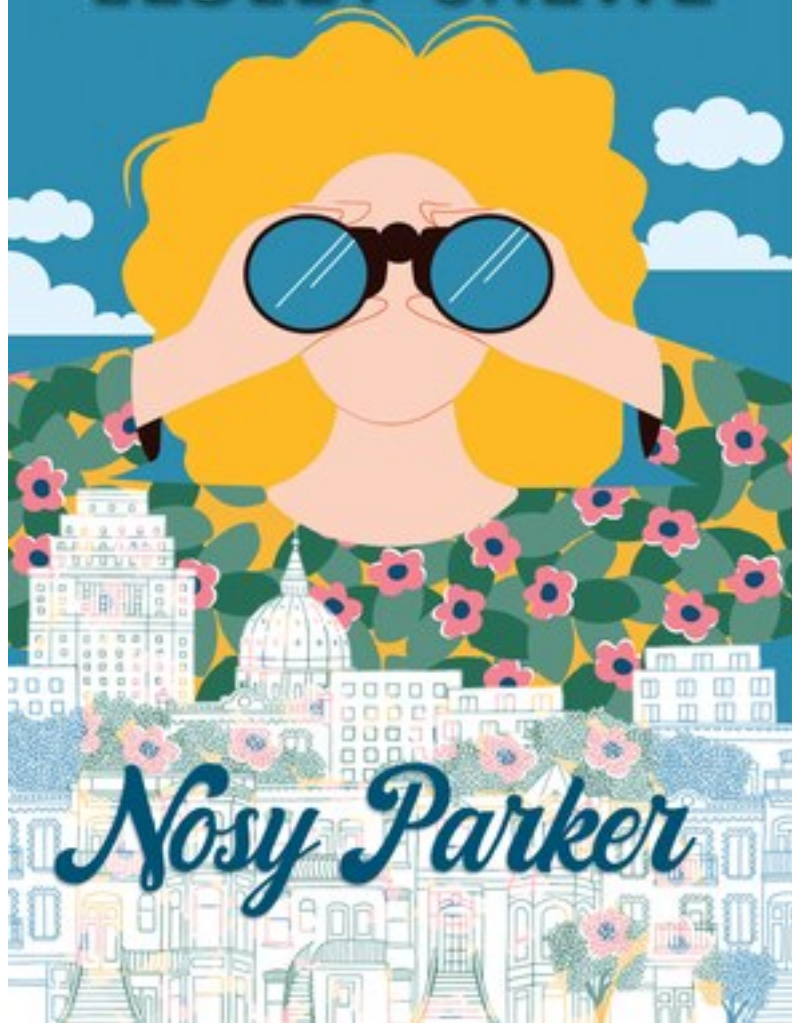


National Bestselling Author of *The Spoon Stealer*

LESLEY CREWE



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Praise for Lesley Crewe

The Spoon Stealer

Globe & Mail bestseller; Canada Reads 2022 longlist

“I loved *The Spoon Stealer* so much, for so many reasons....I laughed, I cried through scenes both charming and horrifying, and I was emotionally attached to every character. Like with every one of Ms. Crewe’s books, each scene and character was expertly crafted, and I was left wishing the story would never end. An absolutely wonderful, heartfelt story of family and redemption, forgiveness and love.”

–Genevieve Graham, bestselling author of *The Forgotten Home Child*

“Lesley Crewe artfully threads history and humour through this touching story of family, friendship, and the preciousness of memories. With its indomitable spirit, down-to-earth wisdom, and a dash of gutsy sass, *The Spoon Stealer* might just steal your heart.”

–Amy Spurway, award-winning author of *Crow*

Mary, Mary

Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour longlist

“A funny and charming story of a dysfunctional Cape Breton family, and the irony of the “white sheep” who stands out like a sore thumb.”

–Atlantic Books Today

Amazing Grace

National bestseller

“A fast-paced novel written in Crewe’s breezy, chatty style. [She] has a gift for creating delightful characters.”

–Halifax Chronicle Herald

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This is a work of fiction. While certain characters are inspired by persons no longer living, and certain events by events which may have happened, the story is a work of the imagination not to be taken as a literal or documentary representation of its subject.

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Nosy Parker

LESLEY CREWE

Vagrant
PRESS

A love letter to my dad, John Brown
The real writer in the family



Chapter One

I know that old fella across the street with one leg is a murderer. He's come home in the middle of the night, and it's pouring rain so hard that it's bouncing off the pavement. A taxi pulled up, dropped him off, and whisked away. He limped up the front stoop with his crutch and is leaning on the railing, wearing a trench coat and a fedora pulled down over his eyes. The kind hitmen wear when they lurk in dark alleys. Now he's lighting a cigarette. The red glow resembles a miniature dinosaur eye.

He's brooding about the execution. How else could he have done it? He needed that cab. One-legged men can't drive cars.

He disappears into his duplex and I wait, but the indoor lights never come on. His windows are always dark. Who doesn't turn on a light?

Assassins.

I'm so busy ruminating about how he might bump me off one night that I don't hear Dad's typewriter stop clacking.

"Audrey Rosemary Parker. What are you doing behind the living room curtains?"

"I'm not here."

"The curtains are sheer. I can see you."

"You're dreaming."

"Christ almighty. Get to bed."

It's my policy to always wait for my father to curse before I obey him. His list of swear words are in my notebook, but so far, I haven't had to write down the big enchilada. Dad thinks I've

never heard this word, and that he's being a proper parent by never saying it out loud. But the day we moved in, the first thing the kid next door said to me was "Fuckin' Anglais." Welcome to the neighbourhood.

I shuffle across the living room rug and take baby steps down the hall.

"Go to the bathroom."

"Meet me in my room with a glass of Pepsi."

He growls. A low rumbling in his throat. He does that a lot.

My very small bedroom is off the kitchen, and this arrangement suits me just fine. The window faces the back alley and I can peer into the rear windows of the houses one street over. It's just a matter of pulling up a chair to spy on the people who live there, and the kitchen is close enough that I can make a peanut butter sandwich and eat it while holding my mother's opera glasses up to my eyes. Dad doesn't know I found them.

I get into bed and lean against the pillows until Dad comes in and sits beside me, handing me a glass with two inches of Pepsi in it.

"You look tired," I say. His black, square-framed glasses are shoved up on the top of his wavy grey hair, which always happens when I interrupt him at his desk. "Were you writing something important?"

"The Ultimate Society,' what else."

"You've been writing that book since I was born."

"Audrey, you've got to sleep at night."

"So do you." I drink the Pepsi in one gulp. "Thank you."

"Aunt Maureen would now tell you to brush your teeth."

"Can't. Have to sleep. Goodnight, Daddio." I throw the covers over my head.

"Goodnight, Nosy." Dad gets up and pats the blanket but misses my body.

"Hey. I'm not nosy. I'm inquisitive."

"Do you have my thesaurus, by any chance?"

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My hand reaches out from underneath the sheets to give it to him.
“Thanks.”

It’s dawning on me that my father is ancient. Prehistoric. In his dotage. I’m twelve and he’s fifty-five. Sometimes I tell people he’s my grandfather just to keep them from asking questions. Because he tends to act like an old man. He doesn’t have the time or the patience for anything he’s not interested in. So aside from writing, philosophy and history books, great literature, classical music, playing the piano, MGs, pipes, alcohol, and good food, he couldn’t care less.

We moved into this downstairs stone-clad duplex in NDG because Dad got fed up with his sister Maureen constantly nagging him: “An apartment is no place to raise a child.”

Hey, I liked our apartment. The superintendent kept a big turtle in the tropical water fountain in the lobby. The palm trees were fake, but the turtle didn’t care. He lived for lettuce. And a garbage chute is the most exciting thing in the world. But the best day of my life was when the super sat outside the front doors and wouldn’t let kids come into the building on Halloween night. There were only a few kids who lived in the complex, so we zoomed up and down on the elevator, knocking on every apartment door. The folks were very happy to see us, and most of them ended up dumping everything in our bags. At one point I ran back to our apartment to get a pillowcase.

Ideally, Maureen would have liked Dad to buy a house, but you can only push a stubborn old goat so far.

We turned the key to our new home on April 28, the day Expo 67 opened to the world, which wasn’t great planning on our part, since the city of Montreal was a zoo. The traffic was hideous, with everyone and their out-of-town relatives trying to be the first ones through the gates.

It's now the first of June, and Dad still hasn't gotten around to taking me to this amazing world's fair. Something else Aunt Maureen mentioned just the other day.

"If it bothers you so much, Maureen, then please feel free to take her yourself."

"Into a crowd of tens of thousands of people? Are you nuts?" She glances at me and flicks her cigarette ash in the kitchen sink. "This child is a jackrabbit. She'll take off and I'll never find her again. I'm not having that on my conscience."

My aunt has never gotten over the time she took me shopping downtown at Ogilvy's and thought she lost me for an entire hour. I had her under surveillance the whole time from my hiding place. She was so distraught, she approached a security guard and babbled incoherently about losing her baby girl.

"Don't worry, madam. We'll find her. What does she look like?"

"A real mess! Unbrushed hair, dirty, freckled face..."

The guard gave her a confused look. "How big is she?"

Maureen held her hand over her head.

"So, not a toddler?"

"No! She's ten, tall and gangly. Looks like a crane fly. I'll kill her when I find her."

When they eventually spotted me, I was crouched down in the middle of a circular rack of women's sweater sets. Maureen grabbed my arm and pulled me out, dragging me through the store, absolutely mortified.

"Why on earth did you embarrass me like that?"

"I was tailing a shoplifter. I would've had the evidence, too, if you hadn't shown up."

"Not one word to your father, do you hear me?"

Aunt Maureen is too bossy. Domineering. Overbearing. And really stubby. Her husband died recently out on his lawn chair in their backyard. They'd had an argument and Aunt Maureen thought he was just stubbornly sitting out there ignoring her. Finally, at

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dusk, she marched over to him to tell him to knock it off. She shoved the back of his shoulder and he fell right over and hit the ground.

Her two sons came home for the funeral and then left again. They live in Toronto.

The next morning I'm pouring Cap'n Crunch into our bowls for breakfast when the doorbell rings. I hear "Shit!" from the bathroom.

"I told you not to move so close to her."

The front door opens. "Only me."

Dad walks into the hallway in his work trousers and sleeveless undershirt, wiping a few spots of shaving cream off his face with a hand towel. "Maureen, why are you here at the crack of dawn?"

She waves a cigarette and limps past him. "Nothing else to do."

"What happened to you?"

"Tripped over Jerry's damn cat. I should've buried the bloody animal with him."

She sits at our green Formica kitchen table, pulling a glass ashtray closer to her. "Hello, you."

I plunk both bowls of cereal on the table. "Hey, Moo. Want some?"

She shakes her head. "You should be eating thick porridge with lots of brown sugar and cream. You need to fatten up."

I go to the fridge, take out chocolate milk, and pour it over our cereal. Dad sits down with his newspaper and starts eating.

Aunt Maureen stares. "Is that what I think it is?"

Nodding, I take a big spoonful and Cap'n Crunch away. "Mm-hmm."

"You let her eat cereal with chocolate milk?"

"Mm-hmm," Dad replies, still looking at the headlines.

Aunt Maureen takes a long drag off her cigarette and blows the smoke straight up over the table. "Now I've seen everything. I better move in here and take charge."

“NO!” both Dad and I yell with our mouths full.

She gives us a startled look. “Thanks a bunch. It’s nice to know my family loves me.”

Dad gathers his wits. “Of course we love you, Maureen. When you suggested we move here, I was happy to know we’d see each other more often, but this doesn’t mean you can come in here at all hours of the day telling us what to do.”

“And I didn’t know my selfish husband would drop dead in the meantime. I have no one else now.”

“You are hardly alone. You have two grown sons, four grandchildren, and six siblings.”

“My two live in another province and our family grunts at each other once a year, so how does that help? You know, Jack, you never would’ve managed without me when Audrey was little.”

“That’s very true, and I’ll always be grateful, but she’s grown up now.”

“She’s only eleven, you foolish man.”

I’m still crunching. “I’m twelve today, as a matter of fact.”

They both look at me, horrified. “How did we forget your birthday?!” Dad shouts.

“We’ve been busy moving. No point in having a party if I have no one to invite. Buy me a box of Creamsicles and I’m good to go.”

“Goddammit, Audrey. I’m sorry, I feel like a louse.”

“It’s okay. I’m autarkic.”

“No.” Dad points his spoon at me. “Wrong usage. You are self-sufficient. Able to stand on your own two feet.”

Aunt Maureen looks under the table. “This sweet birthday girl is standing on her own two feet with a hole in the toe of her sneakers. There’s also a huge ink stain on her blouse, not to mention her fingers. Is this how she goes to school?” She takes another puff of her cigarette and crushes it into the ashtray. “I wasn’t lucky enough to have a daughter of my own, but if I did, you can be sure she’d look like she came out of a band box. Audrey needs all the help she

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can get. I know how kids can be. She shouldn't go around looking like a waif. Especially in a new school. Thank God she has to wear a uniform, or it would be worse."

And with that, she gets up and leaves, but then she comes back. "And another thing. You are the only member of this family who's actually made it in the world, Jack. Need I remind you that we come from a tenement building in Point Saint Charles, and most of us still have nothing? But you make a decent living. So why is your daughter walking around in holey shoes?"

"Dad and I don't care about money. We are unfettered and don't need much, do we, Daddio?"

"You heard the girl."

"You two deserve each other. Happy birthday, honey."

This time she does leave, and she slams the door on her way out for good measure.

Dad shrugs, shakes his paper, and continues to read. I finish off my cereal and go into his study to open my favourite book.

Waif. Guttersnipe. Stray.

Back to the kitchen. "Am I really a guttersnipe?"

"No. You are not an orphan."

"But apparently I look like one."

He growls softly, more like a purr. "You could brush your hair now and again."

That hurt. He sees it on my face.

"You are perfect, Aud. Oddly perfect, just as you are. I'm late. Is my coffee ready?"

"Indeed."

He does his usual dance around to get his shirt and tie and suit jacket on, then gathers papers off his desk to put them in his briefcase while I pour his coffee into a mug that reads *World's Greatest Dad*.

"Two cream, two sugar," he says.

"I'm not stupid."

“Find another word.”

“I’m not a peabrain.”

“Better.”

While I hold the mug by the front door, it’s time to go through the list. “Do you have your glasses?”

He feels the top of his head and brings them down to rest on his large Roman nose. I know that’s what it’s called because he looks just like the statue of Julius Caesar. He also has what’s called a strong jaw. I think I do too. Chewing meat is very easy for me. “Check.”

“Your wallet?”

He pats his pocket. “Check.”

“Keys?”

Pats the other pocket. “Check.”

“Umbrella?”

“Good thinking.” He takes it off the coat rack.

“Hat?”

“Right.”

That’s on the chair where we put the mail.

“What are we having for supper?” he asks.

“Swanson TV Dinner. Fried chicken.”

“My favourite.” He takes the mug, and since his hands are full, he leans down and pecks the top of my messy head. “Try not to get into trouble today.”

“Check.”

“OH! And happy birthday, Nosy Parker.”

And out he goes to drive downtown in bumper-to-bumper traffic, so he can sit at his magnificent desk in the iconic Linton Apartment Building on Sherbrooke Street West, where he has his own publishing company on the first floor. He tells me he writes, edits, sells, hustles, has two-martini lunch meetings at the AAA Club, and hobnobs with artsy types in the Montreal literary world. He’s met Mordecai Richler. I had to look him up. If he does all that

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and has to look after me as well, it's no wonder it's taken the poor man twelve years to write his own book.

I've spent many a day hiding under that desk. Once I tied his shoelaces together. I'll never do that again.

Time to gaze at my hair in the bathroom mirror. You can't brush curls. Curly hair is messy. Hence the phrase, *a mess of curls*. Doesn't anyone know anything? And besides, no one notices the tangles. They're too dazzled by the colour. Dad's barber called it strawberry blonde, and that sounds delicious, so I'm satisfied. (Even though Aunt Maureen almost fainted when she found out Dad was taking me to a barber.)

But I do take another wrinkled blouse out of the hamper and throw the ink-stained one back in. I'm brushing my teeth when a sound piques my interest. I put the water glass up to the bathroom wall and hear Mrs. Weiner (the best name ever) yell at her boys about being late for school.

Our duplex is smack-dab in the middle of a street that has an elementary school at the top and a high school at the bottom. This is a plus when trying to figure out when I should head out the door. If there's only a few kids on the sidewalk, I have time. If I look out and a flood of minors are running up the street and awkward, pimply teenagers are meandering down, I need to get going.

And right now, the street is crawling with offspring, so I shove a couple of tissues in the hole of my shoe, pick my book bag up off the coat rack it's been hanging on since I put it there yesterday, and grab my key. Once the door is locked, I put the string around my neck and hide it under my blouse.

We might only live a half a block away from the school, but I drag the gold bike Dad bought for me when we moved here out from behind the front hedge and proceed to pedal down the sidewalk. The bike is too big for me, as Aunt Maureen pointed out, but Dad wisely reasoned that I'll grow into it and the scabs on my knees and elbows will heal.

I'm almost to the end of the block when I glance down one of the paved driveways between the buildings and see a fat-bellied man shaking his finger in the face of a skinny adolescent. He shouts and throws his hand around like there's a bee in his face. This could be a police matter. I hop off my bike and let it fall on the grass of someone's lawn, sneak over to the nearest front porch, then tiptoe to the edge of the brick duplex. Stone. Brick. Stucco. This street has no uniformity at all. By this time, I have my trusty notepad and pencil out of my jacket pocket.

The particulars are as follows:

Fat guy. Old. Mustache. Beady eyes. Yelling in a foreign language. Somewhat threatening manner.

Young guy. Skinny. Trying to grow a mustache but not having much luck. Can't get a word in edgewise.

Time—I look at my Mickey Mouse watch—8:57 A.M. Date: Thursday, June 1, 1967.

Just as I look up again, the flabby guy gives the young one two swats. One on his cheek and one on the back of his head. Then he shoves him away with a wave of dismissal and disappears into a garage.

The young man walks down the driveway with his hands in his pockets. When I burst out from behind the brick wall, he jumps with fright. "Merda!"

"I saw the whole thing! We can call the police and arrest that man for assault!"

"What the hell are you talking about? Beat it, squirt."

"I saw him hit you. I can be a witness."

"He didn't hit me. He's my pops."

My pencil is poised over my notebook. "And what's his name?"

"What's it to ya? Now buzz off, you little weirdo. And get that bike off our lawn."

He keeps walking towards the high school. I put my notebook and pencil in my pocket and pick up my bike. That's the thanks I get for trying to be a good citizen.

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Of course, when I pull into the schoolyard, all the kids are inside and the bike racks are taken. Once again, I have to put my bike down on its side, because it never seems to stay up on its stand. It's going to be totally scratched at this rate.

My new elementary school is a huge, dark brown, rectangular brick building that takes up an entire block if you include the playground. And every couple of feet along the facade of this four-storey prison there are enormous multi-paned windows. A five-year-old could've drawn this on an Etch-a-Sketch, so who was the brilliant architect on this project? It reminds me of Aunt Maureen's dry meatloaf, without the ketchup on top.

I've only been here a month, but I know that my seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Fuller, will have a scowl on her face when I show up. She always looks like she has indigestion, and she throws chalk at us. Maybe there's a connection.

There are hooks outside the classroom, and I put my jacket over Yana's sweater. She's a chubby girl and the only one who doesn't seem to mind my jacket. But maybe she does. She doesn't usually talk, so I'm not exactly sure.

Everyone is standing singing the national anthem accompanied by music piped in over the intercom. Mrs. Fuller sees me in the doorway and points a bright red claw in my direction, which means *stay where you are*.

If only I sat in the back of the room, but no. Mrs. Fuller decided that I need her special supervision, so I get to be across the room by the windows in the very first seat next to her desk, which means every student watches me slink over to my spot when "O Canada" is over.

"Late again, Audrey. I will have no choice but to contact your mother if this continues."

"Good luck with that," I mumble.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fuller. I'm sorry I'm late. I almost had to call the cops."

The whole class bursts into laughter. This is why she hates me.

“Sit down and keep your mouth shut. Everyone, open your math books, please.”

But there are advantages to this location. It seems I’m surrounded by nice-looking boys, the ones who cause trouble. Mrs. Fuller obviously likes the rebels to be within grabbing distance.

The only exception is the boy behind me. He’s Norwegian. I asked him if he was from Norway and he nodded, although there was really no need. He looks exactly like the triplet boys in the *Snipp, Snapp, Snurr* series. I mentioned it in passing one day, but I don’t think he heard me. I’m secretly in love with him and want to go to Norway someday.

But Derek beside me is a pill. The only thing he pays attention to is girls’ chests. Only one girl in our class has actual breasts. Pamela. She’s pretty popular. I didn’t think I had any, until Derek made a curved gesture to his friend when I leaned against the front edge of my desk one day. I looked down and then sat straight up.

“Mind your beeswax,” I hissed at him.

“Aud-ball. Get it? Aud-ball. Or did that go right over your head?”

“For you to say anything that would go over my head, you’d have to stand on a chair.”

At recess we pour out of the room like a tidal wave, the boys pushing ahead to get to what looks like a baseball diamond at the back of the paved schoolyard. They aren’t allowed to play actual baseball with bats and whizzing balls flying through the air, which makes total sense. No one needs to be concussed while eating their Lik-M-Aid. The game seems to be a cross between soccer and kick-ball. Only the Grade Sevens are allowed there, since they run the school.

The playground equipment is also popular, consisting of a ten-foot-high monkey bar, a metal slide that burns your legs when the sun hits it, the maniacal roundabout, and three crotch-destroying see-saws. To avoid these deathtraps, I stand by the chain-link fence and watch the girls play double Dutch with their skipping ropes or

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jump on one leg through hopscotch mazes drawn in coloured chalk. My real interest is the little boys playing with marbles. Every single one of them has a soft cloth bag with a drawstring, and they crouch down to flick them with the front of their thumbs on the pavement. It's beyond me why they do it, but it keeps their interest. It seems there's a marble called a cat's eye, and this intrigues me. Might have to put it on my Christmas list. Not that Dad ever reads it, since it's usually several pages long.

A rubber ball bounces my way, so I pick it up and see the owner come running over. I bounce it a few times and then toss it to her. "Hi, Gloria."

"Hi, Audrey. Thanks. Wanna come to my house for lunch tomorrow? My mom said to invite you since you're new to the neighbourhood."

"Sure. Where do you live?"

"The first house on your street. The white one."

One of the few detached houses on a street full of duplexes. "Are you rich?"

"No, we're Greek. See ya."

Off she goes, whacking at her ball.

Pamela and her equally chesty friend from the other Grade Seven class saunter by and eye me up and down. "You've got Kleenex coming out of your shoe."

"Thanks! I've been looking all over for that." I reach down and pull the tissue out of the toe hole and blow my nose with it.

Pamela rolls her eyes and they keep walking.

Every day a different teacher is on duty during recess and lunch hour. My favourite day is when the kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Brown, strolls through the yard. She has the nicest smile and all the little kids love her. Her pretty face looks like the portrait of the young Queen Elizabeth that hangs on our classroom wall. She is a new addition to my *Women I Admire* notebook. I've kept one since I was seven, when it intellectually occurred to me that I didn't have a

mother. The first woman I put on the list was Aunt Maureen, but that was more out of family obligation. I love the woman, but she can be strange. Wacky. Weird.

I happen to walk close to where Mrs. Brown is standing, pretending this was my destination all along.

“Hello, Audrey. How are you getting along, dear? I hope you’re meeting new friends.”

“Yes, I’ve met a few nice girls and some boys who are real finks.”

Mrs. Brown holds her hand up to her mouth so I can’t see her smirk. She points at a girl rocking back and forth, waiting for the right moment to jump in the middle of a swinging skipping rope. “That’s Jane Andrews. You’d like her. I know her mother well. Jane is a Girl Guide. That might be something you’d be interested in. They meet in the basement of St. John’s United Church every Monday evening at six.”

“I’ve always wondered about Girl Guides. Are you sure they aren’t a cult?”

Mrs. Brown laughs out loud. “Oh, Audrey. I have a feeling your parents have their hands full.”

“Well, one does, anyway.”

The deafening buzzer goes off, letting the entire district know that recess is over. We all scatter, the boys running to the boys’ entrance on the left and the girls gathering in two lines to the right. Which makes absolutely no sense to me, because the minute we troop up the stairs and pass through the heavy panelled glass doors, we mingle back together again.

I have my doubts about adults and their rules.

The only noteworthy moment after recess is when Mrs. Fuller throws a piece of chalk from the blackboard and it lands down the front of Pamela’s blouse at the back of the room. The boys go out of their minds. It’s at least fifteen minutes before things calm down. I’m annoyed on Pamela’s behalf. She looks humiliated. I write down the details of this travesty to present to the principal at a later date.

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It's possible I'll need a few more incidents to make a tighter case against Mrs. Fuller.

After an excruciating French lesson (*ouvrez la fenêtre; fermer la porte; j'ai été kidnappée*), the equally rattling lunch buzzer goes off and once more the spawn of countless nearby couples migrate home for their noonday meal.

It takes me about forty-five seconds to bike to our abode. Who's standing on the porch but Moo. It's quite warm out, but she's wearing an all-weather coat that goes to her ankles. All her clothes do, since she's so elfin. Mrs. Weiner leans on her side of the railing in her zippered housedress, laughing to kill herself while they puff away.

"There she is," Aunt Maureen says cheerfully. A little too jovial, if you ask me. She might be annoyed.

Mrs. Weiner has short, jet-black hair but the top of her head is teased to a great height, with a curl hairsprayed flat in front of each ear.

She nods her head like one of those little suede dogs on a car dashboard. "Bubala! Do you know your Doda has been waiting here for a half an hour? You should give her a key. And Audrey, it's Audrey, right? Come on over anytime. I might have some odd jobs for you, like babysitting. Do you like babysitting?"

I take the key from around my neck and stick it in the lock. "I've never done it."

She waves a hand at me. "It's simple. You tell them what to do, and if they don't do it, feel free to smack them."

"Really?"

Aunt Maureen comes up behind me to hurry things along. "Oh, Mrs. Weiner, you're such a kidder. Thanks for keeping me company. I appreciate it."

Mrs. Weiner has mesmerized me. "Are you joking?"

She shrugs. "Of course. Oh, here are my angels now."

Two little dark-haired boys are beating each other up as they walk down the sidewalk. I've never seen that before. How do you

punch someone while you're walking? They fight up the stairs and past their mother, who screams, "STOP FIGHTING!"

She flicks her cigarette butt over the front porch, grabs her angels by their shirt collars, and pushes them through the front door. "It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Novak. You too, Audrey," she says before she shuts the door. The yelling continues.

Aunt Maureen then pushes me through our front door, her cigarette hanging between her lips. "Bloody hell, I have to pee!" She rushes past me and wiggles her way down the hall, trying to keep her short legs together. "Oh, I forgot. Happy birthday!" She throws a bag on the floor before she disappears into the bathroom.

Inside the bag is a shoebox. She must have bought me new sneakers. I open the lid and push back the wrapping paper. Pink Mary Janes.

Oh, crap.

And they fit.

Shit.

Aunt Maureen comes out of the bathroom looking a lot less stressed. She opens the fridge and pours some of dad's tonic water in a small glass and sits in her favourite chair.

"So what do you think?"

"Thank you for the shoes. They're very nice."

"Aren't they something? The only pink pair left at Brown's. I was delirious when I saw them."

That's the word I was looking for. *Deranged* would also apply.

"Now, what can I make you for lunch? I don't imagine your father left anything for you."

"Yes, he did." I open the pantry and take out a jar of peanut butter, and then slide up the curved front of the metal breadbox and take the last two pieces of bread from the bag.

"I despair," Aunt Maureen sighs before lighting another cigarette.

"I can share. Would you like an open-faced peanut-butter sandwich? They're all the rage. There's even grape jelly to go with it."

Nosy Parker

“Where do you come up with such drivel? Pass me that box of Ritz.”

After I pour chocolate milk into a glass, we sit together and munch away. I’d rather be reading, but while I’ve got her here, I can snoop.

“Moo, when you say you grew up in a tenement, is that true?”

She nods her head and gazes out though the glassed-in back porch to the clothesline that’s attached to the edge of our narrow back deck. It runs across the paved alley twenty feet off the ground, where it’s tied to the single maple tree out in the scraggly backyard. She points at the few items on the line. “Even your socks have holes. Has your dad ever talked about it?”

“Not really. Only when I ask, and then he doesn’t say much.”

Maureen puts her hand inside the Ritz box and takes two. “I’m not surprised. He has a lot of bad memories. He’s the oldest. I don’t remember most of it.”

“Why are his memories bad?”

“Our father. He once beat Jack up for taking the last slice of bread.”

I look at my plate. Now I’m not hungry.

“My sister told me that our father slammed the piano lid down on his fingers when he was five because our grandmother was teaching him how to play. Dad thought it was sissy.”

When I stare at my sandwich, I think Maureen realizes she’s said too much.

“It was all a very long time ago and your father is a happy man now, because he has you.”

“Sometimes he just pretends to be happy.”

Maureen takes a long puff. She’s thinking about what to say. I don’t want her to say anything.

“I’ve been invited to lunch with a friend tomorrow. She lives at the top of the street in the first house.”

“The white one? Are they rich?”

“No, Greek.”

“Make sure you wear your new shoes. That way they might invite you back.”

Mercifully, I have to go back to school, so Maureen pats my head and leaves.

I don't have the energy to take my bike, so I follow the Weiner angels as they scuffle their way back up the street ahead of me.

Most of the afternoon I stare out the window. Dark clouds gather and our classroom gets very gloomy. Montreal is known for its fierce thunder-and-lightning storms. Dad always opened the sliding door of our apartment balcony to stand and watch, listening to the rain. Now that we have a more protected covered front porch, I sat on his lap last week on a folding chair to scan the sky for lightning bolts as we counted between the rumbles of thunder to see how fast the storm was drifting away. The woman who lives in the upstairs duplex on our side (we don't know her name yet) gave us a disapproving look when she happened to open her door to put out her milk bottles.

“That's dangerous,” she said.

“Thank you for your concern,” Dad replied.

She shut the door in a hurry.

I'm resting my chin on my hand, watching the black clouds gather and the trees on the street bend with the wind. You can feel the energy right through the windows. What if *la fenêtre* blows in? I'd be cut to pieces with shards of glass. There would be no way to identify me, except for my curly hair.

There's a sharp poke in my spine. I turn around and my adorable Norwegian points his pen towards the front of the class and nods his head for me to look forward, so I swivel back and there's Mrs. Fuller, standing with one hand in the air, just about to throw a piece of chalk in my direction.

“There's no need to hurl that missile, Mrs. Fuller. I hear you.”

She squints her eyes at me. “You will stay after class and write on the board, *I will not be rude to my teacher* one hundred times.”

Nosy Parker

I don't care. It will give me more ammunition when I speak to the principal about her behaviour.

It might be my imagination, but as everyone leaves for the day, the boys who surround me give me a few admiring glances before they disappear. This fortifies me somewhat.

"Erase the boards, please," says Mrs. Fuller, "and then proceed. I have work to do."

Erasing a chalkboard is very relaxing. Enjoyable, almost. But trying to write a sentence in a straight line isn't easy. My cursive skills are admirable when I start, but by sentence forty-seven, they've deteriorated noticeably.

My wrist is sore after a while, but the thought of my father's handwriting keeps me going. It's absolutely beautiful. I have no idea how such a clumsy man has the ability to use a fountain pen with such finesse. It's almost as if he loves words so much that he makes a special effort to make them look their best. I'll never be able to write like him, which is why I save every scrap of his writing I can find. The tin box in my closet has many grocery lists and phone messages in it. And I treasure the few notes he's written to me. *My girl is offbeat, astute, scintillating, quirky, and mine.*

That's how I knew there was no Santa. When I was five years old, there was a brown tag tied on the handle of the case holding my small record player. It read, *To Audrey, Love Santa Claus.*

There's no way Kris Kringle wrote that, unless he's the world's best forger.

I'm at the end of this assignment. To make sure, I count my sentences. There are ninety-nine.

"That's enough, Audrey. You may go."

"I have to finish it. I have one more."

"I said go. It's getting late and it looks bad out there."

No way.

I quickly write, *I will not be rude to my teacher* in the only space left at the bottom right-hand corner of the board.

She gives me an exasperated sigh. “You are a stubborn little girl.”

I place the chalk on the ledge of the board. “Yes. I am.”

I’m drenched walking home and nearly get blown over a few times. All the lights are on in every house on the block except ours— and Mr. Murder’s place across the street. The duplex looks lonely and it matches my mood.

Dad gets home at the usual time with a big birthday cake in a box.

“That wasn’t necessary.”

He smirks. “It’s all for me.”

I take our TV dinners out of the oven when he emerges from the bathroom after washing the dirt of the day off his face and hands. We sit together and peel away the tinfoil, uncovering the treasured soggy fried chicken underneath.

Time to play our game.

“So, what did I have for lunch?” He grins.

“Probably chicken, knowing you.”

“No. I knew we were having chicken tonight.”

“Tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“Nope.”

“Were you at a meeting?”

“Yep.”

“Escargot and Dover sole. And two Manhattans.”

“You’re a genius.”

“Dad?”

“Mmm?”

“We’re out of bread.”

“I’ll get some after supper and bring you back a treat. Do you want a candy necklace?”

“I’m not five.”

“You used to like them.”

“A hundred years ago.”

“Let’s have cake first.”

Nosy Parker

He brings back two boxes of Creamsicles, two loaves of white bread, chocolate milk, Cap'n Crunch, peanut butter, Ritz crackers, dish soap, cheese slices, and maple-walnut ice cream, along with a small box of Mackintosh's Toffee for me and a package of Liquorice Allsorts that he immediately sticks in the top drawer of his desk.

I decide to have a hot bath, since I'm still chilly from my walk home in the rainstorm. Before the water drains away, I realize I have a sore throat, so I gargle with salt and water and crawl into bed with my Collier's Encyclopedia. I'm on book R-S-T. Dad bought me the set a few years ago.

I'm trying to read, but Beethoven is coming from Dad's record player in his study and I end up listening to that. It's hard to believe that Beethoven still wrote music after he went deaf.

Dad's typing stops, and he appears in the doorway of my room holding three big yellow coconut Allsorts in the palm of his hand. He sits beside me as I pop them in my mouth one by one.

"You're in bed early. Are you feeling okay?"

"Just a bit of a sore throat. Although this helps." I eat the last piece.

Dad takes a small box out of his pocket. "Happy birthday, Princess."

"You already bought me a cake and Creamsicles. I'm good." He holds it out until I take it. "Thank you, Daddio." It's a silver necklace with a tiny typewriter charm. "This is delightful! I adore it!"

"Figured a wordsmith such as yourself might get a kick out of it."

"I'm never taking it off."

He helps me put it around my neck.

"Dad?"

"Um-hum?"

"Would you play the piano for me? I think it would make me feel better."

"Sure."

We go into the living room, me wrapped in a blanket, and I sit

on the piano bench beside him as he plays “Moonlight Sonata” by Beethoven and my favourite, “Clair de Lune” by Claude Debussy.