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'An absolutely gripping story of a hidden world . . . I couldn't put it down'
Tamora Pierce

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REBECCA STEAD

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To Sean, Jack, and Eli, champions of inappropriate laughter, fierce love, and extremely deep questions

The most beautiful experience
we can have is the mysterious.

– Albert Einstein *The World As I See It* (1931)

Things You Keep in a Box

So Mom got the postcard today. It says *Congratulations* in big curly letters, and at the very top is the address of Studio TV-15 on West 58th Street. After three years of trying, she has actually made it. She's going to be a contestant on *The $20,000 Pyramid,* which is hosted by Dick Clark.

On the postcard there's a list of things to bring. She needs some extra clothes in case she wins and makes it to another show, where they pretend it's the next day even though they really tape five in one afternoon. Barrettes are optional, but she should definitely bring some with her. Unlike me, Mom has glossy red hair that bounces around and might obstruct America's view of her small freckled face.

And then there's the date she's supposed to show up, scrawled in blue pen on a line at the bottom of the card: *April 27, 1979.* Just like you said.

I check the box under my bed, which is where I've kept your notes these past few months. There it is, in your tiny handwriting: *April 27th: Studio TV-15,* the

words all jerky-looking, like you wrote them on the subway. Your last "proof."

I still think about the letter you asked me to write. It nags at me, even though you're gone and there's no one to give it to anymore. Sometimes I work on it in my head, trying to map out the story you asked me to tell, about everything that happened this past fall and winter. It's all still there, like a movie I can watch when I want to. Which is never.

Things That Go Missing

Mom has swiped a big paper calendar from work and Scotch-taped the month of April to the kitchen wall. She used a fat green marker, also swiped from work, to draw a pyramid on April 27, with dollar signs and exclamation points all around it. She went out and bought a fancy egg timer that can accurately measure a half minute. They don't have fancy egg timers in the supply closet at her office.

April twenty-seventh is also Richard's birthday. Mom wonders if that's a good omen. Richard is Mom's boyfriend. He and I are going to help Mom practice every single night, which is why I'm sitting at my desk instead of watching after-school TV, which is a birthright of every latchkey child. "Latchkey child" is a name for a kid with keys who hangs out alone after school until a grown-up gets home to make dinner. Mom hates that expression. She says it reminds her of dungeons, and must have been invented by someone strict and awful with an unlimited child-care budget. "Probably someone German," she says,

glaring at Richard, who is German but not strict or awful.

It's possible. In Germany, Richard says, I would be one of the *Schlüsselkinder*, which means "key children."

"You're lucky," he tells me. "Keys are power. Some of us have to come knocking." It's true that he doesn't have a key. Well, he has a key to *his* apartment, but not to ours.

Richard looks the way I picture guys on sailboats—tall, blond, and very tucked-in, even on weekends. Or maybe I picture guys on sailboats that way because Richard loves to sail. His legs are very long, and they don't really fit under our kitchen table, so he has to sit kind of sideways, with his knees pointing out toward the hall. He looks especially big next to Mom, who's short and so tiny she has to buy her belts in the kids' department and make an extra hole in her watchband so it won't fall off her arm.

Mom calls Richard Mr. Perfect because of how he looks and how he knows everything. And every time she calls him Mr. Perfect, Richard taps his right knee. He does that because his right leg is shorter than his left one. All his right-foot shoes have two-inch platforms nailed to the bottom so that his legs match. In bare feet, he limps a little.

"You should be grateful for that leg," Mom tells him. "It's the only reason we let you come around." Richard has been "coming around" for almost two years now.

* * *

We have exactly twenty-one days to get Mom ready for the game show. So instead of watching television, I'm copying words for her practice session tonight. I write each word on one of the white index cards Mom swiped from work. When I have seven words, I bind the cards together with a rubber band she also swiped from work.

I hear Mom's key in the door and flip over my word piles so she can't peek.

"Miranda?" She clomps down the hall—she's on a clog kick lately—and sticks her head in my room. "Are you starving? I thought we'd hold dinner for Richard."

"I can wait." The truth is I've just eaten an entire bag of Cheez Doodles. After-school junk food is another fundamental right of the latchkey child. I'm sure this is true in Germany, too.

"You're sure you're not hungry? Want me to cut up an apple for you?"

"What's a kind of German junk food?" I ask her. "Wiener crispies?"

She stares at me. "I have no idea. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"Do you want the apple or not?"

"No, and get out of here—I'm doing the words for later."

"Great." She smiles and reaches into her coat pocket. "Catch." She lobs something toward me, and I grab what turns out to be a bundle of brand-new markers in rainbow colors, held together with a fat rubber band. She clomps back toward the kitchen.

Richard and I figured out a while ago that the more stuff Mom swipes from the office supply closet, the more she's hating work. I look at the markers for a second and then get back to my word piles.

Mom has to win this money.

Things You Hide

I was named after a criminal. Mom says that's a dramatic way of looking at things, but sometimes the truth is dramatic.

"The name Miranda stands for people's rights," she said last fall, when I was upset because Robbie B. had told me during gym that I was named after a kidnapper.

I had left my keys at school and waited two and a half hours at Belle's Market on Amsterdam Avenue for Mom to get home from work. I didn't mind the waiting so much. I helped Belle out around the store for a while. And I had my book, of course.

"Still reading that same book?" Belle asked, once I had settled into my folding chair next to the cash register to read. "It's looking pretty beat-up."

"I'm not *still* reading it," I told her. "I'm reading it *again*." I had probably read it a hundred times, which was why it looked so beat-up.

"Okay," Belle said, "so let's hear something about this book. What's the first line? I never judge a book by the cover," she said. "I judge by the first line."

I knew the first line of my book without even looking. "It was a dark and stormy night," I said.

She nodded. "Classic. I like that. What's the story about?"

I thought for a second. "It's about a girl named Meg—her dad is missing, and she goes on this trip to another planet to save him."

"And? Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Sort of," I said. "But that's not really the point."

"How old is she?"

"Twelve." The truth is that my book doesn't say how old Meg is, but I am twelve, so she feels twelve to me. When I first got the book I was eleven, and she felt eleven.

"Oh, twelve," Belle said. "Plenty of time for boyfriends, then. Why don't you start from the beginning?"

"Start what from the beginning?"

"The story. Tell me the story. From the beginning."

So I started telling her the story of my book, not reading it to her, just telling her about it, starting with the first scene, where Meg wakes up at night, afraid of a thunderstorm.

While she listened, Belle made me a turkey sandwich and gave me about ten chewable vitamin Cs because she thought I sounded nasal. When she went to the bathroom, I sneaked a little bunch of grapes, which I love but can't ever have, because Mom doesn't like the way the grape pickers are treated in California and she refuses to buy them.

* * *

When she finally got there, Mom hugged Belle and told her, "I owe you," like I was some repulsive burden instead of the person who had very helpfully unpacked three boxes of green bananas and scoured the refrigerated section for expired dairy items. Then Mom bought a box of strawberries, even though I know she thinks Belle's strawberries are overpriced and not very good. She calls them SSO's, which stands for "strawberry-shaped objects."

"Where did Robbie B. get the dumb idea that anyone would name her own daughter after a murderer?" Mom asked. Our building was still half a block away, but her key was already in her hand. Mom doesn't like to fumble around in front of the building looking like a target for muggers.

"Not a murderer," I said. "A kidnapper. Robbie B.'s dad is a prosecutor. He says the Miranda warnings were named for a guy named Mr. Miranda who committed some horrible crime. Is that true?"

"Technically? Maybe. The Miranda warnings are essential, you know. People need to know that they have the right to remain silent and the right to an attorney. What kind of justice system would we have without—"

" 'Maybe' meaning 'yes'?"

"—and then there's Shakespeare. He invented the name Miranda, you know, for *The Tempest*."

It made perfect sense now that I thought about it: Mom wanted to be a criminal defense lawyer—she

started law school and almost finished her first year, but then I was born and she had to quit. Now she's a paralegal, except she works at a really small law office where she has to be the receptionist and the secretary too. Richard is one of the lawyers. They do a lot of free work for poor people, sometimes even for criminals. But I never dreamed she would name me after one.

Mom unlocked the lobby door, which is iron and glass and must weigh three hundred pounds, and she pushed hard to swing it open, her heels slipping on the tile floor. When we were inside, she leaned against the other side of the door until she heard the click that means the lock has caught. When the door swings shut by itself, it usually doesn't lock, which drives Mom nuts and is one of the things the landlord won't fix.

"So? Was he a kidnapper or not?" I punched the button for the elevator.

"Okay, you win," Mom said. "I named you after a monster, Mira. I'm sorry. If you don't like your name, you are welcome to change it."

That was so Mom. She didn't understand that a person gets attached to a person's name, that something like this might come as a shock.

Upstairs, she threw her coat on a kitchen chair, filled the spaghetti pot with water, and put it on to boil. She was wearing an orange turtleneck and a denim skirt with purple and black striped tights.

"Nice tights," I snorted. Or I tried to snort, anyway. I'm not exactly sure how, though people in books are always doing it.

She leaned against the sink and flipped through the mail. "You already hassled me about the tights this morning, Mira."

"Oh." She was usually still in bed when I left for school, so I didn't get to appreciate her outfit until she got home from work. "Nice nail polish, then." Her nails were electric blue. She must have done them at her desk that day.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you mad about waiting at Belle's? I was super busy—I couldn't just leave."

"No. I like it at Belle's." I wondered whether she'd done her nails before, after, or during her super busy afternoon.

"You could have gone to Sal's, you know." Sal and his mom, Louisa, live in the apartment below ours. Sal used to be my best friend.

"I said I *like* it at Belle's."

"Still. I think we should hide a key in the fire hose, for the next time."

So after dinner we hid our spare key inside the nozzle of the dusty, folded-up fire hose in the stairwell. The hose is all cracked-looking and about a hundred years old, and Mom always says that if there's an actual fire it will be of no use whatsoever and we'll have to jump out the window into the neighbor's garden. It's a good thing we live on the second floor.

You asked me to mention the key. If I ever do decide to write your letter, which I probably won't, this is the story I would tell you.

The Speed Round

There are two parts to *The $20,000 Pyramid*. Mom calls the first part the speed round because it's all about speed. Contestants try to make their celebrity partners guess seven common words by giving clues. So if the first word is "fork," a contestant might say, "You use this to put food in your mouth—not a spoon but a . . ."

If he has a brain, which Mom says he might not, the celebrity partner will say "Fork!" and then there'll be a ding and the next word will show up on a little hidden screen. Each team gets thirty seconds for seven words.

Then the little screens swivel around, and it's the celebrities' turn to give the clues and the contestants' turn to guess. Another seven words, another thirty seconds. Then the screens swivel back, and the contestants give the clues again.

There are a possible twenty-one points in the speed round, and a perfect score earns a cash bonus of twenty-one hundred dollars. But the most important thing is just to beat the other team, because the team that wins the speed round goes to the Winner's Circle, and the Winner's Circle is where the big money is.

* * *

There isn't a lot of time for practice tonight because it's tenant-meeting night. Once a month, the neighbors sit in our living room and complain while Mom takes notes in shorthand. Most people don't bother to come. It's always the old folks, who don't get asked to go many places and are mad that there isn't more heat. Sal's mom, Louisa, works in a nursing home, and she says old people can never get enough heat.

After the meetings, during which Mr. Nunzi has usually burned a new hole in our couch with his cigarette, Mom always writes a letter to the landlord and sends a copy to some city agency that's supposed to care whether we have hot water, if the lobby door locks, and that the elevator keeps getting stuck between floors. But nothing ever changes.

Our doorbell is going to start ringing any minute. Mom is running through a few speed rounds with Richard while I make lemonade from frozen concentrate and open the Oreos.

Louisa knocks her regular knock and I answer the door with the plate of cookies. She takes an Oreo and sighs. She's wearing jeans with her white nurse shoes, which she kicks off by the door. She hates these meetings but comes out of loyalty to Mom. And someone has to watch Mr. Nunzi's cigarette to make sure he doesn't accidentally set our apartment on fire.

"Lemonade?" I ask. I refuse to play waitress during Mom's get-togethers, but I'll pour Louisa a drink anytime.

"Lemonade sounds lovely." She follows me to the kitchen.

Just as I put the glass in her hand, the doorbell buzzes for about a minute straight. Why, why, *why* do they have to hold the button down forever?

"Old people," Louisa says, as if she can read my mind. "They're so used to being ignored." She grabs two more cookies and goes to answer the door. Louisa doesn't normally eat what she calls processed foods, but she says she could never get through a tenant meeting without Oreos.

Fifteen minutes later, Mom is sitting on the living room floor, writing furiously as everyone takes turns saying that the elevator is dirty, there are cigarette butts on the stairs, and the dryer in the basement melted somebody's elastic-waist pants.

I lean against the wall in the hallway and watch her hold up one finger to signal Mrs. Bindocker to slow down. Once Mrs. Bindocker gets going, not even Mom's shorthand can keep up with her.

Mom cried the first time she saw our apartment. The whole place was filthy, she says. The wood floors were "practically black," the windows were "caked with dirt," and the walls were smeared with something she "didn't even want to think about." Always in those same words.

I was there that day—in a little bucket-seat baby carrier. It was cold out, and she had a new coat on. There were no hangers in the closets, and she didn't want to put the coat down on the dirty floor or drape

it over one of the peeling, hissing radiators, so she carried it while she went from room to room, telling herself it wasn't so awful.

At this point in the story, I used to try to think of someplace she could have put her coat, if only she had thought of it.

"Why didn't you drape it over the rod in the hall closet?" I'd ask.

"Dusty," she'd say.

"On the windowsill in the kitchen?"

"Dusty."

"What about over the top of the bedroom door?"

"Couldn't reach," she'd say, "*and* dusty."

What Mom did that day almost twelve years ago was put her coat back on, pick up my bucket seat, and walk to a store, where she bought a mop, some soap, garbage bags, a roll of sticky shelf paper, sponges, a bottle of window spray, and paper towels.

Back home, she dumped everything out on the floor. Then she folded her coat and slid it into the empty bag from the store. She hung the bag on a doorknob and cleaned the apartment all afternoon. I knew enough, she says, to snuggle down in my bucket seat and take a very long nap.

She met Louisa, who didn't have a husband either, in the lobby on that first day. They were both taking garbage to the big cans out front. Louisa was holding Sal. Sal had been crying, but when he saw me, he stopped.

I know all this because I used to ask to hear the story over and over: the story of the day I met Sal.