Breadcrumbs

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WALDEN POND PRESS
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
Part One
It snowed right before Jack stopped talking to Hazel, fluffy white flakes big enough to show their crystal architecture, like perfect geometric poems. It was the sort of snow that transforms the world around it into a different kind of place. You know what it's like—when you wake up to find everything white and soft and quiet, when you run outside and your breath suddenly appears before you in a smoky poof, when you wonder for a moment if the world in which you woke up is not the same one that you went to bed in the night before. Things like that happen, at least in the stories you read. It was the sort of snowfall that, if there were any magic to be had in the world, would make it come out.

And magic did come out.
But not the kind you were expecting.

That morning, Hazel Anderson ran out of her small house in her white socks and green thermal pajamas. She leapt over the threshold of the house onto the front stoop where she stood, ignoring the snow biting at her ankles, to take in the white street. Everything was pristine. No cars had yet left their tracks to sully the road. The small squares of lawn that lay in front of each of the houses like perfectly aligned placemats seemed to stretch beyond the boundaries of their chain-link fences and join together as one great field of white. A thick blanket of snow covered each roof as if to warm and protect the house underneath.

All was quiet. The sun was just beginning to peek out over the horizon. The air smelled crisp and expectant. Snowflakes danced in the awakening sky, touching down softly on Hazel’s long black hair.

Hazel sucked in her breath involuntarily, bringing in a blast of cold.

Something stirred inside her, some urge to plunge into the new white world and see what it had to offer. It was like she’d walked out of a dusty old wardrobe and found Narnia.

Hazel stuck her index finger out into the sky. A snowflake accepted her invitation, and she felt a momentary pinprick of cold on the pad of her bare finger. She gazed at the snowflake, considering its delicate structure. Inside
it was another universe, and maybe if she figured out the right way to ask, someone would let her in.

Hazel jumped as her mother’s voice came from behind her. “Come inside,” she said, “you’ll freeze!”

“Look at the snow!” Hazel said, turning to show her glimmering prize.

Her mom nodded from the doorway. “It’s amazing when you can see the patterns like that. Look at it. See the six sides? It’s called hexagonal symmetry. A snowflake is made—”

People were always doing this sort of thing to Hazel. Nobody could accept that she did not want to hear about gaseous balls and layers of atmosphere and refracted light and tiny building blocks of life. The truth of things was always much more mundane than what she could imagine, and she did not understand why people always wanted to replace the marvelous things in her head with this miserable heap of you’re-a-fifth-grader-now facts.

And then Hazel’s mother said something brisk about getting her inside and something funny about someone calling child protection, followed quickly by a practical warning about getting to school on time and not making things worse there, and then Hazel saw her mom’s head suddenly snap to the right, saw her eyes widen and her mouth open and heard some sound creak out, but before
Hazel could make sense of it all, she felt something hit the middle of her back with a *thwack*.

Ouch.

Hazel yelped and whirled around. There, on the front step of the house next door was a brown-haired, freckled boy packing another snowball and smiling evilly.

A grin broke out on Hazel’s face. “Jack!” she hollered, and bent down to gather some snow.

“No you don’t,” said her mom, shooting a glance at the house next door. She reached over the threshold and placed her hand on Hazel’s back to guide her back into the house.

“I’ll get you later,” Hazel called to Jack as she disappeared inside.

“Just try it!” Jack called back, cackling.

Hazel’s mom closed the front door with a sigh. “Look at you. What were you thinking?”

Hazel looked down. She had clumps of snow hanging off her pajama legs. As she moved her head, snowflakes fell off of her hair. She seemed to be shivering, though she had not noticed the cold until now.

“Come on. You better get dressed. You’ll be late.”

She was late. Hazel walked out the front door, bundled sensibly now in her green jacket and knit gloves and red boots, to see the yellow school bus disappearing into the
Snowfall

distance, its wide tracks scarring the snow-covered street, its puffing black smoke trespassing against the white sky. She blinked and looked toward the front window of her house where her mother’s form was already seated at the desk on the other side. Now she felt the snow’s bite against her ankles like a bad memory.

Chewing on her lip, Hazel unlocked the front door and went back into the house. Her mom looked up at her and let out a nearly imperceptible exhale.

“I’m sorry,” Hazel said.

“I’ll get my keys,” her mother said.

In a few moments, their small white car was bursting out of the garage onto the thickly blanketed driveway. And then there was a crunching from the back tires, and they were stopped.

The car groaned. Her mother swore. The wheels spun, one moment, two—the car lurched forward and backward, and her mother swore even more colorfully, and then they were free.

It was a twenty-block drive to school, fourteen of them down a two-lane one-way street. As they moved toward school, the houses became bolder, sprouting second stories that stood uneasily in their rickety wooden frames. Hazel used to want a house like this—something beat-up and possibly haunted, with a dumbwaiter for passing
messages, with hidden compartments that contained mysterious old books—but then she would not live next to Jack anymore, and that was not worth all the secret passages in the world.

The snow was coming down harder now, and Hazel’s mother leaned forward in her seat as she drove, as if to will the car through it all. Shiny SUVs charged through the snow, whizzing past Hazel and the other small cars that crept along like scared animals.

Hazel’s mom started pressing down on the brake long before they got to the big intersection where they were to turn left—the one with the gas station that Hazel and Jack biked to in the summers to spend their allowance on Popsicles and push-ups; where the bakery with the birthday cakes used to be before it became another gas station; where the burger place that her dad always took her to after T-ball games had been before it was replaced by the fast-food Mexican place that her mother said made everything taste like plastic and sadness—but that didn’t stop them from skidding when they hit the patch of ice just in front of it. The car began to spin to the right, her mother wrenched the wheel and pumped her foot furiously on the brake, a horn bleated behind them, and from everywhere around them came a polyphony of screeching tires.

Hazel yelped a little, and the car skidded into the busy
intersection and stopped. A car swerved around them, and another, before someone finally stopped and waved them ahead. Her mom sucked in her breath, then straightened the car and joined the slow-moving group in the far lane. Hazel did not think this was the time to tell her she was, technically, running a red light.

“Ah, this car,” her mom said, to no one in particular.

Hazel laid a hand on the gray dashboard as if to comfort it. A year ago her father had bought a new station wagon. Better for driving in these Minnesota winters, he had said. Safer for everyone. Suddenly, they, too, were charging through the snow, leaving all the little cars of Minneapolis to fend for themselves. But that was last year. Hazel did not mind, though; she had lived many years with this old car, she remembered all the dents, and she had no use for gleaming new station wagons—even if they did have anti-lock brakes.

As they pulled into the side street next to the school, Hazel’s mom let out a long breath and squeezed the steering wheel—though whether out of the camaraderie bent of surviving hardship or out of some desire to strangle the car, Hazel was not sure. As for Hazel, she chewed some more on her lip, because that seemed the thing to do. Her mom’s eyes fell on her. “Well,” she said, releasing the wheel, “that was an adventure.”
Hazel nodded, though her mom knew nothing of adventures.

“I know you didn’t mean to miss the bus, Hazel,” her mother added, her voice gentle. “But you’ve got to try to be practical for me, okay? You’re a big girl, and I just can’t be—”

Hazel nodded again.

“Okay, good. Listen, I’m having coffee at Elizabeth Briggs’s after school. Why don’t you come? I’ll pick you up right from school.”

Hazel squirmed. She did not want to argue with her mom, not now. But—

“I’m going sledding with Jack.”

Actually, this was not strictly true. She and Jack had made no plans. But they didn’t need to make plans, for there was a thick layer of snow on the ground and hills to sled down. Plus she owed him a good pounding with a snowball.

“I thought perhaps you’d like to go hang out with Adelaide,” her mother continued, as if she had not spoken. “She’s such a nice girl. I think you two would really get along, if you just gave it a chance.”

“I have plans.”

“I know, but you can sled with Jack another time. I think you should spend time with . . . other people.”
Hazel flushed. *With girls,* her mother meant. She scowled slightly, and her guilt plummeted deep into the snow, burying itself where no one would find it. She mumbled her good-bye and hopped out onto the sidewalk before her mom could cancel any more of her pretend plans.

The air was filled with the smells of winter, and car exhaust, and the familiar sausage-y–maple syrupy wafting from the Burger King across the street. Hazel took a moment to inhale it all, to let the smells wash over her—not that they were particularly good, but it was one more moment that she didn’t have to be in school.

This was Hazel’s first year at Lovelace Elementary. After her father moved away over the summer, her mother explained that they didn’t have the money to send her to the school she’d gone to since kindergarten and she would have to switch. Her old school had been very different. The classrooms didn’t have desks. They called their teachers by their first names. Hazel tried that with Mrs. Jacobs on her first day at Lovelace. It did not go over well.

The good thing was she now went to the same school as Jack. The bad thing was everything else. Hazel did not like sitting at a desk. She did not like having to call her teacher Mrs. Anything. She did not like homework and work sheets and fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice. It used to be that Hazel’s teachers said things like *Hazel is so creative* and
Hazel has such a great imagination, and now all she heard was Hazel does not do the assignment asked of her and Hazel needs to learn to follow school rules.

So Hazel stood and gathered herself for another day of the things she did not do and the things she needed to learn, when a voice burst through the air. “Hey!” it said. “Crazy Hazy, are you coming to school today or what?”

Hazel grimaced. Tyler Freeman was walking behind her, sporting a Twins hat like it was exactly the thing to wear in a blizzard, like all the coolest kids in the Arctic wore baseball caps on particularly snowy days. His mom’s minivan sped down the street behind him, ready to crush the snow.

“Miss the bus, Hazy?” he said, his voice taunting.

“Um, so did you,” Hazel said, turning up her nose elegantly as if it were not filled with stale fast-food sausage.

“Whatever,” said Tyler.

Hazel grumbled inwardly. Now she was either going to have to pretend there was something really urgent she had to do right there on the snowy sidewalk, or walk in with Tyler, who hated her because Jack hung out with her during recess now instead of him. She couldn’t help it if she was more interesting. Tyler and his friend Bobby made it very clear that they blamed her for Jack’s abdication of duty. They were sure she must have done something to Jack,
because he never would have picked a girl over them if he had his wits about him.

Hazel was about to bend down and wrestle with a particularly intricate problem with her right boot when Tyler burst ahead of her and ran through the gate, his messenger bag trailing behind him.

Hazel watched him go. Everyone in the fifth grade had messenger bags, everyone but Hazel, who had not been cc’ed on that particular school-wide email. And by the time she figured it out on her own, it wasn’t like she could have asked her mom for one.

She’d asked Jack, a week into school, why he hadn’t told her. He frowned, looked at his own messenger bag, which he’d had for a year, and shrugged. “Who cares about stuff like that?” he asked.

Now, slinging her perpetually uncool backpack on her shoulders, Hazel headed through the tall fence, up to the side entrance that they were supposed to use if they were late, and buzzed to be let in. She held the door for a group of fourth-grade fellow stragglers, because she was a nice person, unlike some people.

Hazel was decidedly late, and she had endured enough days with Mrs. Jacobs to know how this was going to go. But that didn’t stop her from pausing outside the classroom opposite the hall from her own and peering in the window.
There Jack was, as he always was, sitting in the third row at the end, close enough to the door that Hazel could grin at him and he could make a face back at her. She stood a step back from the window and thought in his direction as hard as she could, as she always did on days they could not walk from the bus to class together. One moment. Two. He would know she was there. He always knew she was there. And then his head turned and he saw her, and a slow grin spread across his face. He wagged his eyebrows at her like a giant goofball—and though she had never before known what it meant to waggle, she did now—it meant *I got you pretty good this morning and I bet you want to get me back and Just try it, Anderson and We're going sledding later, right?* And all the weight of Hazel’s snow-dampened morning was gone.

She grinned back at him and raised her eyebrows—*Try it, I will, Campbell!*—and then turned to her own classroom, forgetting the dread she should feel entering it.

But as soon as she walked in, Mrs. Jacobs eyed her and shook her head in the way that we do with people who are terrible disappointments and made a big show of marking something in her book, and there was the snow again, dumped right on her shoulders.

The desks were in five perfect lines of six. If ever these lines strayed from perfect, if someone should move his by
scooting backward too vigorously, or trying to get just the right angle to pass a note, Mrs. Jacobs got very cranky. The average Lovelace fifth grader could not differentiate this from her normal state, but Hazel was attuned to these kinds of subtleties. In Jack’s classroom sometimes they moved their desks into one big circle or into small groups. This was not the sort of nonsense Mrs. Jacobs would brook. Hazel sometimes wondered if her teacher came from that planet at the end of *Wrinkle in Time* where everyone has to be exactly the same, except Mrs. Jacobs would have been too happy there to ever leave.

So, trying desperately not to disturb the universe, Hazel took her place in her usual desk, third row from the back, right next to the window where she liked it. And even though her desk was in a perfect row and a perfect column, like it should be, she knew if someone came into the classroom, some wizard or witch or psychic or somebody like that, he would gaze around the room with the certainty that something was out of place, something was an inch too far to the right, half an inch too far to the back, and his eyes would fall on her.

Hazel sat behind Molly and Susan, who never paid any attention to Hazel, at first because they were best friends and that kept them occupied, and then they stopped being best friends and that, too, kept them occupied. And so that
was all right. She sat next to Mikaela, who was usually too busy aligning her many-hued highlighters to notice whatever thing it was that Hazel was doing wrong. And so that was all right. But she sat in front of Bobby and Tyler. And that was not all right.

And, of course, as soon as she sat down she heard a voice hissing behind her.

“Hazel, you’re late!” Tyler whispered, voice full of fake concern. “You know, you really should try to get to school on time.”

She turned to glare at him. He and Bobby were both snickering. “You guys are big goons,” she hissed back.

“Goons?” said Susan. Next to her, Molly laughed. The girls glanced at each other, and it seemed Hazel’s shocking uncoolness was the thing that would finally bring the two of them back together.

Hazel looked at her desk. They’re stupid, Jack would say. They’re babies. Ignore them. Who cares what they think? In her head, she peered through the glass window of Mr. Williams’s class, Jack waggled his eyebrows, and she grinned.

Mrs. Jacobs began to talk, and soon everyone was ignoring Hazel in favor of taking notes on prepositions or percentages, so Hazel turned her attention where it most felt at home—out the window, letting Mrs. Jacobs’s voice recede into the background with everything else.
The windows to their classroom looked out onto the street, and across to some apartments and a big pet-grooming place. Her class at her old school looked out on a small patch of woods, and Hazel had always thought that there was something magical about them, that it was the sort of place she and Jack were supposed to go into together. They would bring breadcrumbs, and they would cross through the line of trees to see what awaited them.

There was nothing magical at all about the things outside the window in Mrs. Jacobs’s room, but it was still more interesting than the things happening in it.

And then, the drone of Mrs. Jacobs’s voice stopped midsentence—and who knows, maybe that sentence was You then move the decimal point two places, like so, or else Say it with me: aboard, above, about, across, around—and Hazel heard a sound like something deflating. It was a sound she was familiar with. She turned her head reluctantly to the front of the room.

“Hazel Anderson,” said Mrs. Jacobs, who was the thing that had deflated, “would you sit still?”

Somebody sniggered. From somewhere in the back of the room someone else sneered, “Yeah, Hazel,” which was not the greatest insult ever, but one thing Hazel had learned at her new school was when it comes to insults it’s the thought that counts.
Mrs. Jacobs looked at her with weary eyes, and Hazel froze. She was still like the snow-covered morning. She did not even breathe, at least very much. She was going to listen, she was going to try, because she was not a little kid anymore, because it was her job to sit still and listen to the teacher and we all have to do our jobs in this world, even if we don’t like them very much.

“That’s better, Hazel,” said Mrs. Jacobs.

Another snigger.

Hazel felt her cheeks burn. She just could not seem to do things right. It would be so much easier if Jack were in her class. At least then there would be one part of the room where she belonged.

Her mother said it would be a good chance to make new friends. And she’d tried. The first day of school she’d gone right up to the other kids and started talking to them and they’d looked at her like she was offering to welcome them to the Lollipop Guild. She had not known until this year that she was different from everyone else. When they had drama, she was the only girl who volunteered for roles in the skits. When they had art, she was the only one who painted Hogwarts. When they did writing, she was the only one who made up stories about girls with magic swords and great destinies.

She felt like she was from a different planet than
her schoolmates, and maybe it was true. Hazel had been adopted when she was a baby. Her parents said they flew a long way to take her home with them because they loved her so much they would travel the galaxy to get her. They could have meant that literally.

On Lovelace Parents’ Night, four weeks into the school year—which had been more than enough time for Hazel to realize that she was different—she’d walked into the classroom with her mother, and people looked. They looked from her to her mother and back to her. And Hazel, for the first time, saw what they saw. Her mother was white with blue eyes and light brown hair. Hazel had straight black hair, odd big brown eyes, and dark brown skin. People looked, and Hazel looked, too, and when she looked she realized that everyone else came in matching sets of one kind or another.

Hazel stood there, un-matching, and she thought, Ah, this is it, I see now.

But then Susan walked in with her parents. On Culture Day, Susan had stood before the class and wrote her Chinese name on the board and spoke of folding paper into birds and dragons dancing down the street. Hazel wondered at this girl who had not only a great variety of shoes, but culture, too. It was the sort of thing Hazel was supposed to have. Mrs. Jacobs had even asked her, the day before, if she
would have anything to share for the class. But Hazel only had beat-up sneakers.

Susan was from China, but, as Hazel learned that night, her parents were not. Susan did not match. Hazel stared at the girl and her pale, proud parents, stared so long that Susan noticed. The girl turned and stared back, quiz-
zically, a little accusing and a little fearful, as if to ask, *Is there something on my face or are you just a spaz?*

Hazel needed to explain, she needed to say something, because maybe Susan didn’t realize it, maybe Susan thought she was alone, too. This was the sort of thing she knew she was not supposed to do, that it was not quite appropriate, and yet she could not help herself. She walked over to Susan and grabbed her shoulder.

“You’re like me,” Hazel whispered.

Susan gave her a look that clearly said, *I do not know what you think you are saying, but I am nothing like you.*

Hazel dropped her hand and slunk away.

So it wasn’t that, either.

She still didn’t know why she didn’t fit. And she’d given up trying to figure it out.
When it was finally time for recess, Hazel burst out of her seat and flew to her jacket, accidentally bumping into Mikaela with such force she sent a pink highlighter clattering down the hallway. Hazel ran past the doorway where Mrs. Jacobs stood, and out onto the white fields where Mr. Williams’s class already roamed in their winter puffiness.

The snow had stopped coming down now. But the ground was thick with it, and half the fifth graders of Lovelace Elementary hurled themselves into it while the other half lifted their feet in and out of it warily, like they were treading on some hostile alien moon.

And there was Jack, waiting for her by the big slide, as
he almost always was. Every few days he’d go play capture the flag or football with Bobby and Tyler and the other boys to keep them from getting sulky. Hazel was okay with that. She’d sit and read. He’d always come back.

“Hey,” he said, grinning as she ran to him. “Have you recovered from my devious snowball attack?”

“Didn’t even feel it!” chirped Hazel. “Got to work on your arm strength!”

“Not me,” said Jack, molding a snowball in his hands. “You’re pitching today.”

He didn’t have to say anything else. Hazel took the snowball and moved back.

Jack had moved in next door when she was six. She liked him right away because he replaced the girl who’d lived there before, a four-year-old who was always trying to convince Hazel to come to her tea parties, where no talking was allowed. Plus he was wearing an eye patch. Hazel’s six-year-old self was sorely disappointed when she found out that he didn’t actually need one, but she quickly learned it was the wearing one that really mattered. This was a secret truth about the world, one they both understood.

Jack was the only person she knew with an imagination, at least a real one. The only tea parties he’d have were ones in Wonderland, or the Arctic, or in the darkest reaches of space. He was the only person who saw things
for what they could be instead of just what they were. He saw what lived beyond the edges of the things your eyes took in. And though they eventually grew out of Wonderland Arctic space-people tea parties, that essential thing remained the same. Hazel fit with Jack.

Today they were playing superhero baseball, which was a variation Jack had invented on the theory that superheroes, too, needed organized sports. The trick was they had to hide their superpowers, which is hard when you are so awesome at baseball.

Hazel was pitching snowballs, trying to keep her fastball from breaking a hole in the space-time continuum, while Jack hit the ball and jogged stiffly around the bases, pretending he ran like a man who had not been bitten by a radioactive mosquito.

“I got a new character for you,” Jack said, whiffing at a snowball with his stick.

“You do?” Hazel let her arm fall to her side and took a step forward. “Can I see?” Jack was the best artist in the whole fifth grade. He’d been drawing ever since Hazel knew him, and for his birthday last year she’d gotten him this big fancy black sketchbook. He’d been using it to make up superheroes recently. Eventually he was going to make his own comic book. And Hazel was the only one who knew anything about it.
“Naw. Not outside. I’ll show you on the bus. I was going to show you this morning, but you were too busy recovering from my snowball assault to get to the bus stop on time.”

“Cool,” Hazel said. “Can you tell me anything?”

“This one’s a bad guy,” Jack said. “They’re more fun, you know?”

“What’s he do?”

“I’ll tell you later! Come on, are you pitching or what?”

“Sorry,” Hazel said, taking a step back. “I’m going to throw a superhero curve, now.”

“Yeah, I gotta learn to hit the curve if I’m going to be a baseball player when I grow up.”

This was new. “What about comic books?”

“That, too. I can do both. You can’t play baseball forever. I’m going to hit nine hundred home runs and get into the Hall of Fame.”

“Nine hundred home runs? Is that a lot?”

Jack’s eyes widened. “Is that a lot? No one’s ever done that before. Not even guys who cheated! Or I could hit .400 a couple of times; that would do the trick. I’m going to be a great-hitting catcher like Joe Mauer.”

Hazel just nodded and packed snowballs. She liked baseball, but Jack had the statistics of every player memorized, and that just was not good conversation in her opinion. Jack had even made imaginary stats for the superhero game.
Batman, oddly, had a lot of strikeouts.

Hazel wound up and pitched, and Jack smacked the snowball with the stick. It exploded into a jillion pieces. "Oops! Super strength!" Jack said, wiping the snow off his face.

Hazel lobbed a snowball at him. "Superhero baseball turns evil!" she called.

"Are you guys going out?"

Hazel whirled around. Mikaela and Molly were standing just behind her.

"Are you guys going out?" Molly repeated, her voice low and conspiratorial. She looked from Hazel to Jack, the snowballs to the stick, and raised her eyebrows.

At Lovelace Elementary, boys and girls who were together were "going out." At her old school they were just "going" or "going with," but at that point it wasn't something people actually did, just talked about a lot. Then it was okay for boys and girls to hang out together, but here none of the rest of the girls and boys did unless they were together, in which case they stood near each other, sometimes.

Someone asked Hazel this every once in a while, and she thought sometimes she should say yes, and then everyone would think she was the sort of person someone might like to go with, and that would be something. But she didn't want anyone to think it, not really. Jack was her best friend. And
there was a time when everyone understood that, but they didn’t anymore, because apparently when you get to be a certain age you’re just supposed to wake up one morning and not want to be best friends with your best friend anymore, just because he’s a boy and you don’t have a messenger bag.

Hazel cast a glance at Jack, who was looking at her questioningly, his superhero bat dangling at his side, and then she straightened and tossed her black hair.

“Molly,” she said, “you’re a goon.”

From the superhero batter’s box came the sound of Jack cracking up. Hazel smiled. The girls’ faces were identical masks of affront—because it was certainly bad enough to be called names when you were just innocently trying to be obnoxious, but far worse to be called something that, just an hour earlier, you had specifically established as dorky. They shook their heads, and then turned and walked away.

Thwack.

“Jack!” Hazel shouted, grabbing her shoulder where the snowball had hit.

The bell rang. Jack and Hazel fell in next to each other as they moved their way back into school, just a little separate from everyone else.

“So, you want to go sledding after school?” Jack asked.

“Yeah!” said Hazel. “But you gotta show me your drawing first.”
“Promise,” said Jack. “On the bus.”

Hazel felt her heart lift. Jack usually sat in the back with the boys.

It wasn’t until Hazel walked out of school and saw her mother’s car parked across the street that she remembered that she wasn’t going to be riding on the bus at all today. She had forgotten all about the plans her mother had made for her, had placed them in the box in her mind where things like *Take out the trash* and *Do the dishes* used to go, back when it was okay to forget about those things.

“Jack, I forgot. Mom’s making me go with her somewhere. I can’t go sledding.”

Jack frowned. “Bummer.”

“Yeah,” Hazel said, eyeing him. He would never come out and say that he didn’t want to go home, but she knew. “Can we go tomorrow?”

“Cool,” said Jack.

They said good-bye, and Hazel grumbled her way to the car.

“Hi, dear!” her mother said brightly. “How was your day?”

Well, Tyler called her Crazy Hazy again and she was really late and Mrs. Jacobs wrote something in her book and people sniggered at her and you can’t say “goon” and Molly’s going to hate her now and she didn’t get to ride home on
the bus with Jack to make it all okay and he wanted to go sledding with her so he didn’t have to go home and she’s abandoning him even though she’s his best friend and isn’t supposed to do that ever ever ever.

“Okay,” Hazel said.

Hazel could sense the familiar feeling of her mother’s eyes on her. She looked ahead impassively. “Well, you’ll have fun with Adelaide today,” her mother said.

Hazel sighed. She used to play with Adelaide when they were little. There were pictures of the two of them splashing around the Linden Hills kiddie pool in matching arm floaties. But the Briggses left the country for four years, and when they came back neither girl wore floaties anymore. Adelaide liked making bead jewelry and putting nail polish on dolls. Hazel was into pirates. There was no compromise to be had.

“I haven’t seen her in two years,” Hazel said.

“Give her a chance, Hazel.”

Hazel looked at the dashboard. Her mom didn’t understand. She was perfectly willing to give everyone and everything a chance. It’s just no one wanted to give her one.

They drove over to the Briggses’ house slowly. The snow had stopped falling, but cars still inched carefully along the unplowed streets. Hazel’s mom drove their car like it was an emotionally unstable bear.
The Briggeses lived far from the blocks made up of rows of single-story houses plopped on top of place-mat yards where Hazel lived. There was nothing uneasy about the houses along this drive. They wore their second and third stories with assurance. No one had to dream up shutters and window boxes and trim, or porches and turrets and wide curving staircases. The snow covered the houses here, too—but where in Hazel’s neighborhood it let the ordinary borrow magic from it, these houses seemed to be lending their power to the snow.

The Briggeses lived on one of the lakes that lay in the heart of the city like a chain of jewels. There was an ice rink on it, complete with hockey boards and lights and a warming house, and as Hazel peered out her car window she saw families in matched sets sailing around the rink. She must have been the only girl in all of Minneapolis who did not know how to skate.

The Briggeses’ house perched on top of a small hill across from the lake, its red brick glowing against the white snow. It looked the size of Hazel’s house and Jack’s and one or two more put together. It made Hazel’s look like a toy built from a cheap kit.

“Ready?” asked her mother as they parked.

“Sure,” said Hazel.

The big dark-wood front door had an iron knocker on
it, the kind you’d expect Dracula to have, and Hazel tried to reach up for it. Her mom rested a hand on her shoulder. “It’s just decoration,” she whispered, pressing the doorbell.

And then Adelaide’s mother was opening the door, and she smiled at Hazel, and Hazel was struck by how easy a thing it seemed for her to do. “Hazel!” she said. “You’re all grown up! Come on in. Adie will be so happy to see you!”

Hazel took a breath before she entered, because it seemed like the sort of thing you should do. Inside, the house was all color and brightness and matching sets, the kind that had furniture that was just for decoration. And the smell . . .

“Elizabeth?” her mother asked. “Are you making . . . cookies?”

“Not me,” Adelaide’s mom said. She led them into the kitchen where Adelaide sat at a table, tapping a pencil against a notebook.

Hazel hadn’t seen Adelaide in two years. Her dark hair had curled up and now hung around her face in tantalizing sproings. She had magenta horn-rimmed glasses that were probably very cool, though Hazel was no arbiter of such things. The kitchen around her, which was as big as Hazel’s living room, looked like the sort of kitchen you see on TV, all matching and gleamy. Like Adelaide.

“Hi,” Hazel said.

“Hi!” Adelaide said, gleaming. “I was just doing math
homework.” She motioned to the textbook in front of her. “I’ve got so much.”

“Oh,” said Hazel. She looked down at Adelaide’s textbook. She didn’t recognize it. It struck her that she didn’t know where Adelaide went to school, and if it was the sort of place that told you you had a good imagination or the sort of place that told you you needed to work on following the rules. “I probably can’t help you.”

“That’s okay,” Adelaide said, leaning in like she was telling a secret. “I can’t help me either.”

“I don’t want to keep you,” Hazel said, shifting.

“Oh, don’t be a goof.” Adelaide shut the book. “Come on, sit down.”

"Goof." Hazel blinked. “Okay.” She crossed the kitchen and sat down on the cushioned oak chair next to Adelaide.

“What, I’m not here?” a male voice said.

Hazel turned. Adelaide’s kitchen was big enough that if there was a man taking cookies out of the oven you might not immediately notice. Which in this case there was.

The man smiled at Hazel. He was roughly parent age and tall, with a poof of brown hair and sparkly gray eyes. He looked like the sort of person who might hand you an invitation to wizard school. “I’m Adelaide’s uncle. You can call me Martin.”

Hazel could not take it all in, the kitchen, the gleaming,
the uncle in the apron. This was the universe that everyone else lived in. She wanted to ask Adelaide to explain this place to her, to explain the rules, to show her the potion you had to drink to fit in here, but all she could say was “Your uncle makes cookies.”

He shrugged. “They’re from a tube.”

“Uncle Martin’s a screenwriter,” Adelaide said. “That means he writes movies. But he can’t sell them, so he’s freeloading on my parents.”

“That’s right,” her uncle said cheerfully. “But I make excellent tube cookies. I think it more than makes up for any freeloading.”

“We’re writing a story together,” Adelaide told Hazel, eyes serious.

“Yes,” said Uncle Martin. “Adie is going to make it up and then I am going to steal it and sell it for a jillion dollars and then who will be freeloading upon whom? But I will certainly put her name in the end credits. And yours, Ms. . . . ?

“Um . . . Hazel.”

“What a lovely name,” he said, nodding appreciatively. “Very heroic.”

“Really?” Hazel said.

He turned to Adelaide. “Isn’t that Lee Scoresby’s daemon’s name?”
“No, that’s Hester!” Adelaide looked at Hazel. “Have you read *The Golden Compass*?”

Like a thousand times. “Yeah,” said Hazel.

“What do you think your dæmon would be?”

Hazel paused a moment, as if she hadn’t already thought about this very carefully. “A cat,” she said, because that was a normal thing to say.

“Really? I think it would be, like, an owl.”

“Really?” Hazel asked.

“Mine is a slug,” said Uncle Martin. “Now, Hazel, tell me your life story, from the beginning until you met me.”

“Hazel’s adopted,” offered Adelaide. “From India.”

Hazel blinked again, and looked from Adelaide to her wizard-school slug-dæmon uncle. It wasn’t the sort of thing people usually came out and said.

“Really!” Martin said. “I want to go there someday off my screenwriting riches. Do you remember it at all?”

Hazel bit her lip. She supposed this was the sort of thing people with decorative furniture did. They just said things, because their houses had enough room for all kinds of things, no matter how odd and funny-shaped they were.

“No,” she said. “I was just a baby.”

“You should go back when you’re older. It could be a quest, heroic Hazel.” He nodded at her. “Now, Adie, tell Hazel the story I’m going to steal.”
Adelaide nodded, her curls springing a little. “Okay,” she said, leaning against the table toward Hazel. “There’s a witch who lives wherever it’s winter.”

“We’re starting with the villain,” Martin interjected. “Because they are the most fun. Do you want to help, Hazel?”

She did. Adelaide looked at her expectantly. “The witch travels on a sleigh pulled by huge white wolves,” Hazel began. This was not original. She tried again. “The wolves have mouths as red as blood. The snowflakes follow her like bees.” She glanced at Adelaide, who nodded earnestly.


“A white dress and white furs,” Adelaide said. “And she has a crown. Made of the thinnest of ice.”

“Because she’s a queen,” Hazel said. “She’s the Snow Queen.”

“Yes, nice. Where does she live?”

“In a palace of ice,” said Hazel. “And she has a heart to match.”

“Very good.” He looked at the two of them seriously. “And what does she want?”


“Everyone in a story wants something,” he said.
“Especially the villains. And the hero’s job is to stop them from getting it. So, what does she want?”

“Eternal winter?” said Adelaide.

“Kids,” said Hazel. “She wants kids. She wants to collect them. She puts them in snow globes. She traps them with promises, and if she can get them to agree to stay there forever, they’re hers.”

The words came tumbling out of her mouth, and once they were out there she could only look from Martin to Adelaide in horror. This was the sort of thing she was not supposed to say out loud.


Hazel heard the sound of throat clearing. She had not noticed the two mothers step into the room. Her mom was looking at Adelaide’s meaningfully, and Hazel knew that they had spent the last ten minutes talking about her. See how she is?

“Marty,” Adelaide’s mother warned, “you’ll give them nightmares.”
“Come on, Lizzie.” He shook his head dismissively. “Kids can handle a lot more than you think they can. It’s when they get to be grown up that you have to start worrying.”

Adelaide smiled smugly at Hazel, and it was the sort of smile that invited her to smile smugly back. Which she did.

“So, did you have fun?” her mom asked as they drove off.

She did. “It was okay,” Hazel said.

“We can go over to Adelaide’s any time you want. I don’t get to see Elizabeth much. It’s nice for me. Maybe on the weekends?”

“Maybe,” Hazel said. Weekends were for her and Jack. She needed to be there if he needed her.

They drove home on newly plowed streets, which their little car tackled eagerly. Hazel stared out of the window and watched the houses shrink and thought of villains and snow globes and what it would be like to be trapped inside.

When they pulled into the driveway, Hazel cast a glance over to Jack’s house. It was dark. She wondered if he’d been able to make plans, if he was still out, or if he was home in his room, drawing or reading comic books or making up superhero baseball stats, with the shades drawn and the door closed. She wished he had a place to put all
his funny-looking things.

Her heart panged. She was supposed to be with him, not eating tube cookies and speaking in fairy tales. She was his best friend. She would do better. Tomorrow.