. Of course I'm sure we'll go deeper into the subject now than we did in fourth grade.

During lunch I asked Kovalchuk where he'd seen *Alice in Wonderland*—the film, that is—as there doesn't seem to be many televisions in this town. We certainly don't have one, aside from the one *reserved* for the *Sega Genesis*! And that one technically belongs to Victoria.

“Oh,” he said, “we have a VHS player. We got it from the music store. They sometimes order blank ones for the Society—”

“The Society again! What’s with the Society?!”

“The Ink Sun Society? The organization that basically runs this town? Yeah, I don’t know either,” he said, dismissing the question. “Anyways, we have one of the only VHS players in town—me and Grandfather, that is—and I don’t actually watch a lot of TV, the signals are always ruined when I try to catch any show at all on any station at all, save for this boring man who always speaks in a monotone. I watched him for an hour once, kept repeating odd symbols—3. 4. 5. 1. Your. Pig. 5. 7. Bat. Wing. Code. Glum, or something like that—and then he fizzled out.

“Weird,” I said. “Weird...”

“What did you think it would be, in a town like ours? Weird is practically the definition of Spoon Valley.”

“Fair.”

When you respond like that to someone’s statement, it’s an instant conversation stopper. So we ate the rest of our lunches in silence.

I’m getting pretty tired of turkey sandwiches.

In fifth period, Mrs. Langley, a ninth-grade teacher, instructed us on common manners. Why we needed to know such things at our age, I can’t fathom... or can I? Yeah, it’s probably because most teenagers don’t have very good manners.

Teenagers...

I’ll be one of them soon.

Anyways, sixth period was pretty boring and Bethany seemed content to leave me alone for a period at least. So I have to do my homework. More tomorrow. Stay tuned.

June 27, 1991

4:42 A.M.

And now it's time for... *bum bum-bum-bum bum-bum bum bum!* The Lydia Pasternack Show! In which I drone on about my weird life!

Yeah, never mind, no one would listen to that. Not even if I paid them.

So anyways, today was kind of dull, for my last day as a twelve-year-old. I'm almost done with *Charlotte Doyle* and it's getting ever more exciting. I read all through breakfast and got scolded for reading under the table. But it's too exciting to stop, urgh! I decided I had to take it to school today, too, and finally finish it. Sadly, I didn't get such a chance. Mrs. Gruber confiscated the book when she saw me reading instead of paying attention to the lecture, which was clearly more important than the fate of a thirteen-year-old girl under the cruel hand of a murderer—oops. Probably shouldn't have said that. Ah well. Too late now. She gave it back to me at the end of the period. But I didn't have much other time to read in my other periods and I didn't want the book to get confiscated again, so I didn't take it out. And so school was boring. I kept staring at the forcibly black walls and willing something cool to happen, like *fungus* growing out of the walls and infecting everyone in the school. Well, maybe that wouldn't be so great in the long run. But at least it would be cool! I was also willing spiders to crawl out of the ventilation system and land on the overwhelmingly annoying head of Bethany Sanders. But that one seems less likely than the fungus. Partly because the universe wants her to

get her way. This is being recorded shortly before bedtime because I had to run some laundry down to the laundromat again after school today. And when I did that, Bethany said I had to pay the Friendly Tax, and I said no thank you, I don't have more any money on me, and Bethany said "I'll search you if I have to," and I said "Fine, go ahead," and so she fished ten dollars out of my pocket, which is why I now have only forty dollars. Good thing allowance day is tomorrow. I think Mom and Dad forgot all about it, though, considering the move.

Well, now I have to read more of the book before I'm forced to go to bed. It's a little short today, sorry...

June 28, 1991

4:12 AM

I woke up today hopeful, for once. As I walked through the hallway to prepare breakfast, it was as if my stomach was full of Pop Rocks—a candy I haven't tasted since the second grade, when Camille Anders had a birthday and passed a package out to each of us in the class. I wanted to find Dad there, cooking, or Victoria disinterestedly studying a magazine, or, heck, even Amanda singing *Borderline*—a song I've always hated—at top volume. But instead I found an empty kitchen and that big black fridge.

"Well," I said to Sir Gilbert, whom I was clutching, "I guess no one remembered."

Today, I, Lydia Pasternack, am thirteen years old. But no one remembered.

I made scrambled eggs for Victoria and Amanda and undercooked toast, heaped with butter, for Mom.

Dad managed his own breakfast, as he woke up a few minutes after I started breakfast.

I didn't mention anything, anything at all. They would just look at me strangely and say, "I thought that was in three weeks," which was not what I wanted to hear.

I, as usual, said nothing on the walk to school. At least those creepy stone owls wished me a happy birthday in their own way—I think I saw one of them flash its eyes at me as it watched me. But I can't be sure. Maybe it was a trick of the light—er, trick of the dark? Moon? Stars? Trick of the moon, or trick of the stars? I dunno which.

Well, of course you know who was waiting for me at the steps by now, don't you? Yes, it was none other than Bethany Sanders. She tipped her pink cowboy hat in greeting. "Pasternack."

"If you're trying to be nice, it's not working."

"I'm not trying to be nice, Pasternack. I'm trying to let you know exactly what your worth is," Bethany said. "Which is *nada*."

"Is that all the Spanish you know?" I said.

"That's nunya beeswax, Pasternack."

"You know, you're remarkably immature for your age. I suggest you try this magical thing called reading. It'll do wonders for your brain."

Bethany seethed, hissing through her buckteeth. "Don't think this is over, Pasternack!" She held up a fist.

"You wouldn't," I said, standing firm as she advanced towards me. Suddenly, I could smell her

perfume more strongly. “You’re too much of a goody-goody. You hate getting in trouble.”

“Oh, do I?” Bethany said. “Do I now? Wanna test that, Pasternack?” She held the up the fist closest to me and I could smell her nail polish—this time the red fingernails weren’t fake.

“Not particularly, no.” My breathing accelerated.

“Mmm... too bad!” And then her fist connected with my gut.

Ten minutes later, I, covered in bruises, sat in the principal’s chair, looking down at my untied sneakers.

“Lydia Pasternack, correct?” said the principal—no, I haven’t used *queried* in a while. Let’s use that instead—*queried* the principal.

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t *sir* me, I’m much too old for that.”

“Yes, s—” I caught myself before finishing the word.

“Good, good. Now, you seem like a good kid—in your two weeks at our school you haven’t acted out at all. So this is surprising to me.” He folded his hairy hands in. “I can’t fathom what could have provoked you to attack Bethany Sanders today.”

I didn’t attack her, I thought, she attacked me. She’s been attacking me since day one. Even out of school—

“She—er—she made fun of my lunchbox.” I have a Minnie Mouse lunchbox. It’s embarrassing. I usually bring lunch in a paper bag but we were out today, so I had to bring it in the lunchbox. I brought it out for the principal’s inspection.

He took it and studied it. “I see... and do you think that striking Bethany would make her stop teasing you?”

“...Maybe...?” I said. Did he not notice that I was covered in bruises? “I wasn’t really thinking—”

“That’s right, you didn’t think. You see, that’s a bad image on many of our teachers here at Snicket.”

I slowly nodded. “I guess...?”

“Apologize to each of them. At the beginning or end of each class.”

“Will do.” I tried to leave, but the principal continued speaking. “And, Pasternack?”

“Yes?”

“I know what you’re thinking. This is no reason to go out in the sunlight.”

The principal’s eyebrows furrowed into a glare as he said this. I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I told you not to call me sir!” he called after me as I left.

So I delivered an apology to each of my teachers at the start of my classes—extra for Mrs. Gruber because I was late. Bethany mocked me for being late, of course, and she mocked me for being so sensitive. I mocked her for trying to mock me. And I think you can tell how that went.

It was kind of an awful school day. And when I came home, it turned out that my family had forgotten my birthday after all.

I kind of stopped in the doorway when we arrived home, while Victoria and Amanda put their backpacks on the hooks near the door. I like to think I looked expectant, but I’m told I look like I’m constipated

when I'm trying to look expectant, so I don't really know what the heck I looked like then. Let's hope it was expectant.

Needless to say, no one at all noticed my expectant look. And if they did, they didn't care.

"My goodness, who is this cutie?" I felt my cheek being pulled. I looked up to see a grown-up smiling with overly white teeth.

"That's Lydia," my mom said from beside her. I've barely heard her speak since we moved here, so I barely remember what her voice sounds like. It was sort of jarring.

"How old is she?"

"Twelve."

I didn't bother to correct Mom, since *technically* she was correct. I won't be thirteen until two-thirty this afternoon.

"Lydia, this is Genevieve," Mom whispered to me when I tried to leave. "Genevieve Turner. She's a friend of ours. Treasurer for the Society." She nodded like I was supposed to know exactly what the Society was. *Again with the Society*, I thought. *What I really want to know is what the heck the Society is.*

I went into the kitchen and fixed myself a snack. While I ate, Mom and Genevieve discussed grown-up matters that Dad tells me I'll understand when I'm older but I never do. Financials and such. I heard the word "husband" at least ten times.

At least there's no school tomorrow night. I'll—I don't know whether I'm going to Kovalchuk's store or he's coming here. Either way.

I have to finish my homework—and *Charlotte Doyle*—so I'm not going to record any more today.

[Chapter Nine]

Chopin is the Music of Choice for Master Detectives

June 29, 1991

2:43 AM

I was allowed to sleep in this... evening...? I was going to say “morning”, but it really isn’t morning, is it? It’s the night. So this evening. I guess.

I woke up to the sound of sizzling bacon in a frying pan, and I was not disappointed. In the kitchen, Dad was cooking bacon.

Bacon isn’t my favorite food, but I was too glad I wasn’t making breakfast to care. I jumped out of my bed and hurriedly took out the trash—Mom and her friend were talking almost until we went to bed, and I heard a lot of scribbling and talking. The trash was full of little papers—I could tell from the weight of the bag—but Mom had closed it and left a note not to open it. I was afraid for some reason I was going to get spanked if I asked about it, so I just took out the trash while Dad made breakfast.

Spankings. I didn’t say anything about spankings yet, did I? Well, it’s a pretty common thing to do here in 1991—I dunno if your future parents’ methods are stricter or not—and I hate it. It’s the worst. Whenever Victoria, Amanda or I—it’s usually me—have done something wrong, we get a spanking. Spankings are not the worst punishment I can think of—Johnny’s parents in *The Outsiders* come to mind—but we live in some degree of fear of spanking. The last time I got spanked was before we moved here, actually—it was because I had dropped the box containing Mom’s tea set from a trip to London she had taken with her high

school. They were from the sixties, of course, so not *super* fragile, but Dad... Dad cared. Dad cared a lot. Enough to spank me. It didn't make me cry, not that time, but sometimes it does; it did when I was younger. Thank goodness they don't spank me as much as Daphne's parents used to. She would tell me horror stories all about how they would whack her if she forgot to do something, forgot to say something, forgot to forget. It was awful to hear and awful to imagine, and probably even more awful-er (is that a word? It should be a word) to experience.

After breakfast, Dad left to go someplace. When he goes places, he doesn't really tell us where it is—he'll just *go*, and we don't know when he'll be back (though now I guess it's certain he won't stay out late—er, early). Then Mom announced she was also going to go to Genevieve's house. Amanda whined to go and Mom didn't protest. She just—gave in. She does that more and more these past years. I remember she once got into a *really* heated argument with Dad about what kind of coffee maker they should buy (because grown-ups love their coffee makers, I guess) when I was five. But after Daniel, she kind of, I don't know, softened or something. It was sort of strange the first couple months; then we got used to it and life went on.

Victoria left also, to go to the music store—wherever that was. She admitted she didn't know but promised Desmond knew the way.

A few minutes after she left (and I was trying to finish up *Charlotte Doyle*), there was a rap at the door, which was odd. I wasn't sure Mom or Dad hadn't

invited somebody, then forgotten to attend to the visitor. But the rap was followed by six others in a rhythm that sounded suspiciously like Shave and a Haircut, so I was pretty sure it wasn't someone my parents had invited over.

"Kovalchuk?" I called, walking from the couch to the door. "Is that you?" The big golden doorknob is already full of scratches from who-knows-what, and I could feel every one as I turned it.

"Yeah!" came a voice. "It's me!"

I opened the door, feeling only slightly perturbed. "How did—how did you find me?"

"They have spies everywhere," he said, lowering his voice so that it sounded like Boris Karloff's. I must have looked pretty disturbed because he laughed and said, "It's pretty easy to find somebody around here, especially if you're like me and you know everybody. You just have to bug 'em until they give in. One guy down there on the bench—he was drawing this same thing over and over again on a big sketch pad and when I asked 'im where to find you, he just said 'Talk to the hand'. But I admit Bethany Sanders was loads more helpful."

I could only stand there as he let himself in, drowning in the sea of words that seemed to fly so effortlessly from his mouth. He was wearing a dark green T-shirt and dark jeans, and he was holding a package. A *wrapped* package. I wanted to ask after it but feared it would be impolite, so I just stood by while he entered the apartment.

"Nice place you got here," he said as he stopped, set down his parcel, and stretched. "The apartments

were built quite recently. Say, do you have any pickles?"

I blinked and then shook my head.

"Ah. Sorry, then." He had been making his way to the refrigerator. "Do you have a safe place where no grown-ups or other prying people will think to look? 'Cause the grown-ups are all in on it, you know."

"Umm..." I shook my head again.

"Okay, we can just go over to my place. Come on, it won't be long if we walk. But first—" he held out the parcel. "First, happy birthday."

I just kind of stood there for a minute. Wallowing in a cheesecake of silent tension.

Then I reached out my hand hesitantly and took the parcel. "For... me...?" I asked haltingly.

"Yeah!" Kovalchuk bobbed his head. "For you."

I opened it up slowly, savoring the feeling of having someone other than my family care enough about me to purchase a birthday present, and saw a copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

I smiled, a small smile. "Thanks..." I said quietly.

"I *really* like that book! It's one of my favorites," he explained. "I like the Island of Conclusions... I probably go there a lot—but you haven't read the book yet, have you?" he asked, stopping himself.

I shook my head yet again. I did a lot of shaking my head today.

"Okay, forget I said that. Do you want to head over to my house now?"

I nodded uncertainly, then remembered something important. All I said to Kovalchuk was "Ah!" before I rushed off to retrieve my tin of thumbtacks. I've

slowly been amassing them since the fifth grade—I think I have about thirty by now. Thumbtacks of all colors: red, green, clear, a few of them are even blue... I love my thumbtacks!

“What are those?” asked Kovalchuk when I got back and we headed out the door, pointing at the tin.

“Thumbtacks,” I said. “I thought we might need them.”

“I see,” said Kovalchuk. He nodded sagely. “I see.”

It was a short walk. Along the way, Kovalchuk pointed out the candy store, OLD JUNE’S, the one we went to last week. I told him as such and he said, “But have you been to the back room?”

“The back room?” I asked, sounding sort of stupid.

“Yeah. There, they have a bunch of candy bars that you can’t get anywhere else in this town, not even at the Jumping Jehoshaphat.”

Ah! The Jumping Jehoshaphat! That’s the grocery store! Sorry for not saying anything earlier. Ha, ha...

“Such as?” I asked.

“They have horehound candies, they have Violet Crumble, they have Hershey’s chocolate of all sorts...”

“What’s horehound?”

“It’s a little hard candy, kinda like lemon drops, and they taste like licorice kinda. That’s a lot of kindas,” he added as an afterthought.

I nodded and Kovalchuk was silent for about ten seconds, which I think is a new record for him. Then he began trying to talk me into reading *The Adventures of Tintin*, which I have no interest in doing. The debate took so long that we barely realized we

had been in SIMPERING OAK BOOKS for five minutes before we did.

“Well,” Kovalchuk said sheepishly, cutting off a sentence about the tragic fate of the character Tintin at the end of the last—unfinished—“album”, “I guess do you want to go upstairs?” Sentence construction is not Kovalchuk’s strong suit. He will say what he wants to say no matter how it comes out, and then correct himself later. This was not a sentence upon which he corrected himself.

I nodded, and Kovalchuk set aside the chain that said DO NOT MOVE PAST THIS POINT—THANK YOU and we once again entered his kitchen. His grandfather was there, apparently baking a cake of some kind.

“That smells *heavenly*, Grandfather,” Kovalchuk said as he walked in—not to me, to him.

“Thank you, Kovalchuk,” said his grandfather. He was smiling, and he adjusted his glasses to get a better look at him. “Who’ve you brought over today, eh? Your girlfriend again?” He smiled.

“Why does everyone think she’s my girlfriend?” cried Kovalchuk, exasperated. His grandfather chuckled—it was more of a cackle, really. “Because she’s *not!*”

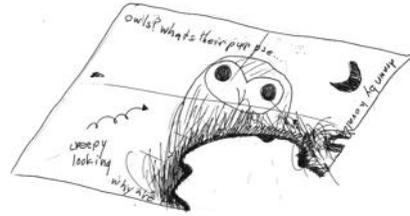
Kovalchuk led me to his room in relative silence. There, he held up several papers and a skein of red yarn. “I’m glad you brought those thumbtacks,” he said, “because we’re going to need them.”

He put on a Chopin cassette and it slowly played while we worked. We. Drew. Everything. Everything that confused us about this little crazy town.

[Special Note: The images on the following page have been salvaged from the wreckage and may contain according char marks. We have tried our best. Said pictures are assumedly drawn by the subject with Kovalchuk.]

We drew a picture of the owls, the creepy owls, the ones that

watch us, and connected them with thread to a note detailing the Ink Sun Society and what we'd inferred



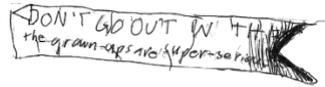
about it (practically nothing). We drew a

confused picture detailing the fifth period lessons and how confused we felt about them. We drew a picture of the mayor's forbidding gaze and wondered why she never, ever



came out of her room. We made our best

reproduction of that cat the guy on the bench never seems to stop drawing, and our wonderings about what it might mean. We had a really long scrap of paper saying "DON'T GO OUT IN THE SUNLIGHT". All



of it, we realized at last, must have been connected to the Ink Sun Society. Whatever the heck that was. I asked Kovalchuk and he said, "It's the organization that runs our town. I don't know much about it other

than that it provides funds for some, if not all, of the establishments here to help out, and they don't force us to pay rent either. I asked Grandfather once, and he said that we were very lucky we got to live here. And that was all he said." And that's all *he* said.

After the investigations, Kovalchuk offered lunch (we'd been at it for over an hour), which I happily accepted. We made grilled cheese sandwiches and sampled his grandfather's spice cake, and as we ate I learned something. Kovalchuk said, "Are you excited for break?"

"Break?" I asked. "What break?"

"The school break. We get Thursday off for the Fourth of July, and then the Friday after, and two weeks after that. Then we go into the eighth grade."

"There's a break?" I asked, delighted. I'd thought they would just... continue on with school. Forever. Kovalchuk nodded enthusiastically. "Yep! Break!"

Then he had an idea, which he indicated by snapping his fingers. "Hey, wanna watch a movie?"

"A movie?" I asked, before remembering: "Oh, that's right, you have a VHS player!"

"Yeah, what movie do you wanna watch?" he asked. "The TV is in the living room."

"I dunno," I said. "What do you have?"

We finished our sandwiches and then Kovalchuk brought out about fifteen movies. He had *Alice in Wonderland*, he had *The Parent Trap*, he had *The Outsiders*, he had *An American Tail*, he had *The Princess Bride*, he had a lot of movies. We ended up watching *The Princess Bride* 'cause Kovalchuk said it

was his favorite movie of all time and I wasn't about to argue. And it was inconceivably good!

After we watched the movie, it was getting to be three and a half hours since I'd arrived and although no one at my house will get worried if I'm out for too long, I still feel somewhat bound to come home in time for dinner. So I did, I headed home, not that my parents would care. And they didn't—Mom wasn't even home yet, and Dad was sitting back and reading the paper.

"Can I read the comics?" I asked.

"There's no comics in the Saturday paper," he said. "What's that in your hand?"

"My thumbtack collection," I explained. Does he know nothing? "They were required for a project."

He nodded. "What kind of project needs thumbtacks?"

"A thumbtack-y one?" I tried, grinning.

"All right, all right. You're twelve years old; I think you're allowed to have your secrets," he said, waving me to my bedroom. I didn't bother to mention to him that I'm thirteen. And I've been thirteen for twenty-four hours. Or about that much, anyways...

After recording this, I have to take a fresh load of laundry down to the laundromat, then I'll finish *Charlotte Doyle*! I hope. I think. Gee, I sure hope so. Hmm, maybe I'll go to the candy store? I could try the horehound candies that Kovalchuk said were good, or at least ask for them, but that's a lot of social interactions in a day and I just wanna read my book... yeah okay I'll just finish my book for now.

June 30, 1991

3:21 AM

Today began with a sound. A low, loud hoot. There was an owl, very close to our window.

Perhaps it was a dream. But no—I don't dream anymore. Not since that weird cockroach dream. The eye masks have taken care of that. Maybe it's that if I *see* nothing, I'll be *thinking about* nothing and therefore won't dream. If that's the case, the grown-ups sure have done me a favor because before we left, my dreams were really strange. The cockroach one of course was weird, but another was weirder. There was one that I had almost every night, and it started with a door. I always felt compelled to open the door. I did for about two weeks, and then one day I decided I wouldn't. When I didn't, I felt a sharp pain blossom up my right arm (I'm right-handed), the one I would normally use to open the door, and once I finally gave in and touched that bronze doorknob, it stopped. I don't remember anything about the dream other than that door. But I remember that door really well. It has a white trim, but the main color is red. The paint seems fresh—I can usually smell it, in the dream, not that there's nothing else in my nostrils in the dream—the door is the only thing there, other than a black nothingness that surrounds me. And the doorknob has a bronze handle.

But I haven't had that dream since we came here.

I didn't think it was odd till now.

The hoot was loud, and it woke me up almost instantly. I'd slept in slightly, actually, and I sort of panicked because I needed to make breakfast. The owl hooted again as I got out of bed and dressed—

which was a pity; my pajamas were my nice ones, they have long legs striped blue and white, with a white short-sleeve shirt and a striped blue and white pocket. I chose them specifically for their non-girliness. I don't like girly stuff generally.

Then I made breakfast: raw toast. "Yummie yum!", as Trixie Belden would say. I loved those books when I was eleven, but I realize now they weren't very well-written...

Nobody liked it and Amanda outright said she was tired of raw toast. I didn't have the nerve to tell her what I wanted to say: that if she didn't like what I'd made her, she could just go ahead and make breakfast herself.

After breakfast, Victoria announced that she was going on a date with Desmond, and that he was going to come over again to pick her up. She did not say where she was going although it was likely the least expensive option. From what I've gathered about Desmond, he does not seem like the type that will spend all of his money on his girlfriend.

We got to stay at home—what a privilege!

Mom promised that she would take us to lunch, and Amanda and I thanked her even though we knew she would forget her promise. Then Dad said he was going to the town hall to get something that would help with his work in the Archives, wherever that is. We just kind of mooched around for about an hour then.

I started *The Phantom Tollbooth*, as I finished *Charlotte Doyle* last night, and it's surprisingly good! It's about this kid called Milo, see, and he is always

bored, and he gets a present from somebody he doesn't know (it's just lying there in his bedroom) and it's a tiny tollbooth and he gets into his tiny toy car and he drives into the tollbooth, and the tollbooth asks him where he wants to go and he just picks a random spot on an unfamiliar map. And he just goes along the road until he gets to the random spot, Dictionopolis, which is where I left off because I had to fold the laundry also.

Then it turned out that Mom actually remembered her promise. She was kind of staring at us vacantly as she said "Let's go, girls," and we didn't say no; we just "go"ed. Is "go"ed a word? It's appropriate in this instance, at least! I'm sure it is!

We went to a different diner: VICKY'S BURGERS & FRIES, on the opposite side of town near the real houses, which did, in fact, sell BURGERS & FRIES. It also sold fried okra, fried frog legs, and fried alligator (heaven knows where they got *that*). None of these, however, ended up being in our order. We all just got normal cheeseburgers while Amanda told us *all about* how she was *thriving* at school and how *nice* her teacher was and how *nice* her friends were and how nobody was mean to her. I must have scoffed because Mom shot me a disdainful look, but there was tiredness in it, and she didn't say anything about it.

Just as Amanda was explaining about Ellen's other friend, Kirsten, who liked pink best (no surprise there), the order came in. Amanda stuffed her face while she continued talking about things nobody wants to know. I wanted to tell her to shut up, but I didn't, because I didn't want to annoy Mom, so I just

sat there and ate my overcooked burger and didn't say anything. It was a *really* overcooked burger. You could *taste* the charcoal! I had to practically spit out a coal once. And there were severe burn marks on the bun—I checked.

It wasn't a very enjoyable lunch. The burgers didn't even come with French fries.

After we finished lunch, I got home and of course my parents needed their laundry done, so I had to take it to Bethany. When I arrived at her door, she sneered.

"Friendly Tax, Pasternack. Pay up." A song blared in the background: "Holding Out for a Hero" by Bonnie Tyler. I sighed. "Can I not today?" I asked hopefully, hoping (as the word "hopefully" implies) that she would give in but not sure at all that she actually would comply.

"Mmmmm..." Bethany put a finger to her chin, as if she was *really* thinking about it. Like, *really, really* hard. "No!" She snapped her fingers as she squealed the word. She smiled and adjusted her cowboy hat. "Out of luck, Pasternack! Pay up!"

I reluctantly gave her the money.

On the way back, as I was hauling the empty laundry basket back to the condominium, an old man stopped me by. "I haven't seen *you* before," he said.

I blinked. Was he *supposed* to have seen me before?

"What number is yours?" he asked me.

"C10," I said. "What's *yours*?"

"Don't talk back to your elders, young lady," he rebuked, then continued: "Why, A7 here!" He patted

the door next to him. "I just left for a stroll! Of course," his voice darkened here, "it's never a secret here."

I blinked again. The guy was really confusing.

"Now, I have to show my hospitality to my new neighbors," he said, more to the floor than me, then rushed back into his apartment. I heard the loud thumping of his loafers as he rushed to retrieve a small tin of cookies, which he then presented me with. "A small gift, for your folks. Celebratory of your family's decision."

He said it like moving here was like altering your entire way of life. And I guess it is, in a way.

"I thank you for humoring an old man," the guy said, and was on his way again before I could stop him.

I never even caught his name.

After I'd arrived back at our condominium, while I was putting the laundry basket back into Mom and Dad's room, I noticed something: Mom had her paints out. I gasped. Mom was lying on the floor painting a picture.

I peered over her shoulder all discreet-like to see what it was. And I guess I shouldn't have, because it was pretty creepy.

There was a mass of people rendered in the blackest black, mere silhouettes on the bottom of the page, spreading out their arms to what took up most of the picture: a black, black sun outlined by white, in the middle of a starless, vast sky.

I inhaled sharply and immediately scuttled back to where I'd been, leaving the room. Mom turned, as if to tell me to do something else, but said nothing.

Why would she paint such a thing?
I can't shake the thought.
Apologies for finishing on such a note, but—well—
I don't choose when my day ends. I wish I could.

Side Two

[Chapter Ten]

She Knew

July 1, 1991

4:06 AM

Well, today was pretty much what you'd expect of a normal, ordinary school day, or as ordinary as you can get in this town. We're having exams in our classes, because of the break (and after the break, we're going into the eighth grade). I decided to switch up the menu slightly and make pancakes, pancakes which we had to eat on the way to school because I took way too long to make them. We do have a cat-face mold, though, and I used it to make a really cute cat pancake. And at least they weren't undercooked or overcooked too much (they were slightly undercooked).

As we walked, Amanda talked through her mouthfuls about Kirsten, again, because apparently Victoria needed to hear about her too. Apparently, Kirsten thinks there is a specter residing in her house and is intent on discovering it. These are not the exact words Amanda used, as I doubt she knows the words "specter", "residing" and "intent", but I've made the point.

While dropping Amanda off, I saw an odd movement at the top of the steps to the school. As I swung my flashlight around the area to get a better look, I realized that there were women in pale cream dresses near each of the schools' doors. I didn't ask them what on earth they were doing there and

instead simply entered the school, as I was slightly later than usual and neither Kovalchuk nor Bethany were waiting for me outside.

When I approached the lady in a pale cream dress standing outside the entrance for Snicket, she beamed. “Don’t let your family miss out on the annual Fourth of July picnic! Fireworks and lunch!” she said much more cheerily than was necessary, her red curls bouncing on her shoulders as she handed me a flyer. It had no color—obviously the city council couldn’t be bothered to do *that*—but it was nicely designed. It said: FOURTH OF JULY PICNIC! FIREWORKS & LUNCH PROVIDED! BRING YOUR OWN APPETITE AND/OR PICNIC BLANKETS! And then, in smaller font at the bottom, SPONSORED BY THE INK SUN SOCIETY.

I thanked the lady and went inside the school, where the tests were waiting for me.

I think I managed to get through three of them okay (four periods before lunch; however, study hall didn’t have a test, Mrs. Pear was just forcing me and Jack to help put up her Oriental Trading decorations) before lunch. Lunch was when Kovalchuk and I discussed the nature of the flyers.

“Sponsored by the Ink Sun Society...” I mumbled over another turkey sandwich. “Why is that everywhere?”

Kovalchuk shrugged. “This is maybe the fifth time you’ve asked me that question in the past week.”

“That’s accurate, actually,” I said, and laughed slightly. “Do they have these every year?”

Kovalchuk nodded. “Yup, every year. The sound of the fireworks always smell of chocolate. It’s such a

good smell! And very loud,” he added as an afterthought.

“I see...” I said and nodded.

“Oh,” he said, reddening, “do you think it’s weird that I keep describing sounds as smells?”

I didn’t want to nod and so I did nothing, even though yes, I *did* think it was weird that he kept describing sounds as smells.

“Well, it’s because—I suspect—I have something called *synesthesia*.” He then launched into a full-on lecture about this condition. “I learned about it in a book. You see, when you’re a baby, all your senses are linked together. But you eventually lose that as you get older. Most people do, anyways. And I lost most of them, too. But I can still smell sounds. It’s not something that prevents me from functioning in this world. It’s just a small quirk of my own mind. But I was kind of surprised you couldn’t smell the sounds, either.”

We were kind of silent after that, until Kovalchuk said, “It’s kinda weird, though, that the mayor never shows up to her own event. Let’s show up to school early tomorrow, and ask the principal.”

“The principal?” I gulped. “Okay...”

And we shook on it. So now I’m going to school early tomorrow.

At least all the tests mean I don’t have any homework today. But *that* means I can focus on cleaning up the living room because Amanda has strewn all of her stuff around. Stuff she doesn’t even play with much. I think it’s intentional. [*subject sighs*]

July 2, 1991

4:15 AM

Oh my gosh.

Oh my gosh.

I still have trouble believing that what happened today really happened. I keep hoping that it was my imagination, that today was just a dream, but I keep pinching myself and it—*[subject cries out]*—it still hurts.

Today, as promised, I arrived at school early. “Early” being about ten minutes before its start. Still, Kovalchuk didn’t specify and I hadn’t thought of asking yesterday, so I just went whenever I could, pouring bowls of cereal for Victoria and Amanda and leaving a note: LEFT EARLY FOR SCHOOL WITH FRIEND. LYDIA which I think got the point across.

When I got to the school, Kovalchuk was waiting for me on the steps. “We’ll have to knock on the door,” he said as we opened the doors—me on the right, him on the left. “You know what happens when you touch his doorknob.”

I nodded knowingly. “Yep.”

We could hear the sounds of *Shadowgate* being played from the hallway as we walked. “Who’s playing *Shadowgate*?” I asked.

“Some eighth-grade nerds who think they’re so smart,” said Kovalchuk. “They never even accept my book recommendations!”

He muttered something about how *stupid* someone would have to be to refuse his book recommendations that I didn’t quite catch, then we arrived—at last—at the principal’s office.

“Don’t use Shave and a Haircut this time,” I whispered to him as we approached the door. “That is unprofessional.”

“Hey, speaking of professional...” Kovalchuk pulled out a tiny notepad from his jeans’ back pocket. “I’ve a notebook to take notes on what he says and we can add it to the thread!”

“Cool!” I said, disappointed that I hadn’t had this excellent idea (or perhaps that my pale blue skirt didn’t have pockets).

Then he knocked. Three raps, each two seconds apart. *Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

There was some scuffling behind the door, assumedly because the principal was trying to remove the fire-poker. “What do ye need?”

“We’d like to ask you some questions about the school,” said Kovalchuk, as he is exponentially more socially able than I am.

“I’m busy, laddieback,” he said. “Try another time.”

“With what?” asked Kovalchuk, and I gasped a little. He’d talked back to a grown-up with zero reservations.

“Erm, ah...” The principal opened the door. “Come in, come in!”

Kovalchuk nodded and immediately began firing off questions.

“You know I can’t give an answer, laddieback,” he said. “Bound by oath and all that.”

“Oath...?” Kovalchuk and I shared a look.

“Thank you for your time, sir,” I blurted, and then, to Kovalchuk: “We’d better go.”

“But *why?*” he whined.

“He obviously isn’t going to tell us anything. We’ll have to try our teachers instead.”

Kovalchuk looked disappointed, but he nodded and we left the room.

“All right, we’d better go to first period,” he said.

“We’ll be really early,” I reminded him. “School *starts-starts* in five minutes.”

“Yes, but we’ll be early...!” he said and I didn’t argue with his somewhat flawed logic.

It’s a very good thing he walked with me to my first period.

The door was closed when we got there—there was no note, or anything, it was just closed. “Huh,” said Kovalchuk, glancing around. All the other classrooms in Corner 11 had their doors propped open, ready for students.

“Let’s just go in,” I muttered, and pushed the door open as it wasn’t locked. I shouldn’t have.

As I headed for my seat, I noticed something: there was quite *more* of Mrs. Gruber on her desk than there usually was. I looked up to see that she was slumped there, blood seeping from her mouth.

I inhaled sharply. There were five bloody scars on her back, as if stabbed in by a knife. Which was what had likely happened.

Mrs. Gruber’s eyes were glossy and lifeless. She was dead.

On the wall behind her desk were words, written in blood, dripping onto the floor and nearly unintelligible.

SHE KNEW

I think I was hyperventilating by this point. Someone had murdered Mrs. Gruber, and not for no reason. Someone who clearly had an intention to kill. Someone who might have been in the building still.

I shook it off. Surely the bloodstains were old enough that the murder had occurred at least fifteen minutes ago, long enough for the killer to leave the building before we'd even arrived.

Kovalchuk peeked into the classroom, suspicious of the nothing he heard, and gasped as well. "Is that—" he broke the tension in the room—"what I think it is?!"

I nodded. "It's a dead body," I whispered. "Mrs. Gruber is dead."

"But who—" Kovalchuk shook his head. "Why—"

"I—I don't know," I said, gasping. "I guess..."

"We just need to find out."

That was the general sentiment between us as we gazed at the body of the stabbed teacher and the words written in blood on the wall behind her.

We just need to find out.

Slowly, kids started filing into the classroom, while Kovalchuk and I tried to cover Mrs. Gruber's body with a bright blue tarp we'd found in the classroom closet. "You know," I told Kovalchuk as we spread it, "you're going to be late to class."

"I know," he said as if it was no trouble at all. "I know..."

"We have to tell the principal," I said.

"Maybe it *was* the principal," said Kovalchuk.

"If it was the principal, he wouldn't have been so willing to let us in, nor would he have been acting like

that. He seems smart enough to not act frazzled when he really is.”

“That’s logical.”

“We’re going to have to tell him regardless,” I reminded him. “He’ll likely act surprised, or he won’t believe us.”

“It will probably be the latter,” agreed Kovalchuk, and having put the tarp over the body we set out in the hall.

We hadn’t gotten more than five steps, however, when we bumped into Bethany Sanders.

“Well, well, well!” she said, smiling. “If it isn’t Pasternack and her little boyfriend!”

“Hey, I’m older than her—” objected Kovalchuk before I said “We’re *not dating*, Bethany! Can your mind the size of a prune consider that?!”

She pinched me on the arm. “Don’t you—”

We walked right on by.

The principal, when we arrived at his office, did not quite seem delighted at our reappearance. “You lads and lasses had better not go about sticking your noses where they don’t belong or you’ll be in for it,” he said when he let us in. “What is it now?”

Kovalchuk looked to me to tell the tale. I gulped. “Someone’s murdered Mrs. Gruber.”

“Murder?” He pinched me on the arm. “Are you sure you’re not dreaming, lass?”

“I saw it too,” Kovalchuk put in. “It’s real. Mrs. Gruber has been murdered.”

“I’d better take a look at this,” he muttered. “You kids come along.”

He left the office and we went with him.

When we arrived, the principal gasped. “My golly, you weren’t lying,” he said as he peeked under the tarp to see Mrs. Gruber’s body lying on the desk like a dead fish. “That’s a dead body if I ever seen one.” He cleared his throat. “I’d better call the coroner.”

The coroner came within ten minutes of calling, during which time the principal had paced the room and played several pranks on unsuspecting children. It was a lady with a pinched face and blonde hair done up in a bun. “Hello, Mr. Gallagher,” she said. “I assume *this* is the dead body?” She gestured towards the tarp.

With a nod of his head, the principal confirmed. The lady peeked under the tarp. “Hrm. Knife wounds?”

“It would appear so, ma’am,” said the principal, whose name is apparently Mr. Gallagher.

“There’s been a murder. This is now a crime scene. I’m calling the police.” She looked to the principal. “Where’s the phone?”

“Why, it’s in my office,” he said, and they hurried off, leaving us in the classroom. A few minutes of silence ensued, before the bell rang for passing period and everyone rushed out of the classroom.

So there you have it. Mrs. Gruber was murdered.

At lunch, we evaluated possible suspects. “It can’t be the principal,” Kovalchuk said as soon as we sat down. “And it’s certainly not you, or me.”

“So who *is* it?” I asked. “That gets us practically nowhere.”

“Maybe it was one of those boys who were playing *Shadowgate*,” said Kovalchuk.

“That’s an idea!” I said with conviction. “Let’s go—er...” I suddenly had reservations about talking to a bunch of acne-ridden teens a year older than I was.

“Yes, let’s!” agreed Kovalchuk, which he didn’t have to as it was his idea in the first place, taking out his notebook.

We headed over to the table, where three teenage boys were rolling dice. Well, two of them were—one of them was behind a folding screen with an illustration of some fantasy things.

“Whaddaya want?” they said when we arrived. “We’re busy here, can’t you see?”

Kovalchuk sighed. “We’re here to ask you where you were between the hours of ten and eleven PM. You see, a teacher of ours has been murdered, and no offense, but you were the only other people in the school when we arrived to find her dead body. So you’re immediately in the suspects list.”

I almost laughed at how blunt he was.

“I was at home eating breakfast,” said one boy, raising his hand. “Then I headed to school at 10:40 to play *Shadowgate*.”

“I, too, was at home eating breakfast,” said another, raising his hand. “Then I headed to school at 10:40 to play *Shadowgate*.”

“Ditto,” said the third guy, the one behind the screen, raising his hand as well.

I sighed as Kovalchuk scribbled down their alibis. “Are there people who can confirm this information?”

“Oh, yeah. Ask my mom, or the tech lab supervisor.”

“We’ll have to check those out,” Kovalchuk said.

“Thank you for your cooperation, gentlemen.”

“I hate this part of decectiveing,” I whispered to Kovalchuk as we walked away. Is that a word, “detectiveing”? It should be.

While we ate, we discussed how we thought we’d done on our tests. “I confess, I don’t think I did very well,” admitted Kovalchuk. “I’m a B student.”

I, who has never gotten anything under a B, explained that I was quite nervous about keeping up appearances.

“It’ll be fine,” he reassured me. “It’s not as if it’s going on your permanent record, is it?”

“Is it?” I asked skeptically. You can never be sure, in this town.

“Mmmmmmmmmmaybe?” Kovalchuk said after a lot of “mmm”ing. Is *that* a word?! “I don’t really know.”

“Great!” I gave him a fake smile, and he laughed. “How... *reassuring!*”

Fifth and sixth period were quite dull. In the latter, our tests were passed back—thank goodness, our English tests were two-parters—and I got a B+ and an A respectively. Not *too* bad—I mean, I don’t know what I was hoping for, but it’s pretty good.

Mom and Dad didn’t ask me how my day was, so they still don’t know about Mrs. Gruber. I don’t know whether they’d take the information well. Especially because I went to school early. They might suspect me.

They’re the type to suspect their own daughter. Certainly not Amanda, or Victoria, but me? I wouldn’t have trouble believing that.

Once I got home from school, I played chess with Sir Gilbert.

He won.

July 3, 1991

4:59 AM

They brought in a substitute for Mrs. Gruber today. A nervous woman in her seventies, she wore a pale lilac dress with a floral design. She had big bubble glasses and white hair. When the bell rang to signal that passing period was over, she said, "Hello, children!" That gained her instant dislike with most of the seventh-graders, who *hated* being called children. "I'm your substitute teacher. Mrs. Gruber is—" her eyes darted around the room like a scared squirrel before she continued—"not here at present! I am your substitute for the day. Now, before her unexpected leave, Mrs. Gruber was kind enough to grade your tests. I'll pass them back now!" She proceeded to do so.

I got an A- on mine. Bethany got a B+. WHO'S LAUGHING NOW, SANDERS?! [*subject proceeds to laugh maniacally. She is laughing now.*]

Lydia, what's all that noise? [*this is a different voice that we assume comes from the mother of the subject.*]

Oh, nothing!

I'll have to be *quieter* from now on... [*subject begins speaking in hushed tone.*]

Second period wasn't much better. I got a B+ and a B respectively on the two parts of the test, announced out loud in between Mr. Petersen's loud slurps of coffee. At least Kovalchuk is in that class, and we talked together on the way to third period.

"How did the lead with the computer lab supervisor go?" I asked. He'd promised to look into it.

“He confirmed the alibi. We’ll have to strike ‘em off the list.”

I nodded. “Good to know.”

“By the way,” said Kovalchuk just before we parted, “did you finish *The Phantom Tollbooth* yet?”

“No, not yet,” I sighed. “They’re still in that throne room and having a square meal.”

“That’s a good part! Tell me when you’re done, okay?” With that, we parted ways.

In third period, Mrs. Pear told us to just do whatever as long as it was non-destructive. Jack grinned and took out a Walkman from his pocket, putting the headphones that had been looped around his neck onto his ears—he’d obviously been predicting just such a fortunate turn of events.

Suddenly a thought came to me—what if Jack did it? He has no alibi, after all, not that I know. However, I also took into consideration the fact that he likely wouldn’t be able to hear me if I asked him, and seeing as he was (I think) an eighth grader, I didn’t have any other classes with him. That was the excuse I came up with, at least, and *I* think it’s a pretty good one.

I just kind of sat there, trying to think of something *other* than the murder, as it’s all I’ve been able to think of since I discovered it. But I was unsuccessful, and my thoughts wandered to the cause of death. Surely there was a bloody knife somewhere in town that would give evidence as to who did it, I initially reasoned. Then I realized quite quickly that it was easy to wash off a knife and put it back in the knife-block, claiming the blood was of a pig, or something...

A pig. A pig, a pig, a pig. I couldn't take my brain from that idea. Could the butcher have done it? I don't know if there's a butcher in this town, but there almost certainly is—and he likely has access to a large knife. Large enough to murder Mrs. Gruber with.

I'll have to ask the butcher at the town picnic tomorrow. It'll be a great way to eliminate a few suspects.

After third period, it was fourth period, social studies, where our tests were passed back—I actually got an A+! Mrs. Morales did a horrible job of only teaching us things once; she kept teaching us the same thing over and over again and it is now *ingrained into my mind*. Lewis and Clark's every exploration points are now what pop into my mind when I enter that classroom.

At lunch, I told Kovalchuk my theory about the butcher, and he said, "The police are already going to be all over him. We need not pry." He actually said "need not"!

"But what if he lets down his guard? He would never do such a thing with *professional* investigators, but what about a couple of kids? If he slips up, who's going to believe them?"

Kovalchuk nodded slowly. "That's good reasoning," he said, "but I still don't think it's a very good idea. I think we should investigate the coroner, Eugenia Lincoln."

"Why?" I asked, because I hadn't yet considered her as a suspect and was frankly disappointed that Kovalchuk had.

“Did you notice how quickly she arrived? The coroner’s office is all the way on the other side of town, next to the music store. No one could have gotten here that fast, not even on a bicycle.”

“What if she used a car?” I posited.

“Unlikely,” said Kovalchuk, taking a big bite out of his tuna sandwich (he’s *that* kind of kid). “Not many of us have cars. Of course, the police do, and the mayor does, but it’s not as if anyone would want to leave, is it?”

“What?!” I shrieked. “WHAT?! Of *course* I want to leave!”

Kovalchuk made a face, then, slowly, began nodding. “If you leave, I’m coming with you.”

“Of course,” I said. “Why would I leave you behind?”

We sat in an uncomfortable silence after that, because no one could think of anything to say.

Then, we did the rest of the day, in which we learned about cats’ ultraviolet-sensing capabilities (fifth period) and played a whole-class game of Boggle, in which Bethany did her best to obscure my view of the board (sixth period).

When I got home, I headed to the laundromat—thank goodness Mom and Dad haven’t bothered to pay a visit yet, or they’ll have realized that my asking for extra money is a result of the Friendly Tax and I can scarcely imagine what might happen if I don’t pay up... oh, goodness, I can’t imagine Bethany treating me worse than she does now.

Tomorrow there’s the Fourth of July picnic, which Mom and Dad announced over dinner we were most

certainly attending. Fun town event! Bonding experience! “Maybe,” Dad suggested, elbowing me, “Lydia could make a new friend!”

I doubt it. I really, really doubt it.

[Chapter Eleven]
Fireworks and Foul Findings
July 4, 1991
4:02 AM

Well, today was the Fourth of July picnic, and it was every bit as awful as I thought it would be—and worse. But I’m getting ahead of myself. First I’ll tell you about what happened this morning—er, evening. I keep having to correct myself on that.

Over breakfast—er, “breakfast”—[*subject speaks here in different tones that we suspect indicate sarcasm*], Dad tried to get Victoria excited about the Fourth of July picnic. *Tried* being the key word. It should be noted that the efforts were not entirely his. They were mostly not his. In an attempt to curry favor with her, he refrained from waking her up, woke *me* up instead and sent me with a ten-dollar bill to the doughnut shop to get—what else?—doughnuts.

The walk wasn’t *super* long, it was just that I was groggy and swinging my flashlight around, illuminating various signs and wondering if this would really better Victoria’s mood or if it would be ineffectual as usual. Though my mind was elsewhere, I kept some degree of attention on the names of the shops I passed: LEBLANC ESPRESSO (this appeared to be a coffee shop); PETER PIPER’S PICKLED PEPPERS (it didn’t appear to be run by either Peter or Papa Piper but instead, when I entered, I was greeted by a balding man named Spalding); POST OFFICE (what did you think it was? huh?); and, um... well... I can’t remember any others but I did pass by a lot!

I eventually arrived at the doughnut shop. The shop's windows are very grimy, as if no one has cleaned them in years, but they are still bright with displays of doughnuts, not that they are easy to see—I had to squint to make out the words MAPLE BAR in a tidy scrawl under three uniform doughnuts. But when I walked inside, it was a stark contrast—there was a lady sweeping up and everything was quite clean.

“How can I help you, dearie?” she asked, stopping her continuous sweeping.

“er” I said. “uh”

“Would you like to buy some doughnuts, dearie?”

“er” I said. “uh, um, yeah?”

“Which ones?” she asked, heading to the window—it had a handle, and when she pulled it there was a popping noise and the glass came right off.

“er” I said. “uh, um, yeah?”

The lady tutted. “Children nowadays just don't know how to behave properly,” she said as she shoveled several apple fritters into the bag. “It's this newfangled parenting... it's usually the parents' fault...”

In my case, it wasn't, not entirely. It should also be noted that though beloved by the rest of my family, apple fritters are a confection I detest.

Nevertheless, I paid (it was seventy-five cents per doughnut) and left clutching my change in one hand (darn you, women's clothing that doesn't have any pockets!) and the bag of apple fritters in the other. On the way back, I'm pretty sure I saw the owl watching me again. Maybe it was a different one.

When I got home, Victoria *still* wasn't up, but Amanda was. She was noisily creating what appeared to be some sort of space alien on her Lite-Brite. *Chunk, chunk, chunk*, went the pieces as her grubby fingers pushed them into the holes.

She turned when she heard the door opening. "Lyds! Lyds! Look what I did!" She beckoned for me to view the space alien. It was only half-completed.

"Wow," I said, trying my best to smile, "that's really... cool...!...?" [*subject pronounces the "o"s in the word for far longer than necessary and fluctuates in tone for several seconds*]

She beamed. "Yay, yay! Aylee, aylee!"

I sighed and walked into the kitchen. "Hi, Dad, I'm back."

He took the doughnuts and plunged his hand into the back. "Mmm, apple fritters!"

I nodded. I don't really know why. Maybe to confirm the apple frittery-ness of the apple fritters?

"Let's not wake your sister," Dad said in hushed tones. "Let her wake up when she wants."

When I bet she *wants*—heck, what *I* want—is to wake up at nine in the morning like normal people, but hard as we wish for the opposite, this isn't a normal town.

"Mmmmmph?" came a voice from the hallway, then footsteps. "I heard my name?" Victoria came stumbling out from the hall, wearing her too-big Whitesnake T-shirt as pajamas.

"Victoria, I *told* you to stop using that shirt as sleepwear," warned Dad.

“MmmI don’t care,” mumbled Victoria like it was one word. [*True to the subject’s wishes, we have indeed printed it as one word, questionable as it may be in the field of grammar.*]

“Victoria...” warned Dad, but Victoria’s mind was elsewhere. “Are those apple fritters?” she exclaimed, snatching the bag from Dad’s hands. “They *are!* Thanks, Dad!” She took a doughnut from the bag and began munching happily.

Dad shook his head. “Young lady, such behavior shan’t be tolerated in this house.”

I could have added that this *wasn’t* a house, that it was a *condominium*, but I didn’t. Dad was already in a bad mood.

“*Shan’t?*” Victoria scoffed. “You sound like an old man. Wait—you *are* an old man.”

“Don’t talk back to me, young lady,” said Dad, and now he really sounded serious.

“Eep! Yes! Okay!” Victoria shoved the bag back in his hands and sat down at the table to finish her apple fritter, wiping her sticky hands on her Whitesnake T-shirt.

“Well,” Dad said, offering the bag to me, “I guess it’s breakfast time. MAISIE!” he called down the hall.

I shook my head. “No thanks.”

“What do you mean, ‘no thanks’?”

“I’ll—” I glanced around the kitchen, my eyes eventually resting on Tony the Tiger. “I’ll just have some cereal, thanks. Victoria can have the extra doughnut.”

“Well, okay then, sport,” said Dad, shrugging and plunging his hand into the bag. Amanda soon came

scurrying to get *her* doughnut. And once Mom arrived, they were all chomping away happily—well, except for Victoria, who had already finished her doughnut and retreated to our room as soon as Mom got out, presumably to listen to *more* loud, screamy music. Dad was not pleased with this, but he let it be, probably because he wanted to preserve Victoria’s good mood (and to revel in the fact that his elaborate scheme actually paid off). He just pulled out a Poirot novel—I dunno how he never runs out of those—and started reading. Amanda went back to work on her Lite-Brite, Mom went to work on an acrylic painting (she didn’t give specifics, she never does) and I finally finished *The Phantom Tollbooth*. We were sitting around for almost forty-five minutes when Dad announced that it was time to go. I felt a great sense of fulfillment as I rummaged around in my suitcase for my own tiny notebook (I’d had no call to pull it out before, sadly)—it’s a standard black-covered spiral-bound one, and my pen is a blue BIC ballpoint—I’ve looked for better but have found none. *At last*, I thought, *I’ve remembered!* *At last*, I thought, *I’m the one with the good idea, not him!*

Of course, this was not the first time (at least, I don’t think it was) that I’d had a good idea and Kovalchuk hadn’t, but I still felt very happy.

I chose the pale blue bag from the SHINDAISY PUBLIC LIBRARY from our large selection of tote bags (it’s really just the one and a Safeway one we got, like, two years ago that my mom saved), slipping the notebook in my pocket before I helped Mom and Dad prepare the food.

“Isn’t this *exciting*, Maisie?” Dad asked Mom conversationally over his loud chopping of a salami

(the butcher, he'd explained, apparently didn't carry it pre-chopped). "We'll get to see the —s again!" [*the pause the subject makes in the middle of the dialogue relay is reconstructed here by an em-dash, which by the way are not just for AI use.*] The silence in the middle of the sentence was a bit I couldn't hear, because at that point he was brushing salami off the cutting board with the knife onto foil and making a loud scraping noise. Therefore, I had absolutely no warning when they turned out to be old friends with said people. Said people have a sadistic, malevolent daughter.

"Oh, them?" Mom raised her head. "They're coming?"

"I'd guess so!" Dad said. "Practically the whole town will be there, except for the mayor, because *of course* the mayor isn't coming. The mayor *never* comes. We've been over this."

"No need to remind me, Fred," said Mom, and she piled every foil-wrapped item into the bag—prep hadn't taken long with three people. "I know. Better than you, in fact."

"Of course, my dear," said Dad, and then he called to Victoria and Amanda: "Time to go!"

They came, Amanda whining that she wasn't finished with her Lite-Brite "massie" yet and Victoria in an indifferent mood—a vast improvement from previous "fun family trip"s, in which she'd complained, moaned, and generally scowled her way through them. Dad grinned at her and she narrowed her eyes as we walked out the door, me carrying the bag.

It wasn't an especially long walk to the park—I'd been there before when I brought Amanda, and Mom

and Dad knew the way, so no one attempted awkward small talk on the way. There were a few people behind us, the line accumulating into a mostly-silent procession (I think we were sorta late due to the doughnut excursion, but I don't believe Dad cared). Mom eventually found Mrs. Turner and they began cordial conversation while Dad thumped the back of a man wearing a checkered button-down shirt like a lumberjack (and had a long brown beard to match) who he introduced to me as Robert James, who works at LeBlanc Espresso.

Instead of shaking his outstretched hand, I tried to look at anything but his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, before turning to Mr. James and saying, "She's shy with strangers."

When we arrived at the park, I scanned my immediate vicinity for Kovalchuk but didn't find him. Was he not there? I didn't know. Perhaps he was even later than we were. "Run along now," said Dad after a few seconds, pushing me gently into the grassy field. I nodded and "ran along now", trying to find Kovalchuk.

I eventually found him waiting in line for the swings. He was number thirty-four. He's such a child.

"I'm only number thirty-four in line!" he said. "You can cut me if you want!"

"No, I don't want to cut you!" I explained, slightly relieved that I had found him (not that I would ever tell him that). "I was *wondering* where you were!"

"Did you finish *The Phantom Tollbooth* yet?" he asked in a melancholic tone as we walked away, shaking his head and looking forlornly at the swings as

another child eagerly dashed forward in the line to take his place.

“Yeah, I did,” I said. “This morning.”

“Did you like it?”

“Oh, I really did!” I said. “I especially liked the allegory bit, about jumping to Conclusions.”

“How’s that an allegory?”

“It’s an allegory for how people tend to do it so often nowadays. For a thirty-year-old book, it’s really with the times,” I explained.

Kovalchuk nodded. “I’d never really thought about that before, but I guess so. The only political allegory I’ve ever read is *The Little Prince*.”

“What?” I said, incredulous. “That’s not a political allegory. That’s *an examination of what really matters in life*, and it just so happens to be my favorite book in all the world!”

“Really?” said Kovalchuk. “Because I lied. I only read part of it, when I was maybe ten. I lost interest.”

Now, *The Little Prince* has been my favorite book in all the world for quite a long time. It used to be *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, but that was quickly knocked off in favor of the former title when I first found it in the second grade at the library. I took to the weird pictures and meandering narrative even though I didn’t get the philosophical undertones (*isn’t it true that grown-ups are a different species than kids?* I’d reasoned and shrugged it off). It was only when I read it in the fifth grade, for the five millionth time (kidding, it was fourth), that I understood what the book was trying to say (helped in part by the library’s new copy with a

quote from *The New York Times* explaining it all for me). Since then, I've been reading it at least once a year.

"Really?" I asked. "Got bored of *The Little Prince*, did you?"

Kovalchuk held up his hands in surrender. "I thought it was boring! I'll try again if you want, but then you have to read one of *my* favorite books that you've been refusing to read..." he negotiated, his lips slowly curling into a smile.

"And what might that be?" I asked, already knowing the answer in my gut.

"Tintin, of course! You'll have to read *Tintin in Tibet!*"

"No. I'm *not* reading Tintin. You know that."

"Okay then, I won't read *The Little Prince*." Kovalchuk can be a good negotiator when he feels like it, which is rarely.

"ugh!" I muttered. "Fine! Loan the book to me tomorrow."

Kovalchuk's smile widened. "Thank you!"

"Let's just interrogate suspects," I muttered. "And you have to do the talking."

"I thought detectiveing was supposed to be a two-person job! No one wants to be the Watson, so they don't have to be!"

"I'll be the Watson," I said, raising my hand weakly. "I'll be the Watson, just don't ask me to talk to people."

Kovalchuk looked at me. "They play a continuous game of Good Cop, Bad Cop in those books," he said. "You obviously haven't read them. Being more affable, Watson—" here he pointed at me— "is easier to talk to."

I gulped. “Fine! You can be Watson! But who has more eccentricities here, *you*... or *me*?” While I said “*you*” I pointed to him, and then at the word “*me*” I pointed to my own chest.

Kovalchuk blinked. “I don’t think that’s a question I can comfortably answer. Okay, okay, you can be Holmes, the one who gets all the credit!”

“And Bethany can be Moriarty...” I suggested, snickering.

“Yes!” cried Kovalchuk! “But who’s Lestrade?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but we’ve wasted too much time already.”

“But this is actually good,” he reasoned. “This means that people have finished their introductory greetings and will be more open to—heeeey...”

“What?”

“*Bloodstains on clothes!* We have to ask Mr. Sanders!”

“I—Bethany’s father?!” I nearly shrieked.

I looked around nervously and, to my horror, saw Dad coming across the field towards me, shining a flashlight in my direction. “Hiya, sport,” he said. “I’ve got you a real nice opportunity to make a new friend!”

“Sorry,” I whispered to Kovalchuk as I was dragged away. We walked through a river of people heading towards a large, appetizing cake to where Mom was sitting on the corner of a moss-eaten bench and talking with three people sitting on the other side, two of which were leaning their heads in her direction in apparent interest and one of which was applying makeup—I assumed it was the other two’s teenage daughter.

We got closer, and Dad shone the flashlight. Their faces were illuminated, so I got a better look than I'd had from the two lanterns that were on each side of the table.

It was Mr. and Mrs. Sanders.

I'll give you three guesses as to who the teenage daughter was. [*subject pauses*] ...Brilliant, Holmes.

Dad beamed. "This," he said, "is Mark and Diana Sanders, our old friends! And *this* is their lovely daughter Bethany!"

I was about to scream.

"Hi, Pasternack!—er, Lydia!" said Bethany, slapping on a fake grin as she slapped her tiny mirror closed and slapped the cap on her lip gloss.

"Oh, have you two met before?" Dad asked.

"No!" I said quickly—too quickly—before amending: "Yes! No. Yes?"

"A little wishy-washy, as I can see," said a deep male voice from next to me, and Mr. Sanders turned to face me. "So this is Fred and Maisie's girl!"

"*Hey, Pasternack,*" whispered Bethany while Dad took his place beside Mom and Mr. Sanders continued remarking upon things of little consequence to me, "*you know what today is?!*"

I didn't give her the satisfaction of an answer.

"*Today's my birthday, Pasternack,*" she said, and then turned around to shine her flashlight on someone whose hand was on her shoulder. "Oh, Dylan!"

"*Pasternack, this is Dylan Kingsley,*" said Bethany, grinning as she shined the flashlight in my eyes, making it impossible to see Dylan. "*He's my boyfriend. I bet you're jealous. Your boyfriend is such a nerd.*"

“What’s that, Bethany?” said Dylan in a timid voice. He was a well-built boy with red hair and a birthmark on his wrist, the wrist from which the hand that fell on Bethany’s shoulder came. “I play basketball and—and everything—”

“Oh, nothing,” said Bethany and pulled his face close to hers. They engaged in a passionate kiss.

I have always believed that I am much too young for romance, and Bethany’s way of kissing did nothing to encourage me. Instead of puckering up, she put her lips right around Dylan’s puckered ones—as if she were eating them. Then she made small moaning noises. When they pulled their faces apart, his was smeared with her makeup. He looked as if he’d eaten bloody meat.

Maybe Bethany just doesn’t know how to engage romantically.

I quickly ran away without telling Dad—he wouldn’t care anyways. I ran to where Kovalchuk was waiting, and explained the situation in between panicky breaths: “Mr. and Mrs. Sanders are friends of my parents’, and they expect me to be friends with Bethany!”

Well, I said it half out of breath, so it must have sounded like: “Misters—*gasp*—Sanders—*gasp*—friend—*gasp*—expect—*gasp*—friends with, with—*swallow*—Bethheeeee”.

Kovalchuk looked at me weird. “Okay.”

“Sorry—Mr. and Mrs. Sanders are friends of my parents’, and they expect me to be friends with Bethany!”

“Oh.” Kovalchuk winced sympathetically. “Oh boy.”

“Also, I learned that Bethany is not very good at kissing.”

“How’d you learn that? I’m morbidly curious,” said Kovalchuk. “Just—here. Whisper it.” He turned around so I could see the side of his head.

I whispered, “I saw Bethany kissing Dylan Kingsley.”

“Dylan Kingsley?” said Kovalchuk, turning back around. “Everyone knows that Bethany is Dylan’s girlfriend. And everyone knows that the only reason Bethany allows him to be her boyfriend is because he’s a big jock, or pretends to be. But guess what?” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I have a locker close to his, and once I caught a glimpse inside. He likes Van Halen—he has a poster of them. Also, he has a teddy bear wearing a button-down shirt in there, calls it Poppet.”

I snickered. “That’s funny!”

“Yeah. Bethany doesn’t know a thing. She thinks he’s cool. He’s a dork.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“So I guess Mr. Sanders is out of the question?”

“I think so. I don’t want to do it with my parents hovering over me. They, uh... they don’t exactly know the murder happened.”

“What do you mean, they don’t know the murder happened?” Kovalchuk asked. “Did you not tell them?!”

“They don’t trust me with anything,” I explained, “except chores. They certainly wouldn’t allow me to partake in a murder investigation if they had any say in the matter. So I’m not giving them one!”

Kovalchuk nodded. An awkward silence descended upon us. That happens a lot—neither of us wants to

break it by saying something stupid, even though Kovalchuk usually does. But even then I'll just sometimes say "mmm" and then the awkward silence will regrip us. It happens far too much than I would like, but what can I do? I don't wanna be the one who always says something!

"So... who do you think we should investigate?" said Kovalchuk at last, drawing out the word "so" so that the "o" was at least a full second long.

"I told you, I think we should investigate the butcher."

"And *I* told *you*, the police are gonna be all over him! We should totally investigate Miss Lincoln or Mr. Sanders!"

"Wait—which one is Miss Lincoln again?"

"The coroner! Remember? The one who arrived too soon?"

"How do you know she didn't use a car?"

"um" said Kovalchuk. "Actually, I hadn't thought of that. But—wouldn't we have heard the engine?"

"That's true," I said, "but do we ever hear engines in this town? Ever?"

"Well, the Federal Express trucks do sometimes come," said Kovalchuk. "And I can hear those."

"Why would you be hearing a Federal Express truck?" I asked, confused.

"For the new books!"

"Oh! That's right..." I had completely forgotten about the bookstore.

"Well, anyways, the point is that I *know* what an engine sounds like, but I certainly didn't hear one that morning."

“Well, I don’t know about you, but my brain was completely panicking at that point in time, so I didn’t quite have the awareness to hear a car sidling up to the school!”

“Fair, fair,” said Kovalchuk. “But I still think we should investigate her, not the butcher!”

“Why not the butcher?” I asked, exasperated.

“Because, I told you, the police are gonna be all over him! I’ve said that twice now today!”

“What police?” I asked. “Who’s going to investigate this?”

We fell silent. I think Kovalchuk suspected the same thing I did: that it was perpetrated by the Ink Sun Society, whatever that was, and therefore those who were a part of it—the police, surely—wouldn’t look into it. If there even *is* a police force in this town... Victoria told me a horror story while I was putting on my eye mask about the guards who patrol the streets before the sunrise, making absolutely certain that you aren’t up. “And if you are,” she’d said, “you get turned to dust.”

“Did you hear the one about the guards who go on patrol shortly before the sunrise...?” Kovalchuk started, and I said: “...and if they see you out, you get turned to dust? Yeah, my older sister Victoria told me that one.”

“Well, that’s been going around the town for as long as I can remember. Dennis Greene told it to us when we were doing a creative writing unit in the fourth grade and his version centered on a kid who *had* been out after light.” He sighed. “Lydia? Is a sunrise—is it beautiful? Quite as beautiful as they say?”

“Oh, it’s more so,” I said, and perhaps I romanticized it a bit as I did. “It’s orange, and it’s purple, and sometimes it’s pink. It looks like the sky is simply the sun’s eyelid, closing for the night, and most of the population’s eyes along with it. —In the summer months, at least. In the wintertime it goes down closer to five-thirty.”

Kovalchuk sighed again. “What I wouldn’t give to see one of those...”

“No—it’s really nothing special! Don’t feel bad!” I cried in a desperate attempt to reassure him. “The description in *The Outsiders*—the sunset—is better than anything you could see in real life!”

“Yeah,” Kovalchuk said quietly, resignedly. “I guess.”

“Let’s go investigate the coroner, then,” I suggested, to try to take his mind off things.

“Yes, let’s.” He grinned and took out his tiny notebook from his pocket. I grabbed mine and we dove into the river of Spoon Valley residents.

After shining our flashlights around the park, we finally found her sitting at a table with the man I’d seen at the pickled peppers store, Spalding. Eugenia Lincoln had her blonde hair at her sides this time and it was not a good look on her: her pinched face was further emphasized, and it wasn’t one of her better features.

“Hello, children,” she said, taking a large bite out of a Dorito from a bag she was clutching. The white and orange starkly contrasted with her black-and-gray pullover. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Miss Lincoln,” said Kovalchuk, “this is a serious matter. We have reason to believe that *you* are involved in the murder of one Augusta Gruber.”

“Old Gruber? The one who died day before yesterday? Now I remember you. You’re the two nosey parkers who discovered the body in the first place.”

“That’s us,” Kovalchuk said, nudging me. “We’d like to ask you a few questions about the murder. What was the cause of death?”

“Stabbing, of course. *Duh*,” she said. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: what nosey parkers you two are!”

Kovalchuk was trying his best to keep smiling. I was looking down and kicking a rock while scribbling down the word *stabbed*.

“Can you please tell us where exactly you were between the hours of 10:30 and 10:50 on Tuesday evening, Miss Lincoln?”

“I was getting my shop set up,” she replied promptly, still not exactly pleased that whom she perceived as two annoying children were interrogating her.

I scribbled this down as Kovalchuk nodded. “That’ll be all, Miss Lincoln. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

Then we left, heading towards a tree where no one was clustered around (cake had come out, a black mass of sugar on a plate), to discuss our next plan of action.

“I want cake,” Kovalchuk complained, leaning against the tree.

“Mmm,” I said, because I wasn’t that interested in giving a reply. He resolved the comment himself: “But we have to focus on the case. If it is a case...? In that case—in that case, ha-ha that’s a pun, isn’t that funny?—we need a detective agency. But what would

we name it?" He paused to think. "Ummmm, Pasternack & Dawes Investigations?" He looked to me.

"Sherlock Holmes didn't have a detective agency name. They just said 'call Sherlock Holmes', not 'call Holmes & Watson Investigations,'" I pointed out.

"Well, then, I guess we don't need one! But which person are they gonna say to call?"

"I'm Sherlock Holmes, remember?" I reminded him. "You're Watson."

He sighed. "I should *never* have agreed to this. What if we're *both* Sherlock Holmes?"

"There can't be two Sherlocks! Plus we already agreed you'd be Watson!"

"Fine! I give up!" He held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. "But *as Sherlock Holmes*, you have to choose who to investigate next."

"I choose..." I pretended to be thinking hard. "Hmm." I snapped my fingers in mock epiphany. "The butcher!"

Kovalchuk muttered "I knew you'd say that" but didn't protest as we looked for the butcher.

"Do you know what the butcher actually looks like?" I asked after we'd been searching fruitlessly for a few minutes (not counting the time we stopped for cake).

"This is good cake," said Kovalchuk, conspicuously avoiding the subject.

"*Do you?*" I asked more severely, and he finally responded, "Okay, maybe I don't! So sue me!"

"Why don't you know what the butcher looks like?"

"I assumed *you* did, since you suggested we interview him! Whenever I go to the shop he's cutting meat and his apprentice, Jack, is there! Mostly because of school."

“Jack...? Is that really his name?”

“Yes...? Why?”

“I *know* him!” I cried. “He’s in my third period!”

“Well, why didn’t you say so? Let’s look for him!”

“Because I don’t actually know him all that well...” I trailed off after the word “actually”, my words getting slower and quieter as Kovalchuk ran away and I realized I had no chance of stopping him. “Umm, umm...”

“Hey!” I ran after him. “Wait up!”

I stopped to catch my breath while we ran, and he stopped as well. “It’s good of you to come, Sherlock,” he said in a mock British accent. “Your presence most eminent will be required for this, such a baffling case.”

“Why, thank you, Watson,” I said in my best impersonation of Basil Rathbone, taking out my tiny notebook. “Lestrade hasn’t arrived yet, I trust?”

“Hey, that’s not a British accent!” Kovalchuk mock-rebuked.

“It’s Basil Rathbone,” I explained. “From the radio dramas.”

“What dramas?” Kovalchuk looked confused. “Like *West Side Story*?”

“No—a radio drama. It’s from the World War Two era.”

“Like the *Star Wars* radio dramas?”

“Yes, exactly!” Victoria used to have those and she’d listen to them all the time. “I can lend them to you if you want.”

“Okay.” Kovalchuk nodded.

Just then, I noticed Jack at a table to the left of us, and I pointed. “There he is!”

“You do the talking,” I reminded him. “I’ll write things down.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” said Kovalchuk dismissively, then went to talk to Jack.

“Mr. Jack Hardy, we have some questions for you,” he began, but Mr. Jack Hardy interrupted—“Is this about the Socks Incident? Because whatever it is, no. Just no.”

“No, it’s not about the Socks Incident,” Kovalchuk reassured him. “We want to ask you a few questions about your employer. Was he away from his business establishment between the hours of ten and eleven o’clock the evening of July second?”

“I dunno.” Jack shrugged. “I was at my house at the time. And by the way? Asking questions like this is *so* uncool.”

I rolled my eyes behind the safe veil of Kovalchuk’s Mickey Mouse T-shirt. I should have known he’d be like this.

“Where is he currently seated?” Kovalchuk asked, while I wrote down that he was cooperating poorly but seemed to be hiding something, and did not know where the butcher had been.

“Over there.” He pointed across from him, where a man wearing a stained apron over a large red jacket sat reading *Pet Sematary*, eyes wide. He was bald, but had a beard the color of late autumn leaves—when they are brittle and brown, in stark contrast to the brilliant yellows and oranges they once were just earlier that season. “Why do you want to know?”

“Mr. Hardy, we—or my *investigative partner* here—” he nudged me— “believe that your employer is involved in the murder of one Augusta Gruber.”

Jack laughed. “Old Mack? The guy wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

I wrote this down while Kovalchuk nodded and said, “Thank you for your cooperation, sir.”

Jack guffawed. We left to talk to “Old Mack”.

“What are you doin’ all the way back here?” he asked as we sat down at the bench opposite him, so that we could make eye contact—Kovalchuk of course was on the end so that he could be the one to do so more fiercely.

“Are you the butcher?” Kovalchuk asked, just to clarify.

“Mr. Malcolm Spencer, at your service,” said Mr. Malcolm Spencer, holding out a large hand for Kovalchuk to shake. He did so.

I could hear his joints popping. His eyes bulged out of his skull—it almost looked cartoonish. The handshake was first a squeeze, then a vigorous wring, as if his hand were a dirty washcloth.

Mr. Spencer didn’t appear to be aware of the pain it was causing Kovalchuk. He was beaming. Kovalchuk, for his part, pretended not to feel it and tried his best to grin.

When they were through with this painful interaction, Kovalchuk began the investigation, taking out his own tiny notebook. “Now, sir, the reason we’re here is because we—or, rather, my *investigative assistant*—” he nudged me— “has (or *have*?) reason to believe that you were involved in the July second murder of Augusta Gruber.”

“Gus?” Mr. Spencer grinned. “That old slimebag has finally met her maker, eh?”

“We would ask you to refrain from expletives, as there are children present,” said Kovalchuk, “namely: us.”

“Of course, of course,” apologized Mr. Spencer.

“Now. –Where were you between the hours of ten and eleven o’clock on July second?”

“I was in my shop, preparing fresh salami to package up for the Jumping Jehoshaphat. Meat doesn’t make itself, you know.” Well, it kinda does, but he didn’t ask me.

“Is there anyone that can confirm this information?” pressed Kovalchuk.

“My wife can confirm that I left the house, but no one saw me on the streets except—” His smile began to look forced. “Never mind that.”

“Except *what*, sir?” Kovalchuk asked.

“Except,” he said, lowering his voice and glancing around before speaking, “the owls.”

“I *knew* it!” I whispered to Kovalchuk. “I *knew* they were watching us!”

“What says your lady friend?” Mr. Spencer snickered.

“Oh, nothing,” said Kovalchuk. “Did you have any customers between these hours?”

“No sir,” responded Mr. Spencer. “The shop opens at eleven o’clock every evening, on the dot, rain or shine. You can quote me on that.”

I *did* quote him on that, and made a note to hold him at his word—to visit the butcher shop at eleven o’clock.

Kovalchuk nodded. “Thank you for your cooperation, sir.” Then we walked away.

“I really think this is a dead end,” whispered Kovalchuk, gesturing towards Mr. Spencer, who had opened up *Pet Sematary* again.

“I’m inclined to agree,” I whispered back. “He seems like a nice guy.”

“He is.”

“How do you know?”

“I didn’t know he was the butcher, but he’s a very regular customer. Comes in every Wednesday to get a new book. I reckon he’s read all of Stephen King’s books by now.”

“Wow, isn’t Stephen King a horror writer? That *Pet Sematary* cover sure looked scary. Doesn’t that increase suspicion?”

“No, because we’d know right away if it was a Stephen King method of killing—if that’s a thing, I haven’t actually read any Stephen King novels. The coroner bought one a couple of months ago.”

“So she would have pointed it out if she’d read it in the book?”

“I guess so. This is turning into sort of a convoluted theory, but—” he shrugged. “I can’t think of a better one.”

“So every suspect we’ve asked so far is a dead end.” I hung my head in defeated exasperation. “Who else do we suspect? Is it even worth investigating this anymore?”

“Don’t be like that!” Kovalchuk cried. “Someone *died* two nights ago, and it’s up to *us* to figure out who, ‘cause the grown-ups sure aren’t gonna bother with trying to figure it out! It has to be us! Don’t you see?”

I nodded weakly. “I guess.”

“Then let’s get on with it!”

We did get on with it, after a pit stop for another slice of cake—there was extras because most of the grown-ups had declined to accept their generous pieces and there was more than one cake made. When we were close to approaching Mr. Sanders, I told Kovalchuk to wipe his mouth—it was completely covered in chocolate icing. “We’ll be dismissed as little kids sticking their noses where they don’t belong,” I whispered. “Do you have a napkin?”

He wiped it off with his sleeve. “But that’s exactly what we are, kids sticking our noses where they don’t belong.”

“I think our noses, as residents of this town, belong right here—in the community’s affairs.”

“Our noses aren’t residents of this town,” Kovalchuk corrected me. He’s kind of annoying when he does that.

“Okay, fine! As residents of this town, our noses belong in the community’s affairs!”

“That’s better,” said Kovalchuk, and nodded accordingly (that would be approvingly).

“You still have some chocolate on your lips,” I informed him, and we went to interrogate Mr. Sanders.

“Lydia, is it?” said Mr. Sanders as we sat down across from him (Dad had left to talk to someone else). “You’re Fred’s second daughter, ain’t you?”

I nodded clumsily.

“Now, Mr. Sanders,” Kovalchuk started, “we’ve come here to ask you a few questions regarding the murder of Augusta Gruber, on July second.”

“Mrs. Gruber...” Mr. Sanders nodded. “That’s Bethany’s English teacher, isn’t it? Yeah, yeah, Bethany told me all about that!”

Of course she did, I thought.

“Now, Mr. Sanders. Knowing that you own the only laundromat in Spoon Valley, did you happen to see any adult clothing with bloodstains on it, turned in after 10:30 PM on July second?”

“Well, Mr. Spencer’s clothes sometimes have blood on them, but that’s never human blood.”

“Not *that* kind of blood.”

“Well, there was a little kid who had bloody tights at the knees...”

“We’re not asking about that kind of blood! We’re asking about *bloodstains*. *People* bloodstains.”

“Why would there be—*oh*.” Mr. Sanders grinned uneasily. “You don’t suspect—”

“No, Mr. Sanders, we don’t suspect *you*! We want to know if any of your *clients* have had bloodstains in unusual places!”

“Come to think of it...” Mr. Sanders paused. “There was this kid. He was about sixteen. He had brown gloves, all bloody. He said he had fallen on his bike.”

“What was the name of this youth?” Kovalchuk asked while I scribbled this down.

“I forget! Dennis, or something?”

“Dennis... Dennis... Can you think of anything else?”

“There was a lady in her thirties, Miss Primrose, who works stock at the Jumping Jehoshaphat. She had a bloody dress.”

“Miss Primrose, Miss Primrose...”

I was scribbling like mad trying to write all this down, but the sentences all blurred together. I think I got the point across, though.

“Anything else?”

“No, not as of late. What business is it of yours to snoop around in my business?”

Kovalchuk reddened. “Thank you for your continued cooperation, kind sir. I believe the time is ripe to make our leave.”

As we left, we could hear Mr. Sanders guffawing behind us. “Such pretentious kids. Somebody should’ve taught ‘em to mind their own beeswax.”

We wandered back to the tree and leaned against it while Kovalchuk reviewed my notes. “Good job,” he said. “Brilliant, Holmes.”

“I’m honored, Watson,” I said, looking flattered for his benefit.

He handed the notebook back to me, then paused midway through extending his hand. “I think I heard someone calling your name...”

And sure enough. Dad’s voice rang throughout the park. “Lydia! The fireworks are starting!”

I ran to him. “Dad! Can I watch the fireworks with my friend?”

He smiled, making his mouth open so wide it looked downright creepy. “Of course you can watch with Bethany.”

“No, not Bethany—” I started, but he was already off. The idea was firmly planted in his mind—the roots of it were stuck like glue to his brain. There would be no convincing him otherwise.

I sighed and followed him, hoping he would forget about what I said, and sure enough he did after he began conversing with Mr. Sanders again—you'd think that would make him *remember* it, but no. They were talking about how their lives had been going since they'd last seen each other.

As I sat at the picnic table and gazed up at the fireworks (they were quite loud), I heard Mr. Sanders say my name. I snapped my head back to look at him, then stopped halfway, the logical part of my brain remembering that it would be both impolite to stare and arouse unnecessary suspicion if they knew I was eavesdropping. So I slowly swiveled my head back to the sky and strained my ears to listen.

Mr. Sanders began: "...your daughter, Lydia. I'm afraid she's fallen in with the wrong sort."

Dad: "What do... the wrong sort?"

Mr. Sanders: "An emotional one. Sure of himself, confident, *inquisitive*. Those never last long."

Dad: "They're children. No one's going out in the sunlight."

Mr. Sanders: "I *suspect* the boy has been investigating the town."

Dad gasped: "*Surely* he hasn't found out about—"

About what, I thought, but didn't say.

Mr. Sanders: "He knows nothing. I am sure of it."

Dad: "Thank you for your input, George."

The fireworks had come to an end by then—clearly there hadn't been many. Victoria and Desmond were playing chopsticks and Amanda was waiting in the line for the swings with Kirsten ("But Kirsten gets to go nexie!" she whined when Dad rounded her up). Mom

joined us after several minutes of goodbyes with Mrs. Turner.

Then we had lunch—a very late one. We sat down at the only vacant picnic bench and ate.

After that, we headed back to the condominium. The flashlights illuminated our bodies so as to make them look ghostly. Amanda pretended to *be* a ghost, yelling “wooooo... wooooooooo...” to everyone else. I shone my light on the ground and made shadow puppets. There’s the rabbit, the duck-billed platypus, the coyote, and the great white shark that kills everyone.

I ended up playing shadow puppets a couple of times.

While I was doing that, I thought of something. A mystery. One I’ve never known the answer to.

Mom and Dad are going out for dinner tomorrow. Leaving us home alone.

Giving me the perfect opportunity to do something I’ve been meaning to do this entire time. Something that might give me answers into a very immediate, much older mystery.

Read *Arpeggio*.

CASSETTE 04
Self-titled *Audio Journal*, Vol. 4
In which the subject's life becomes almost
tolerable
Maxell UR 90 tape

Side One

[Chapter Twelve]

Arpeggio of Life and Death

July 5, 1991

4:53 AM

[subject exhales] Okay, I did it. Today, I did it.

But first I did all the other stuff I did today. Which wasn't really significant compared to doing it, but it's still sort of significant. Anyways, this is supposed to be chronicling *everything* that happens in the day, not just the interesting bits, though I do tend to more fully realize those than the less interesting ones.

In the morning, I made hard-boiled eggs for breakfast. I don't particularly care for the taste, but it balances out because they don't take long at all to make.

Then Mom took Amanda to a playdate of hers that had been scheduled yesterday. Dad went to work and Victoria began to play a game on her Sega Genesis—*Heckfire*, I think it was. *[subject seems to be referencing the game Hellfire for the Sega Genesis. Subject also seems reluctant to speak the first part of the name]* You know. The usual. Or—you *should* know, by now...

Soon after everyone else left, I was playing chess with Sir Gilbert when suddenly there was a knock on the door. I didn't have time to think *who could that be* when... hrm... how many was it? Ah, six... six rhythmic knocks came after it. Shave and a Haircut. It could only be Kovalchuk.

“Hi, Lydia!” he said when I opened the door somewhat reluctantly.

“Hi,” I said. “Why are you here?”

He dug into his pocket. “I had nothing to do today, and I was thinking...” He took out a dozen quarters. “Maybe you wanted to go to the arcade.”

I was stunned. “What?” Someone wanted to go somewhere. With me. As friends.

“Do you want to go to the arcade?” he repeated, confused as to my reaction.

“Uh, sure! Let me grab some of my quarters.” I did so and joined him at the door, making sure to give Victoria the condominium key (given to me by Mom and Dad in case Victoria decided to go out with Desmond).

“So,” said Kovalchuk as we walked down the lane from Chiropteran Hights, “what’s your favorite arcade game?”

“I dunno,” I responded. “I haven’t really been to the arcade much. I’d rather read, really, but I’ve got nothing to read.”

“Except *Tintin in Tibet*.”

I looked at him. Before I said anything, he caught on: “And yes, yes, I did start *The Little Prince*.”

“What do you think?”

“I’m on page three!” he protested. “It’s too early!”

“Okay, okay.”

“So what *is* your favorite arcade game?”

“Um... I like *Pac-Man*.”

“Pac-Man?” Kovalchuk cried. “That’s so dull, though! You should try some of the other games! Like... like Galaga! And Burger Time! Those are *my* two favorites.”

“Okay...” I saw no real point in asking me the question if he was just planning upon using it as a vehicle to express his own opinions.

“What’s your high score? I can never get past the second level.”

I scoffed. “Course you can’t. I can get to level five, easy!”

“woaaaaah” said Kovalchuk in awe. “Can you teach *me* howda do that?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I think you’re a lost cause.”

“Come on!” said Kovalchuk. “Be a pal!”

“I’m not anyone’s pal,” I said, and dashed inside of the arcade which was quite close by then. The quarters in my jeans pockets made little jingling sounds as they were squished together.

He followed me. Of course he did.

The arcade was densely populated today. Children, grown-ups, teens—they were all there. We even saw Amy from the town hall. “Hello, children,” she said as we passed by the pinball machine (where a small child I assume is her son was playing, and therefore where she was supervising him—this excursion was likely his idea). When we didn’t greet her back, she pursed her lips. “I said hello to you, children.”

“I’m not a children—” protested Kovalchuk, then stopped himself and said, “Hello, Miss Amy.”

She turned her cold gaze to me. Her eyes were glacial blue, tiny sapphires floating in an ocean of milk.

“H-h-hello, Miss Amy,” I got out. I think. I could be remembering wrong.

“Miss Amy,” said Kovalchuk seriously, “I’m afraid we’ll need to know where you were between the hours of ten and eleven o’clock on July second.”

“Oh, I—” Amy began, but before she could finish, the child interrupted: “Mommy does all sorts of things! She told me not to tell—she does surgemy! Um, um... ocluar stuff! She says it’s top secret!”

“Quiet!” hissed Amy to her child, looking angry that the toddler had divulged this information. “I’ll spank ya when the children leave.” Then she turned back to us. “Apologies. Hank can be somewhat disruptive at times.” Smiling in that fashion grown-ups do that is clearly brummagem while patting her son’s skull with some force, she explained, “At that hour, I was holding a meeting with the town council.”

That also gave a very strong alibi for the rest of the members of the town council. “Thank you, madam,” said Kovalchuk. Then he walked towards a machine near it. It said BURGER TIME in large bubble letters, yellow and blue. The cabinet was orange and there were little cartoon burgers all over it, with a chef guy grinning dumbly on the side holding a burger. Peter something.

“This one is fun,” Kovalchuk said, inserting a quarter into the machine. Then he gripped the joystick and moved it in all sorts of different directions. “It’s like Tetris, but different,” he explained. “It’s, um, you control this guy, see—Peter Pickle or something, or is it Peter Pepper—and you try to make a burger out of the ingredients.”

I nodded. “Seems easy enough.”

After a few seconds, Kovalchuk's eyes began to dart away from the cabinet and through the arcade. "Why—why don't you find another game to play while you wait?" he suggested rather meekly.

"Okay," I said, digging into my jeans pockets for my quarters.

I wandered over to the *Pac-Man* cabinet. I got to level four and then Kovalchuk sauntered over. "I played twice," he said. "I got a new record!"

"I didn't," I said. I had just been involved in a particularly interesting chase, and Kovalchuk's appearance had caused me to stop concentrating for just long enough. "Drat!" Turning back my attention to the screen, I noticed what had happened: the red ghost had overtaken me and eaten up my last heart. *Pac-Man* wilted. The words *GAME OVER* flashed on the screen.

"woaaaahhhh!" said Kovalchuk, peering over my shoulder at the screen. "Level *four*? On your *first game of the day*?"

"Didn't I tell you I was good?" I responded, feeling just a little smug—okay, maybe more than a little.

"Okay, okay, I guess you did," said Kovalchuk. Then he clapped his hands together as if in prayer, turning his head to mine. "Teach me."

"This isn't something you can teach," I said, and I hope I sounded cool doing it. "This requires pure talent."

Kovalchuk frowned. "*Pure talent* didn't get Michael DeVito anywhere. I think."

It was my turn to frown. "Who's Michael DeVito?"

"He's the hot dog-eating champion! He ate twenty hot dogs! In one go!"

I blinked. “How’d you know?”

“The newspaper reports on the hot dog-eating contest every year. I’m sure there’ll be a new report soon—there always is, the Sunday after the Fourth of July, which is when I think the contest goes on.”

“Interesting.” I hadn’t known that. “How do they know who wins the hot dog-eating contest—”

As soon as I finished the sentence, I knew. They had only to go out and watch it on TV. But how? Do they have some sort of cable TV that Kovalchuk doesn’t? Some access to outside channels? I dunno!

“I dunno,” said Kovalchuk, shrugging. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Good question,” I said, “except we can’t watch live TV.”

“That’s true.” Kovalchuk sighed. “I guess you beat me.”

“It wasn’t a game,” I said, gesturing to the Pac-Man machine. “*This* is a game.”

Kovalchuk’s eyes lit up. “You have to teach me how!”

I kept protesting, but eventually had to give in, because he bribed me with quarters. I showed him the shortcut—get all of the cherries when you can—and he showed me how to play Burger Time. It’s easy enough to understand but difficult to play because you can only attack three enemies in a game with pepper and the rest of the time you have to squash them, which is pretty hard.

We also played the claw machine, even though no one ever wins at it and it took two quarters. The stuffed animals in the claw machine, illuminated by ghoulish purple light, were all things like ghosts and monsters.

I asked Kovalchuk what was up with that, and he said it was to appeal to teenagers: “Normal stuffed animals just won’t cut it for those guys.” I tried and failed to remind him that we, too, were also teenagers. Hey, it’s been less than a year—less than a month for me. It’s difficult to remember sometimes that I’m not twelve. It’s harder, apparently, for my parents.

Then we had to leave, but not before Kovalchuk reminded me *one more time* that I had to read *Tintin in Tibet*.

“Okay, okay,” I told him dismissively, “I told you I’ll do it later!”

“No you won’t!” he said stubbornly. “You come with me. I’ll go fetch it from my room! Race you to the bookstore.”

And we were off. I beat him by ten seconds because his glasses fell off on Pickle Street.

Kovalchuk raced inside the bookstore once we got there, and was back twenty seconds later (not without a lot of thudding while I waited at the foot of the steps) and handed me a worn copy of *Tintin in Tibet*. “It’s the best one,” he assured me. “It smells like a cherry snow cone.”

“All right, all right,” I said carelessly (have you ever noticed in *Winnie-the-Pooh* how Christopher Robin always says things “carelessly”? It ticks me off) [*Yes, and it is annoying*] and left.

When I got back home, I found Victoria still playing the Genesis. Mom and Amanda had gotten back from their playdate. “Oh, Lydia, you’re home!” she said when I pushed the door open. I grinned internally at this acknowledgement of my presence, but my inner face

fell when she said: “Would you cut a peach for Amanda? She’s so hungry from playing, and I have to run down to the store.”

I nodded diligently, then moved to the counter to cut the peach, making sure to wash it first—who knows where the Jumping Jehoshaphat gets their stock. Then I cut it and gave it to Amanda. “Peechey!” she cried. “Peechey!”

“Yes, yes, it’s a peach.” Comic book in hand, I retreated to the sofa to read. I hadn’t got five pages through, though, when Victoria called “Lydia! Trash here’s full!” from the bathroom as she exited. I quickly stepped to take care of it. Then I emptied the kitchen trash and washed Amanda’s bowl. *Then* I read my book, accompanied by the sounds of *Heckfire* in the background.

It was actually okay! It was all about this Tintin kid, and how he went to save his friend after his plane got felled in the mountains of Tibet. The art was really good and I thought the guy with the sailor hat was funny. What was his name? Harry or something?

Then I was pretty hungry for lunch, so I fixed Amanda and I bologna sandwiches and brought Victoria a lettuce and tomato. Then Mom came home and went to fold laundry while I put away the groceries and finished my sandwich.

Then I finished up my game of chess with Sir Gilbert. I won because I made him make a stupid decision—he exposed his king and I went in for it. That’s the fun of playing with stuffed animals—if you can’t control anything else in your life, at least you can control your duck or other creature.

Then I played *Sorry!* with Amanda (“Sor-sor!”) because she demanded it of me and threatened to cry if I didn’t, and I had some nasty luck—she won. But it only took around half an hour.

Just as we were wrapping up, Mom and Dad appeared at the bedroom door. “Girls, we’re leaving for our date,” said Dad (what date? He hadn’t told us anything about this). “We’ll be back by five fifteen. Till then, please make supper and don’t slap each other unless you have to.”

Once the door closed, we cleaned up the game and I set out to make dinner, fizzing with a sort of excited energy. I had gotten an unexpected chance to read *Arpeggio*. I got out a pot, put in three cups of water (that’s how much I usually do for two cakes of Top Ramen, since Victoria hates the broth) and set it to boil while I paced around trying to figure out how I was going to hide this from Victoria and Amanda. It was only three thirty now, but time goes fast when you’re cooking instant ramen. When it was done, the clock read three forty-five. I slurped up my bowl, washed and dried it and the pot, and told Victoria that she had to wash her own—which was met with an indignant “Hey!”. Then I made sure that I could still hear slurping before I ran down the stubby hallway and dove into my parents’ room, grabbing the rubber band-sealed notebook and tearing off the elastic with my hands shaking. Shoving it under the covers of my quilt that Aunt Jennifer made for me, I quickly changed into my pajamas, brushed my teeth and got into bed, diving under the covers with my flashlight and cracking the cover.

The pages are well-worn and very thin. The notebook is only one hundred pages, but Daniel had small, cramped cursive and he made good use of the space. The cover says COMPOSITION BOOK: 100 PAGES and then, in the tidy cursive that occupies the pages, *Arpeggio of Life and Death—by Daniel Pasternack*.

There are three stories inside. One, *The Lighthouse Keeper*, is about a man, Mr. Glaston, who feels he has done little with his life. In a search for meaning, he takes a job to become a lighthouse keeper, but only to have his boat capsize on the way. His life jacket, half-eaten by rats, doesn't last, and he drowns. The majority of the story is his reflections on life while drowning.

The second one, *Burning Building*, is about a husband and wife who are Expecting (the word is capitalized). They are rushing to the hospital to get her a C-Section. As she is lowered into her bed, someone—an unnamed assailant and observer who is the narrator—sets the hospital on fire and the wife dies. The husband is forced to live with his guilt.

The third one, *Childhood*, is happier. It's about an old man and a young boy, and how they become friends.

I cried the whole way through, I kid you not. But I made sure not to make a sound lest Victoria or Amanda hear me. When I finished, I wiped my face on the quilt to destroy the evidence and put the book back with the rubber bands in the exact same place. Then I recorded this and, well, Mom and Dad are back, a little late, and I have to put on my eye mask and go to sleep. Sorry. But that's the way things are in this town. I can't let Victoria or Amanda hear this either.

July 6, 1991

4:05 AM

Well, today was pretty good! It was a Saturday and I was feeling okay, so I made pancakes for breakfast. It's always a pain to wash those dishes, but Victoria was sure cheered up. She actually thanked me for it and got out the jam once she got up. When Dad saw her in that Whitesnake T-shirt again, he was not happy. "Victoria, why are you still wearing that as sleepwear?" he asked—no, *queried*, I keep forgetting to use that one instead.

"Because I want to," responded Victoria carelessly, mouth full of pancake.

"Don't take that tone with me, young lady," admonished Dad. "And stop talking with your mouth full."

"Do you want manners, or do you want a prompt response?" Victoria shot back, mouth still full of pancake.

That made Dad stop and close his eyes in exasperation. "You're asking for a spanking, Victoria," he said when he finally opened his eyes, his brow creasing.

"Eep!" cried Victoria quietly and shut her trap.

I watched this exchange with apprehension as I ate my pancakes.

While washing the dishes, Amanda began work on another Lite-Brite "massie", Victoria went out with a school friend to the Jumping Jehoshaphat, then to said friend's condominium to watch a movie (apparently, Kovalchuk isn't the only one in Spoon Valley to have a VHS player. Or maybe her friend's is Betamax), and Mom explained that she had a commission from the

city council to draw a poster for the quilting club at the butchers' (who knew Mrs. Spencer was into quilting?). Dad cracked open the newspaper and I was just finished with taking out the trash for Mom and Dad's bathroom when the phone rang.

"Hi, Lydia," came a voice that I immediately recognized as Kovalchuk's.

"Kovalchuk!" I nearly cried in surprise. "How did—how did you find our number?"

"Easy," said Kovalchuk. "I forgot since you're new here, but all the condo phone numbers are in the town phone book."

"What *town phone book*?" I asked, opening the drawer under the phone (which is on the counter next to the stove, which is next to the refrigerator). Sure enough—there it was, SPOON VALLEY PHONE BOOK. It's a slim volume but evidently contains everyone in town's phone number according to address. Some addresses were listed more than once with different numbers for households that had more than one phone. So this is how Victoria has been making these plans with Desmond: she does them on the phone while I'm away.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know about that."

"Okay. Listen, can you come over? We need help shelving these new books that came in. You can have one for free if you help us reorganize—Grandfather has a bad back, so if he drops anything you'll have to pick it up, and someone needs to play with Milo."

"Yeah, I'll come over. Just a second." I hung up, rounded up ten dollars and said a quick goodbye to Dad, then took off.

When I arrived, Simpering Oak was chaos. Kovalchuk was sorting through a large box of books with his grandfather, handing him all of the nonfiction books to sort by Dewey decimal and sorting the fiction ones himself, a pile for each letter of the alphabet: “Chrichton, C... Spinelli, S... oh, that’s a kids book... Cooney, also C...”

“Here, let me help,” I offered, kneeling down next to him, but he stopped me. “I can do this myself,” he responded, not looking up from his task. “Can you play with Milo, keep him from skittering around?”

I nodded compliance and picked up the cat toy from where it was last time, shaking it tantalizingly. “Milo! Where are you?”

The cat soon emerged from behind a stack of books about geology. “*Meow.*”

“Oh drat,” said Kovalchuk.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s the sound he makes when he wants food. I forgot to feed him since the order came really early, just as I was waking up.”

“Do you want me to feed him?” I offered.

“Yeah, thanks! His food is in the top cabinet. C, Christie...” He went right back to sorting the books.

I ran up to the upper half of the building. The living space (I dunno if it’s an apartment, or a condominium, or...) looked oddly deserted with Kovalchuk and his grandfather gone. Opening all of the top cabinets, I found the fancy china, some bobbleheads, a beetle in a jar and Milo’s food. I hurriedly opened the can and looked around for the bowls, finding them behind the kitchen counter and beside the table. I poured the food

inside and dumped the can in the trash, picking up the toy from where I'd placed it on the counter and dashing back downstairs. Once there, I beckoned Milo to the food, which he devoured eagerly. Then I raced back downstairs to see if I could be of further use.

"No," said Kovalchuk. "Just get a book or something. You can help shelve when I'm done sorting."

The shelves, I noticed as I perused them, had a lot of empty space—it seemed that even though it was also a used bookstore, a lot more people bought books than gave them away, and many of the books on the shelves were worn paperbacks. As I selected from the children's section a slim volume, *The Westing Game*, which looked pretty interesting (I remembered that Kovalchuk had recommended it to me when I visited here for the first time), Milo came down from the stairs. I only heard him because he bumped his head on the chain as he crossed the last step—it was pretty low so people who couldn't read it would trip, I think. He walked over to me and twined himself around my legs.

"That means he likes you," Kovalchuk informed me. "I'm almost done. You can pick him up if you want."

I did indeed pick him up. He didn't squirm and instead remained quiet as I pressed him close to me. He was very warm. I couldn't suppress a smile as I went over to show Kovalchuk. "He's not squirming!"

Kovalchuk sighed, stopping his sorting. "That also means he likes you. In any case, I'm all done."

"Do you need help putting them on the shelf?" I asked.

“Yeah, the fiction books. Grandfather’s tagging the nonfiction ones. He’s trying to teach me the Dewey Decimal system, but all I remember is 636.6.”

“And what is that?”

“Cats!”

I laughed. Of course it would be cats.

Putting Milo down, I held out my hands to get a stack of books. “These go in Children’s,” he said, handing me a stack. “Make sure they’re all alphabetically organized. And while you’re doing that...” He bolted for the stairs, then came down with loud footsteps and a boom box. “This calls for music.” He inserted the cord in a power outlet located on the right wall (which sported a shelf containing the mystery books), took out a Cyndi Lauper cassette and inserted it into the door, which was over the CD tray. We don’t have many CDs since we just got a CD player last year—Dad complained about how expensive they were compared to a cassette deck—but what little we do have is piled in the attic in an unopened box and it’s all Mom and Dad’s music. From when they were kids, in the ‘50s and ‘60s. The Beatles and stuff. [*Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was found in the rubble, cracked and worn—the cassette was worn beyond using and warped by heat.*] Nothing I like. I don’t know what music I like. All I have are those Sherlock Holmes tapes and *The Trout*, by Schubert. Also a bunch of blank ones I got for my birthday last year—that’s what I’m using to record these.

While Mrs. Lauper wheedled on about how *money... money changes everything* and later how *girls, they wanna have fun, oh girls just wanna have fun*, I shelved

the books. Kovalchuk did the nonfiction ones once they were done.

Once we were finished, he said, “I can’t let you leave without paying you! Here, have a free book,” and he wrenched the book out of my hands. I didn’t have time to reprimand him before he held it back out to me, grinning. “Paaaaaaaymeeeeent,” he said, nodding and shoving it closer to me.

I edged back, but eventually took the book. “Thank you!”

“No, thank *you* for helping. It would have taken twice as long without your shelving help. Besides, you fed Milo. That’s better than I can say for me.”

“But you did the—”

“Yes, I did, but you were there!” he protested. “Don’t you know that feeling, when it sometimes just feels good to have someone *there*? When you’re struggling? I’ve never had anyone treat me with such kindness before. So—*thank you!*”

I was stunned by this spontaneous display. I didn’t add that I hadn’t had anyone spill out their guts in front of me like he just had.

“Would you like a snack of some sort?” Kovalchuk offered after an awkward silence. “Some tea?”

“Oh, no thank you, I should probably get going,” I said. “My parents will get worried if I’m out too late.” Which was a lie. They wouldn’t care so long as I was in before daylight.

[subject laughs] Funny. If we’d been in Shindaisy, I’d have said before dusk.

Kovalchuk sighed. “Lucky. I wish I had parents. But they’re dead. Both of them.”

Oh dear. This was not where I wanted the conversation to go. Kovalchuk's stark lack of parents.

"Their ship... their ship went down in the middle of the Atlantic. They were going to Italy. The Coast Guard wasn't fast enough."

"Oh dear." I gulped. "Um. Sorry."

"It's all right." He sighed again, more heavily. "I've gotten over it. It happened when I was a baby. Grandfather and Grandmother stayed behind to raise me, but she died soon after we moved here. It was her decision—she thought it would be nice to have a new start at her age. And then she died, peacefully, in her sleep. She had some sort of cancer—Grandfather won't talk about it, he just says she 'got cancer'. And then he was left to raise me alone. Goodness knows it couldn't have been easy raising a child at his age, much less *me*. But we found a way, and the mayor approached him when I was six years old—I remember very clearly going to the town hall when it was under renovation, and waiting outside the big scary door while he talked with her—we were asked to use one of the newer buildings and make a bookstore. We didn't find Milo till last year, when I was starting the seventh grade. I found him in the garbage bins, looking for food, just a small kitten. I can't tell you what possessed me to bring him home—sorry I'm talking so much, you can leave if you want, it doesn't matter."

"No, continue," I said, engrossed and disliking the idea of going out into the heat—it's hot, even at night. That's July for you.

"Okay then... I brought him home, and at first Grandfather was shocked. Then he posited an idea—

that's one of Grandfather's favorite words, *posited*, I think he's read the entire dictionary—that he would become our bookstore cat. He used to live in New York before here, he says, even though I don't remember it at all, and the corner store used to have a cat and it brought him great joy to stroke it. It was called Shoe-Leather, he said, and we should have a similar name for ours. He suggested Licorice or Sardine, but I protested, having recently reread *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and convinced him to name it Milo." He inhaled comically. "That's the story of our family."

I nodded. "Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for listening."

We both blushed bright red.

"Young people," came a voice from behind the cash register. "So heedless."

"Grandfather!" cried Kovalchuk. "Were you eavesdropping?"

"I'm a grown-up, my boy, and I should think that enables me to do whatever I want. Yes, I was eavesdropping and I'm very proud of the way you told the story," Kovalchuk's grandfather said, poking his head out from behind the cash register. "Now turn that song off, you know I can't stand Cyndi Lauper," he said, gesturing to the boombox, which was now playing Cyndi Lauper's fruitless promises with some male singer or other that she'd be waiting *time after time*... Kovalchuk complied, pressing the stop/eject button. The cassette came out and he put it into the case.

"Where are you getting these cassettes?" I asked, unable to suppress my curiosity.

“At Fermata Music on Fourth Street. I can take you there tomorrow if you’d like.”

“Okay!” I said brightly.

“It’s a date,” Kovalchuk’s grandfather cut in, his tone an annoying singsongy one.

“Grandfather!” moaned Kovalchuk. “Bye, Lydia. Thanks for the help.”

“Thanks for the book,” I said, and left.

Milo followed me out. Kovalchuk had to pick him up and bring him back inside.

I began reading my book on the way home and immediately was sucked in. You see, *The Westing Game* is about some people who live in the new apartments in a town—I forget the name, I don’t think they mentioned it. A millionaire in the town has died and wants to dispense his inheritance to someone who can win the “games” of the title. Personally I’m hoping for Turtle to win, the shin-kicker. She reminds me of me.

I knocked on the apartment door with one hand while holding *The Westing Game* with the other. “Victoria, get the door!” came a voice: Dad’s. Victoria moaned but got up and thumped her way to the door. Then she appeared in front of me as it was opened.

“Where have you been? The laundry needs taking out!”

I sighed. Victoria never changes. “All right, all right! I was at the bookstore!” I showed her *The Westing Game*, and she scrutinized it for half a second before saying: “That looks stupid.”

I didn’t say a word but instead stepped inside and went to our room, throwing my book onto my bed and taking the laundry basket by its handles, carrying it

down the hallway. “Thanks, loser,” said Victoria as I left. It feels good to be acknowledged.

When I got to the laundromat, Bethany Sanders was waiting for me (as usual). She was listening to a Madonna tape and dancing to it, which she abruptly stopped as soon as she noticed me. “Oh. Pasternack, it’s you. Pay up.”

“This is extortion,” I muttered under my breath as I handed her the money and shoved the laundry into the washing machine.

“What’s that, Pasternack?” Bethany taunted. “Going to tell your parents about this little agreement we have, are you?” She pinched me in the elbow. Hard. “Just remember that we’re *friends*, Pasternack. Best friends. Pop just won’t shut up about you now that he’s met you; he thinks I know you. I’ve just been making it up. But if we ever meet with him there again, we have to pretend we’re friends. And if we don’t I’ll pummel you. Got it?!”

I’m having the same problem with my own father and am sort of glad that this worked out. I nodded sedately.

“Very good, Pasternack. Ta-ta!”

I left, lugging the empty laundry basket behind me.

Then I made lunch for everyone. I nicked my hand on a knife while cutting an apple, and it hurt. A *lot*. Luckily, I know what to do when these things happen: rinse it with cold water, wrap it in a Band-Aid and continue cutting the apple.

“Thankeee!” cried Amanda when I set down the plate of apple slices which had caused me so much pain in front of her. “Thankeee, Lyds!”

“I *told* you not to call me Lyds!” I told her, but Mom was in the room. “Lydia, don’t take that tone with your sister.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She nodded haughtily, then turned to Amanda. “Your friend Kirsten wants to have another playdate...” But I didn’t hear all of it. I was going to our room, to read.

I didn’t have lunch today. Instead, I read *The Westing Game*. I got through about half of it and I really want to read the rest tomorrow, although I probably won’t get to.

When I finally emerged from the room, where I’d been sprawled out on the floor to the chagrin of Amanda, who’d been sprawled out on the floor herself—doing a coloring book. I ask you, which one is more important?

Then it was dinnertime. I tried my hand at making Rice-a-Roni, which Mom never lets us get due to her never liking it as a kid, but she gave in this time I guess. Mmm yum Rice-a-Roni! The San Francisco treat. Rice-a-Roni! The flavor can’t be beat.

I probably got that song stuck in your head, huh? You’re welcome!

[Chapter Thirteen]

Excursions

July 7, 1991

3:03 AM

Well, today I went to the music store with Kovalchuk, as promised, but I ended up doing something else, something unexpected.

As I was groggily pouring Amanda's cereal into her special sheep bowl (she manipulated me by calling me Lyds again), the phone rang. I rushed to get it—Mom was taking a shower. "Hello, Pasternack residence!" I answered as I'd been trained to.

"Oh, are you one of the girls? Is Fred Pasternack available to speak with?"

I held the phone to my chest to muffle the sound, then called out "Dad! Call for you!"

He got up from his chair and his paper, taking the phone from me rather gruffly, in that cranky early-evening way (I was going to say morning, but it's not. It's not morning. It's evening). "Hello, this is Fred Pasternack?"

I headed back to my seat, but not before surreptitiously reading Dad's paper, the headline of which read: COMMUNITY GARDEN OPENS ON MONDAY. I didn't care, though. I opened it up, looking for the comics—found them!

There were three comics. One was *Peanuts*, one was *Calvin and Hobbes*, and the last one was something called *Scary Situations That Could Happen to YOU!* Today's natural disaster, apparently, was a blowfly laying eggs in your ear, and the bugs eating your brain once they hatched. I shivered, returning to my seat—

but not before reading *Peanuts* and *Calvin and Hobbes*. The dates on the strips were about three days late.

“Mm-hmm, we’d love to join you. Thanks!” I heard Dad say as I took up my spoon, and he set the phone down. When he turned back to us, he was grinning. “Girls,” he said. “Girls, girls, girls! Guess what?”

I gulped. It isn’t usually good when he says that.

Victoria appeared in the kitchen behind him and said, “What is it?”

“So.” Dad grinned wider. “You know how there’s no church here. Well, a kind Mr. Smith has taken it upon himself to have our own. He’s set up chairs in his garage—” *We don’t have a garage*, I thought scornfully, *because we live in a condominium*. “—and a big organ, so everything is ready.”

“CHURCHIE!” cried Amanda, shoveling down her cereal.

Dad chuckled. I did not. Victoria made a little angry sound.

Well, Dad told Mom and Mom seemed okay with it, so fifteen minutes later we were walking to church. It was raining on the way there, and Dad held Amanda because she was “Tire! Tire!”. He babies her too much.

When we arrived at the house of destiny (ooh! That sounds *cool!* The *house... of destinyyyyyyyyyy!*), the garage door was open. People were already inside, and there was one of those automatic coffee machines on a tiny table that someone had just brought out. I think there were more people lined up for coffee than sitting down.

“We’re a little early, it seems,” said Dad, chuckling nervously, and went into the line to get some coffee. I rushed into the garage to get under the shelter.

It was boring in that garage. I sat down on a chair at the back of the garage and watched the rain come down and people come in. There weren’t many people after us; about half the amount that were there to begin with. There were young kids, and twentysomething couples, and old people, but it was mostly people Mom and Dad’s age—to the number, which surprises me.

And then, three minutes till the service started (according to the light-up clock on the garage wall), Kovalchuk arrived with his grandfather.

I stood up from my seat immediately, waving. “Hi! Sit here!”

“Lydia!” Kovalchuk said, waving back, then spoke with his grandfather imperceptibly and went to sit next to me.

At church in Shindaisy I didn’t have any friends. At church in Shindaisy I sat alone.

At church in Shindaisy I liked it that way. But here... it’s different. Or maybe it’s me that’s different.

Kovalchuk and I both agreed that it was quite a pleasant surprise to find each other here, then he asked how I was doing with *The Westing Game*, and I told him I really liked it. He told me that he actually hadn’t read it since he was ten, so he wanted to reread it once I was done, maybe? I agreed, and then the service started. A well-dressed man with stubble running all down his chin and cheeks cleared his throat at the makeshift pew.

“Hello,” he began, “and welcome to the first church in Spoon Valley!” There were general cheers. He grinned and began a very long, very boring sermon about somewhere in the Bible which I don’t remember. Kovalchuk’s grandfather was evidently gripped, clutching his Bible and looking very interested-like at the pastor, whose name I also forget (I think it was Harvey, or something). Kovalchuk and I didn’t dare whisper to each other, not even after we finished the prayer and Pastor Harvey or something took out a boombox and played some Amy Grant very loud. He’d obviously pre-wound the tape to make “Sing Your Praise to the Lord” play right when he pressed the button. He had also obviously forgotten about the organ, gathering dust to his right.

“So. Do you want to go right to the music store after this?” Kovalchuk asked rather tentatively after the song finished and people started filing out of the meek garage.

“I have to get my money first, remember?” I told him.

“Yeah, right! I have to, too! I’ll, um, meet you at the bookstore at...” He looked at his watch—a Spider-Man watch, which he informed me he’d had since he was seven and his grandfather was too much of a cheapskate to buy him another one. “11:45?”

I nodded. That was in fifteen minutes.

Then we went our separate ways. It was a long, sad walk home in the rain—well, not a walk, I suppose, but a dash; I’d informed Mom and Dad of the plan and begun to run right after the arrangements were made. I turned the key in the lock, snatched my money up and

locked up again, dashing to the bookstore. When I got there, I was three minutes early, and I played with Milo while Kovalchuk got his money rounded up. Then we headed to Fermata Music.

Fermata Music is a small, lonely store on Car buckle Street—so small that if you weren't looking for it, you might miss it if not for the blinking neon sign outside it that said FERMATA MUSIC & FILM (the & FILM bit looked as if it had been rather hastily added on with a pen)—SPOON VALLEY'S ONE & ONLY. Kovalchuk pushed open the door, then held it for me, and I thanked him as I entered. It felt very good to get out of the rain.

The store is small, and cramped. The checkout counter is to the left, and the shelves of merchandise to the right.

"Customers!" came a voice which appeared to be coming from behind a door just past the checkout counter and a general chorus of banging. Then a man with scraggly white hair who looked to be about Kovalchuk's grandfather's age came stumbling out of the door to the counter. "Oh, it's young Mr. Dawes! Who's your lady friend?" He gasped. "Is she—*new to town?*"

Kovalchuk gave a nod of assent.

"Now remember lassie—" he dropped his voice and beckoned me closer so he could whisper in my ear—"in this town, you can go in, but you can't go out, not unless you want to face extreme persecution from the Society. Be treated like one of them Sunlighters—"

"What's a Sunlighter?" I asked, confused.

His face darkened. "That don't matter, lass. But heed my warning—don't be going out of doors after sunrise,

mind. Don't even be awake. Wear your eye mask every night—keep 'em in the care of a trusted adult. And whatever you do, don't stay up. And you'll be just fine. It happened to my daughter. We never saw her again, she's gone, but I'm alive, alive, I'm alive. Lass, I'm alive, and it's a beautiful thing, innit, we never should have moved here, never should have succumbed to the Society—"

I edged away, whispering to Kovalchuk, "Is he always like this?"

Kovalchuk nodded. "Yep, and don't mention it to him or he'll get really mad. Otherwise, he's a nice guy!"

We left him rambling on about the Society and went to peruse the cassette selection. There really wasn't anything good, though Kovalchuk did recommend several to me. Because they were at a reasonable price, I took one from him: WATERMARK, by someone named Enya.

It was only nine dollars, so I bought it. Now I have thirty-one dollars—I'll have to ask for allowance this week...

Kovalchuk obviously gets his allowance every week because he bought a very expensive VHS tape called *Footloose*. I whistled when I saw the price tag, but he shrugged and said it was normal, and suggested I come over tomorrow to watch it. I nodded timidly and we went to the checkout counter. The store owner, whose name I still hadn't caught, wrote something on my receipt when he gave it to me. It said, in a cramped scrawl:

BEWARE THE SUNLIGHT!

I gulped uncertainly as I showed it to Kovalchuk on our way out, getting my flashlight out from my pocket and shining it on the message.

“That’s normal. After since his daughter went out in the sunlight a couple years ago, when I was ten, he went paranoid.” He showed me his own receipt, which read in the same cramped scrawl as mine: ENJOY! WITHIN A REASONABLE HOUR! “He just wants us to keep safe. We should heed his advice. Or we could *run awayyyyyyy...*”

I laughed at the silly voice he used. But I think he was serious because he sighed wistfully. “I can’t imagine the sun. Can you imagine not being able to do that? Where you’re from you saw it every day. Is it odd, to look up at that great orb of fire in the sky and know that it’s keeping you warm, keeping you safe, keeping you *alive?*”

I certainly can’t image the sun on these streets, but I tried to console him. “It’s no prettier than the moon. The moon is actually quite a bit cooler.”

“Cooler is right,” said Kovalchuk, and shivered from the rain.

He was silent the entire way back to the bookstore. I think he was dreaming of the sun.

When I got back I made lunch for myself, then read a bit more of *The Westing Game*—I’m now 115 pages through! It’s getting very exciting indeed... Unfortunately, it didn’t last long—when the laundry needed picking up, it was Super Pasternack to the rescue! I folded while listening to that new cassette tape—it’s boring, but it’s *good* boring. Then I put the laundry away and recorded this (I thought I’d get a

head start). I'll have to make some dinner soon, and I want to read more of *The Westing Game* before that.

July 8, 1991

4:23 AM

Today was *horrible!* Absolutely *horrible!* You've no idea what sort of torture I've had to go through today!

Well, perhaps I'm dramatizing it a bit, but it was certainly bad. Today... [*subject pauses for dramatic emphasis*] I was dragged on a *shopping trip*. With *Victoria and Desmond*.

Here's how I got roped into it. As I was making oatmeal for breakfast (never a favorite, but nice and easy, and a change from cereal and burnt toast), the phone rang. I answered it, saying the usual "Hello, Pasternack residence". And the voice on the other end of the line was a deep male one, and it sounded like Victoria's boyfriend. "Oh, you're one of her kid sisters. Is Vickie here?"

No one calls Victoria Vickie except Amanda, and she gets slugged when she does that. And her friends, and Mom and Dad sometimes. Whenever *I* try, I get slugged too.

"She's asleep. Try in fifteen minutes," I said, looking at the clock, which read 9:32—I'd gotten up twelve minutes before.

"Right then. I'll call at 9:45." He hung up. I went back to making the oatmeal.

When everyone was up, I dished out the oatmeal, then ate my own. Amanda, Victoria, and Dad all got up eventually. Mom showered while they ate. Then the phone rang and I told Victoria it was for her, from Desmond, because it was what I'd surmised, not

noticing that it was only 9:44. It turned out to be Kirsten's mother, asking if Amanda wanted to have another playdate. Almost immediately after she hung up on that one, the call from Desmond came. They made plans to go to the mall together.

And when Mom got out of the shower, ate her oatmeal, and washed the pot (she *never* does that), she asked who all the calls were from, and I explained who they were from, and she nodded and asked me when the playdate was supposed to be, and I told her, and she thanked me, and slipped me my allowance, and I was left standing dumbfounded at the fantastically swift sequence of events which had just taken place and transformed my entire day. Ten dollars. Then she said something that caught me completely off guard.

"Go with Victoria to her shopping trip, would you? It's not good for the health to be trapped up at home all day."

"That hadn't been my plan," I protested. Well, it kind of had.

"You don't mind, do you, Vickie?" Mom said in a rather threatening tone, and Victoria grumbled assent. So that was how I got roped into it. That was how I spent my entire day shopping with Victoria and Desmond.

The youth came to our apartment at 10:32 to the minute, just a few minutes after Mom and Amanda left. Dad went to work because he is a grown-up and doesn't get summer vacation. "Hey, little lady," he said, patting me on the head, as I opened the door for him, and I scowled. "Where's your sister?"

“Oh, Des!” said Victoria, coming out of our room, where she’d spent the better part of an hour primping. She looked like a deranged clown. I scowled fiercer. “My little sister, Lydia, is coming with us today. Moms, right?”

Desmond nodded, but he looked at me. “Is she the suspicious sort?”

“Oh, no, she’ll behave. I’m really sorry about this, Des, I tried to—”

He mimicked waving her protests away with his hand. “Don’t matter, so long as she behaves. So, where do you wanna head? The music store?”

Victoria grinned. “And I thought I was gonna die of boredom!”

Desmond returned the grin, and I gagged inwardly. Why can’t a boy and a girl ever just be friends in anyone’s minds?

On the walk to Fermata Music, Desmond and Victoria discussed:

a particularly nasty teacher called Mr. Shneider who never, ever graded assignments on time and assigned detentions so frequently you never knew if you were going to get one, even if you’d done nothing wrong,

the new album by something named Desiccated Spleen, which I remember Desmond wearing a shirt of one time and sounded to me a lot like some more loud, screamy music,

and their *next* date, which was supposed to take place next week.

I entertained myself by twiddling my thumbs and thinking about how Kovalchuk had acted while talking about the sun, both yesterday and on the Fourth of July.

Thankfully, their conversation came mostly to an end when we arrived at Fermata Music. They rifled through the cassette collection for the Desiccated Spleen album, and upon finding it freaked out very loudly at the exorbitant price (something upon which the store owner rebuked me for, even though it hadn't been *my* fault—I learned his name today, David Blince) but bought it anyway. The supposed “exorbitant” price was fifteen dollars.

Then they looked at the VHS tapes (because Desmond is a friend of the friend who has the VHS player, I think) and selected *Back to the Future II*, because one wasn't enough for Mr. Zemeckis, oh no.

Then when we walked from the music store to TAMMY'S, which sells nail stuff and clothing (to save space, I guess—and guess what the owner's name is), they discussed:

Mrs. Gruber's murder, which they had somehow heard about, probably from a classmate whose younger sibling was in one of her classes,

their incorrigible youths, especially the foolish things they supposedly did when they were my age (when Victoria was my age, she tried lipstick for the first time at a friend's party... but not the way you'd think. She thought it was a kind of candy and ate it, and got sick as well as in a lot of trouble with that friend afterwards),

and the new Desiccated Spleen album. They were fondling the J-card between themselves and staring at all the band members on it. The cover is really creepy.

When we arrived at TAMMY'S, Desmond seemed uninterested in Tammy, the owner, and her many

wares (which she was more than happy to show us) and was checking his watch a lot—he promised Victoria he'd stay for thirty minutes, which had started at 11:03. That made it until 11:33 that I would have to endure the agony of Victoria trying on different clothes and Desmond telling her they all looked splendid on her, no matter how much they emphasized some of her less desirable features.

While she was occupying the sole changing room in the place, the thought occurred to me that I didn't know where Desmond had been when the Gruber murder occurred. I decided to ask him, and decided at the same time that the best way to do that was to poke him in the shoulder (that was all I could reach—he's easily over six feet tall). "Pssst! I need to ask you some *questions* regarding the murder of Augusta Gruber."

"Old Gruber?" He looked stricken for a moment, then regained his composure. "I can tell you one thing: from what I've heard, a lot of people had it out for her. But why are you asking *me*?"

"Desmond, where were you between the hours of ten and eleven PM on July second?"

"Woah, woah, woah." He held up his hands. "Do you mean that you suspect me in your teacher's murder?"

"Everyone's a suspect," I said, and my voice sounded a bit too high for my liking. Too childish.

Desmond rolled his eyes. "I ate breakfast, read a book, walked to school, and suffered through a pre-calc lesson. What else's there to tell?"

"Who can *confirm* this information?" I asked.

"My mother, for *one*," he said, annoyed. "And Mr. Shneider."

“Thank you for your cooperation, sir,” I said, mulling over whether he could be a solid suspect or not. I eventually stopped thinking about it because I would need to ask his mother and his teacher to extract any further information.

Just then Victoria emerged from the changing room. “You look ravishing,” Desmond told her as she posed, and I rolled my eyes.

Things continued on that way until 11:33 on the dot, when Desmond reminded Victoria that it had now been thirty minutes. “Five more minutes,” she whined, and I knew that it was going to be more than five minutes.

I asked Desmond if he liked books at all. He said no, he had always been forced to as a child. I asked him if he liked cake. He said, “Who doesn’t like cake?” Which was a good point. I asked him if *he* had any suspects as to the murder of Mrs. Gruber, and he said no.

I asked him why he was dating Victoria, and he said, “Because she’s new, and so’s her heart. I haven’t broken it yet. And it’s such fun to see the spark go out of someone’s eyes.” He grinned scarily when he said that.

We eventually ended up leaving the store at 11:49, sixteen minutes after we were supposed to. Bored out of my skull, I asked where we were going next and was told: “We’re going to the arcade.” I sagged in relief before remembering that I had barely any quarters in my wallet. I’d have to spend them all on games.

And I did. I tried to get better at Burger Time, but I didn’t. We were really only at the arcade for twenty minutes. When we left, it was 12:08, and it was

because Victoria was getting hungry. And of course Desmond, ever the valiant one, and to take her to some sort of restaurant or other. And pay for her food.

We went to Rita's Roarin' Restaurant like we did a few weeks ago on the first day here. It was just as bad as it was last time. Except I saw Desmond and Victoria *kiss*.

[subject begins singing, very quietly] Desmond an' Victoria, sittin' in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes the baby in the baby carriage! That's not all, that's not all, give the baby alcohol! *[subject chuckles, then stops before it gets too loud]* Sorry, Victoria.

So yeah. Desmond also paid for my meal, though he grumbled about it. I was given a kids menu and chose the least expensive option (plain pasta) with no condiments, no drink and no side. It was not very filling but I didn't complain—it was better than making it myself.

Then we headed back home. When I got inside, I was told by Mom that there had been a call for me from Kovalchuk asking if I wanted to come over and watch *Footloose* today, but he was told no. The response, apparently, was that he would check again tomorrow. In the center of the living room, Amanda was back at her Lite-Brite making a portrait of Victoria. It also looked like a deranged clown, and Victoria swore at her for it, and was scolded.

Then I finished *The Westing Game*! It was a very exciting ending. I'm glad Tur—sorry, I don't want to spoil it for you.

Then I did a puzzle that I've had for a very long time, since I was eight—one of *Robin Hood*, 100 pieces, from when Aunt Jennifer was a kid (she's our only aunt since Dad was an only child, can you tell? So she tries to lavish us with gifts, and it doesn't work). It was very easy. Then I made some Top Ramen for dinner, and Dad came back from work and read the paper. Then I recorded this and now I'm going to play solitaire until I have to go to bed so bye.

Side Two

[Chapter Fourteen]

Simpering Oak

July 9, 1991

4:08 AM

I had fun today! No sooner had I finished eating the scrambled eggs I'd made myself for breakfast (not for anyone else, oh no. They can make breakfast themselves) than the phone rang. I answered it hurriedly: "Hello, Pasternack residence!"

"Lydia! Do you want to come over *today* to watch that tape I got at the store, *Footloose*? Yesterday your mom said you were busy, but now you aren't right?" Kovalchuk's eager tone came through loud and clear.

"Yeah, sure!" I said. "How about in fifteen minutes?"

"That works," he said. "Oh—there's a customer. Gotta go, bye!" He hung up.

That was it. I'd just signed my entire morning away. And I was feeling pretty happy about it.

I grabbed Sir Gilbert and dashed out the door after telling Dad I was going to the bookstore. The clouds swelled with rain just waiting to burst out, and I got inside the bookstore just as it was beginning to drizzle. Milo greeted me with a "Meow!" and twined himself around my legs. I picked him up and hugged him, then asked the cat: "Where's Kovalchuk, buddy? Where'd he go?"

"I'm right here!" came a voice from the cash register, and sure enough there he was, handing over change to a teenage customer holding one of the new books, *The*

Face on the Milk Carton by Caroline B. Cooney. It didn't look very good.

"Ready to watch the movie?" I asked.

"Not yet. Because you know what any proper movie night needs?" he said, a twinkle in his eye.

"Snacks?" I guessed.

"That's right!" he said, and held up a ten-dollar bill. "We have this to spend at the Jumping Jehoshaphat. Come on!"

"Oh sure. Don't bother to say goodbye to your old grandfather," came a voice from a chair near the mystery section.

"Bye, Grandfather! Sorry!"

We arrived at the Jumping Jehoshaphat before the rain began really coming down. It's a small store, well furnished, with a good heating system—that's what really mattered to us. The owner, Mr. Evans, handed us towels.

"Thank you for your graciousness, sir," I said, shocked.

"I have dozens of 'em in the Housewares aisle!" he responded. "Why would I miss one? You can keep 'em."

Suddenly, I stopped walking, gasped, I glanced at Kovalchuk as I realized something. "Miss Primrose!"

Kovalchuk gasped too. "That's right! Miss Primrose! Sir, is Miss Primrose in today?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, then called into the door behind him: "Miss Primrose!"

"Yes?" came the reply.

"Visitors for you?"

Looking slightly confused, Miss Primrose exited the room, which appeared to have several boxes inside of it. “What is it?”

“Miss Primrose,” began Kovalchuk, “We’d like to ask you why you had blood on the clothes you turned in for washing on July second.”

“Oh, that,” said Miss Primrose, and she looked less confused. “I had a nasty fall. Don’t worry, it’s all fixed now.”

I looked at Kovalchuk. “Can we trust her?” I whispered, suspicious.

Kovalchuk shrugged. “I don’t think we have any choice. Thank you, Miss Primrose.”

As we left, I thanked Mr. Evans again, and so did Kovalchuk. Then we looked for snacks. We sorted through brilliant white bags of Doritos, Lay’s bags of all different colors and even a few Funyuns bags before settling on original Lay’s chips (Party Size, Kovalchuk insisted, because it *was* a little bit of a party) and Happy Cola. I protested against that last one because I hate gummy bears, but he persuaded me to try them. We checked out with Mr. Evans and headed back to the bookstore, putting the towels over our heads so we wouldn’t get wet. I hadn’t had a hot shower since Sunday and was really looking forward to having one when I got back.

When we got back to the bookstore, we opened the packages of snacks and went to Kovalchuk’s bedroom, which he’d cleaned up so you could watch the TV there. He put the *Footloose* tape in the VCR while I poured the chips into a large bowl, then rushed back for the beginning of the movie.

It was a pretty good movie. It was about this teenager, and he, um, he went and saved his town from the ban on dancing that it had. The songs it had in it were really good and the dancing was good too. Kovalchuk sang through every song—he has the cassette of the soundtrack and he let me borrow it—and remarked upon the smells of the voice of the actors: Kevin Bacon was a very aromatic pea soup. But when the tape ended, he didn't seem happy at all. His face grew sad, and cold, and withdrawn.

As the VCR rewound the tape, we sat in silence. Then, after he took it out, he looked at me and said: “Why? Why haven't I ever seen the sun?”

Why? He sounded so much like a little kid; earnest, sad. All he wanted was an answer.

“Is there some way I can appeal to the Society to let me—” He swallowed. “No, there probably isn't. Dang it, Lydia... I wanna see a sunset for once.” His voice turned husky and cynical—deeper than I'd heard it before. “It doesn't matter, does it? No one cares. No one thinks I'm missing out.”

A pause, then: “I would spit scornfully on the ground if this wasn't my room.” He frowned, but I think even he could tell that what he had just said was funny.

“I'm sorry about that. I'm just—do you want some lunch?”

“What do you have?”

“A *lot* of bologna since Grandfather loves it. We have, um...” He thought for a second, then got up and beckoned for me to do the same. “Let's go to the kitchen and see what we have.”

They had pickles. Kovalchuk likes pickles. He and I ate the entire jar, which left me so full I didn't care for anything else except chocolate. Then we got bored and decided to watch another movie. We watched *Alice in Wonderland* and I made my case as to why Alice was stupid in the movie but not in the book. Kovalchuk made his case against this claim: he asserted that she was stupid in *both*. He won because of a particularly convincing piece of evidence involving the Mock Turtle.

After that I went home. It was about 2:00. But before I left I went to buy another book.

"Since you liked *The Westing Game*," said Kovalchuk, "you should try a grown-up mystery." He went over to the mystery shelf and picked out a tiny paperback: *And Then There Were None*, handing it to me. "Here."

I shied away from it. "I don't like grown-up books. They're too mature and there's too much romance. And those are my dad's sort of book."

"There's barely any romance in this one," he promised, "and it's a really good mystery. I read it last year."

I took the book rather hesitantly. "Okay."

"You can have it for half price. Friends & Family discount."

"Thanks!"

I paid and left in the rain. I left my towel with Kovalchuk because it would be weird if I came home from a boy's house with a towel.

When I arrived home, I wanted a hot shower (obviously). But apparently, Victoria was in the only shower (in Mom and Dad's room, so I had to wait in

line to use it after her—Dad told me all this before instructing me strictly not to touch anything. Carrying my pajamas in one hand and my comb in the other, I tapped my toe impatiently, looking at Mom and Dad's large yellow wall clock that's always exactly one minute slow—Dad refuses to fix it because he says simple subtraction is good for the brain—as the hours ticked by. Victoria had been in the shower for at least half an hour when I stopped thinking about *The Westing Game's* shock ending and started noticing things in the room. Namely: the dark black box on Mom and Dad's nightstand.

Crouching down next to the billowy black duvet cover, I examined the box. It didn't look like one of Mom's jewelry boxes for sure—no, it was too big for that, about as big as the space between my ears on my face. I knew I'd been told not to touch anything, but my curiosity won out in the end.

When I opened it cautiously, that sickly sweet smell hit me, stronger than I'd ever smelled it. It made me feel oddly drowsy, as if I was being given some drug.

Five eye masks were being soaked in an odd liquid—clearly the source of the sickly sweet smell. That must have been what was making me so dizzy. I picked up the eye masks—one was smaller than the others...

They were without a doubt ours. Mom always asked for them back at the end of the nights, but she never said where they went. She always gave them back before—before we had to go to bed each night. There's only one explanation for this.

She knew. This was a clear attempt to keep us down—keep us asleep—so we couldn't get up during sunlight hours. At all. An attempt by the Society.

And my mother.

Just seconds after I carefully placed the eye masks back in the box where they'd been before and closed the object with trembling fingers, Victoria finally finished blow-drying her hair and emerged from the bathroom. I rushed in to take my shower.

I sang "Let's Hear It for the Boy"—or at least I mouthed it into my comb.

After the shower, I made pasta for dinner, then began *And Then There Were None*. It's pretty boring so far, but I'll push through. For Kovalchuk. I just realized it's one of those Agatha Christie books Dad always has—I'll have to ask him if he's read it.

July 10, 1991

3:59 AM

Today was pretty okay. While I was eating cereal (and reading *And Then There Were None*) the phone rang again. It was Kovalchuk. "Kovalchuk!" I said. "What is it?"

"Do you want to come over and play Clue with me?" he asked.

"Clue sounds fun," I said. "Sure!"

I had totally forgotten about what I saw yesterday.

I went over after finishing breakfast just like yesterday. It was less of a miserable walk, because it wasn't raining, but there were a lot of puddles around—it had rained considerably during the day as well, apparently.

When I arrived at the bookstore with wet shoes and a dry head, Milo greeted me before Kovalchuk did. I picked him up as Kovalchuk said, “Hi! Are you enjoying *And Then There Were None?*”

I looked from side to side. “Um.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry, it gets better. Here, come upstairs and we’ll play Clue.”

We went upstairs. As Kovalchuk headed to his room to pull out the game, he asked, “What character do you want to be?”

“Professor Plum.” That was always Dad’s character. He loves Clue. Or he did. It was Daniel’s favorite. He hasn’t played it, and neither have I, since he passed away.

“But *I* want to be Professor Plum,” complained Kovalchuk, and then conceded after a lot of scuffling as he emerged from his room: “Fine, I’ll be Colonel Mustard.” He pronounced it *Colluhnell*.

“It’s pronounced *Kernel*,” I told him.

“No it’s not!” he cried. “*Colluhnell!*”

“*Kernel!*” I cried.

This continued for quite some time until Kovalchuk’s grandfather poked his head into the upstairs apartment, told us to quiet down and that we were annoying an important customer (Mr. Spencer, here for the new Stephen King novel), and that I was right, that it was *kernel*. I may have gloated. A little bit.

“Okay, okay,” said Kovalchuk, taking a seat at the dining table where we’d set up the game. “Let’s start. You know the drill, don’t you? Mr. Boddy has been murdered.”

Murder. The term brought to my mind a much more recent development. “Kovalchuk!” I interrupted. “I asked Victoria’s boyfriend about it and he isn’t very suspicious.”

Kovalchuk nodded. “Great. I’d, um... actually forgotten about that. A little bit.”

“You *forgot* that one of our teachers was *murdered*?” I cried incredulously. “And that we’re trying to find out *who*?”

Kovalchuk blinked. “It slipped my mind.”

“This is why you’re Watson,” I said, annoyed, and gestured for him to continue as I slouched in my seat.

It was Mr. Green with the candlestick in the Dining Room. I figured it out way before Kovalchuk did and proceeded to give him another “This is why you’re Watson”. He rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes.”

Just then Kovalchuk’s grandfather came upstairs. It had been about half an hour since we’d seen him last.

“My midmorning tea,” he said, putting a kettle on the stove to boil.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore, Grandfather,” said Kovalchuk. “It’s midevening.”

“No it’s not!” said Kovalchuk’s grandfather stubbornly. “It’s midmorning tea to *me*, thank you very much. And what’s that you’re playing? Clue? I thought so. You wouldn’t have the know-how to play chess or some other sophisticated game.” He shook his head. “Kids these days.”

Kovalchuk was blushing, and he whispered to me: “I wasn’t taught how. He never taught me. This is technically his fault.”

I rose my hand (raised? No, that isn't right! No, no, raised your hand is what you do, right?! RIGHT?!?!?!).
"I can play chess."

Kovalchuk's grandfather whirled around. "You can play chess, but can you beat the King of Chess?"

"You're not the king of chess anymore, Grandfather," Kovalchuk reminded him. "You lost that title to Ernie Miller three years ago. Now you're the Duke of Chess."

"Ah yes m'boy," said Kovalchuk's grandfather. "Apologies: Duke of Chess. My memory is not the best."

So we played chess while Kovalchuk's grandfather made tea. He won—he's *scary* good.

But he said I was good company. Everyone in the bookstore seems to think so.

I don't remember anyone ever telling me that in Shindaisy.

When I arrived back at the house—no, *condominium*—there was a letter waiting for me on the counter as I made my lunch. It appeared to be from the school: The return address read MR. MICHAEL GALLAGHER, 49 EAGLE STREET. SPOON VALLEY, OR 99951. It had our address under it, with my name. LYDIA PASTERNAK, UNIT C10, CHIROPTERAN HEIGHTS, SILVER STREET. SPOON VALLEY, OR 99951.

I opened it rather eagerly. It was an elective sign-up form. The options, as were typewritten on the letter, were art, band, theater, or study hall. I chose art, because all the other options sounded horrible. Then I rang up Kovalchuk to see what he chose, and he said he hadn't gotten the letter yet but would choose art when it came.

Then I read more of *And Then There Were None*. It got pretty good, and I think I got pretty close to finding out who would be the first victim when I was called upon to vacuum. We have a Hoover vacuum (Hoover invented it.) because Dad saw an ad for it on Supermarket Sweep last year and decided we needed a new vacuum cleaner. So that's how I spent an hour.

Then I settled down to read *And Then There Were None*. At last, at last, someone got murdered! Then someone else got murdered! And the murders seem to be connected to these weird figurines on the mantle of the fireplace in the house they're all staying at! How exciting!

Mom made dinner tonight. I did the dishes. She made this stew thingie. I forget what she called it.

Now I want to find out what happens in *And Then There Were None* next, so byyyyyyye!

July 11, 1991

3:02 AM

Today was *boring*. I had basically nothing to do. So I decided to go all out on breakfast: I made muffins! Which are always a pain to clean up after because of the sludge that clings to the pans and pots and EVERYTHING, but are delicious to eat. I made blueberry muffins. Amanda said they were "dillie! DILLIE!" and proceeded to make a model of one on her Lite-Brite. Victoria grunted when I asked her whether she liked them, which I take to mean she did. Mom said nothing and Dad took one on his way to work, so I didn't hear anything from him. I think I used too much salt in the recipe, but they were delicious otherwise.

Then I called Kovalchuk and asked if he wanted to come to our house and I would teach him how to play chess so he could beat his grandfather.

“Actually...” he said when I finished asking. “I’ve been thinking. About the town hall.”

“What about the town hall?” I asked.

“Oh, stuff... you know how they have those archives?”

“What archives?” I was confused.

“The archives in the town hall!” Kovalchuk appeared to be on the road to agitation. “Surely you know about them!”

“Don’t call me Shirley!” I growled through the phone. It’s an old joke that I sometimes hear Dad use when he’s with his friends.

Kovalchuk laughed. “But really, do you?”

“No!” I said, my tone switching from lighthearted to exasperated. “I don’t!”

“Then you’ll just have to see,” Kovalchuk said dismissively. “Meet me outside the town hall at 10:15.”

He hung up, assuming I’d agree. I didn’t have anything better to do, so go I did.

When I arrived, out of breath, at the town hall, Kovalchuk was waiting for me, sipping a Coke. He produced one from his exceedingly large and exceedingly bulgey pocket (wait... *is bulgey* a word? It is now!). “Want one?”

I accepted it. “Sure. Do you want a blueberry muffin?” I’d brought some on my way in case we got hungry.

“Sure,” said Kovalchuk, holding out his hand. In the hand I placed a blueberry muffin.

Once the muffin had been eaten, Kovalchuk and I went up to the door. His fist was raised to knock when I held up a hand. "Stop!"

"Why?" he whined, but he did stop.

I rapped three clean times. "Because you always do Shave and a Haircut," I reminded him.

"But it's fun!" he protested. "Where's your sense of humor?"

"It got burned away when I looked at the sun," I said.

"Oh." Kovalchuk blinked. "Not what I was expecting. Okay."

I laughed. "I'm kidding—"

The door opened with a loud, inconspicuous creak. Amy poked her head out of it.

"Oh." Her face fell when she noticed who it was. "Can I help you children?"

"For the last time," I heard Kovalchuk mutter, "I'm *not* a *children*—"

"Madam, we'd like access to the town archives," I said, trying my best to sound like a grown-up.

Amy pursed her lips. "The archives are not available for public access at this time. The Ink Sun Society wishes to offer their condolences."

"Why?" whined Kovalchuk from behind me.

Amy closed the door on us without answering the question, leaving us in silence.

"So." I gulped at what I was contemplating but didn't stop it from coming out of my mouth. "Do you want to come over and I can teach you how to play chess?"

"Chess is boring!"

"Chess is *not* boring!"

"Is too!"

“I’m not getting into this,” I said adamantly. “Do you want to come or don’t you?”

“Sure,” said Kovalchuk, “but I have to tell Grandfather first.”

This sentence caused a pang in my gut. Does Kovalchuk’s grandfather really care that much about where he is?

So we headed back to the bookstore—it was on the way back to my house, anyways. The town hall is pretty far from there. It’s close to the entrance—

[subject inhales] Wait a minute.

Where is our car?

We had it. Dad parked it outside the condominium complex. The next day, it was gone.

I thought they’d taken it to some garage. Maybe they have. Wait, I’ll go ask Dad—he just got home. *[smack! Smack!]* He was very vague about it. He said it was someplace, he didn’t really know. How can one not know where one’s car is?!

So back to the... thing. Yeah. Kovalchuk and I went to Simpering Oak, he told his grandfather while I petted Milo, then we left and headed back to my house. Sadly, just as we were entering, Bethany Sanders was exiting.

“Hi, Pasternack,” she said in an annoying voice, tipping her equally annoying cowboy hat.

“Greetings, Sanders,” said Kovalchuk in a robotic voice. “We are from the planet Glorp and will leave peacefully if you give us cookies.”

“Pasternack!” She looked at me. “What is your boyfriend doing? What is he, six years old?”

No, he's just read some Calvin and Hobbes books one too many times, I thought. "Shut up, Bethany. Kovalchuk and I aren't dating. For the last time."

She thought this was great fun and poked me. "Hey. Pasternack. What's your favorite game?"

I didn't give her the satisfaction of answering.

"Mine's poker. Get it? Poker?" She poked me again. And again. Then she shrieked with laughter. "Later, losers!"

[Ahhhh, nostalgia... the perennially popular game of poker persists to this day.]

We went inside and ran up the two flights of rickety stairs leading to our condominium.

"Here we are, unit C10," I said. "Home sweet home." I turned my key in the lock, letting us in.

Then I taught Kovalchuk how to play chess. Or, I tried to. I taught him about the pawn rules, and about how you weren't to expose your king, but then he sort of lost interest and we played Garbage instead, about three times. By then an hour or so had passed, so we had a sort-of early lunch. I made a grilled cheese sandwich for Kovalchuk while I made myself a delicious peanut butter sandwich (like the mouse loves in *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. When I was reading that book for the first time in second grade I could never figure out why Ralph didn't ask for jelly in those sandwiches). Then Kovalchuk left, and I felt lonely for approximately forty-five seconds, then I took out the trash and washed the cutting board I'd made the sandwiches on, and then washed the pan I'd made the grilled cheese in, then I used the bathroom because I don't think I mentioned I drank a more-than-

substantial portion of water with that peanut butter sandwich, and then I read some of *And Then There Were None*.

And then Mom and Dad said we would be going on a Fun Family Trip! to the arcade. Victoria didn't protest, and neither did Amanda, and even though all I wanted to do was stay home and read my book, and even though I wouldn't get any more quarters for a very long time, I still went. We were given a free quarter and so I milked a game of *Burger Time* out of that—I'm still no better at it than I was last time. Then I paced around for about an hour and eventually read some more *And Then There Were None*. I'd stashed it under my sweater (it is rather cold out at night). It's getting *really* exciting. I read the whole way home, flashlight in between my teeth (it hurt my mouth after a while, but I didn't mind), and I read more after. Then I was commissioned to make dinner again. At least Victoria helped. A little. We made some spaghetti. Then I went and recorded this.

I wonder whether I should put on that eye mask tonight. I wonder whether I should tell Kovalchuk.

Probably better not to. Someone could be listening. Someone could know I know.

July 12, 1991

3:02 AM

I may have to leave pretty soon and make dinner, so I'll record as much of this as I can before then.

First thing I did after I woke up was read *And Then There Were None*. I finished it in bed and then sprang out and poured myself some cereal, filled with energy from the marvelous amount of sleep we've been

getting over the past few weeks and the shocker of an ending that book has—I won't tell you in case you haven't read it, but it's *really* good, I promise.

Then I was playing a game of Solitaire in the living room when Kovalchuk rang me up on the phone. Picking up the eerie black speaker, I asked him what this was all about.

"Do you want to go to the community gardens?" he asked. "They just opened on Monday. Grandfather read about it in the newspaper and we're going today. Do you wanna come?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, and slammed the phone back onto the dial. Then I left.

It was a long walk. Thank goodness I ran into Kovalchuk on the way there—I must have been going pretty slow. You see, Kovalchuk's bookstore is only a few blocks from Chiropteran Heights, just between us and the town hall. But the community garden is in the opposite direction, and it's pretty far in the opposite direction—it's near all the houses where the church house is. I didn't know that, though, so it was a lucky thing they noticed me pacing around.

"Lydia!" called Kovalchuk from behind me. I whirled around, startled. "Don't scare me like that!"

"That's not what I was trying to do." Kovalchuk's jeans pockets were bulging with something. He took one of the items out of his right pocket. It was a slick black walkie-talkie.

"These were Grandfather's and now they're mine. You can have one. We'll keep in touch. You'll always know it's me this way." He handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly.

“Gonna send bedtime love messages to each other?” Kovalchuk’s grandfather said coyly. “Ah, young love. Young man, did I ever tell you about the time I met your grandmother, God rest her soul?”

“Geez!” Kovalchuk whined. “We’re not dating, Grandfather!” Heavy sighs came from both of us.

“Sure, sure,” he said dismissively. “Denial will get you nowhere.”

Kovalchuk hung his head in embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault!” I cried. And repeated it, into the walkie-talkie—or tried to. The two machines were too close to each other, so they both made a horrible whining sound when I tried to speak into mine. I turned it off immediately. “Sorry. I’ve never had a walkie-talkie before. My brother used—” I stopped in the middle of that sentence.

Kovalchuk gave a grin that was trying too hard to push the unspoken aside. “Let’s go to the garden, shall we?”

“Good idea,” I said shakily, but my mind was still on Daniel.

We walked in silence after that. I didn’t dare whisper to Kovalchuk about how much I loved *And Then There Were None*, when my mind finally turned to the subject from my dead brother. I just shoved my hands in my jeans pockets and tried very hard not to notice the soft scraping of stone against stone as those owls on the tops of the buildings scraped their stone heads around to look at me.

Finally, we made it to the community garden. A very new, very orange fence (it actually just looked like it

was a bunch of wooden boards cobbled together hastily by someone who was getting paid very little) surrounded a large expanse of blocks filled with dirt. There was one woman with black hair tied in an extremely tight bun watering the plants with a silver watering can.

“The sound of that watering can smells horrible,” Kovalchuk whispered to me. “Like gasoline.”

The woman turned to us. “*What* was that?”

“*Her* voice smells like gravy!”

“Young man, don’t you know it’s rude to gossip?” The lady had a very loud, gravelly voice, and though I don’t have synesthesia it sounded to me a lot like rocks scraping against each other.

“Sorry, ma’am!” said Kovalchuk abruptly. “I was actually wondering if we could plant. Something. Today?” he finished haltingly.

“Oh, a plot for you and your girlfriend. That’s sweet.” The lady smiled, and her lip jutted out as she did so. “The cucumbers need planting.” She picked up something from the ground and handed it to Kovalchuk, who had taken several steps towards her.

“She is *not* my girlfriend,” muttered Kovalchuk so the lady wouldn’t hear, and headed off towards where she was pointing: a mostly empty plot of land upon which several pairs of gloves were planted.

“Hey, where are all the tools?” Kovalchuk called to the lady.

She looked surprised. “What tools?”

“The ones you use for gardening!”

“Did you really think that you were going to get tools like that?” She smiled sweetly at his naivete. “The

Society doesn't think it's safe for children to handle dangerous weapons like that."

"I'm *thirteen*," muttered Kovalchuk. "I'm *not* a children."

"If you're really desperate," she said, "you can dig in the dirt."

Wouldn't we have to do that anyway? I wondered.

"You may use the gloves if you dislike getting dirt under your fingernails. If you're too much of a *coward*." The lady giggled, and her cruel laugh was a higher octave than her speaking voice.

We all put on the gloves. Everyone's a coward in the community garden.

We planted the cucumber seeds. They looked exactly like the seeds in cucumbers. I think you could pry them out and plant them and they would make a cucumber. Kovalchuk, his grandfather and I each planted five (there were fifteen in the pouch, which was much too large for the small amount of seeds in it although it did have a pretty cool design).

Then we asked if we could have a turn with the watering can, and the lady said, "*No*." Then she dropped the watering can onto the sprout she was watering and ran off. We finished the job for her. Don't worry.

That took a long while—about a half hour, actually; we'd underestimated how many people would be at the garden and how many crops the lady had actually watered, which was one or two (most of her rather brief time at the garden was spent bossing us around). It was 12:00 when we finally finished.

“What a lot of garden beds,” Kovalchuk remarked, “and what a lot of seeds.”

“Why do we need a community garden?” I wondered out loud, then noticed a small plaque I hadn’t seen before, near the end (Kovalchuk had taken that part—we’d found another can on a small shelf near the entrance). I handed the watering can to Kovalchuk and let him hold it while I looked at the sign.

THE WONDERS OF PHOTOSYNTHESIS, it was titled. I think. It was a diagram of how plants use sunlight for food. Like what Mrs. Gruber was trying to teach us before school got out.

Funny thing to put in a town like this.

It also detailed cellular respiration, which is what plants do at night to make energy when there is no sun to be found.

In this town, we are all doing cellular respiration. Robbed of the sunlight that nourishes us. *[Subject’s analogy is slightly problematic—people cannot perform photosynthesis and are thus forever doing cellular respiration, even when the sun is out. Reader is reminded that the subject is thirteen years old.]*

Kovalchuk doesn’t even know what it’s like to get sunburned. To sweat outside without ever moving.

Gee. I didn’t realize it before, but the sun... the sun is actually a pretty big part of human life.

For other people, maybe. But not for us. Not anymore.

We left the community garden after we finished watering all the plants. Kovalchuk invited me over to the bookstore and I played with Milo while he served some customers.

“Are you doing all right over there?” he asked when a fifth satisfied customer—an eleven or so-year-old kid with blond curls (I would call them “sun-kissed” if I didn’t know better)—had left with a book called *Fear Street* by an author called R. L. Stine. It looked pretty creepy.

“Yeah, fine,” I called back.

“Would you like some tea?”

I realized suddenly that I was thirsty. “Yes, please!”

“All right, then. Let’s go upstairs!”

I got Milo to follow me upstairs using the cat toy—it wasn’t difficult. He loves that thing. Then I tried to hold him once we got up, putting the toy on the kitchen counter, but he squirmed out of my arms once he noticed that I had not in fact put the cat toy in its normal position after hours: the top of the cabinets. He clearly wanted a chance to catch it while no one was waving it tantalizingly in front of him, and he certainly got that chance.

When Kovalchuk saw me, he blanched. “Milo isn’t supposed to be on the counters!”

“Sorry.” I blushed.

“No, it’s okay,” he said, ripping the toy out of Milo’s grip and beckoning the cat to his room.

“What kind of tea would you like?” he asked as he closed the door.

“Um, what do you have?”

“We bought some more Earl Grey the other day. Would you like some?”

“Sure!”

“And would you like milk?”

“Sure.” I had been meaning to ask anyways. I think Earl Grey tea is bitter without milk.

“Okay, coming right up!”

He got out two teacups and put the tea bags inside. Then...

Then we sorta stood there in an awkward silence.

Kovalchuk rescued us from this, however, by running to his room and pulling out Monopoly. “Wanna play?”

I nodded. “That sounds good. Can I be the hat?” I was always the hat.

“No!” Kovalchuk said almost immediately.

“Why not?”

“Because *I’m* the hat.”

“Be a pal!” I cried.

“No! *I’m* the hat!”

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll be the boot.”

Kovalchuk grinned. “Thanks.” The teapot had begun whistling. He pulled it from the stove and poured the water it contained into the two cups, then set them down at their small, circular dinner table along with the box. The table was for four.

It used to be four, I think. Probably five.

I know it’s odd, but it made me feel less lonely. Knowing other people had lost people.

We played Monopoly while we drank our tea. It took a very long time because we were discussing whether the ending of *And Then There Were None* should have been allowed. I won’t tell you what we said because you probably haven’t read it, and if you haven’t read it, you should.

“So you’ve finished that one, then...” Kovalchuk said when I had convinced him of my opinion. “Do you need another one?” He rolled the dice, and they fell on the board with a *thunk*. “Six! Yes!” He passed GO and collected two hundred dollars—something he badly needed since he was nearly bankrupt. He kept buying all the yellow properties, saying it would pay off in the end.

“Yeah,” I responded. “Do you have any recommendations?”

Kovalchuk scoffed as he handed the dice to me. “Do I have any recommendations,” he mimicked. “Yes, of course I have recommendations! What sort of book do you want?”

“Ummm, I want a lighter book,” I said, rolling the dice—four. Drat. That would land me on Marvin Gardens, Kovalchuk’s property. I reluctantly forked over the twenty-so dollars. “After *And Then There Were None*. You know, regarding tone.”

Kovalchuk nodded. “Yes. Very good.”

“Do you mean with the recommendation, or the game...?”

“Well, the recommendation, but... both!” He rolled the dice—a good nine.

“So do you have anything?”

He moved the hat (the hat that was supposed to be *my* hat) to the space. “Ummm... Let me think.” He handed the dice to me.

After I landed on South Carolina Avenue and had to pay him MORE rent, he snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it! Have you read... the Moomin books?”

“What’s Moomin?” I asked confused.

"I'll show you. Come on!" He headed downstairs, abandoning the game, and I followed him. His footsteps were very loud even though he was only wearing his short grey socks.

"This," he announced when we arrived at the children's bookshelf, selecting a thin volume. "This came in last year. It was very interesting. I wanted more of the books but it hasn't sold yet, so people won't go looking for it. That's why I have to recommend it to you!" He shoved it into my hands.

The cover looked very whimsical: a pale blue illustration of a jungle-like land. I looked at him. "This certainly seems... whimsical..."

"It is!"

I looked around. "Not the *good* whimsical."

Kovalchuk sighed. "Come on, try it!"

"All right, all right, how much?"

"Four dollars."

"Okay, I'll go get my money after we finish the game."

"Oh yeah! Monopoly!"

We went back upstairs to finish it. "Don't bother saying a quick hello to your dear old grandfather," came a voice as we left. He hadn't said a word until then.

Eventually, Kovalchuk won Monopoly, but only because I kept landing on his stupid yellow spaces and he kept getting houses for them. He knows how to play the game.

Then I gulped down the rest of my tea—the game had been so engrossing that I'd forgotten I'd had the

very large mug in front of me—and told Kovalchuk “I’ll go get my money and then I’ll buy the book.”

I ran to the condominium, knocked on the door and was let in by Victoria, who was playing the Sega Genesis because of course she was. I bolted into our room, retrieved my money from the very secure spot of inside the pocked of a church dress I was purchased for Easter when I was eleven—a very itchy yellow floral-print dress which I never wore again, a dress perfect for hiding things in the pockets of—and ran back to the bookstore. I was panting, sweaty, and out of breath when I returned. My cheeks were very red. Kovalchuk handed me the book from behind the counter (his grandfather was having lunch) and I handed him the five-dollar bill I had retrieved. He handed me my one dollar of change and the book was officially mine.

“You sure look tired,” remarked Kovalchuk when the transaction was completed.

“Ya think?” I said sarcastically.

“Do you want a drink of water?”

I gasped. Not since laps with Mr. Banter have I felt so thirsty. “Yes! Please!”

He ran up to the upstairs and came back thirty seconds later with a very full, very icy, glass of water. “Here.”

Nothing has ever felt so delicious, so cooling as that water as it slipped down my throat. When I finished the glass (it was quite small), I wiped my mouth. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Thank *you* for running all the way back here. Would you like some lunch?”

My stomach grumbled in response and I didn't object. I was prepared a grilled cheese sandwich in tandem with Kovalchuk's own. I have never particularly liked grilled cheese sandwiches, but it's rude to refuse a gift. Right? Right!

After I'd finished the sandwich and Kovalchuk was sipping a glass of milk, I got up to leave.

"Bye," said Kovalchuk pathetically as I strode past him. I waved goodbye and petted Milo, who was out of Kovalchuk's room and very much in my arms, and brought him down to the bookstore area, where Kovalchuk's grandfather was. Then I waved goodbye to him and the cat, and left the store. The bell attached to it jingled merrily as I shoved it open, then closed again.

When I arrived back at the condominium, I was instructed to check the mail. The mailbox is in the condominium building's lobby. I took our key from Mom and inserted it into the tenth locker in the small box, marked C10 and then in a plastic sleeve, PASTERNAK.

There were letters for me, Amanda and Victoria from the school district! I raced upstairs to hand them to my sisters, and they accepted them rather disinterestedly. I opened mine, excited.

First period: Mrs. Williams; Biology. Second period: Mr. Darnell; Algebra. Third period: Mrs. Cartwright, art. Fourth period: Mrs. Ryland, history. Fifth period: no teacher listed. More of those rambling lectures about who-knows-what. Sixth period: Mr. Petersen, English. I nearly squealed with joy at the art class listed, and called Kovalchuk on the walkie-talkie: "Do you have art third period?"

The response was an excited “Yes!”

I listed my other classes, and it turns out the school is small enough that we have first, third and fourth period all together!

I can’t believe it, but I’m excited to go to school, if only because of the promise of art class. With a friend.

Then I read some of the book Kovalchuk recommended to me. It is very strange and I only got to read a little bit of it, because Amanda whined for me to play with her and Dad was in the room when she did Most significant interaction with this person:

it, and he said “Would it kill you to have a little social interaction once in a while?” and I finally grudgingly agreed to a game of Uno.

It was very boring, as Uno usually is (and as I’d expected). Amanda beat me because I wasn’t really paying attention to the game, and taunted me with the Loser dance (which involved making an L with her fingers over her forehead and dancing all around crying “Lossie Flossie! Lossie Flossie!”) because of it.

Well, that’s about it except now I’m being called to make dinner, so that’s it for now.

July 13, 1991

3:14 AM

Mom’s making dinner tonight, so I’m safe with recording this early again.

While brushing my hair, I was startled by the sound of static coming from my shared room. I slammed the comb down excitedly and raced across the dinky hallway.

“Lydia! Lydia!” Kovalchuk’s voice came from the walkie-talkie. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here! What is it?” I asked, hoping that it would be something exciting.

“Here’s the thing: I have to take Milo to the vet this morning, and Grandfather’s arthritis is really bad and he has to take a shower. Can you come over and, er, work the cash register? Sorry about that.”

“Yeah, sure, when?”

“In about ten minutes.”

That was how long it took to walk to the bookstore in the first place. I quickly made toast and ate it in a napkin as I left. I had to jog all the way there, leaving me out of breath but not so much as before.

“Hi,” said Kovalchuk as I came in. He was holding Milo in his arms. Milo was pawing and trying to get out. “I just cut his nails, don’t worry,” he said, noticing my horrified expression as I looked at the cat. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Thanks!”

Then he left. There it was. No instructions at all.

I wandered behind the cash register and put the napkin in my jeans pocket (which caused it to bulge). I then tapped my fingers against the cash register.

The bell jingled after about five minutes, and it made me jump.

“Who’re you?” came a voice. It was the butcher, Mr. Malcolm Spencer.

“Um, um, Kovalchuk’s, um, um,” I stammered.

“Is *Misery* in?” he asked. “Walter told me you’d ordered it.”

“Wha—um—go check!” I said. “I don’t know! I—”

“Why don’t you know? Why are you here and not Walter or his grandson?”

“I—er—”

“All right, all right, I’ll go check, but I’m telling Walter about this!”

He came back about a minute later with a book that read in large letters: MISERY. Under it was WORDS ARE HIS POWER and then on the bottom, STEPHEN KING. I vaguely remembered Kovalchuk telling me that the butcher was a great fan of Stephen King. This book in particular looked very creepy and had a small image of a cabin on it—it was a tie-in for a movie that was supposed to have come out last year, apparently.

“That’s—” I began, inspecting the book, but before I could finish he handed over the cash. “Thanks, kid.” It was six bucks—exactly the right amount. I put it in the cash register—one fiver, one onner (do you say “onner”? [*No.*]).

Then he exited the store. The bell jingled behind him as he left.

I drummed my fingers against the shiny wood of the counter. It was not painted lacquer black, as most surfaces are at school, but instead retained the wood’s warm brown color.

It was a most excellent surface upon which to drum one’s fingers. And the large, empty room made it the perfect place in which to sigh dreamily.

I was caught in the middle of a fourth dreamy sigh by another customer. It was someone I didn’t recognize.

I stood up straighter and tried to say something—anything—but my mouth went dry.

“Who’re you?” asked the customer. Or, rather, one of the customers. It was a little girl.

“Um, I’m—” I was unsuccessful in finishing this sentence.

“Do you have the next Baby-Sitters Club book?” asked the kid. Her mother stroked her head. She couldn’t have been much older than Amanda—seven or eight, maybe. “Dear, you mustn’t be so forward in your questions.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mom,” whined the kid. “So, do you or don’t you? I want book number eight.”

I knew enough about that series to know where it would be shelved. I took out book eight from a large array of about ten from the shelves—book one and then book eight (all the others, I assume, were purchased by this girl or her mother). It did not look child-appropriate. There was a smiling lifeguard guy tickling the feet of a teenaged girl. I didn’t know how old they were—they were twelve in the first one, which I tried to read when I was nine and then couldn’t because it was too *boring*—but I was pretty sure she was at least my age, though she didn’t look it.

I took a deep breath and handed the book to the kid. “Here you go.”

The kid beamed. “Oh, man! Thanks, lady!”

Lady? I was briefly insulted before retaining my composure and informing the child of the price. The mother paid and they both left the store.

At first I was sort of shocked that the lady would be raising a young child in this sort of town. Then I realized that my own mother was doing the same thing to Amanda, and that Kovalchuk’s grandfather had done the same to him.

Does that make them bad people? Or are they just good people who've made bad choices?

Sadly, I wasn't left alone a second when none other than Bethany Sanders entered the bookstore.

"Pasternack." She grinned. "Saw your boyfriend through the window running to the veterinarian. Thought I might pay the store a visit—but I didn't expect this surprise." She grinned. "Why are you wearing jeans? It's such a hot night. Why aren't you wearing shorts?"

When I didn't give an answer, she grinned. Very slowly, she grinned. "Is it because your legs are hairy? Is that it? Is it because you're ashamed of your hairy legs?" She began giggling uncontrollably.

"Shut up, Sanders!" I cried, my face red.

"Speaking of fashion, what is that shirt you're wearing? Is that plaid?"

I looked down at my shirt. "Yes, yes, it's plaid, *Sanders!* Glad you were able to discern that!"

Bethany looked momentarily stunned before continuing. "Plaid is so boyish. You have to get with the program, Pasternack." She tossed her hair in a way that she must have thought made her look cool, but what it actually did was get hair in her eyes and her mouth. I could hear her spitting it out. Fortunately for her (and unfortunately for me), her cowboy hat kept it from getting very far on her face.

"I don't *care* if it's boyish."

"Betcher boyfriend doesn't." Bethany took a few steps into the store and began dancing. "Dawes and Pasternack, sittin' in a tree... K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

With each letter she plunked a book from a random place off the very well-organized nonfiction shelves. “First—comes—love!” Now it was every syllable. “Then—comes—marriage!” She wasn’t very far into the catalog, but I knew this would take a very long time to clean up. And I couldn’t stop her, could I? “Then—comes—the—baby—in—the—baby—carriage!”

“Bethany—” I tried, but my voice came out squeaky.

“That’s—not—all—”

“What’s going on down there?” came a voice from upstairs... Kovalchuk’s grandfather’s voice. And he didn’t sound happy. “Kovalchuk, what’s happening?”

“That’s—not—all—give—the—baby—alcohol!”

“BETHANY, STOP IT.”

I immediately covered my mouth. Bethany did indeed stop. She looked at me. Her expression did a complete 180, her annoying smile turning into a malicious glare.

And then she ran up right close to the counter and before I knew what was happening, I was punched in the gut.

“er—” was all I could make out as she exited. I dropped to the ground, winded. My hands were trembling.

She had hit me. She had actually hit me.

Half an hour. That was all it had taken. Half an hour for her to notice Kovalchuk wasn’t here, come, and ruin my entire night.

I tried, for the next half hour, to put the books back on the shelf, going by the sticker numbers on the spines. I was just finishing up when Kovalchuk’s face appeared in the clear door. He pushed the door open.

His face was covered in scratches, as were his arms—Milo doesn't like the vet, and there's no cat carrier. "Hi."

"Hi," I said, and my voice cracked a little—not because of the rush of those hormones raging through my body. Oh no, it was because I was only just getting over Bethany Sanders punching me in the gut. "How was the vet?"

"Oh, it was all right. Milo was a perfect puss, *right, Milo?*"

Milo wriggled free from his scarred arms and jumped to me. He looked at Kovalchuk, sending a mental message: *How dare you betray me like this?* Then he jumped up to the top of a bookshelf and did not leave.

"So how were things? Sorry I was so short, but the human patients are usually given priority at the doctor's office, you know, and if I arrive there even three minutes late they won't give Milo a checkup." He sighed.

"Um." I gulped and touched a hand to my stomach. "It was... good."

"Yeah? Did anyone come in?"

"Mr. Spencer, a kid who wanted a Baby-Sitters Club book, and..." I trailed off.

"And who?" Kovalchuk pressed.

"And Bethany Sanders." The whole story came tumbling out. "She was singing the 'sitting in a tree' song, and she was pulling books off their shelves, and she punched me in the gut."

"Wow." Kovalchuk blinked. "Okay. Are you... are you all right?"

“Are *you* all right? You’re the one whose arms are covered in claw marks!”

He winced as if these injuries had just been sustained, rather than simply alluded to. “Right. I’ll go get a Band-Aid, if you don’t mind waiting down here. I’m really sorry about that. Bethany’s never come before, not without her parents, and that’s when she was really little.” He dashed up the stairs, and after a few minutes (which I passed by perusing a rather dull book about theology, and why it should matter to ME) he came back down. “All right, all patched up. Now, would you like to be paid for your time?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t want to take money from you.”

“Then accept—” He dashed back upstairs, then returned— “this humble pickle.”

“Thanks! Very good payment!” I said, crunching into the pickle. Kovalchuk was holding it out to me on a fork and I was just eating the pickle from it. It was a very long fork and I made sure I never bit his hands. That would have not have been pleasant for him.

“So, I asked the doctor,” said Kovalchuk as I was finishing the pickle, “and she said she didn’t even *know* Mrs. Gruber had been murdered. She called me ‘young man’ like how grown-ups do when they’re cross, in that voice of her that smells like fresh peaches, and she got real mad that I would be accusing her of such a thing.”

I blinked. “So does that mean we have a lead?”

Kovalchuk grinned. “Yes!”

I gasped. Finally, a lead in this case! “Great! When can we start stalking her?”

"It doesn't work that way!" Kovalchuk sighed. "We're not going to *stalk her*. We're going to lead her straight to us."

"How?" I asked.

"I happen," said Kovalchuk, "to know that the town doctor, Dr. Shneebly, likes a certain series of books by a certain author." He grinned.

"What?" I asked in suspense. "What series?"

"She likes," Kovalchuk said in a dramatic tone, "Miss Marple."

"My dad likes those," I said. "I've never read them, though. He says they're less good than Poirot."

"Yeah, they probably are. But *And Then There Were None* is the only Agatha Christie book I've read, so I can't say anything."

"But what does Miss Marple have to do with anything?"

"I know people that know people. Specifically, I know the receptionist at the post office, who I can send with a bribe so he can make sure a letter arrives quickly."

"For whom?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I already knew.

"For Dr. Shneebly, of course, saying that the new Mrs. Marple book is in if she wants it."

"Agatha Christie is dead," I said. "It says so on the back of, like, every book."

Kovalchuk offered a sheepish smile. "Yeah, well, maybe she'll be so excited she'll forget!"

I almost laughed. "So why do you think that the doctor is the murderer again?"

“She was acting very suspicious, and we don’t have any leads, so we should work with the one we have,” he concluded. He presented no reason as to why I should argue with this mostly sound logic. “Also, she likes murder mysteries.”

“Mr. Spencer likes Stephen King novels,” I pointed out, “and those are way worse than Agatha Christie.”

“Yeah, but we know Mr. Spencer. We know he’s innocent.”

“Or do we?” I said half-jokingly, raising an eyebrow, but the truth was that we didn’t. It was true. We both fell silent at this uncomfortable realization.

Then I thought of something. “Does Dr. Shneebly perhaps go to church? The one that we did last week?”

“I think I saw her there...”

“Then that’s it! We’ll tell her tomorrow morning—” I stopped and corrected the statement: “*You’ll* tell her *tomorrow evening*.”

“Yes, okay, that’s definitely a better idea,” Kovalchuk agreed.

Just then, the door opened and a customer entered. “Got any book recommendations today, Kovalchuk?”

“Lenny!” Kovalchuk gasped. “You’re here!”

“Course I am, little dude,” said Lenny, ruffling Kovalchuk’s hair. It made his glasses go askew.

“I’m not little,” protested Kovalchuk. He isn’t much taller than I am—in fact, he is exactly the same height as I am, four foot eleven.

“Yes you are,” said Lenny, sounding annoyed. “These are the best years of your life, kid. Don’t waste ‘em.”

“You *just* graduated,” protested Kovalchuk. “You’re eighteen!”

“Correction. I’ll be nineteen in *two months*, which means I’m eighteen and five-sixths. Gosh, what did that quack Gruber teach you?”

Kovalchuk raised his eyebrows. “Actually... about that... Mrs. Gruber was a science teacher.”

“Was?”

“She’s dead.” He said it matter-of-factly. “She got murdered.”

“Woah, that’s brutal, man! By who?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Kovalchuk said, and I elbowed him. “Hey!” he cried.

“We’re not supposed to *tell* anyone!” I hissed to him. “He could tell on us!”

“Oh yeah.” Kovalchuk offered the youth a smile. “Forget you heard any of that. Now, about that book recommendation...” He nervously paced the aisles, then came back. “Sorry, my mind is just really scattered today. Come back Monday.”

“After school. Cool.” He grinned. “For *you*, that is.”

“Go on, rub it in,” muttered Kovalchuk, and closed the door behind him.

“Who was that?” I asked him when he was out of earshot.

“That was Lenny,” said Kovalchuk, “one of the few people in this town who will take my book recommendations. Too bad he only likes nonfiction.”

“Why did you tell him about the murder?”

“We can trust Lenny! He’s a nice guy.”

“Can we now? He’s a grown-up.”

“He’s a *youth*. He’s eighteen.”

“He’s probably in on whatever we’re not!” I protested. By now I was just trying to be right.

“Yeah, I agree with you on that,” said Kovalchuk, sighing as if fatigued. “Want another pickle?”

My face brightened. “Sure!”

He came back down with another pickle, and when I was finished eating that delicious pickle, he said:

“You should probably go. Your parents might get worried... seeing as you came so early.”

This caused a pang of regret and sadness in my stomach. “Um. Yeah, yeah, I should get going!” I shrugged. “Bye!”

“Bye!” Kovalchuk waved. Milo meowed. I opened the door and walked into the night.

The guy, who I haven’t seen for a very long time now, was drawing that cat on that bench again. I almost asked him what it was about, but I didn’t. I tend to come off as apprehensive when it comes to talking to people.

When I returned, guess what? Mom and Dad’s laundry had to be done. Big whoop.

I took it down to the laundromat, grumbling as I held the basket above my legs so they wouldn’t bump it.

“Hello, Pasternack!” said Bethany when I entered. “Did you like what I did there in the bookstore?”

I didn’t give her the dignity of answering. I inserted the money into the machine and left before she could force me to pay the Friendly Tax.

I read *Finn Family Moomintroll* while I waited for the laundry—it would take an hour. I finished it, in fact, and I quite liked it, although it was somewhat strange. It reminds me of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* a bit. *[The author of the former did illustrations for the latter*

at one point. Our HQ contains a quite lovely copy, currently published by New York Review Books.] So yeah. After that I went down to the laundromat and put the clothes in the dryer, then paid the Friendly Tax (I had to this time) and left. Passing the time for this (doing that Robin Hood puzzle again), I heard the phone ring and rushed to get it. “Hello, Pasternack residence.”

“Lydia.” It was the voice of Mrs. Genevieve Turner. “Is your mother there?”

“Yeah, I’ll get her.” I pressed the phone to my chest. “Mom! Call for you!”

“Is that any way to talk to your mother?” reprimanded Mom as she came. She hasn’t been sprightly enough to reprimand me truly in a while. It’s a good sign. This town is doing good things to her.

To her. Not to me.

Well, I suppose, it has given me one good thing: Kovalchuk.

She talked very tersely on the phone. “She *what!* Yes, I’ll have a talk with her... Who told you? Mm-hmm, we know... yes, Gen, I’m quite aware!...” With that, she hung up. I scrambled back to the Robin Hood puzzle.

Pretty soon, however, the laundry was finished (a few minutes *after* the Robin Hood puzzle was finished, and I sat around simply shuffling my deck of cards for a few minutes—it’s a very nice deck of cards; Dad got them for me for my twelfth birthday) and I had to go back down to the laundromat for the *third time* to get it. Then I had some lunch. Then I folded the laundry.

Then I started writing a story, and it goes like this.

Once there was a man, and he was trapped. He was trapped in a small glass cube.

Why was he in that glass cube? Beats me! I'm not in charge of that man! Why are you asking me?

Okay, that last part, from *beats me!* on, wasn't the story. It was just me. I didn't get any farther than that because I was very interested in drawing the man in the glass cube. *[No such story or picture has surfaced.]* Then I sorted through my books, trying to find one to reread, but found none, so I ended up going back to the bookstore in defeat.

"You're back!" cried Kovalchuk. "How was your lunch?"

"It was good," I said weakly. I'd had a peanut butter sandwich.

"What did you have?"

"A peanut butter sandwich."

"Do you want anything else?"

"Not for lunch, no; I need a book recommendation."

His eyes suddenly sparked. "A *book recommendation? So soon?*"

I nodded. "Yep. Book recommendation."

He very quickly returned with an entire stack of books. I sifted through them and chose the winner: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, something Kovalchuk had pressed upon me. I did not have to pay for it (it was payment for helping out earlier) and left satisfied and with another pickle, because I wanted another pickle and Kovalchuk was happy to provide.

I started reading it. It's a very crazy book and I'm beginning to regret choosing it. But ah well. That's all that happened today; Mom's done with the pasta and

I'm pretty sure I'll have to do the dishes. So bye for now!

July 14, 1991

4:24 AM

Lots of stuff happened today.

I was eating my cereal rather groggily when Kovalchuk radioed me to confirm I was coming to church today. As far as *I* knew we were. I confirmed the statement.

"Wazzat?" asked Amanda as I put it away (she had just woken up). "Lyds, wazzat?"

"It's a walkie-talkie. A... radio thingie." I mimed talking in it, and she squealed with laughter. "Agenn! Agenn!" I ended up doing the impression seven different times, before Victoria woke up due to Amanda's loud giggling and said, "Can't you see I'm trying to sleep?" She wasn't asleep, and she had gotten... let's see... I think it's maybe *fifteen or sixteen hours* in. That's a lot of sleep. I doubt she needed much more.

I went back to eating my cereal, then got the paper when the paper boy knocked (it's usually Dad who does it, but he chose today to take a shower, so I was the one to retrieve it). I read the paper. The paper contained the same strips as it had last week; today's natural disaster in *Scary Situations That Could Happen to You!*, it was all about wildfires. It was disturbing.

After Dad finished his shower and ate breakfast (time which I passed by reading *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—I found this out later, but there's a lady in it called Trillian. Like the chair), we went to church.

Church today was more populous than it was last week. I assume the word was spread—I think I saw the owner of the Jumping Jehoshaphat, Mr. Evans, there and I also think I remember seeing a flyer in their window for the church.

“Hello, friends. Thank you for coming back. If it’s your first time, I’m your pastor, Harvey.” He didn’t bother giving his last name and no one asked.

He launched into a sermon about how we should forgive each other, and not hate each other, and all that stuff like we learned in fifth grade Sunday school.

When he was all done, someone actually played a song on the organ—“Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring”—and it reminded me a lot of the school I used to go to when I was really young. Then we all left after helping to put away the foldable chairs.

“Did you talk to Dr. Sheebly?” I asked Kovalchuk after everyone else had left.

“Drat!” cried Kovalchuk. “I *didn’t!*”

I sighed, igniting a long, awkward silence.

“So do you want to go to the post office instead?” he offered at last.

“Good idea, but I’ll have to get some paper first.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I should too. Bye! See you there!”

Ten minutes later I was standing outside the condominium building, clutching my tiny notebook and a pencil in one hand and the walkie-talkie in the other. “Kovalchuk? Where exactly is the post office?”

“It’s near the town hall,” he explained, as if that was all I needed to know.

“Great,” I said confusedly.

The post office, as it turns out, is actually quite near the town hall—it's on Gladd Street (which ends with the town hall), so we passed it when we first came here last month. I guess I was too busy reading. [*subject sighs*] That day seems so far away now. So much has happened since then. A woman was murdered. Victoria got a new boyfriend. Mom's beginning to come out of her shell. I made an enemy.

And I made a friend. A best friend. That's more than I can say for most of the years of my life.

Kovalchuk was waiting for me when I arrived at the post office. It's a small blue building, with a white sign reading POST OFFICE in large red letters standing above the glass door, which has golden trim around the edges and the handle, which Kovalchuk pulled open—you know, how some glass doors, they have black or they have golden? This one had golden.

"Hello," came a voice from behind a plain brown desk as we entered, shoes clacking loudly on black linoleum. "And how can I help you children today?" The voice was that of a young man—not the "get over here, young man, you're in very big trouble" sort of young man, but in that he was a man that was young. A younger man, early twenties probably. He was wearing a black shirt with a white name tag which read: C. STANLEY.

"What does the C stand for?" I asked as I studied his outfit.

"Nothing in particular," he said dismissively, turning to Kovalchuk. As soon as he noticed who it was, his face lifted. "How are ya?" he asked—no, *queried*, he *queried*,

his tone becoming far less formal as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“Pretty good,” responded Kovalchuk, bumping fists with him. “Listen—can you perhaps do us a small favor?”

“What?” queried the postal worker. “What sort of favor?”

“Well,” began Kovalchuk, “we kinda, sorta need you to forge something.”

The man gasped. “Forgery? I apologize, Kovalchuk, but my influence has limits. If I have any at all...” he muttered darkly to himself.

“Come on,” whined Kovalchuk. “Surely you can try.”

“Well, I suppose I can try. For you.”

Kovalchuk nodded and passed him five bucks. “Thanks. Remember, don’t tell Mr. Marshall.”

“Who’s Mr. Marshall?” I asked as Kovalchuk began writing a letter with a blue ballpoint pen.

“He’s the postmaster,” explained Kovalchuk. “Very good friends with the mayor.”

The mayor. If I would remember any of my dreams in the past month, aside from that cockroach one, I’m sure Gladys Hatcher would have been in at least ten of them. But I know why my sleep has been dreamless as of late. It’s the masks, the masks.

The thought of the masks made my breath catch in my throat. I hadn’t told Kovalchuk yet. I tapped on his shoulder and whispered to him, “Does your grandfather perhaps... force you to wear an eye mask when you sleep?”

Kovalchuk nodded solemnly as he folded up the letter and passed it over to C. STANLEY, who put it in a

cubby behind him marked PRIORITY. “He won’t let me go to bed with out it on. And it always smells so weird, no matter how many times I take it to the laundromat.”

I gulped. “Um. Try something for me tonight, won’t you?”

“Yeah, what?”

“Don’t wear that eye mask tonight. Pretend to, but—don’t.” I was stumbling over my words. “It’s—the eye mask—it contains a sedative. I should have told you sooner, oh gosh, the *smell*. It’s the smell of a sedative. The grown-ups are trying to keep us asleep. Making sure the town stays nocturnal.”

Kovalchuk gasped. “I—I can’t believe my grandfather would do that,” he stuttered in disbelief.

“Welcome to 1991,” I said shortly.

As Kovalchuk has already told Dr. Shneebly that the shipment of books arrived last week, C. STANLEY had to stamp the letter July 7th, so she wouldn’t be suspicious. Kovalchuk and I both said our thank yous, then we left the post office.

When we were outside, Kovalchuk turned to me and said breathlessly, “I still can’t believe—”

I froze, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Mmph!” he cried in protest. “Shh!” I shot back. He stopped as he noticed what my free arm was rapidly gesturing towards.

A stone owl on top of the post office was turning its head slowly towards us with an inconspicuous scraping sound.

We parted ways at the bookstore in silence.

After that, I really didn’t do much. You know... I finished *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, which I

thought was pretty good except it was more focused on being funny than having a plot, and I played a few rounds of solitaire and played chess with Sir Gilbert, and now I have to go make dinner. Sorry. I don't think I'll have space to record tomorrow's on this, so that's the end of it. Tomorrow's the first day of school, so there'll probably be a lot about that. Bye!

[Click. Silence.]

CASSETTE 05

No self title

In which the subject uncovers the truth at great cost, and after which you may find yourself experiencing an urge to throw this file across the floor due to its spectacularly unsatisfying ending

Side One

[Chapter Fifteen]

Everything Falls Apart

July 15, 1991

4:04 AM

[Subject is breathing hard as she turns on the tape recorder.]

I—

No. I still can't think about it. I won't. I won't until I have to. I won't until I come to that point. I will tell you everything that happened today. I will be honest, I promise, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know anymore. I don't know anything. Thank goodness I don't have any homework, because this is going to take a long time, and—I—

Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning. Before I knew anything.

[There's a meow.]

I know, Milo. I know. Come here.

So, okay. Amanda was whining for "Cheeries" when I got up. *[subject laughs harshly]* Funny that I haven't ever told her to stop it. Funny, that. Funny I'm powerless in this world.

So I did it, I gave her Cheerios in the sheep bowl, then I brushed my hair and went to the bathroom and got dressed and all that. I wanted to look nice for the first day of school, but not *too* nice. I wore an old pair of overalls.

They are pretty comfortable overalls for your knees to buckle in.

I groggily poured myself and Victoria some Frosted Flakes. Then I ate said Frosted Flakes. They were slightly stale since I've been trying to make breakfast more lately.

"Are you excited for school?" I asked Kovalchuk over the walkie-talkie as I gathered up a pencil, the schedule letter, a sack lunch of a hastily prepared bologna sandwich, and my trusty flashlight.

There was no response on the other end.

I shrugged, thinking that he had probably left already, and opened the door for Victoria and Amanda, both of whom were complaining about how early it was.

When I arrived at Snicket Junior High, it didn't look any different than it did when I left it. But today Bethany Sanders was waiting for me, not Kovalchuk. This made me wonder where on Earth he could have gotten to. But I dismissed it, thinking he had probably joined the people playing *Shadowgate* and was doing that instead. I shouldn't have dismissed it. I should have known.

"Hey, Sanders! Ready for eighth grade?"

I scowled at her as she tipped her cowboy hat.

"Where's your boyfriend?"

I shrugged and strode past her, looking at the letter I had gripped in my fist for my first period: Mrs. Williams in Room 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ for biology. Right next to Mrs. Gruber's classroom, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$. *Just a coincidence*, I thought and headed for the classroom.

I passed by Mrs. Gruber’s on the way there. It looks like the “substitute” lady who was there at the end of last year is now the permanent one. Good luck, seventh-graders.

Mrs. Williams has blonde hair. That is her one trait. I think I remember her from church. I saw her one time talking with Dad. I also think she dyes her hair. Her eyes are nondescript, her clothing is nondescript, her manner is very nondescript. She has blonde hair.

“Hello, class,” she said when the last student had taken their seat—no Bethany in this class—and most sighed in relief. They like being called “class” better than “children”. It reminds me of Kovalchuk, who always protests that he’s not a children, he’s thirteen, even though he’s clearly still a kid. I looked around for him and didn’t see him. There was an empty seat next to a very tall boy with curly hair.

When no one said anything, she pursed her lips. “What do we say when someone says hello to us, children?”

There it was. The class groaned and chorused, “Hello, Mrs. Williams.”

“Very good. Now, today we’re going to examine our pulses...”

She taught us how to check our pulses, and how pulses work and all that.

Then the bell rang and I headed to second period: Mr. Darnell in room 12 5/6 for Algebra.

Mr. Darnell has sideburns like you’ve never seen. He never smiles. He also has a mustache and large thick glasses.

What didn't make the class any better was that Bethany is in it. She played Poker with me while Mr. Darnell taught us that "x is our *friend!*"

I want to xcommunicate x.

Then, third period: Art. the class Kovalchuk and I were both super excited for. The class where everything changed.

The art teacher seems nice. Her name is Mrs. Pert. She has very short brown hair, cropped to her throat so it looks as though the strands are encroaching upon it. She is smiley! She is nice! And she was interrupted from a tutorial on how to draw a people by the large walkie-talkie on her belt crackling.

"Lydia Pasternack to the principal's office, please. Lydia Pasternack."

"She's on her way, sir," said Mrs. Pert into the machine, then looked at me. "You heard that."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and strode to the principal's office, apprehensive about what was going to happen.

"Lydia Pasternack," said Mr. Gallagher severely when I entered.

"Yes, si—" I said, stopping myself in the middle of saying "sir".

"You appear to be friends with Kovalchuk Dawes, no?"

"You've seen him today?" I sagged in my chair. "Oh, thank goodness. Where is he?"

Mr. Gallagher cleared his throat and declared the news that has turned my world upside down. "I'm sorry." He met my gaze. "Kovalchuk Dawes did not go to sleep as ordered last night."

“What do you mean?” I asked him, the scaredness flowing back as the suspicion that I knew creeped up on me.

“I mean that instead of going to bed like a good little boy, Kovalchuk ran away. He didn’t even say goodbye to his poor frail grandfather. He left, and he hasn’t gone back.

“Kovalchuk Dawes went out in the sunlight. Kovalchuk Dawes is dead.”

I felt like I would scream and vomit in the same breath. “Sorry?” I coughed out. “What did you say?”

“Your friend is gone. And so’s his grandfather. At the news, the shock was too much. He keeled over and fainted. He hasn’t opened his eyes. Dr. Shneebly is doing everything she can.”

My breaths came faster, faster, until I was hyperventilating. I checked my pulse with my forefingers, like Mrs. Tanner had taught me. It was racing like mad. “Okay. Right.”

“Someone needs to take care of his cat,” continued Mr. Gallagher, oblivious to my terror, “and we thought you would be a good candidate. The bookstore may never reopen and the cat needs someone to take care of it. We ask that you stop by after school to pick him up.”

I nodded numbly. I don’t remember what he said after that. I only remember that, after I left the principal’s office and closed that door, I slumped against the wall and began crying. I don’t remember the last time I cried that much, or that hard. I cried when Daniel died. I cried at his funeral. I cried when we moved away from Daphne. But after that?

Nothing. I balled my fists and hugged my knees close to my chest, and wetted them with my tears. I cried like there was no tomorrow, because it doesn't feel like there is going to be one. It feels like my life has ended.

I went to fourth period after that. I listened dumbly to an introduction on the Pacific Northwest that Kovalchuk should have been listening to with me. Then I ate the bologna sandwich quietly, alone. I headed to fifth period, listened to another lecture on moles like last year's by who I now know to be Mrs. Ryland. Then I went to Mr. Petersen's class. He has not changed. His voice still smells like oranges in the rain. *[subject laughs, and it quickly turns into a sob.]*

Then I got to leave, lugging new textbooks under my armpit. When I got home, I proposed the addition of the cat Milo to our household.

"It will be good for her to learn responsibility," said Mom, and it was decided. But I heard her mutter before I left: "I can't believe our child would consort with a future sunlighter."

I don't know what a sunlighter is. My mother is beginning to scare me.

The bookstore was utterly empty save for Milo. It was odd not to have Kovalchuk greet me at the door, to offer a book recommendation. There was paper shrouding the shelves of books and it made me feel oddly hollow. Like some vital organ was snatched from my chest.

I retrieved Milo's cat box and nail clippers from the bathroom, and his cat treats from the cabinet where Kovalchuk told me they would be on that day that

feels like it is forever ago, and shoveled it all into a tote bag. Then I wandered around, looking for the cat. After around ten minutes, I found him. He was dozing peacefully on Kovalchuk's bed, trying to salvage the warmth his body must have impressed upon those sheets. I picked him up. "Come on." His claws snagged on the comforter before they gave way, and as he meowed in protest my heart broke just a little more. I reckon it's completely torn in two by now.

I'm recording this as I hug him on my bed. I don't know what I'm going to do.

July 15, 1991

4:35 AM

Just had dinner. I know what I'm going to do.

I'm going to look for Kovalchuk. And I'm going to bring him back.

July 15, 1991

5:30 AM

[subject once again breathing hard through loud, unsettling scraping noises]

They're looking at me. They're all looking at me. I didn't notice how many of them there were. There's one on every building, and they're all looking at me, and oh their eyes are red. Oh, no—*[loud alarm sounds]* AAAAH they've found me they've found me out what are they gonna do I dunno I dunno I can't—coming, coming out, they'll take me away, oh, no, please, I have to find—

[Click.]

[Chapter Sixteen]

The Truth, Whether I Liked It or Not

July 17, 1991

11:16 PM

They let me keep the cassette recorder. I'm having to keep my voice down so I can tell everything that happened. It's not pretty.

Golden sunlight is streaming through the bars of this cell, and I'm squinting through it, trying to see where I am. I can't see. I don't think that's the point. The bars have mesh along them, making it very difficult to see through. Also, my eyes aren't used to this much light. Not anymore.

Last time I recorded, I left you. Sorry about that. I went to find Kovalchuk. I was convinced he was somewhere. And I didn't find him. Instead, I found something else.

I found the truth.

I shoved some bags of chips into the tote bag I used to gather up Milo's belongings. I said a quick goodbye to the cat and left while everyone else was getting ready for bed.

I looked everywhere in the bookstore, but he wasn't there. I looked everywhere in the doctor's office (or everywhere I could), but he wasn't there—I shone my flashlight through it and tried to find him. Then I looked in the community gardens—didn't find him. Went to school—nothing. And then, it turned five thirty.

The owls' eyes glinted red and they all turned in my direction. Panicked, I stumbled blindly back in the direction of Chiropteran Heights. But I never got

there, because as I yelled my panicked thoughts into this cassette recorder, two large, burly men in black jumpsuits found me. They pressed a cloth against my face that smelled sickly sweet, like the eye masks but stronger. I couldn't fight them. I had to pass out.

When I woke up, it was in this cell. Someone had draped a quilt over me. I blinked sleepily and looked from side to side, taking in the surroundings and the sunlight that streamed through the bars of the window. The bag was next to me, and I rifled through it, panicked that they had taken everything out. They took the chips, but not the cassette recorder.

It was then that I had the unsettling sensation that someone was watching me. I turned my head.

"Hello, Lydia. I was wondering when you'd notice."

My heart leaped in my throat. Mom was standing there, wearing dark black sunglasses and holding... something. It was two small cylindrical blocks of wood, held together by a bit of paper.

"Mom," I said. "Where am I?" I took a small bit of comfort in knowing that my mother was there, and rushed to the barred cell door. "Will you let me out?"

"Now why on Earth would I do that?" she said in a cold voice. "I was the one who put you in, after all."

I gripped the door's bars so hard my knuckles turned white. "Why? Why, Mom?"

"You aren't the first person to go out in the sunlight, Lydia. I didn't think you were this foolish. I thought you cared about us. The Pasternack family." She looked genuinely hurt.

"I—I didn't know! I wasn't wearing a watch!"

“No, you weren’t, Lydia. You weren’t.” Her eyes flashed, and her tone hardened. “I’m terribly sorry, but you’ve seen the sun. That is something that cannot be forgiven. We moved here. We signed documents. And you dare jeopardize our position in the Ink Sun Society, an organization which is doing so much good for the human race.”

“Oh, so killing innocent women is *good* now?” I spat, the blood flowing in my veins plummeting in temperature.

“Don’t think I don’t know about your little detective game with that foolish boy,” Mom said maliciously. “Old Gruber found out about what we do to the sunlighters. She threatened to tell. We couldn’t have that. So we sent our best assassin after her. Desmond Keyes.”

Victoria’s boyfriend. I felt like I would crumple up if squeezed, so frail I was.

“Of course, Victoria knows nothing. Not of anything. In fact, she believes she’s having a doctor visit right now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What are you doing to her?”

“She is undergoing a *surgery*. One that will change her life.”

“What surgery? Mom, what’s going on?” I wanted to throw the bars between us away, to press myself against her and smell her sweet perfume, for everything to go back to when it was when I was little. Before Daniel died.

“I have been working on this diagram for years. You thought I was crying in that studio. You thought

wrong. I recorded a cassette filled with my sobs and played it on repeat. Daniel means nothing to me,” she spat. “He deserved to die.”

She took the two cylinders and pulled them apart, revealing a diagram of the human eye, similar to one I saw once on TV. Except, it was different. A thin... *thing*, standing in front of the light receptors. Blocking parts of them.

“This,” she said, pointing to the thing, “is the dark branch. *Branche tenebris*. It keeps the human eye from absorbing all the sunlight it can. In short—” Her eyes flashed. “It keeps us from seeing in the dark. And when the sun goes out—which is sooner than you think—we will be left powerless, defenseless, *cold*. We will freeze to death, hungry, vulnerable to all the monstrosities nature contains. All because of this little organ.”

I gulped, speechless. I didn’t ask why they weren’t trying to find a way to make the sun *not* go out, or something.

“*Why don’t we just remove it*, you ask? Well. It is not so simple as that. You see, the branch connects to the heart.” She pointed her finger at her eye and slithered it down her throat and chest until it reached the heart. “And if you snip it, it cuts off blood flow. You die.

“However.

“We are engineering a way to make it *better*. To snip it and *not* die. And this time we believe we have perfected it. Yet, it works best if one has never seen the sun.”

My heart stopped. Suddenly it all made sense. Why no one in this town had ever seen the sun.

They were planning to experiment on us all. Like guinea pigs.

“Your father and I learned of this spectacular group when we were in college. I was struggling to get by when Daniel was born. And that’s when the Ink Sun Society stepped in. They offered financial support. Security. Friendship. At one cost.

“That we join them.”

This had evidently been an unwise decision.

“We moved here when a spot opened up. We moved here because they needed new guinea pigs.

“You. They wanted to know if it would work on people who had only seen the sun for a decade. You three were the perfect subjects: young, careless, disinterested. Especially Victoria.”

This mystery that was the move was making sense, but somehow it was a twisted logic. Wrong. If this is sense, I don’t want it.

“We’re operating on them now. You, however, have seen the sunlight. You’ve ruined it. You’re going to receive the sunlighter treatment. It’s such a shame that your path has gone this way at twelve years old.”

My grip on the bars grew ever tighter. “Mom.”

“But these things have to be done, and—”

And I interrupted her. For the first time in my life, I interrupted her.

“Mom. I’m thirteen.”

She pursed her lips, looking slightly taken aback. “Well, then. Good for you.”

She snapped her fingers. “She’s ready,” she called into a hallway behind her.

Two men in black jumpsuits put the key into a large metal bar in the cell door. They swung it open and grabbed me by the arm. “Hey!” I cried, trying to squirm free to no avail. One took me by one arm, the other by the second, and they dragged me down to the end of the cold metal hallway. To ten large machines shaped like purple coffins.

Nine of them were closed, but one of them was open. The one that was open, I knew instinctively, was for me.

The guards shoved me in, and I gave a small cry of surprise as the door shut behind me, plunging me into darkness.

And then—

Bars tightened under my arms and legs so I couldn’t escape. I’ve never been prone to claustrophobia—I used to hide in a crevice in the attic of our old house when I was quite small—but it made my heart race like mad. And then the needles came in.

The needles. Oh, the needles. They pricked my eyelids with surprising force, causing me to gasp in pain. Then they made their way inside of my head and began to extract.

I squeezed my eyes shut as painful white light burst across my vision. It didn’t help one bit. The needles were somehow taking every memory I had of feeling the sun’s light. I almost screamed in agony, the white light hurt so much. It drummed against my eyes, never letting me rest. I thought the two marbles inside of my skull would rattle around and burst like

two over-ripe berries. But they didn't, and after what seemed like forever, it was over.

The door opened and I was let out. I saw several other people being let out of theirs.

I noticed a small label on the side of the terrifying, coffin-like machine as I exited. It read:

SUNLIGHT EXTRACTOR

Then they allowed me to go back to the cell, where I sat, alone, and cried out of fear, and abandonment, and pain.

That is what the Ink Sun Society does to sunlighters. They take their *memories* of the sun for power.

But power for what? Their surgical machines, to give the operation? Or something worse?

I don't know. I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, and although Mom showed up and gave me answers to most all of my burning questions, I feel more lost and alone than ever before.

Where is Kovalchuk?

July 17, 1991

2:19 AM

I think the thing that happened after the sunlight extractor was even worse. Even worse. I—I don't know how to—*[Loud crackling noises; subject screams]* Aah!

Okay, okay, this is better. I'll have to record this while I run, because—because I have to go back, and get Milo, because I can't just leave him to die. I'll tell you what happened. All of it. Honest.

As I was moping in that cell, there was a soft buzzing noise. It had been—*[subject pants]*—an

hour—[pant]—after the sunlight extractor—[pant, gasp]. Yeah, okay, I don't think this is—[gasp]—going to work. I'll just stay here, in this alley, and hope the buildings sandwiched between it aren't connected.

The soft buzzing noise grew louder as it continued. I looked at the floor, from which it appeared to be coming, to realize that someone was lasering their way in—cutting a hole in the floor, the way people in movies do with glass sometimes.

At last, the circle was complete. I held my breath to see who came out.

A face popped from the abyss opened by the circle. A face with black hair and askew glasses.

Kovalchuk.

First my breathing stopped, then my heart.

“Lydia,” he said.

I nodded dumbly. The tears flowed from my eyes faster than they had before.

“Come on. I have some people I want you to meet.”

He handed me a flashlight from a pocket and beckoned me down the abyss.

“Underground?” I found my voice at last. “Where have you been? Kovalchuk, what happened to you?”

“That doesn't matter,” he said, brushing me aside. Like a grown-up. “Are you coming?”

“Yes.” I followed him down the abyss.

It wasn't a far jump down. Kovalchuk appeared to have climbed up by two pickaxes he held in his hands.

“Better question, what happened to *you*?” he asked as we dropped to the damp soil floor of a tunnel.

“Your eyes are quite dark. Almost black.”

I touched a hand to my head. The skin felt inflamed. Sallow. “I—I went through this thing. The sunlight extractor.”

His face darkened. “So you know about it, don’t you?”

“About what?”

“The Ink Sun Society. How they plan to keep humanity around forever.”

“My mom—” I swallowed hard. “My mom is one of them. And she—er, Victoria—my sister’s boyfriend killed Mrs. Gruber.”

“Yeah, I know. She told me all that stuff, and she said she’d take me to the sunlight extractors. But before she could, I escaped.”

“How?”

“The same way you just have. Someone opened a hole to these tunnels. This is the Ink Sun Society HQ we’re under. And under it is the HQ of something else. WORM.”

“What’s WORM?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” said Kovalchuk, and stepped aside to reveal another fork in the road. I had just been blindly following him before, gripping a flashlight.

I saw someone in one of the ways. He smiled.

“Lydia.”

What is it with people saying my name when they see me today?

[The crackling has been going on for some time. Now it’s reached a peak. Subject screams.] Aaaaah, it’s tipping! It’s tipping! The building is—*[loud crash.]* It’s gone. I have to find somewhere else. I have to get in Chiropteran Heights before it burns down too. I have

to get Milo. He's the only thing I have left of Kovalchuk.

So anyways. I recognized that person, that person in the fork in the road, as I shone the flashlight over his face.

It was—

“Daniel?” I whispered in disbelief.

He opened his arms for a hug. “It’s me. I’m here.”

“*Daniel*” and then I was in his arms, clutching his chest, hugging him, squeezing him as he twirled me around. “You’re getting big,” he said affectionately, tousling my hair. “How old are you now, thirteen?”

I beamed through my tears. He’d remembered my birthday. “Where have you been?” I cried. “Why did you leave us?”

“I had to, Lydia. Your mother is... she isn’t... *sane*.” Daniel grimaced. “I faked my own death. But she found out. She came after me. That’s why you moved here.”

“I thought—”

“That was just an added bonus. She wants to eradicate WORM. Stamp it out like a bunch of—a bunch of worms. But we will survive. Isn’t that right, Kovalchuk?”

Kovalchuk looked uncertain as Daniel continued. “Kovalchuk is our newest—and youngest—member. I believe you two know each other?”

We nodded in unison.

“Now, Lydia. Did Kovalchuk tell you all about WORM yet?”

“No, I figured I’d let you do it,” said Kovalchuk solemnly.

“Thank you,” he told him, then turned back to me. He started talking as we began making our way down the tunnel.

“You see, WORM stands for *World of Rejected Moonlight*. We started as a faction, shall we say, of the Ink Sun Society. Our parents always knew I had a creative mind, and placed me at the helm. We were to build the sunlight extractors that I believe you have had the unpleasant experience of entering.”

I shuddered.

“But we grew tired of serving them. Why should we have? We decided they were crazy. We would make our own plan. So instead of having to prepare for doomsday, we’re making sure it never happens.”

We were at the end of the tunnel. He stepped aside.

I found that we were in a large, cavernous... well, cavern, I guess. There were many other tunnels leading out of it. It was where they all converged.

How could I see all this? It was due to the large, heavy-looking metal orb in the middle of it, held up by what looked like hundreds of wires flowing into it.

“This is the artificial moon we created in protest. This is the midnight sun.”

As Daniel stepped into the light, I noticed something that made my breath catch in my throat. His right leg and arm were both made of cold steel. I suppose that car accident left a mark after all.

There were people crowded all around that midnight sun, people with blowtorches and wiring and big steel plates.

“The buildings are all connected to it. We feed off their central power to keep it running. You never

know when the day might come, and then everyone in the entire Earth will worship us. We will be gods. Everyone who wears this pin.” He lifted his jacket to show me a pin of a cat in a business suit, saying:

WE’RE ALL MONSTERS HERE

The cat the man had been drawing outside Chiropteran Heights. I had been in the presence of an agent of WORM so many times, and I didn’t know it.

Daniel dug into his pocket and fished out two pins of the same design. “Here,” he said, handing one to me and one to Kovalchuk. “Have them. Swear allegiance to WORM, not the Ink Sun Society. When the world goes dark, we will be the light.”

“Do you really think it’s going to come this soon?” queried quietly, then louder. “When the sun goes out, shouldn’t we also be worried about how we will stay warm? Dry? Fed?”

“This will help with all of that. We will disperse them across the world. Just touch your hand here.” He put his left hand on the thing like it was his best pal.

I reluctantly did the same.

It was oddly sticky, oddly warm. I pulled back. “What is this thing made of?”

“That’s not for you to ask!” he shot back.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a child!”

I was getting really tired of people—even people I loved—treating me like I didn’t deserve to know something, even if I was a child. I think it was then that I made the decision. I think it was then that I realized that Mom and Dad were not going to save me

this time, that I was going to have to take matters into my own hands. That I was going to have to grow up.

“What has that got to do with it?” I spat. My temper, which I had been shoving down and down and down for *years*, was beginning to bubble up.

“There are some things that children shouldn’t know!” he said, but he didn’t seem so sure of himself.

My hands curled into fists. Fists that reached out and grabbed a blowtorch from the hand of a person blowtorching another steel plate on the light next to me. He removed his mask with an “Oh!” It was the post office worker Kovalchuk and I saw only the other day. So he is an agent of WORM as well.

I gripped the blowtorch. “I’m not afraid to use this.”

“Lydia!” Kovalchuk’s voice, from behind Daniel. He was biting his lip, his breathing coming hard. “Please. He’s my friend. He’s your brother. Don’t you love him? Don’t you love *me*? As a friend,” he quickly amended.

Then I decided to do something I now think was very stupid. I need someone to know what happened, though, so I shall tell you. Don’t expect it to be something that would earn me a medal of valor. I was a coward. I panicked and ran, basically, in a room—a town, really—full of conspiracy theorists and insanity that have once been people I care about.

I looked Kovalchuk in the eyes, gulped, and said, “I’m sorry you had to do this.”

Kovalchuk said, “What do you mean? What are you doing? Lydia?” but his cries fell upon deaf ears. I threw the blowtorch to the ground and moved closer to those wires, heart clenching, reaching out.

And I ripped the wires from the wall. They sparked, and then—

The orb collapsed on the people working on it. And then it began to smoke. The smoke gave birth to a fire.

I dropped the blowtorch and ran. Ran like I never have before. Not while running laps with Mr. Banter. Not while running to the bookstore. Not ever. Never have I run this fast or this long. I heard panicked cries, which quickly turned to screams, behind me, and when I came up back in that cell of mine, I grabbed my cassette recorder (which was getting scorched) and ran. The door had been unlocked.

The building I was in was burning, going up in a glorious blaze. The screaming was louder than it was in the tunnel. I was causing so many people pain and misery—still am—and yet I feel no sympathy for these people who tortured me. Who felt I had no right to know anything. Who feel it is their duty to make sure humanity survives, no matter the cost to other people's lives, hearts, minds. No matter the cost to their own.

I hunkered down in an alleyway and I began recording this.

I'm going to go, and I'm going to get back to Chiropteran Heights now. I'm going to save Milo. Then I shall jump out the window. I will make a parachute out of Victoria and Amanda's clothing. I doubt they'll need them. The fire will kill them, if the operation hasn't.

I will not look back. I shan't.

I am sorry that I have killed so many people by causing t his fire. But I am also very much not sorry

that I, Lydia Pasternack, have caused the death of certain other individuals, and that makes me feel very much alive, perhaps more than I have in seven years. Perhaps more than I ever have.

I hope someone finds this when I am older. Or not. I will change my name so no one finds me. I will do whatever I can to get away from this. I will—oh, goodness, I don't know what I'll do. Just—not this. Not here.

[The tapes end here.]

[Transcriber's Note]

I spent several years, after that, looking for her. I couldn't find her. I suppose she changed her name, as she said. Went far away. I never saw Milo again either. Funny, that.

Daniel and C. Stanley drove me away in a large black car that they kept hidden in a garage. They said there'd be a backup plan, but there wasn't.

We drove for a long time. Too long of a time. I lost count of the hours. I must have fallen asleep at some point.

We got to Seattle and they told me to get out, to get a life. They said they were going to Canada, to find a better life, but I don't know how they did with the border guards. I never heard from them again. And no, I never did learn what the C. stood for.

I was taken in by a kind family who had three small children. They have become like siblings to me. I even changed my last name in honor of them. But it is under my original surname that I credit these.

I tried to forget. I tried so hard to forget. But my stupid brain, still stuck at thirteen, wouldn't let me.

She came to me, in a dream. She wore a yellow dress—the one she wore to church. She was holding Milo. Sunlight shone on her smiling face, her freckles moving with her mouth as she laughed.

That was when I knew I had to find her.

I tried so hard. The Internet never got me very far—any search for *Lydia Pasternack* led to nothing. Dead end. I did, however, find an obituary for a cat that looked suspiciously like Milo in *The Seattle Times* one cold December evening.

I founded the Salvaged Sun Society not as an attempt to resurrect the flawed, insane dreams of our forebears, but to try to take it from history. To make sure it never happens again. Because those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

I found Bethany Sanders, eventually. She survived the fire and is now living in California as a supporting actress. We fax each other occasionally. She played a very, very minor role in the film *Miss Congeniality*.

There are others in our organization—I sincerely hope that if you've read this file to the end, you are part of it. We shall find out what happened in its entirety.

All the best,
Kovalchuk Dawes
Salvaged Sun Society founder

[Acknowledgements]

If I'm being truthful, this was never supposed to be as long or complicated as it was. I was working on it as a side project—my main project being the first book of a projected steampunk saga. That book was dead on arrival, but the main character still occupies my head. I believe I'll return to it soon, except I can't think of a way to do it right.

This book is about a world very different from my own, in a time very different from my own. But the people who are its characters are very similar to me—yes, even Bethany, who I may have partly based off of Lucy (the *Peanuts* character, not the cousin of mine). Even during the crazy parts at the end, the emotion threaded through this novel is what truly makes it unique, I think.

The idea for this book was first planted in elementary school. In fourth grade, I read *The Westing Game*. I'll never forget one bit in which the mother asked: "Where's Turtle?" (Turtle is the kid.) The dad gave a shrug. "I don't know." I found that an excellent concept, not having your parents know where you are all the time. Turtle must have had complete and utter freedom. And to be able to kick people in the shins without being rebuked! I wanted to make a world in which people could do that. So I turned to historical fiction, which this was never really meant to be when I hypothesized about a nocturnal town in fifth grade.

I wish to thank, first, Clara Baur. She was my first reader of this, and she devoured it. I sent it to her before I finished it—an unwise decision, as turns out, because she would not stop heckling me for hints.

Now she's finally got the answers. I was in sort of a rush to finish this book because she is moving to Vancouver at the end of the week (five days at the time of writing). Clara, I shall miss you sorely.

Second, I wish to thank my family: my parents and my sisters. And our fish. Thanks for raising me and all.

I was going to thank my supposed editors, Ezra Fields and Karis Hall, but they both quit because they were "too busy". Don't be too hard on me if there are lots of mistakes. Because there probably are.

I'd also like to thank Mrs. Simon and Mrs. Monica, the Kamiakin Middle School librarians (yes, if you couldn't tell, this book was written by a thirteen-year-old kid—well, mostly; I was twelve when I started it) for always having my back with a good book.

Now. Because I'm that sort of person, here are some books to read if you enjoyed this one. I would recommend *Eventown* by Corey Ann Haydu, *The Stars Did Wander Darkling* by Colin Meloy and *Drifters* by Kevin Emerson (mostly the last one) if you like the idea of a small town hiding secrets. And if you like the sort of story with a slow buildup and a big shocking reveal at the end, try *Catch Me If I Fall* by Barry Jonsberg.

Thank you for reading this, my sophomore novel, all the way to the end. Here's to book three, a fantasy probably, and all the books after it.

(In the way of historical accuracy, please note that this is not exactly 1991. This is my dream version of 1991. Please excuse any error.)

—Author