

“*Nest* sings with heart and emotion. Simply gorgeous.”
—Jennifer L. Holm, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Turtle in Paradise*



ESTHER EHRlich

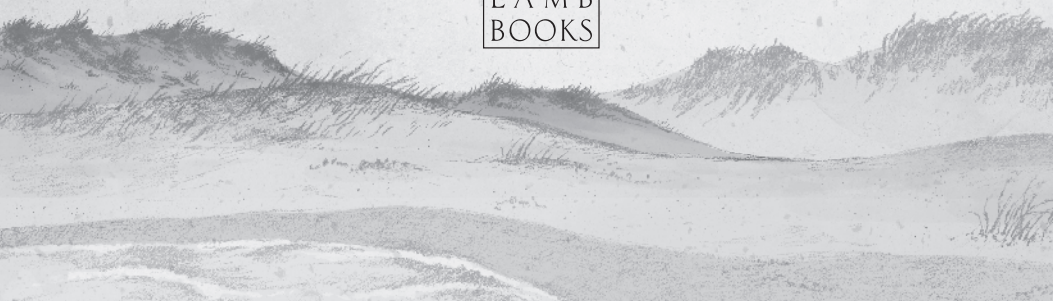


CHAPTER SAMPLER



ESTHER EHRlich

WENDY
LAMB
BOOKS



KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .



CHAPTER ONE



SHOULD HAVE TAKEN THE shortcut home from my bird-watching spot at the salt marsh, because then I wouldn't have to walk past Joey Morell, whipping rocks against the telephone pole in front of his house as the sun goes down. I try to sneak around him, pushing so hard against the scrub oaks on our side of the road that the branches scratch my bare legs, but he sees me.

"Hey," he says, holding a rock and taking a step toward me. He doesn't have a shirt on; it's been broiling all week.

"Hey," I say, real friendly, like I'm not thinking about the fact that I'm a girl and he's a boy who might pop me with a rock, since he comes from a family that Dad says has *significant issues*. The Morells have only lived across Salt Marsh Lane from us

since early spring, but that's long enough to know that his two brothers are tough guys, and Joey, he goes hot and cold.

"It's getting kind of dark for you to be wandering around all by yourself," he says, tossing the rock up and catching it with one hand.

"I know."

"Things can happen to girls outside in the dark on summer nights," Joey says, smacking the rock into the palm of his other hand.

"I know."

"So where were you?" Joey asks, like it's his right to know.

"Nowhere."

"How was nowhere?"

"Just like somewhere," I say.

He looks at me, real serious, and then he smiles and drops the rock.

I don't smile back, since he might be trying to trick me, which is what tough guys do.

"How's your arm?" he says.

"My arm?"

"You know, do you throw like a girl?"

"I *am* a girl."

"Here," Joey says. He picks up some rocks and holds one out to me.

I don't take it, but I don't run away, either.

"Let me see you throw," Joey says. "You don't even have to wind up." His voice sounds gentler now, so

I take one baby step closer to him. His blond hair is as dried out and tangly-looking as a song sparrow's nest. I can just hear our teacher from last year, Mrs. McHenry, saying, "A comb, young man. Do you not know the *function* of a comb?" if he had ever dared to show up in class like that.

"Stupid mosquitoes!" Joey says, slapping his cheek. He's got three bites on his forehead and too many bites on the rest of him for me to count without him asking what the heck I'm staring at, like maybe I'm interested in his skinny, suntanned chest. His bites look like hot-pink polka dots, which means he's been scratching, scratching, scratching.

"Why don't you go get some bug dope to keep the mosquitoes off you?" I ask.

"'Cuz I can't go in."

"Why can't you go in?"

"'Cuz I'm locked out."

"But the lights are on," I say. "It looks like someone's home."

"They're all home," Joey says. "They're having dessert. Chocolate pudding. But I'm locked out." I want to ask Joey what he did wrong, but I don't want to make him feel worse.

He throws a rock against the telephone pole. *Bam.*

"Your turn."

I grab a rock from the ground and take a few giant steps so I'm a whole lot closer to the telephone pole than Joey. Too close to miss.

Bam.

“Not bad,” Joey says. He comes and stands next to me. He smells like the lime Dad cuts up for his gin and tonic before dinner.

Joey’s turn. *Bam.*

My turn. *Bam.*

His turn. *Bam.*

My turn. *Bam.*

“Crap,” he says.

“Crap,” I say.

“Double crap.”

“Triple crap.” Dad says swearing is *inappropriate* and not what he expects to hear from either of his daughters. I don’t know if *crap* is officially a swear, but I do know there are lots of more polite words in the English language.

Joey picks up a whole handful of rocks. He throws them into the air, and they smash down on the road.

“Is your mom’s leg okay?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, it sucks.” My heart is pounding.

“I *love* chocolate pudding,” Joey says.

I pick up more rocks and hand them over to Joey. He throws them up really, really high, and we run out of the way to make sure they don’t crash down on us.

“When will they let you in?” I ask.

“When they’re good and ready,” he says, flapping at the mosquitoes near his face.

“Want me to go get you some bug dope?” I ask.

“Nah.” He bends down to get more rocks. When he stands up, he looks right in my eyes. His are gray-blue, like the water in our inlet on a stormy winter day.

“You’re not gonna tell anyone that—”

“Don’t worry,” I say.

“I guess you’d better get home.”

“Yeah.”

“Catch you on the flip side,” Joey says. I feel him watching me. It’s like a light shining on my back as I walk away.

“Joey?” I stop and turn around.

“What?”

I want to ask him when he was paying so much attention that he noticed Mom’s left leg.

“Nothing.”

“Whatever you say, Milky Way.” He starts whipping rocks again. *Bam bam bam* follows me across our road, up six stairs, and home.



Rachel and I are in the middle of Salt Marsh Lane, singing louder than the rain that gushes down on us and smacks the asphalt like a zillion tiny drumbeats while we twist and shout in our matching green bikinis. Finally the sky’s opened up after way too many days of the 3 *h*’s—hazy, hot, and humid.

“Well, shake it up, baby, now . . .”

We sing so loud that I bet Mom can hear us, even though she’s sitting on the porch in her watching chair and not dancing with us, since her left leg isn’t strong enough these days to carry her down our six stairs, let alone do the Twist. She’s not dancing with us, but her laugh is here. It makes me laugh and Rachel shimmy like she *has* something to shimmy, but she really doesn’t have much. I have even less, being two years younger.

“Hey, Chirp,” Rachel says, slowing down her shaking shoulders, “let’s do it for Mom. Can you?”

“Can *you?*” I answer.

“Of course, we cancan!” we shout at the exact same time. We stop twisting. The cancan isn’t exactly the coolest dance to be doing in 1972, but Mom loves it. I slither my wet arm around my sister’s wet waist. She slides her arm, warm, around me. Now we’re kicking our legs high, flinging streaks of cool water into the steamy air. Little streams land on Rachel’s tanned, blackberry-scratched legs. *Good, strong girl-legs*, Mom calls them. When we’re sure Mom’s watching, we do our special reverse formation, taking tiny steps backward, legs straight, chins up, just like she taught us. My bikini bottom’s slipping down in all our kicky wetness. I yank it up, hoping Mom doesn’t notice. I don’t want to wreck our show. I don’t want Mom to feel disappointed. I want to be a success like

Mom was when she used to dance in contests in New York for the grand prize. Most of all, I want Mom to keep on laughing, *heeee heeee hee hee hee*, like some kind of bird I'm trying to identify by its happy sound.

We're gearing up for our finale. I'm crouched down low in the sandy dirt by the side of the road, facing Rachel, who's still in the middle of the road. My job is to splash through the puddles and spring into my sister's arms. *One, two, three* and I'm running fast on my girl-legs. Does Mom see how strong they are? *Light as air, soft as a feather, light as air, soft as a feather.* I fly up toward Rachel's arms just as there's the biggest flash and then the loudest crash. The scrub oaks glow with light. "*Whoaaa!*" Rach yells, and hits the deck, scared. Without her arms to catch me, I land, hard, on top of her. My arm scrapes the road, and I wonder if there's blood. With my ear on Rachel's chest, I can hear her heart beating.

"Okay?" I ask, but I know she's fine. We're tough as nails, is what Mom tells us. What I really want to know is if Mom's all right. Did the thunder and lightning scare her? Is her laughing squeezed down so deep that I'll have to wait a long time again to hear it? I lift my head off Rachel and make myself look through the rain at our front porch. Dad's hovering over Mom. She's peeking around him like she's trying to check on us, but he moves his body in the way. I bet he's talking to her in his psychiatrist voice, explaining what's what. He puts his arm around her

shoulder and steers her inside like she just might get lost, even though she's lived in this house since before I was born.

"Don't worry. We're okay!" I shout after them, but the screen door has already bumped closed.

Time to get up. If Joey and his brothers look out their window and see me lying on top of my sister, they'll call us lezzies and try to dunk us the next time we go swimming in Heron Pond. They might try to dunk us anyway, because we're Jews and they're not, but I don't want to give them more ammunition.

"Let's go," Rachel says, just as I'm rolling off her and pulling her to her feet. I check my arm. No blood, just trickles of water.

"Let's go see if Mom liked our dance," I say, flinging my wet hair out of my eyes.

"She and Dad are probably talking," Rachel says. "We should give them privacy."

"But I want to find out if she liked our cancan."

"Dad told us at lunch that they're worried about Mom's leg. It's been more than a week now that it's been hurting her. Just leave them alone." Rachel's heading for the stairs.

"That's not what he said." He said they were *terribly preoccupied*, which I'm pretty sure is psychiatrist secret code for *Don't you dare bother us*, but I hate admitting that maybe Rachel's right and I shouldn't go check on Mom.

“What *did* he say, then?” Rachel asks from halfway up the stairs.

“*I’m singin’ in the rain!*” I belt out, ignoring her. She sits in Mom’s watching chair on the porch while I take big, swaying steps down the middle of our road, like I’m Gene Kelly in the movie and there’s nothing that’s worrying me, nothing at all, since there’s nothing in the world but a sky crammed with dark clouds and these fat, beautiful drops of rain.



My favorite bird in August is the red-throated loon, and my favorite time to see the loons is now, when the rest of the family is still sleeping. I need to move fast so that I’m up and at ’em before Dad wakes up. He has an early patient four days a week, so the odds are good that this is one of those days. I wouldn’t want to be him and listen to people talk about their problems when the day is just beginning and nod *uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh*, like I understand everything about everything.

I slept in my green bikini, so all I need to do is pull on my jean cutoffs. I’ve got my knapsack pre-packed with my birthday binoculars, notebook, pen, and pennywhistle, and I grab it off the hook on the back of my door. I slide down the banister so I can avoid the stairs’ squeaks. Breakfast is important for

clear thinking, but I don't need to think clearly when I'm looking for loons, so I skip it. Anyway, there's a blackberry patch with ripe berries on the way to the salt marsh. I leave a note that says, "Back before long. Love, Chirp," in case anyone notices that I'm gone.

The air's already thick and warm, even though the sun's still just a spritz of light in the pitch pines and scrub oaks and not a hot, round ball bouncing on the top of my head, like it will be soon. On the path behind our house, bunny tracks in damp sand, wet spiderwebs, mourning doves, chickadees, a couple of crabby starlings, and the *thwop-thwop, thwop-thwop* of my blue flip-flops. No delivery trucks yet racing down Route 6. In class last year, Mrs. McHenry taught us that Harriet the Spy is good at what she does because she's observant and that careful observation is a skill all of us should develop while we're young, so I'm working on it.

If I take the biggest steps I can from the beech tree, I'll be at the fork in the path in thirty-eight steps, unless my legs grew a lot since last Thursday. This time I'll try to hop the whole way, no counting. Anyone seeing my tracks will think I have just one leg, like Timmy Mahoney, who was just honorably discharged from Vietnam and hangs out in the town square smoking cigarettes with his pant leg neatly folded up and safety-pinned. But if they observe the ground closely, like they're supposed to, they'll wonder why

there's no sign of crutches. It'll be a mystery, solved only by a team of searchers with magnifying glasses and sniffer dogs. And at the end of the investigation? Just me, an almost-sixth-grade girl who hopped on one foot on her way to look for red-throated loons.

Red-throated loons can't walk on land, because their feet are too far back on their bodies, but they can use their feet to kind of shove themselves along on their bellies. Underwater, it's a whole different story: they're fast and graceful and do all kinds of cool stuff, like dive super deep down to catch fish and flap their wings when they really want to put the pedal to the metal. When Dad first met Mom, she was scared of the water, since she grew up in the Bronx, where there aren't any ponds or lakes. I guess there might be swimming pools, but her parents were too poor and busy to teach her how to swim, since they were immigrants from the old country, and even put her in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum for two years when she was really little because they didn't think they could afford to keep her. Dad, on the other hand, was a very patient teacher, and now Mom can swim okay, even when it hurts to walk. We found that out yesterday morning when we all went to Heron Pond to try our experiment.

The pond wasn't crowded, because all of the summer people were scared off by the storm clouds. In general, summer people only like blue-sky days for

swimming, and they leave the not-blue-sky days to locals like us and the Morells and go play miniature golf and eat soft ice cream at Windee's Dairy Breeze.

"Now, don't push yourself, Hannah," Dad said, but Mom was already walking toward the water with her long, slow dancer steps and her dark, twisty dancer bun.

"Here I go," she said, dipping in before Dad could catch her and finish his lecture. She swam underwater all the way to the rope at the other side of the shallow area and then started doing laps.

"Bravo!" Dad yelled from shore.

"Bravo!" Rachel and I yelled, but Dad shushed us and said that Mom preferred not to draw attention to herself.

"But, Dad," I said, "you're the one who—" But he wasn't listening, because he was already sprinting toward Mom, just in case her leg decided to give her more of that new nasty business.

Rachel had her fake smile on, which means she's upset but won't admit it.

"I think Mom would like us to cheer. Don't you, Rach?" I asked, standing close enough to her that I could smell lemon shampoo and see the goose bumps on her arm. Rachel shook her head and wouldn't look at me, like I'd done something wrong.

"Go, Mom, go," I whispered, jumping with my legs bent up behind me like a cheerleader.

"Stop it, Chirp," Rachel said. "You're being a baby."

Dad knows what Mom wants better than you do.” Then she folded her arms and stared out at the water like she was having deep thoughts. I looked at her hard to get her to look back at me. What I observed was that her hair is wavy-curly, not corkscrew-curly like mine, and her eyes aren’t green with different colors sprinkled in. She’s got Mom’s eyes, nice dark brown ones like wet dirt.

“Fine,” I said when she still wouldn’t look at me, and I dove into the water just like Mom. I skimmed my belly along the sand until my lungs ached and I had to pop up. I figured it was about a minute, which is the average time that my red-throated loons stay under.

The truth is, I’ve only seen a few in my whole life. They’re not easy to find, like cormorants and herring gulls. The encyclopedia says that the red-throated loon population is declining, due to the fact that we’re messing up their habitat with oil spills and garbage. I’d like today to be my lucky day, but that might mean lying low and watching for hours, and my stomach’s already grumbling, since I forgot to load up at the blackberry bushes. Being hungry won’t kill me, but dehydration is a real possibility in the summer heat, which is why Dad says Rachel and I must always take responsibility to bring our own canteens, filled up, when we go on family nature walks, and he really shouldn’t have to remind us since Rachel is no longer a child but in adolescence and I’m not far behind.

No one's here to remind me what I am and what I'm not, which is a good thing, like this spot under the pitch pine that has a perfect view of the water, and my birthday binocs, which turn the sun sparks on the water into big bursts of light, and the air that's so salty and warm I open my mouth, again and again, and gulp it into me—not sweet like blackberries but almost as satisfying.



“Oh, oh,” Mom says, fluttering her hands like butterflies around my face, “you, my girl, are the loveliest creature on all of Cape Cod, the prettiest one on land or sea.” We're sitting together at the kitchen table, and Mom's pulled my curly hair into a twisty bun and tied her purple silk scarf around my neck. Dad would *not* approve of a hairbrush on the kitchen table, but Dad isn't here. Just me and Mom. Just Mom and me. I turn up Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass.

Mom smiles at me. Her leg hurts a lot less today, and she thinks that maybe whatever ugly beast grabbed hold of it has let go. As Dad was walking out the door to go to his office this morning, I heard him say to Mom, “Promise me that you'll lie low on your alone night with Chirp and read a book or just take a bath,” but now she's reaching for me, swaying and bending like dune grass in the wind.

“C'mon, Snap Pea,” she says, twirling in front of

me. She turns the record player up even louder. I take her hand and she leads me to the middle of the kitchen. At first, she closes her eyes and just rocks back and forth in time to the beat. I rock, too, but my eyes are wide open. I could watch Mom all night, with her eyes closed tight and her quiet, pretty smile and her rocking. I like how the wavy hair by her ears ticks back and forth, like our metronome. Her neck is long and skinny, like the necks of the Modigliani ladies in the art book at school. She's wearing her really short sleeveless dress that's green like the bay leaves she drops into spaghetti sauce, and her arms and legs and even her feet look strong—not like a muscleman looks strong, but more like pictures I've seen of tigers running. A trumpet shouts and Mom's eyes pop wide open. "C'mon, baby!" She's dipping and diving like the craziest bird. I'm laughing so hard my ears feel hot. "Show me your stuff!" So I do my lowest limbo and my highest leap while Mom claps her hands. She grabs me around the waist, and we whirl together in a tight circle. Lavender, sweat, lemons. We spin until the song stops, but still we don't let go. Mom's heartbeat is all over my body. When she sniffs the top of my head, I feel a cool puff of air.

"You know how much I loved to dance when I was your age, right, honey?" Mom asks, turning off the record player and sitting down at the table. She dances every day, practicing in the studio on her own or rehearsing with the Saltwater Dance Brigade, not

counting the last while, when she hasn't been able to dance at all.

I nod, hoping she'll tell me the story anyway.

"When I was in fourth grade at P.S. 16, a modern-dance troupe from another school did a performance at assembly. I'd never seen anything like it. All of those beautiful, strong girls dancing their hearts out. 'That's me! That's me!' I said to myself. I was so excited watching those girls that I could barely stay in my seat." Mom taps her fingers fast, *tip, tip, tip*, on the table.

"I raced home after school and ran into the kitchen, where my mother was chopping onions. Isn't it funny that I still remember that—the stained wooden cutting board, the pile of onions, the way my mother held that big knife?" I nod, but Mom isn't really asking me.

"'Mama,' I said, running up to her, 'I'm a dancer!'

"She didn't even look up from her onions. 'No, you're not,' she said. 'You're just a silly little girl who doesn't know anything about anything.'

"I felt like I'd been slapped. Here I was with this amazing discovery, this fantastic news. And my mother didn't even want to hear it.

"'Mama,' I tried again. 'There were dancers who came to school, and they did a show for us, and—'

"And do you know what she said to me? 'And I suppose if you saw the circus, you'd be telling me

you're an elephant. Now go change out of your school clothes and pull the laundry in off the line.”

Mom shakes her head slowly. She sighs. “My mother was a *chalaria*. That’s Yiddish for ‘a very difficult woman.’ She sure didn’t give me an easy ride.” Now Mom’s all drifty and sad. She’s talking to me, but I’m not sure she really sees me. I think she’s seeing that gloomy old apartment in the Bronx and her mean mother, who I don’t even have a name for, since she died four days before I was born; and maybe she sees the gray walls and gray floors of the orphanage where her parents dumped her when she was only three years old and picked her up two years later and never even said they were sorry. She had to stand in a long line of girls and have her head checked for lice by a lady who was probably as awful as Miss Minchin in *A Little Princess*. Poor little-girl Mom.

I touch her arm. She looks up, startled. “Mom,” I say, “so tell me about how you learned to dance *anyway*.”

“Oh, honey,” she says. Her voice is different now. Wiped out. Washed out. Done. “You already know the story. I took lessons in secret. Mr. Blumenstein, from the temple, paid for my classes. You’ve heard all of this before.”

I take the record off the stereo and hold it carefully by the edges. Mom doesn’t even open up the jacket for me.

“Mom?”

First she rubs her face. Then she looks around. Then she rubs her face again. It takes forever before she opens up the jacket. I slip the record in. On the album cover is a lady with whipped cream all over her body and a blob of whipped cream on her head. Mom and I look and look together. We’re careful observers.

Finally Mom smiles. “*Mmmm-mmm*,” she says. “Whipped cream.”

“*Mmmm-mmm*,” I say, smiling, too. While it’s still just the two of us, just us and no one else, we turn off the downstairs lights. We flick the porch light on and sit together in the living room on the gold velour couch in the almost-dark and cricket-quiet.



CHAPTER TWO



DAD BELIEVES IT'S CRUCIAL that a family bonds together, so that means lots of talking, like right now at the dinner table, when I'd rather just look out the window and watch the tree swallows swoop down and catch horseflies while I eat my mashed potatoes.

"Naomi?" he asks again, and Mom looks at me like *Honey, please*, so I answer him that, yes, it's a little hard that there are only two weeks left of summer vacation.

"And how are you feeling about the start of school?"

"Okay."

Dad sighs and runs his hand through his wavy dark hair.

"Anything you're particularly looking forward to?"

"Not really."

Dad scrunches up his eyebrows. He's probably

trying to decide how much he should push me to express myself, which he thinks is an important thing for me to learn to do better. On our last alone night, he bought me an ice cream sundae at Benson's and asked a ton of questions, like *What is it about having just turned eleven that's special?* and *Why do you like to watch birds?* I just wanted to eat my chocolate ice cream with hot fudge and whipped cream, but I made myself answer all of Dad's questions. My answers weren't long enough or deep enough, though, because I noticed Dad's forehead all wrinkly with disappointment.

Rachel's leaning forward in her chair, looking right at Dad and smiling. She reminds me of Sally, who always raises her hand in class and never blurts out, even when it's a hard math problem and she's the only one with the answer.

Once when I asked Rachel what she and Dad did on their alone night, she looked at me like it was the craziest question.

"We *discussed* things, Chirp," she said. "*Important* things. That's what Daddy and I always do."

Now Dad asks, "What about you, Rachel? How are you feeling about the start of school?"

"Well," Rachel says, setting down her fork and taking an excited breath, "it's been a great summer so far, but there's a lot about starting eighth grade that I'm looking forward to. I expect that I'll learn all kinds of new things about—"

Dad reaches for his glass of red wine, sits back in his chair, and smiles.

I'm off the hook, and just in time. Two swallows dive-bomb for the same snack. I watch them shoot toward the ground, then do a U-turn, *urrrreeeeech*, like in the cartoons, and disappear into the purple-dark sky. Mom watches me watching them. I think she gives me the teeniest wink.



“Ready for our expedition?” Mom asks. She’s wearing her floppy orange sunhat and—just like me—her black one-piece bathing suit under her jean cutoffs.

“Ready,” I say. Every year Mom and I celebrate the end of summer by going for a hike on the Wood Thrush Trail, just a few minutes’ drive up Route 6. But this year Mom’s leg isn’t quite up to it. Our expedition today was my idea, which Mom says is proof that she can always count on me for creative solutions.

I’ve already schlepped the duffel bags with the fold-up kayak, my backpack with my binocs, and a canvas bag that Mom packed with hard-boiled eggs, cheese, Wheat Thins, and watermelon out to the car. Joey Morell watched me from his front porch. He’s always just sitting out there by himself. “Moving out?” he said, but I pretended not to hear him, because even though he didn’t throw rocks at me the

other night and actually was pretty nice, he chose Sean O’Keefe as his best friend, and Sean is definitely rough around the edges. Also, Joey has two nasty brothers, and you never know when they’ll rub off on him. Dad says that the Moreells aren’t fully intact as a family, which probably means that they don’t have long discussions at the dinner table or take nature walks together. I think the Moreells think Dad’s the one who’s missing some marbles, since he’s a Jewish headshrinker who doesn’t just vacation here in August, like all the others, but actually lives here year-round and doesn’t boat or fish or drink beer in cans and last month offered to pay Vinnie Moreell to fix our broken porch step instead of just doing it himself.

“Let’s go, my girl,” Mom says, and tugs on the end of my braid. “Dragonflies, here we come!”

Today Mom can walk down the front stairs, but she has to hold on to the banister. “I’m still just a little wobbly,” she says, “but soon I’ll be leaping down these stairs. I can feel it in my bones.” I want to sing “*Weebles wobble but they don’t fall down!*” like in the commercial, which I think Mom will think is funny, but just in case she doesn’t, I don’t. Mom manages okay walking across the front yard to the car; she’s just kind of slow.

The door handle on the car is hot, even though it’s still early. “Whew,” Mom says, “it’s going to be a scorcher!”

“Three h’s,” I say in my radio voice.

“Hazy, hot, and humid,” Mom says in her radio voice.

“The mother and the daughter roll down all of the car windows in an attempt to cool off the car before entering,” I say.

“Then, fearless and brave, they enter the car—”

“—hot as it is, and head off on their adventure!”

“Stay tuned for—”

“—the next installment of—”

Mom looks at me, giggling. “Umm . . . help me out here, honey.”

“Overheated Mama and Her Daughter, Toasty Roasty!”

Mom laughs. “Perfect.”

She pulls out onto Route 6. Since it’s summer, there’s plenty of traffic. The warm wind swirls around us. Mom’s smiling. I’m smiling. Mom turns on the radio. *I feel the earth move under my feet. . . .* I sing along, really loud. Mom shimmies her shoulders and hums off-key. I wish we could drive all the way to Hyannis. Or maybe we could keep on going right over the Sagamore Bridge to Boston. We could take a ride on the swan boats, like we did the last time we were there. We could eat a picnic in the Boston Public Garden. We could send a postcard home to Dad and Rachel: *Sorry for the short notice, but we’ve always wanted to see Canada, where the geese come from and men who don’t want to be drafted to Vietnam can go and live in freedom. Don’t worry. Chirp will learn*

tons on the road. We'll try to be home for the High Holidays. If not, please forgive us. All our love, Hannah/Mom, Chirp

Mom pulls off Route 6 onto a paved road that turns into a dirt road that turns into a bumpy sandy road that most summer people aren't brave enough to drive on. Mom looks nervous, biting on her bottom lip, but I know she's determined that we'll have our expedition, since her achy leg already messed up our tradition of hiking on the Wood Thrush Trail and Mom is a big believer in traditions. "Here we go," she says every time we hit a new bump or a blackberry bramble swipes our window. Even though Mom knows exactly where we are, this looks like the kind of road you could get lost on. Mom hates getting lost. Last Thanksgiving when we were going to visit Grandma and Grandpa, we took a wrong turn on the highway and Mom and Dad got in a fight right in front of us and Dad said, "You have *got* to work out this ancient fear, Hannah, because it's absolutely impossible!" and Mom yelled, "I'm doing just fine, Mr. Privileged Childhood!" and Dad yelled, "Well, *this* is a good way to begin the visit with my parents!" and Mom yelled, "At least you *have* parents to visit!" because both of her parents have been dead for years. Rachel whispered to me, "Mom hates getting lost because of the orphanage," which I still don't really understand.

"Mom, is the reason you hate getting lost—"

"Shah, Chirp. I'm concentrating here," she says,

just as the road gets wider and ends, right in front of Dragonfly Pond. “Ta-da! I knew it!” She pulls over and parks the car.

We get out, take off our cutoffs, throw them on the seat, and walk right over to the edge of the pond. The water is tons of shades of blue and green. It ripples and dances, shooting off more sun sparks than I’ve ever seen.

“Wow,” Mom says. She takes my hand and we walk a few steps into the water. The sand is soft. The water bumps, warm, around our ankles.

“It’s a mystery, Chirp,” Mom says. “Magic. A scorcher in August and we have this whole sweet pond to ourselves!” Her voice is peaceful and excited at the same time, like she’s blessing the Shabbos candles. Even though she gave up most of her family’s Orthodox Jewish traditions when she left home at sixteen to study dance, she still thinks Shabbos is a special time that should be passed down through the generations, and so we always light the candles and say the blessings. I’m about to ask Mom if we can just sit in the shallow water and watch stuff for a while when she reaches for my hand.

“Let’s just sit for a while,” she says. She puts her arm around me. We watch two bright blue damselflies zip and dip and chase each other. We watch a bunch of minnows swim right up to our toes, then dart away. We watch a pickerel, like a dark green flute, floating around in the reeds. My plan was to

put the kayak together and paddle us around the pond, but right now right here is just right.

“Whew, hot, hot, hot.” Mom slowly leans back until she’s stretched out in the water. “Ahhh,” she says, and when she laughs, her belly makes ripples. I lie down, too, warm water filling my ears. I hear my breath. I hear my heartbeat. The sky throbs, as bright blue as the damselflies. A flash of yellow. Goldfinches! Mom grabs my hand and squeezes. *Yes! Yes!* I squeeze back.



“Naomi Eva—”

Everyone giggles.

“—Orenstein?”

“Here.”

That’s the way it works. You always giggle at everyone’s middle name when it’s read out loud during attendance on the first day of school. I turn around in my seat and try to look mad, which is what I’m supposed to do. Actually, I like my middle name, because it belonged to my great-grandmother on Mom’s side, who was one smart Russian lady who knew enough to hide out in a field from the Cossacks for three days and nights with her two daughters and just one little bit of cheese and a piece of bread so they wouldn’t be picked on and maybe even killed

for being Jews. After today, Miss Gallagher will skip our middle names. And by the end of the week, she'll skip our last names, too, except for the Lisas, who'll get an initial, since there are two of them. Lisa R. and Lisa B.

Miss Gallagher tells us that she assigned the lockers boy-girl, boy-girl because she assumes that we know how to treat each other respectfully now that we're in sixth grade, which means, of course, no hair-pulling or name-calling or trying to see underpants, like we did when we were little. I think she's brave to even say the word *underpants* on the first day of school, or maybe because she's a new teacher she just doesn't get it. Sean O'Keefe starts laughing, and Joey Morell whispers, "Where, oh, where's the underwear?" which makes Sean laugh so hard he starts to slide out of his seat, and they both get sent out to stand in the hallway and think about whether this is really the way they want to begin sixth grade.

"Let's talk a bit about our summers," Miss Gallagher says, but she's still shuffling papers on her desk and not looking at us, so everyone keeps talking.

"Hey, Chirp"—Dawn Barker leans over—"are you taking the bus home?" which she's asked me, I swear, every day since first grade. Mom says maybe it's like a nervous tic and Dawn can't really help herself. I always take the bus home, since there's no other way to get home. And I always sit next to Dawn, who is

pale and skinny and mostly still reads picture books, because there's something not quite right with her brain.

"Yup. Do you want to sit together?" I ask.

"Yeah," Dawn says, smiling, and hands me a green SweeTART.

"ONE, TWO, THREE," Miss Gallagher starts counting, and since she forgot to tell us what number she's counting to or what the consequence will be, we all quiet down out of surprise.

"Of course, I know we'll have a terrific year together," Miss Gallagher says, but her eyes are flitty, and I don't think she's convinced. I try to show her with my eyes that I'm paying attention, because most of the other kids aren't and I'm already feeling sorry for her. The end of the school year is a long, long time from now.

In the middle of her speech about how we're all part of the classroom community and need to follow the same class rules so we can work well together and benefit from the opportunities that learning offers us, Joey and Sean must be getting bored out in the hall, because they start making peace signs in the window in the door and Lori Paganelli and Debbie Leland crack up, because they think everything Joey and Sean do is hysterical, period. Then the boys bump against the door, *wham*, but Miss Gallagher must have bad hearing, because she doesn't do anything.

"Shouldn't they be in here listening to the rules?"

Claire DeLuca asks in her breathy voice. Lori and Debbie glare at her, and I know she'll be sitting by herself at lunch. Just as I'm picturing her at the picnic table all red-faced and nervous, nibbling on her ham-and-pickle sandwich and trying to ignore Lori and Debbie, who will sit really close and touch each other's hair and trade Fritos for potato chips, she mouths *Lunch?* to me from across the room. I hold up my book.

"Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of the class, Naomi?" Miss Gallagher asks.

"Uh, no thanks," I say.

"If you're not planning to share your book with all of us, perhaps I should—"

She's coming at me with her hand out, but I'm already shoving my book onto the wire shelf under my chair.

Sally gives me a thumbs-up, because she's the biggest bookworm in the world and understands how important reading is to me. Claire gives me a thumbs-down, because she's mad that I'm going to read during lunch instead of saving her from Lori and Debbie. Meanwhile, Dawn is humming the chorus to "I Woke Up in Love This Morning" by the Partridge Family over and over so quietly it sounds like the buzz of the lights on the ceiling but much worse. First day of school, and it's not even halfway over.



“Doesn’t sound like you were in the best hands today, kiddo,” Mom says when I tell her about underpants and peace signs and almost getting *The Burgess Bird Book* snatched away by Miss Gallagher. She buzzes around and I follow her while she pulls on her black leg warmers, puts up her hair, and grabs an apple.

“Maybe she was just having beginner’s bad luck,” Mom says. “I bet she’ll get the hang of it soon. Don’t you think, Chirp?” She touches my cheek with her warm fingers. Her fingers are always warm. “Change out of your school clothes. I’ve got to hurry to rehearsal. I’m still taking it a bit easy, so I’ll be home soon, definitely in time to make dinner.” She’s so happy to be rehearsing again. The Saltwater Dance Brigade is having a show soon to protest the war in Vietnam, and Mom’s a dead soldier. She choreographed the dance, which is something she hasn’t done since before we were born. I watch her purple dance bag bonk against her hip as she walks down the front steps.

“Mom?” I yell.

She turns around.

“Nothing!” I yell. She gets in the car and slams the door. “Be well,” I whisper.

Now it’s my turn to buzz. I eat four Fig Newtons, change into my jeans, grab my knapsack, and head out. There’s no time for hopping or counting steps, since it will be dark before too long and darkness isn’t where I’m supposed to be when I’m alone. Last week I

tried to find out what could happen to me in the dark. Mom and I were reading together on the porch when I saw an eastern wood-pewee flap by. I jumped up and told Mom I wanted to follow it for as long as I could.

“I understand that twilight is the best time for watching birds, but I don’t want you out alone in the dark,” Mom said.

“But—”

“Absolutely not,” Mom said.

“But what will happen to me in the dark?” I asked.

Mom sighed, hugged me, shook her head, looked sad, looked worried, but didn’t answer my question. Sex is usually what it’s about when grown-ups don’t answer questions, but I’m not sure which neighbor would be outside doing sex in the dark, since everyone has bedrooms, which is a lot more private. If I catch Rachel in the right mood, I’ll ask her and she’ll tell me. In the wrong mood, she’ll look at me and shake her head and say *That’s an inappropriate question for a girl your age*, and I’ll want to knock her block off, since *inappropriate* is one of Dad’s words and it makes me mad when she copies him instead of just being a normal thirteen-year-old sister who tells me what I need to know.

Right now what I know is that I’d better start watching if I want enough watching time, even though I’m not in my pitch-pine perfect spot yet. I pull out my binocs and keep walking. I see a red-winged blackbird pecking dried-out blueberries off

a bush. I see some fishing line wrapped around a cattail. I see a seagull standing so still by the edge of the water it looks like a windup toy that needs to be wound up. I check out the sky, and it's still daytime blue with no purple dusk swirled in. I check out the seagull, and it still needs winding. Up, blue sky. Down, stuck seagull. Blue sky. Stuck seagull. Blue sky. Stuck seagull. My careful observing makes me dizzy. I let the binocs dangle from the strap around my neck and just look with my eyes. And then I see him. A little man in a lumpy green jacket, sitting right in my perfect spot. His back's against my tree.

Without my binocs, I can only tell what he isn't. He isn't a fisherman, because he doesn't have buckets and boxes. He isn't a landscape painter, because he doesn't have an easel. He isn't a hippie singer, because he doesn't have a guitar.

With my binocs, he's a she. She's rubbing her face, and her hands are wrinkly and her hair is snarly and dried-out and really needs conditioner. Mom thinks conditioner is an unnecessary expense, but Dad says that she's being overly influenced by the deprivation in her past and he would like his daughters to be freed up from that pain, which means that my hair is extra soft and shiny and smells like coconuts right after I've showered. The lady's jacket is too big, and she's kind of snuggled down inside it. Her eyes are closed, but she's thinking, not sleeping. I can tell by the way her mouth twitches and her forehead is

all scrunched up. She doesn't look upset, but she doesn't look peaceful, either. I guess she looks like she's trying to figure something out.

She's got half a sandwich sitting on top of a plastic bag on the ground next to her. She must not be from around here, or she'd know that if you leave a sandwich out, the black ants call a party. Maybe her family all died and now she's wandering around the country trying to find a new home with decent people who will love her. Or maybe she's the one who's sick and she ran away so that she wouldn't be a burden to her family.

I could sneak out food and blankets to her and help her make a home in the woods out of branches woven together with dune grass. Sometimes in the summer Rachel and I sleep outside in the woods or in the sand at the edge of the salt marsh, and if you remember that the crunchy night sounds are just chipmunks and birds, it's really peaceful. I could let the lady stay in our toolshed with the snow shovels and flowerpots when it gets too cold. I'll lend her my sleeping bag and old copies of *National Geographic* so she won't feel too lonely at night, and I'll bring her hot soup in a thermos when it snows. Mom's been teaching me how to make soup, and so far I can make mushroom barley by myself, which is a good winter soup. The lady probably isn't Jewish, but if she is, I'll show her how to make a menorah by poking holes in a raw potato and sticking the candles in, so that she

can keep her tradition alive and feel connected to her ancestors. Dad says that it's important for people to feel connected to where they've come from and to understand their past so they can make sense of their present, which is what his work as a psychiatrist is all about.

Now the lady's standing up and waving a stick so I'm sure to see her.

"Hello!" I shout, waving back. Maybe she got disoriented in the sun and needs me to give her directions out to Route 6. Before she goes, I could let her borrow my binocs so she can check out the birds.

I start walking toward her. She's waving the stick harder.

"I'm coming!" I yell. "I'll be right there."

She's waving her other hand above her head, too. She must be in some kind of a hurry.

Like a speed walker, I take long steps and swing my arms until I'm right in front of her.

"Hi," I say, nice and gentle, like I'm talking to a lost dog.

She doesn't say anything, just keeps on shaking the stick and shaking her hand.

Maybe she's hard of hearing. Maybe she only speaks Portuguese, like some of the early inhabitants of Provincetown that we learned about last year in social studies.

"Hi," I say again, nice and loud and slow. "Do you need me to show you how to get to Route 6?"

“You know what I need?” Her voice is soft and raspy. She might be crying a little, or maybe it’s just that she’s gotten too much wind and sun and salt spray in her eyes. “I need you to just leave me alone. I’m sorry, but I really need some peace and quiet.”

She wasn’t signaling me over with her stick; she was waving me away! She was shooing me from my own special spot. I’m a kid and she’s a grown-up, so I have to listen to her. I want to smile a big smile to show her I’m just fine, thank you, but my chin is trembly and my lips feel scrunched up, like I’ve just sucked a lime fished out of Dad’s empty gin and tonic glass. My eyes are watery, and it’s not from wind or sun or salt spray.

“Have a good day, lady,” I whisper.

As I walk away I hear her mumbling, “Just a little peace and quiet. Peace and quiet, that’s all I want.” When I know she can’t see me, I start running down the path. I’m Pocahontas, racing through the woods without making a sound. No thuds. No twig snaps. Just peace and quiet. Quiet and peace. I’m the fastest, quietest runner in the world. I run so fast that even the wind can’t keep up with me. I run so quietly that even the ants can’t hear my footsteps.

Take the left fork in the path. *Peace and quiet. Quiet and peace.* Running this fast, I’ll be home in a flash, a milli-flash, which is one thousandth of a flash. No one will be there yet, so I’ll have four more Fig Newtons and then I’ll feel better. I’m at the beech

tree. There must be a speeder on Route 6, because I hear a siren, messing up my peace and quiet. No, it's not the police on Route 6. It's an ambulance with flashing lights on Salt Marsh Lane. An ambulance with flashing lights in front of our house. There's an ambulance with flashing lights in front of our house.

“Mom!” Rachel screams from the front porch as the ambulance drives away. White lights flashing, and the awful red wail of that siren.



CHAPTER THREE



DO I HAVE TO flip them over?" I ask Rachel.

"What does the box say?"

I'm making fish sticks while she makes a salad. I've never made fish sticks. I keep checking on them, because the last thing we need tonight is burnt-black fish sticks thrown into the trash.

"It doesn't say."

"Then you shouldn't flip them," Rachel says.

"Okay."

I don't know how Rachel knows that I shouldn't flip them when the instructions don't say that, but I don't want to fight. She's working really hard to peel the cuke for the salad just like Mom does, sliding the peeler toward herself instead of away. There are little flecks of green all up and down the cuke.

"I don't mind a little skin, you know. It's got extra nutrition," I say.

Rachel gives me a tired smile and shakes her head. "I can do this," she says to herself. "I can do this."

I like the smack of heat when I open the oven door. I'm shivery-bone cold, even though I just took a long, hot shower. Rachel stayed in the bathroom with me the whole time, because we wanted to have a good alibi if Mrs. Morell knocked on the front door and tried to make us come over to her house to eat supper even though we have Dad's permission to stay here by ourselves until he and Mom come home from the hospital later.

"Oh, really? We didn't hear you knock," we'll say if Mrs. Morell ever questions us, which probably won't happen, since, based on my observations, she never leaves her house. Anyway, just in case, we won't be lying, which is something you don't do to an adult, even one who has three lousy boys and a yelling husband you can hear through the closed windows, and even when you have a good excuse, like you were shooed away from your special spot and your mother got rushed to the hospital when you thought she was at dance rehearsal.

"What happened to Mom?" I asked Rachel after the ambulance was gone and we were in the front hall with the door closed and no more siren.

"You're shivering and it's warm out," she said. "You should go take a hot shower."

"First you have to tell me what happened to Mom.

You have to tell me that right now.” My body wouldn’t stop shaking with scared shivers.

Rachel stared at me like she was trying to figure out what my words meant. She looked like a troll doll with her bugged-out eyes.

“Rachel!” I yelled. She blinked her eyes and started talking super fast.

“Mom forgot her boom box, so she came back home to get it and was walking down the stairs to go back to rehearsal. I saw her fall. All the way to the bottom step. I was just getting home from school. ‘I couldn’t help it,’ she said. She told me to call an ambulance, and they came and they checked her. ‘I can’t feel my left side,’ she said, and they put her on a stretcher and then into the ambulance. They called Dad, and he said that he’d meet them in the emergency room in Hyannis and that we had his permission to stay here, and then you came home with the shivers.”

“Were they nice to Mom? Was she scared? Was she crying?” I asked.

Rachel looked at me. She took a big breath. First her eyes got wet with tears, and then her tears spilled over. She sobbed and sobbed, so I took her hand and walked her to the couch. I held on to her and rubbed her head and said, “You don’t have to worry” and “You don’t have to talk,” and because of that she hasn’t told me anything else, not while I showered,

not while we've been making dinner, so I still don't know if Mom was scared and crying.

Fish sticks used to be for when we had babysitters, but clearly our babysitter days are over, because we're doing a very good job taking care of ourselves. The fish sticks look perfect, golden brown. And if you ignore a couple of green spots on the cukes, the salad looks just like Mom's, with lettuce and slices of tomatoes and capers. Mom believes in salads every night, because she says they're the closest thing to eating spring.

"Wash up?" my sister says, and we stand together at the kitchen sink and wash our hands with Palmolive and dry them on the dish towel.

"Time—" she says.

"—for dinner," I say, and my sister and I sit down at the kitchen table that we've already set with two plates and two cups and two forks and two knives and two napkins so we can eat our perfect fish sticks and our almost-perfect salad.



I have the privilege of reading in the reading corner, since I proved to Miss Gallagher that I understand how the Pilgrims and Indians helped each other out, by getting all of my multiple choices on the worksheet right.

"Your pick, Naomi," Miss Gallagher said, smiling,

and now I'm sitting by myself on a puffy red pillow on the floor, trying to decide. I'd like to read *The Burgess Bird Book*, but the rule is only reading-corner books, since Miss Gallagher specifically selected them to improve our reading skills.

"Ten more minutes to finish up your worksheets," Miss Gallagher says, which means I only have ten more minutes in the reading corner. I'd better get cracking.

I want to read the book about the girl who runs away and hides out with her brother in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and sleeps in the fancy beds, but then I can't read the one about the girl who wants to be a writer. And there are two other books that sound just as good, and that's not even counting the poetry book about birds and bugs.

I try spreading the books out in front of me on the rug, closing my eyes, and pointing, but the trouble is that I remember which book is where, and so it's the same as picking one and I just can't.

"Naomi," Miss Gallagher says from her desk at the front of the room, "I hope you're using this privilege well. It doesn't look like you're reading."

My heart's beating fast.

I make myself pick up the poetry book and open to the first page. I try to read, but the words are blurry, and when I blink, the tears spill down. They're coming faster and faster. I've got to wipe them away quick, before anyone notices. I don't know why I'm crying,

but I can't stop. Now my shoulders are shaking, and Miss Gallagher notices.

She's not at her desk, as usual, where she can keep an eye on all of us and make sure we're behaving respectfully. She's standing here above just me and whispering, "Really, Naomi, it's nothing to cry about," but it's a scold whisper, and everyone hears her and turns and looks. I'm not a crybaby. I'm tough as nails. That's what Mom always says, but Mom and Dad didn't come home from the hospital last night like I thought they would, and Rachel and I had to get ourselves ready for school with no parents at all, and now I'm not tough as nails; I'm crying like a big fat baby right in front of everyone.

On the bus ride home, Dawn hands me a whole pack of SweeTARTS. We're not allowed to eat candy on the bus, but I do anyway. Sean sits behind me and says, "*Waah waah waah*," and Joey smacks him in the arm and says, "Shut up about stuff you don't understand," which makes me think that maybe he wouldn't have dunked us in Heron Pond after all.

When the bus pulls up at our corner, Joey and I get out and I run ahead of him, because I see Mom's car, so I figure she's home before I remember that it was the ambulance that drove her to the hospital and her car being parked out front means nothing. I cross my fingers and hold my breath and fly up the stairs

and open the front door. She's lying on the couch with a quilt up to her chin.

"Snap Pea," she says, but her voice is soft and creaky, and she doesn't sound like her.

I'm walking so I can close the terrible space between us when Dad shows up and stands in the way.

"Your mother's tired," he says. "Let's let her rest."

Mom's eyes are fluttering closed. Dad puts his arm around me. He twitches like he's nervous, but he doesn't let me go.

"Honey, I know that this is hard for you. I'm sure you're feeling helpless," Dad says.

I'm not sure how I'm feeling.

"That's a natural reaction right now."

I wish Dad would be quiet.

"If you want to talk about your feelings, of course, I'm here."

What I want is for Dad to stop talking. Just me and Mom. Just Mom and me.

But Dad doesn't stop. He talks about *trauma*. He talks about *pain*. Then he starts walking, and since his arm is still around me, I have to walk, too. I have no choice but to walk away and leave Mom with something wrong with her alone in the room.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ehrlich, Esther.

Nest/by Esther Ehrlich. —First edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-385-38607-4 (trade)—ISBN 978-0-385-38608-1 (lib. bdg.)—

ISBN 978-0-385-38609-8 (ebook)—ISBN 978-0-385-38610-4 (pbk.) [1. Family life—Massachusetts—Cape Cod—Fiction. 2. Multiple sclerosis—Fiction. 3. Sick—Fiction. 4. Schools—Fiction. 5. Bird watching—Fiction. 6. Cape Cod (Mass.)—History—20th century—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.E332Nes 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013036245

The text of this book is set in 11-point Bookman Old Style.

Book design by Stephanie Moss

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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