

ADVANCE
READING
COPY

An illustration showing the lower legs and feet of several people standing in a field of tall grass. The people are wearing various styles of shoes: some are wearing light blue trousers and green lace-up shoes, while others are wearing brown lace-up boots. The background is dark with small white stars, suggesting a night sky. The overall style is a textured, painterly illustration.

SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

ELLEN WITTLINGER

SOMEONE
ELSE'S
SHOES

ELLEN WITTLINGER

For David, for forty-odd years.

And for every comedian who has
ever made me forget, even briefly,
how heartbreaking life can be.

Copyright © 2018 by Ellen Wittlinger

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole
or in part in any form. Charlesbridge and colophon are registered
trademarks of Charlesbridge Publishing, Inc.

Published by Charlesbridge
85 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
(617) 926-0329
www.charlesbridge.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

Printed in the United States of America
(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Display type set in Lunchbox Slab by Kimmy Design
Text type set in New Century Schoolbook
Printed by Versa Press in East Peoria, IL
Production supervision by Brian G. Walker
Designed by Sarah Richards Taylor



We look before and after
and pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
with some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those
that tell of saddest thought.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley





CHAPTER

1

“Why are you running?” Oliver called to her.

“Why are you such a slowpoke?” Izzy answered.

Lately a small, gloomy shadow followed Izzy Shepherd everywhere she went. His name was Oliver Hook, and he was her cousin. Marching through downtown Coolidge, Izzy was at least three strides ahead of the kid.

“Are you running away from me?” Oliver yelled.

“No.” Of course she wasn’t running away from him. But a little pinprick of guilt made her slow down anyway. “I don’t see why I have to go with you, is all,” she said.

“I never bought a pair of shoes by myself,” Oliver said.

Izzy stopped walking and turned to stare at him. “You’re ten years old, and you’ve never bought a pair of shoes by yourself?”

“That’s not weird. My mom always went with me. You always try to make me sound weird, Izzy.”

“It’s not that hard to do,” she mumbled, hoping that Oliver couldn’t actually hear her. It wasn’t his fault he was suddenly her responsibility. She knew it wasn’t fair to take it out on him. She was really mad at the grown-ups, but they had so much else going on, they didn’t even notice.

The sun bounced off the storefront windows, hit the sidewalk, and exploded into her face. She’d forgotten her sunglasses, and the dazzling light made her squint. All around her, people were rolling up their sleeves to enjoy the end-of-summer sun on their skin, but Izzy could feel the approach of autumn racing toward her, and she hunched her shoulders against it. She didn’t like change. In her experience, it never made things better.

What was this, now? Some guy in baggy trousers, a striped shirt, and bright red lips on a white-painted face zigzagged through traffic and hopped onto the sidewalk behind Oliver. He wore white gloves and a big, black hat and had red circles painted on his cheeks. Oliver wasn’t paying

attention, but Izzy caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to watch the man dragging his feet in obvious imitation of her cousin.

Ugh, he must be a mime from the festival in the park. Why did people think mimes were funny, anyway? Nobody appreciated comedy more than Izzy, but she liked humor to come from words and ideas, not imitation. Mimes just exaggerated everything that was odd or silly about a person. That wasn't funny—it was mean.

“Stop following us!” she yelled at the guy. “You look ridiculous!”

Oliver turned too, surprised to see the clownish figure. He smiled briefly, and the mime returned the same smile.

“He’s making fun of you,” Izzy hissed, and then sped up again, hoping Oliver would too.

“Why would he do that?” Oliver asked.

“Because that’s what mimes do!”

The man passed Oliver so that he occupied the space on the sidewalk between the two cousins. His shoulders pulled back and his neck stiffened as he matched Izzy’s aggravated gait.

Oliver’s sudden, barking laugh surprised Izzy. She hadn’t heard a sound like that the entire three weeks the kid had been staying at her house. “He’s walking just like you do!” Oliver said. “Like you’re trying to get away from something.”

Izzy put on the brakes so fast, the mime ran into her. “Go away!” she yelled at him. He shrugged and began to immediately follow a woman walking in the opposite direction. She had a big handbag over one arm, and he leaned to the right with the weight of it, just like she did.

“Who is that guy?” Oliver asked. “He’s pretty funny.”

“I don’t think so. All kinds of nutballs are hanging around the park this week, pretending to be artists.” If Oliver thought that guy was funny, Izzy would have to show him some of her DVDs. Wait till he saw Robin Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire.

“We don’t have stuff like this where I live,” he said. “Our town’s too little.”

“You’re lucky.” But then, because Izzy knew good and well that Oliver was certainly *not* lucky, she felt embarrassed and steered the conversation back around to herself. “Just because I’m a natural leader,” she said, “doesn’t mean I want to be followed by somebody.” Maybe her cousin would get that she didn’t only mean the mime.

“Here,” she said, turning in to the shoe store. She held the door open while Oliver dragged his fingers along the window glass, ogling the merchandise. “Come on!”

She’d never felt impatient with Oliver before—not until he and his dad had moved into her house.

But Izzy thought it was better to feel annoyed with him than to feel sorry for him. Nobody wanted that, did they? In Izzy's experience, pity made you feel like a mangy dog that people might throw some food at but certainly didn't want to touch.

Inside the store, Izzy's attention was captured by a pair of pretty ballerina flats that came in lots of colors, including a sparkly silver. The silver shoe on display was just her size, so she slipped it on and admired the way it made her ankle look long and slim. If only her mother had given her enough money to get herself a pair of shoes too, but she hadn't.

Izzy needed new school shoes—her toes were squished in her old sneakers and the soles were coming loose. In fact, none of her old shoes fit right anymore—her feet must have grown over the summer. But her mother had hardly listened when Izzy had told her about her shoe requirements. All her mother seemed to have time for these days was worrying about her brother—Izzy's Uncle Henderson—and Oliver. Apparently there was a rule that if your mother was a nurse, she had to help everybody else on earth before she had time to listen to *your* problems.

Oliver stood in front of her, holding a very ugly pair of brown sneakers with Velcro straps across the front.

“I like these,” he said.

“Are you kidding? Only babies wear Velcro.”

“That’s not true.”

Izzy blew out a stream of exasperated air. “You’re starting a new school next week, Oliver. You want the kids to think you’re cool, don’t you?”

“How can shoes be cool? They’re just shoes.”

“Also,” she continued, “don’t tuck your shirt in so tight. It makes you look nerdy.”

Oliver shrugged. “I don’t care what anybody thinks. We’re probably not staying in Coolidge that long anyway.”

Izzy hoped he was right about that, but she had her doubts. She found a pair of the kind of shoes boys were supposed to wear. Black high-tops with fat laces. When a salesman came over, she handed him the sample. “We need these in a size six.”

“But I don’t like laces,” Oliver said. “They come open.”

“God, Oliver, you’re going into fifth grade. You can tie your shoes, can’t you?”

“You’re so bossy!” he said, but she could tell he was giving up the fight.

Am I bossy? Izzy wondered. Is it bossy if you’re just helping somebody for their own good? Ten minutes later they left the store with the high-tops in a box.

“I hear music,” Oliver said as they walked out

of the shopping district toward Izzy's house. "Can we go listen?"

Izzy groaned. "There'll be a million people in the park."

"You always exaggerate. Maybe a hundred."

They might as well go to the park. As soon as they got home, Izzy's mother would just come up with some other boring task that fell under the heading of "being extra kind to Oliver these days." She'd ask Izzy to "rise to the occasion," as if she hadn't been doing that for weeks already. Izzy was quite sure that being extra kind to her cousin wasn't going to make a bit of difference to him anyway. Not six weeks ago Oliver's mother had killed herself, which was about the worst thing that could happen to a kid. Nothing anybody could do for him was going to change that.

Izzy felt bad for Oliver—how could she not? But his problem was so enormous and overwhelming, there wasn't any room left for anyone to care about her smaller troubles, which didn't feel all that small to her.

They stood in the sparse circle that surrounded the guitar player, a middle-aged man wearing cowboy boots and a trucker hat. He could strum his instrument well enough, but his raspy voice grated on Izzy's last nerve. Man, she thought, they let anybody play here.

Oliver wasn't impressed either. "My dad's a lot better than that guy," he said as they left the park.

"Well, *yeah*," Izzy said. "Your dad's a professional." Or he *was*, anyway.

"I wish Dad would play his guitar again," Oliver said. "He hasn't even touched it since . . . you know."

"My mom says not to rush him. He'll start performing again eventually."

Izzy didn't actually hold out much hope for Uncle Henderson resuming his career as a singer-songwriter anytime soon. The man had barely even left the bedroom her mom had assigned him when he and Oliver moved into their big, creaky old house three weeks ago. He didn't play his guitar. He didn't sing. He just sat in the rocking chair and stared out the window, as if his dead wife were likely to come walking up the front sidewalk any minute.

It was awful to say, but Izzy hadn't been that surprised when she heard about Aunt Felicia taking the pills. Aunt Felicia had always spooked Izzy a little bit. She was quiet and nervous—just the opposite of Uncle Henderson—and when she smiled, it never seemed like a *real* smile, but more like a mask she didn't want anyone to see behind. Izzy's mother said that Aunt Felicia's depression was an illness, and that mental illness was not

that different from physical illness. She said Aunt Felicia wasn't just sad—it was a lot worse than that—but Izzy still didn't really understand it. She'd had a great husband, a smart little kid, and a job she liked as a gardener. Why wasn't that enough to make her happy?

Izzy was not a psychologist like that Cassie Clayton woman her mother had made her see for a while, but she was twelve years old, and she knew plenty. For one thing, she knew there was no point being overprotective of Oliver just because a bad thing had happened to him. Izzy knew that life could be hard, and sometimes you were going to get hurt. A person needed to toughen up to be able to stand it. That's what she'd had to do when her dad left, and she intended to teach her cousin to toughen up too.

“Izzy?” Oliver said shyly, cocking his head to one side. “When we get home, will you swing me in the hammock?”

She sighed. Her job was not going to be easy.



CHAPTER

2

Izzy and Oliver walked up the sagging front steps of her house to find her mother and Ms. Baldwin drinking iced tea on the front porch while Ms. Baldwin’s son, Liam, sat cross-legged on the floor, yelling at a handheld video game.

“There you two are!” Izzy’s mother said. “Did you get shoes? Let me see.”

Oliver handed her the bag, keeping his back to Liam.

“Look, Liam,” Ms. Baldwin said, “Oliver’s here.” Liam grunted and kept poking away at his game.

His mother tried again. “Put that thing down and come say hello to Oliver.” Liam ignored her.

Yeah, this was going as well as it had the last time her mother had masterminded a playdate between these two. Izzy wondered how her mother could be so dense. Just because Liam was Oliver’s age and also headed for fifth grade at Hopkins Elementary didn’t mean the two of them were going to like each other. You could tell just by looking at them that they had nothing in common. Liam’s hair was completely buzzed off, and he was wearing a Patriots football jersey three sizes too big, whereas her cousin wore a T-shirt with a picture of SpongeBob SquarePants on it and had that smelly, little-boy hair that stuck up all over his head. Didn’t these women have eyes?

Izzy went inside to get herself a glass of tea and find a book to read. By the time she headed back to the porch, Liam and Oliver had been talked into playing in the room her mother called the parlor, a room new houses didn’t have because, really, nobody knew what to use it for. Izzy glanced in to see them dumping Oliver’s big box of Lego pieces all over the floor. So far, so good.

The front porch was large, and it wrapped around the corner of the house, so Izzy snuggled into a chair on the side of the porch where the women couldn’t see her. She opened her book and read the

first paragraph, then read it again. It was hard to concentrate when her mother and Ms. Baldwin were speaking in such quiet voices. Obviously they didn't want her to hear, which made Izzy want to listen twice as much. She noticed that if she closed her eyes, her hearing became extra sharp.

"I'm trying to get Henderson to talk to a therapist, but he just ignores me," Izzy's mother said. "It breaks my heart to see my brother in so much pain. And Oliver too, of course. He's being so good, but I know he's scared senseless. He wakes up with nightmares almost every night."

He did? Izzy must have slept through the noise.

"Well, they're fortunate to have you to help them," Ms. Baldwin said.

"I've always felt responsible for Henderson," Izzy's mother said. "He's my younger brother, and after our parents died, he relied on me. We've always been close."

"Is poor Oliver seeing a therapist?" Ms. Baldwin's voice was sickeningly sweet. Izzy could feel her teeth grinding as Ms. Baldwin said "poor."

"We have an appointment with Cassie Clayton next week. She's wonderful with children."

Izzy wouldn't have said Cassie was wonderful. The woman was nice enough, but all that talking had just made Izzy feel worse.

"I don't understand it. How could your sister-in-

law do this to such an adorable little boy who needs her so much?" Ms. Baldwin whispered dramatically.

"When you're as sick as Felicia was, you can't think about anything but your own pain," Izzy's mother said. "Her despair lifted sometimes, but never for long. Poor Hen was so hopeful after she came home from the treatment center. She seemed better this time, but it didn't last."

Izzy could hear the ice cubes clink as the women swirled them in their glasses.

"She took pills?"

"Cleaned out the medicine cabinet and swallowed everything in it, including two half-empty bottles of cough medicine. Henderson was out at a gig, and Oliver was asleep in the other room."

These were details Izzy hadn't heard before. She was careful not to move a muscle so as not to remind them she was there.

"Oh my God. The child didn't see anything, did he?"

"I don't think so. Henderson found Felicia when he got home. I guess Oliver woke up when the ambulance got there, but a neighbor came over and took him to her house. I'm sure he knew, though. He's a smart kid. I'm sure he knew immediately."

There was a long silence then, but Izzy couldn't go back to her book. She'd been to Oliver's house lots of times. It was not large like the old mon-

strosity she lived in. Oliver's room was right across the hall from his parents' room. If he'd woken up when he heard the ambulance, he must have seen *something*, and Izzy's imagination was able to come up with many possibilities. He must have seen his father wailing and sobbing in the middle of the night. He must have seen the paramedics race in with life-saving equipment they wouldn't need. Maybe, before that neighbor hurried him away, maybe he even saw his mother's body with nobody left inside anymore. Imagining it made Izzy feel sick to her stomach.

"That poor, poor baby!" Ms. Baldwin sounded like she was about to start bawling herself. "This is going to ruin his whole life!"

What was that woman talking about? Izzy smacked her book down on the floor and stomped around the corner to confront the two women. "First of all, Oliver is not a baby!"

"Oh, honey," Ms. Baldwin said sadly, her eyes all soggy-looking. "Were you listening?"

Izzy ignored the question. "Oliver's going to be fine, isn't he, Mom? His life isn't *ruined*."

Her mother reached for her hand. "It's going to take him a while to feel better, Izzy, but over time his pain will diminish, even if it never goes away completely. At the moment Oliver seems better than his father, but I'm afraid he's trying to be a

perfect kid for Henderson's benefit. He can't hide his emotions forever, though. He has to feel what he's feeling."

That was the kind of thing her mother always said. You were supposed to "feel your feelings," as if there were any other choice.

Ms. Baldwin nodded her head as if she were some kind of expert on feelings and not just a high-school French teacher. "Sometimes you have to fall all the way to the bottom before you can start to pull yourself up."

"That's not true!" Izzy said. "Oliver's not like his mother. He doesn't have to fall to the bottom of anything!" She quickly went back to pick up her book and then stormed through the screen door into the house. Behind her she heard her mother say quietly, "This has been hard on Izzy too."

Great. Now they'd sit there and discuss *her* problems. Izzy hated the way her mother acted like she understood everything about everybody just because she was a nurse. Well, yak away, ladies. Izzy was not going to listen. Instead she curled into a chair in the parlor where the two boys were busy ignoring each other, Oliver building some kind of Lego fort, and Liam slumped on the couch, staring at his video game again. Yeah, these two were going to be terrific friends.

But as soon as Izzy started reading again, Liam

threw aside his game. “How come your mom killed herself, anyway?” he grumbled at Oliver.

Izzy slammed her book down and glared at Liam. What was this bratty kid going to say next? She glanced at her cousin to see what effect Liam’s tossed-off question had on him, but Oliver just shrugged. “I don’t know. She was depressed, I guess.”

Liam snorted. “You *guess*? Was there a note? My mom said sometimes people leave notes.”

“Mind your own business!” Izzy snapped.

But Oliver nodded. “She left a note for my dad.”

This was the first Izzy had heard of it. Why hadn’t anybody told her these details? A note was very important in a situation like this, wasn’t it? It told you *why*.

“Really?” she said. “Have you seen it?”

Oliver continued to press one small, colorful piece onto another. “Yeah. Dad showed it to me.”

“Well, where is it? What did it say?” Izzy asked the questions, but Liam sat forward, eager to hear the answers too.

“I don’t know where it is now. It said that she loved us and she was sorry.”

“That’s all? I wish I could see it. I bet Uncle Hen kept it.”

Liam snorted again. “If she loved you so much, why’d she kill herself?”

“God, Liam!” Izzy said. “Stop it!”

“I’m just asking the kid a question. If my mother killed herself, I’d want to know why.”

Oliver snapped a flag in place on the top of his fort, then sifted through the remaining pieces as if he couldn’t hear the two of them arguing.

“He already told you,” Izzy said. “She was depressed. You probably don’t even know what that means!”

“I know as much about it as you do!” Liam’s lip curled up nastily, but then his eyes suddenly cut to the left and the smirk disappeared. He sat up straight and stared at the ghostly presence looming behind Izzy.

Henderson Hook, Izzy’s uncle, had wandered into the parlor, tall and slouched in his stocking feet. He looked around the room, blinking his eyes as if he couldn’t quite focus them. Oliver stood up but didn’t go toward his father.

“Hey, Uncle Hen,” Izzy said. “Do you need something?”

“I think I left my coffee cup in here.” His voice was barely audible.

Izzy looked around. “Is this it?” She picked up a mug from the table beside her.

Uncle Henderson stared at the mug. “I guess so.”

“It’s cold,” Izzy said. “It’s been sitting here all

day.” Actually, Izzy thought, it might have been there since the day before.

Finally her uncle’s gaze landed on her face. “What time is it?”

“About three o’clock.”

“In the afternoon?”

Liam made a strangled sound in his throat.

“Yeah.”

“Guess I lost track.” The foggy look on her uncle’s face scared Izzy. The Uncle Henderson she’d always known—the loud, funny guy who was never without a guitar hanging from his neck—had vanished inside this shadow-man who could barely speak.

“I’ll warm it up for you, Dad,” Oliver said, approaching his father cautiously. “Do you want me to put it in the microwave?”

“Okay,” Uncle Henderson said. “I guess so.”

Oliver grabbed the cup from Izzy and almost spilled the leftover coffee as he dashed from the room. His father lumbered slowly after him.

As soon as they were both gone, Liam exploded with laughter. “Oh my God, no wonder the kid’s a psycho. His father’s crazy too! The guy doesn’t know if it’s daytime or the middle of the night!”

Izzy looked around for something to throw at the idiot, but the only thing available was a lamp. It was an ugly lamp, but her mother would

probably still be mad to have it smashed, even for a good cause. Instead Izzy stood up and made her eyes into thin slits. “You are evil, Liam Baldwin. An evil little creep.”

“Takes one to know one,” he shot back.

“Get out of here!” she yelled at him. She pulled off one of her ill-fitting sneakers and hurled it across the room. Liam ducked away from it, but she was glad to see a spark of fear in his dark little eyes.

“No problem,” he said. “You’re *all* crazy.”

As he headed for the door, Izzy chased him for just a second, and he ran. He *ran*. And she felt good about that.



CHAPTER

3

After dinner Izzy sat cross-legged on her bed, watching the movie *The Heat* on her computer for the third time. (It was R-rated, but mostly for language, and she'd heard worse from kids at school.) She loved it for the way her favorite comic actresses, Melissa McCarthy and Sandra Bullock, pulled off the humor. Sandra would set up the joke in her deadpan style, and then Melissa would knock it out of the park. No stupid mime could make people laugh like that. If you laughed at a mime, it was because you were glad he was making fun of somebody else and not you.

Before her parents got divorced, Izzy used to watch a lot of comedy with her dad. His favorite comedian was Jerry Seinfeld, but he liked Ellen DeGeneres a lot too. He always said, “I love watching people who can work a crowd like that.”

Apparently her dad had once wanted to be a stand-up comedian himself and had gone to a few open-mic nights in New York as a young man. But then he grew up and got kind of boring, like most adults, and his love of comedy became this secret thing he didn’t talk about very much, except to Izzy, who was more than happy to listen.

“With Seinfeld, the first line of the joke is funny already,” he’d explain. “For example, he starts out, ‘What’s the deal with war?’ You’re laughing already because nobody seriously asks a question like that. It’s not a real question—it’s too *big*. And then the joke is about how the Swiss fight with those little Swiss Army knives—bottle openers and spoons. And then he finishes the routine with the best line of all. ‘Back off, I’ve got the toe clippers!’ You see how he builds up to the funniest line?”

Izzy did see. And she loved that her dad thought she was smart enough to understand how the jokes worked. She loved laughing so hard that they’d fall over sideways on the couch, gasping for breath. And she loved the feeling of power she got when *she* said something funny and her dad laughed at *her*.

But that hadn't happened in a long time. It had been two-and-a-half years since her parents had divorced and her dad had moved to Boston. When Izzy visited, he was never in the mood to watch stand-up anymore, or even *Saturday Night Live* or a funny movie. At first he was too sad, then he was too busy, then he was too in love. These days Izzy watched comedy by herself, and sometimes she worked on a routine. She thought about which jokes might make her dad laugh. Or even just make him look at her again.

Izzy climbed off her bed and stood in front of the full-length mirror that hung on her closet door. She was wearing an old pair of pajamas that was too small for her. The legs ended halfway between her ankles and her knees, which made her legs look scrawny and her feet look big. Was it funny? She wasn't sure. Most stand-up comedians had a certain look. They had a stage costume. Jerry always wore suits and ties, Ellen had jeans and sneakers, and Joan Rivers got decked out in jewelry and furs. You had to have an image. Could small pajamas be her look?

She stood so that her feet fanned out sideways, and they looked bigger and sillier.

"So, what's the deal with . . .," she began, then stopped. The deal with what? She looked around her room. "What's the deal with shoes?" she said

to the mirror. “Cavemen didn’t wear shoes. Why do we stuff our feet into little leather canoes, anyway?” Nope, wasn’t funny. What would Ellen say about shoes? Maybe there wasn’t anything funny about shoes.

“So, what’s the deal with . . . school?” *That* was a good topic. “The first few years, sure: you learn to read, you count to a hundred, red and blue makes purple—that’s good stuff. But after that . . .” She thought about Jerry; how he built the joke and then *sold* it. “After that it’s such a hassle! Every day you have to figure out what to wear so you’ll be . . . inconspicuous enough not to be called on in class, but . . . not so invisible that nobody sits with you in the cafeteria. You gotta do well enough on the test so your parents don’t freak out, but not so good that . . . the teacher wants you to join the math team.”

Not bad, she thought. What else?

“Because if you think you’re walking that tightrope *now*—you know, the one between I-can-almost-see-popularity-from-here and maybe-if-I-shaved-my-head-someone-would-notice me—once you become a mathlete . . . once you sign up for *athletics* . . . , you might as well just go eat lunch with the school librarian, because you’ve become a complete social misfit.”

“Ha!” The burst of laughter startled Izzy.

“The way you tell it is funny,” Oliver said. “Mathletics!” He leaned in the doorway, critiquing her performance.

Izzy whirled around. “God, Oliver, how long have you been watching me?”

“Not that long. Also, I don’t see what’s so bad about eating lunch with the school librarian.”

“Who asked you? You were spying on me!”

“Your door was open.”

Izzy stomped over to him. “Well, it isn’t now!” she said as she swung it closed in his face.

But she could still hear him. “It would be funnier,” Oliver shouted, “if you really did shave your head!”

Izzy burned for another moment over being caught, but then she remembered what Oliver had said. “The way you tell it is funny.” He’d actually laughed. Oliver, who hardly ever laughed at anything anymore, had laughed at *her* joke.



CHAPTER

4

“I can’t believe your mother is dating Dr. Gustino now. That’s just so weird,” Pauline said as she unrolled her sleeping bag on Izzy’s bedroom floor.

It was the first time Pauline and Cookie had spent the night at Izzy’s all summer. Cookie was just back from seven weeks at sleepaway camp, which she could not stop talking about, and Pauline had gone to London with her family for an even longer time while her father did research for a new book.

Usually Izzy’s mother didn’t like her to have

people over while she was out for the evening, but this time she'd suggested it. She'd said, "A few more eyes can't hurt," which Izzy didn't quite understand. Were the girls supposed to be babysitting for Oliver? Or for Uncle Henderson? Or were they all supposed to be watching each other while the one functioning adult was away for a few hours?

"I think Dr. Gustino's kind of cute," Cookie said. "You know, for a dentist." She stood in front of Izzy's mirror, arranging her long hair, sun-bleached after the summer, into graceful waves that fell over her shoulders.

"There's just something about dentists, though," Pauline said, a shudder passing through her body. "They have to put their hands in people's mouths all day long."

Cookie agreed. "It's kind of disgusting."

What's the deal with dentists? Izzy thought, but no hilarious answers came to her. It was hard to concentrate when Cookie and Pauline were talking.

"Plus," Pauline continued, "Dr. Gustino has that awful son. You don't have to hang out with him ever, do you?"

Izzy was not interested in discussing Ben Gustino. She'd caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror behind her friends' heads, and she was thinking about her disappointing hair. It was not long and

flowy like Cookie's, nor was it black and spiky like the pixie cut Pauline had returned with from England. No, Izzy's hair was thin and brownish and straggly, and she tended to shove it behind her ears just to get it out of the way. But she'd be starting seventh grade in a few days, and she was tired of looking like her same old boring self. Maybe she should dye her hair a bright color, like some of the high-school girls did. Pink or green or turquoise.

Pauline snapped her fingers in front of Izzy's face. "Where are you? I asked you about Ben Gustino."

"I hardly even know him," Izzy said. "Do you think he's gonna hang around with a seventh grader? He's in high school!"

"You're lucky you don't have to see him," Cookie said. "My brother *hates* him. He's such a bully."

"That's what my sister says too," Pauline said. "She's two years older than he is, and she's *still* scared of him."

"That doesn't prove anything," Izzy said. "Trish is scared of her shadow. What did he do that's so terrible?" Izzy had seen Ben twice when she'd gone with her mother to Dr. Gustino's for dinner, but he'd never eaten with them. He didn't bother with an excuse—he'd just walk out of the house a few minutes after their arrival. Even though she knew

Ben was dissing her and her mother by leaving, there was a part of her that admired him for it. If she'd had the nerve, Izzy would have bailed on those dull dinners too. It hadn't occurred to her that Ben was anything worse than just a normal, rude teenager. *What's the deal with teenagers, anyway?* There must be something funny about them, but Izzy didn't actually know enough about the species to pin down a joke. The only ones she was close enough to observe were her friends' older siblings, and both of them were too dull to be amusing.

"Trish says Ben Gustino beats people up for no reason at all," Pauline said. "You just have to look at him sideways. He's, like, mad all the time."

"Adam told me he got kicked off the baseball team for throwing a bat at somebody's head and giving the kid a concussion," Cookie said.

Great. Just what they needed around here, another person with problems. Not that Izzy was worried about Ben becoming an actual family member. Her mother had dated several different men since her divorce from Izzy's father, but she hadn't gotten serious with any of them. As soon as a man tried to talk about "the future," she called the whole thing off, which was fine with Izzy. Her mother always said, "*You're my future, not some man.*" So the likelihood that Ben Gustino would do more than pass quickly through her life was small.

(Her dad, on the other hand, had apparently started the search for a new wife the minute he hit Boston, his car stuffed with clothes on hangers and cardboard boxes full of DVDs.)

When the pizzas arrived, Izzy paid the delivery guy and called to Oliver and her uncle. She ripped the lids off the boxes while Cookie set the table with plates and napkins. Pauline poured apple cider into glasses.

“Will your uncle want cider?” she asked quietly. Both of Izzy’s friends spoke in whispers when the subject of her uncle or cousin came up. They knew what had happened, and they’d asked the usual, unanswerable question: *Why?* But after that they didn’t seem to know what else to say.

“Don’t pour him any,” Izzy said. “He’ll probably get a beer and take it up to his room.”

She was right. Uncle Henderson appeared briefly, his long hair mashed in on one side and standing up on the other in classic bed-head style. He slapped one small slice of mushroom pizza on a plate, stopped at the fridge to pick up a bottle, and wandered back upstairs to his room without acknowledging any of them.

“I’ve never seen anything so *sad*,” Cookie whispered.

Pauline’s eyes were wide with amazement, but Oliver had appeared by then, so she didn’t say

anything. Oliver pulled up a chair and reached for a slice of pepperoni. He sat with one leg bent beneath him in order to comfortably reach the table. Pauline and Cookie smiled at him, and then they all fell into a black hole of silence.

“What movie should we watch tonight?” Izzy finally asked, just to get them talking.

“I don’t care,” Cookie said, then turned to Oliver. “What movie would *you* like to watch?”

Izzy had not figured on her cousin joining them. He’d probably want to watch something childish, like one of the Lego movies. “I thought we’d watch up in my room,” she said. “We can stream it on the computer.”

“There’s more space down here in the living room, and the TV is bigger,” Pauline said. “Unless Oliver wants to watch up in his room. Which room is yours, Oliver?”

Oliver seemed as surprised as Izzy that her friends were being so nice to him. “I have the little bedroom. But sometimes I sleep in my dad’s room. To keep him company.”

“What a good kid you are!” Pauline said. Then she and Cookie exchanged sad-eyed looks, which Izzy found incredibly aggravating. Did they really think that helped anything? In Izzy’s opinion, it probably just made the kid feel worse. She knew it would make *her* feel worse.

But surprisingly, Cookie and Pauline did not seem to be having that effect on Oliver. He actually smiled at Pauline. “We could watch an Indiana Jones movie if you want. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? I brought it with me.”

No, no, no! Izzy had been wanting to watch the new *Ghostbusters* with Melissa McCarthy and Kate McKinnon.

“Great idea, Oliver!” Cookie said. “I haven’t watched Indiana Jones in ages.”

Pauline and Cookie polished off several slices of pizza while they recounted their favorite scenes from the movie.

“Oh my God, that snake scene is so scary,” Pauline said, wriggling in her seat.

“Most of the snakes weren’t poisonous,” Oliver said.

“Does Indy get bitten by a snake?” Cookie asked. “I can’t remember.”

Oliver shook his head. “Nah. But one of the crew members really did get bitten by a python while they were making that scene.”

“Really!” Cookie and Pauline said together, their eyes wide.

Who cared about the stupid snake scene? Were they going to spend the whole evening hanging out with her cousin? That’s all she’d done for the past three weeks! She’d been looking forward to her

friends' return so things would get back to normal again, and now Oliver was wrecking that too.

Finally Izzy interrupted the Indiana Jones conversation. "Cookie, you were starting to tell us before about that guy at your camp." Not that Izzy really wanted to hear Cookie brag about some boy who'd probably fallen in love with her hair, but at least it was a subject Oliver wouldn't be interested in. Maybe he'd get bored and leave them alone.

Cookie only hesitated for a second. "Oh my God, you would not believe how cute Tyler is. Wait! I've got a picture!" She pulled her phone from her pocket and tapped around on it. Which was annoying because, of the three of them, Izzy was the only one who didn't yet have her own cell phone. Her mother thought twelve (and a half!) was too young to begin an addiction to electronics. Like a smartphone was marijuana or something.

Cookie handed the phone to Izzy. There was a picture of a kid with brown hair and a big nose. What, Izzy wondered, made this ordinary boy seem so special to her friend? Izzy thought his crooked smile made him look untrustworthy, but she knew what her response was supposed to be. "Cute," she said, and handed the phone to Pauline.

"We got together the fifth week we were there," Cookie said. "At first he was going out with this girl, Amanda, but then one day during free swim

at the lake he was sort of flirting with me, and Amanda got mad, so she stopped speaking to him, and to me too, of course, but I didn't care because it was like suddenly *I* was going out with Tyler. I mean, we didn't actually say that, but . . ."

"But what?" Pauline hung on every word that tumbled out of Cookie's mouth.

Cookie glanced at Oliver. "Well, you know. He kissed me."

Pauline sighed. "*Really?* What was it like?"

Izzy wrinkled up her nose. She couldn't help it. The idea of swapping spit with some sweaty boy just didn't appeal to her, and she couldn't imagine it ever would.

"What are you making that face for?" Cookie asked her.

"I don't think we should be talking about kissing in front of Oliver," Izzy said. "He's a little kid."

Oliver kicked her under the table. "I'm only two years younger than you, Izzy. I know about kissing."

"Two and a half," Izzy corrected him. "And I doubt you know very *much* about it."

"I'm not giving him details," Cookie said. "It was just . . . very nice. We kissed a few times. But then I heard he kissed another girl too. Liz Baker."

"Jeez, is that all anybody does at that camp? Kiss everybody?" Izzy decided she was never going to camp, ever.

“No, we did lots of stuff. Swimming and archery and hiking. We put on a play and rode horses. It was a lot more fun than walking around downtown Coolidge all summer or swimming in that muddy river.”

“I like the river,” Izzy said, though in fact she’d only gone swimming there once all summer. She thought she might actually like to go to a camp where you rode horses, but she knew that ever since her dad had left, there was no extra money for things like that, so there was no point wishing. If she asked about it, she’d probably get the lecture again about how they were a one-income family now, and then her mom would start in on how the house needed a new roof, and did Izzy have any idea how much that cost. No, she didn’t. How the heck was she supposed to know about stuff like that?

Pauline was impatient to get back to the subject at hand. “So, did you break up with him? When he kissed that other girl?”

“Well, I was really mad, of course, but he apologized for it. I’m not sure if we’re still going together or not. He said he’d email me, but then I heard he told Liz that too.”

Just as Izzy suspected: untrustworthy. And yet Cookie didn’t seem that upset about it. In fact, telling the story had her so excited, she bounced in her chair.

“Your summer was a lot better than mine,” Pauline said.

“Didn’t you meet any cute boys in London?” Cookie asked.

“There was one boy who lived in the same building we did, but I was too nervous to talk to him.”

“Oh, Pauline!” Cookie said sympathetically.

“Are you kidding?” Izzy said. “You got to spend the whole summer in London, and you’re bummed because you didn’t talk to some stupid boy? Didn’t you walk around the city and see cool stuff? You told me you were going on that big Ferris wheel thing.”

“The London Eye. Of course we did, but I was with my parents the whole time. What fun is that?”

More fun than playing Boggle with your nerdy, freaked-out cousin.

“Did you go into Boston this summer, like last year?” Cookie asked Izzy.

“Just for a few days right after school got out,” she said. “Dad was pretty busy.” She could have stayed longer, but she didn’t want to. The summer before, she’d stayed for a month, and it had been awful. She’d hardly spent any time with her father—just that one Saturday when his girlfriend, Emily, was busy with something or other, and Izzy had suggested to her dad that they watch

some DVDs of old *Saturday Night Live* shows together. That had been an excellent day, almost like old times. But most of the month, she'd had to hang out with Emily and help her get ready to become Wife Number Two. She'd accompanied the constantly babbling woman to look at flowers and wedding cakes and bridesmaids' dresses, one of which Izzy had been forced to wear for the big event last Christmas.

Izzy was uncomfortable around her father now that he was all lovey-dovey with Emily. It seemed like he'd erased her mother from his memory, as if she'd never existed. And if her mother never existed, where did Izzy fit into the picture? It was as if her dad and Emily—whose last name was now Shepherd too—were riding a tandem bike, and Izzy was dragging along behind them on a tricycle. She couldn't keep up, and after a while she didn't even want to. Izzy hoped that someday, maybe when her stand-up routine was perfected, he'd pay attention to her again.

"I just had a great idea!" Pauline said. "My dad is going into Boston for a meeting at UMass on Friday morning, and he's staying overnight at a hotel. If we went in with him, we could sleep over at your dad's and go school shopping on Newbury Street!"

"Can we, Izzy?" Cookie asked. "I need some

new stuff, and I can never find anything in downtown Coolidge.”

Really? They wanted to go all the way to Boston just to shop? Sometimes Izzy hardly recognized Cookie and Pauline as the same girls she’d been giggling with since kindergarten.

“My dad might be busy or something,” Izzy said, stalling for time. If they all went in, it would probably be obvious to her friends that her dad didn’t care about her anymore. How embarrassing would that be? On the other hand, Izzy had felt Pauline and Cookie pulling away from her even before they left town for the summer. It felt as if they were outgrowing her or something. Like they were getting older while she was still the same little kid she’d always been. If she wanted to keep her friends, she figured she’d have to at least pretend to grow with them. If that meant staying in Boston overnight with her dad and Emily and traipsing in and out of clothing stores, she supposed she could do it.

“Can you call him and ask?” Cookie said. “It would be so much fun!”

Izzy nodded. “Okay. I’ll call him tomorrow.”

“What should I do while you’re gone?” Oliver had been sitting there so quietly, Izzy had almost forgotten about him.

“It’s only overnight,” she said. God, couldn’t

she get away from the kid for *one day* without him trying to make her feel guilty about it?

“Maybe you could come too,” Cookie said.

“No!” Izzy hadn’t meant to say it so loudly, but *really*? Couldn’t she have one day off? “I mean, my dad’s place is not that big. And anyway, your dad would miss you,” she told Oliver. Actually, she wasn’t sure that Uncle Henderson would even notice he was gone.

But Oliver nodded. “That’s true. I should stay here with Dad.”

Once again Pauline and Cookie pulled long faces.

“Let’s watch the movie now,” Oliver said.

Since they were being so cruel as to plan to leave him behind for twenty-four hours, there was obviously no question about who was watching what movie with whom. Izzy let them start *Raiders of the Lost Ark* without her while she cleaned up the table. By the time she came into the living room, the three of them were stretched out on the carpet, Oliver nestled snugly between the two girls who’d been Izzy’s best friends her whole life.

She plunked herself down right next to Pauline, as close as possible to the huddle of bodies on the floor. Pauline leaned into her gently, a kind of welcome. Nothing else was going to change, if Izzy had anything to say about it.