

PLANET EARTH

— Terra Firma —

44.5956° N, 75.1691° W

Friday, February 12, 7:48 p.m. EST

As Per: Klara Tippins

Klara hummed as she gazed up at the darkened sky while snowflakes—large as fairy slippers—landed on her forehead, her nose, her cheeks. The flakes melted, as flakes do, and icy water ran from her cheeks down her neck and she stopped humming.

“Fi-ickle snots,” she shuddered, glaring at the sky. “Why today of all days? It’s my birthday and your clouds are hiding my stars—my home!”

From over in the big oak, she felt the barred owl stare at her with his black penetrating eyes, twisting his head this way and that, snorting and sighing at her unseemly brashness towards his sky. Though it was too dark in the nun’s old garden for her to see him properly, she knew he was there—glaring.

“Love you too, Owl!” Her breath floated up in a cloud of mist. It’d gotten cold. And late. Why hadn’t her dad, Mr. Tippins, brought down her telescope already? Sure, now with the snow falling, it could be argued a telescope was of little use. Still, weren’t they wondering where she was,

Klara being the birthday girl and all? If she had a cellphone she'd call them, but Mother wouldn't let her. Imagine, thirteen years on this planet and still no phone!

Peering up at her family's apartment, Klara double-wrapped her scarf to keep melted snow from dripping down her neck. Being an old, refurbished convent, the windows were tall and narrow with wrought-iron framing. Pointlessly, she waved with her mittened hand, hoping against hope, that someone might wave back. But nothing. Of course. Just brightly lit, creepy windows.

Of the three buildings surrounding the courtyard, theirs was the middle one, giving them a superior view of the valley of Pennington. In Pennington people shopped in boutiques and sat with friends at cafes drinking coffee and never once considered living high on a hill in some old nunnery. Mother, of course, didn't mind living far away from everyone and everything because, 'gee whiz, Klara, we don't have to look up at anybody!'

The hat on her head began to slide. Reflexively, she grabbed hold and balanced it to its sweet spot. Stretched and wonky, this required both skill and patience, though Klara had had plenty of practice. It was the only hat she had and the source of much ridicule at school. Having once been Mother's hat, not only was it large, it also reeked of hairspray and was frighteningly beige.

As it slid once more, she let it go. It landed in the snow

with a silent *poof* and Klara stared at it for a moment, then she bent down and, humming sweetly, smoothed it over with her mitten, covering it completely.

Loud thumps from the main door interrupted her artistry.

Mr. Tippins?

Probably. Probably it was Mr. Tippins trying to open the massive church door to finally come see her.

2

Arched and made of solid oak, the massive door was a beast to open. Particularly if you didn't know the precise angle to use on the pull rings and where to pound the door. Even then it was a chore, especially in cold weather, which, this close to Canada, was pretty much always.

Loud grunts began to accompany the thuds; loud enough to reverberate through the door. Klara glanced at the buried hat. Would Mr. Tippins notice it missing? Would he mind? Things were always up in space with him, his mind ambling when, all of a sudden, his ship would land and he'd baffle everyone with his presence.

Picking it up, the hat was so well coated with snow it

was no longer beige. Muttering, she whacked it against her legs, blew on it, brushed it, whacked it again—still the snow clung. Resigned, she pulled it over her head, feeling her brain go numb with cold. Why? Why, oh why, of all the planets in the universe did she have to find herself on the most obnoxious one?

Over at the door Mr. Tippins labored a crack open—no more. Klara was on her way to help him when an assertive “Jesus Christ!” came from the other side—clearly *not* from Mr. Tippins.

“He’d be the man to call on,” Klara called back. “I do believe it’s his door.”

“My dear goodness!” a distinctly female voice exclaimed. “I was unaware of somebody being there. I very much apologize.” There was a roundness and a bounce to the woman’s speech, making it sound kind and welcoming. “How do I—”

With a sudden generosity, the door released and the woman stumbled out, almost knocking Klara over. As she grabbed Klara’s shoulder a pleasant warmth radiated from the woman’s hand, and she was tall. Not only tall, but beautiful in a way that transformed everything around her.

“Dear child, what must you think? Using his name in... what is it you say... unnecessarily, and then running you over like... like one of those things that runs things over...

a...

"... a car?" Klara ventured.

"No, not a car... a steamroller." The woman removed her hand. "They say a lot of first impressions. All I can hope is that none of it is true."

"It's fine," Klara managed. She wanted to say more, but hearing an adult apologize was disorienting.

"My name is Rani Ghaiwal." The woman held out an ungloved hand and Klara quickly took it.

"Klara Tippins."

"It is a pleasure running into you, Klara Tippins," she smiled. "I am a brand-new resident and only earlier today moved into my apartment. Up there." She pointed to the windows of Klara's apartment.

Klara was astounded. "That's where I live!"

"You are pulling my leg! I am on the second floor."

"Then we live right above you!" Klara drew in a sharp breath. "Just so you know, I'm the quiet one. Any loud music is my brother's doing."

"You have a brother? How very special. Is he older or younger?"

"Both."

"Both?"

"He was born three years before me so he should be older, but I don't think he is."

"All the same he looks out for you?"

“Not exactly. Though, in his defense, it can’t be easy having a sibling like me.”

“And what kind of sibling are you?”

“The better one.”

Owl whistled sharply and Rani spun around. “There is an owl here?”

“Uh-huh. One that’s quite annoyed with me.” Repositioning Mother’s hat, snow predictably dribbled under her collar. “Showed up last week and hasn’t let me out of its sight, even follows me to school. The big white tufts over its eyes making it easy to recognize.”

“I must meet this owl.” Cautiously, Rani walked towards the tree. “Though I seem to remember a drop-off...?”

“There is one up ahead, but the property is fenced in, so no worries.”

“And one gate?”

“Two gates: one to the west and one to the east. The western gate you’ve probably met. It opens to the parking lot, is well-shoveled and tells you good morning when you go by—even when it’s not morning.”

Rani smiled. “And what of the other gate, is it also polite?”

“Hardly. The eastern gate leads to the woods: to goblins and trolls. It’s rather maladjusted from what I gather, though I’ve never walked through it. That’s strictly forbidden.”

“Do you like living here?” Rani reached out and righted the hat on Klara’s head.

“I...” Klara faltered. “I’m sure the nuns liked it. Most of them. Most were content.”

“You knew them?”

“No, but the walls hold their thoughts—especially the stone walls. Some of the woodwork too, in particular the benches, the ones that used to be in the chapel.” Klara bit her lip. She had surely said too much. She glanced at Rani, but Rani looked no more perturbed than if Klara had commented on the weather. “So, Rani,” she quickly moved on, “why did *you* move here?”

“The Big Apple became exhausting after a while, at least for me. I need solitude and when I don’t have it, it becomes like a thirst. A few long years back, I bought a cottage in Pinebrook, made plans to live there in my retirement with nothing but birds and the occasional wind for company. Then, when I was indeed retired, I realized the cottage would not hold all my books—”

“You have a lot of books?” Klara interrupted.

“I do. I love books.”

Klara nodded enthusiastically. “Me too.”

“So I decided to keep the cottage but look for an apartment also. Imagine my joy when I found Mountain Manor with ceilings tall enough for nine-foot bookcases! To live in an old, refurbished abbey is to me like living in a

novel; dark mahogany millwork, old Victorian fireplaces... my goodness. I have stayed in many old apartments, both in Mumbai and then in Brooklyn, but nothing like this.”

Wanting to contribute, Klara searched her mind. “I like the chimney pipes,” she decided.

“Chimney pipes?”

“The tubes that stick up from the roof. Have you seen them?”

“I’m afraid I was so adrenalized by everything inside this chateau, that when the realtor took me outside, it was all a blur.” Rani looked up at the roof. Though there was nothing to see but night, she kept looking.

Pressing one hand to the top of her head, Klara peered up and pointed. “I think the lacy edges make the pipes look like Victorian bloomers; as if some ungodly women came to snoop on the nuns and got stuck with their unmentionables sticking up.”

“Unmentionables?”

“Sure. Probably they’d hoped for a scandal only to find the nuns just sitting there, day after day, staring at nothing. After a while, the women got bored stiff and passed out.”

“The garden is *that* stodgy?”

“Rigid benches, prissy roses, sullen statues—nothing’s more stodgy than that. Sit in this garden too long and you’ll turn to stone.”

“Turn to stone...?” Rani wasn’t gazing at the roof

anymore; she was staring at Klara, a concerned look on her face. Sneepers, now she'd worried the woman.

Klara pivoted on her heels, slamming her toes together to warm her feet. Think happy. Happy, happy, happy... "I like how snow brings everything together; the way mansions and junk yards look equally pretty and how it removes hedges so everything belongs. Also, the light... winter lights don't scream at you the way summer lights do; they hold you. I like that too."

"You have a most unusual mind, Klara Tippins. May I ask how old you are?"

"Thirteen. My birthday is today."

Rani slapped her thigh. "My star, now I get it! This morning a book kept jumping out of my bookcase driving me nutty. Now I see that it does not want to be with me—it wants to be yours! Wait here and I will fetch it for you."

With joint effort they managed the door open, then Rani ran up to her apartment while Klara sat down on the stairs to wait, her mind running loops inside her heart. Could a grownup be a friend? Surely Rani must think her silly. And why would she give Klara a book? Would it be ill-mannered to accept it? To not accept it?

Not a moment too soon, Rani returned. Brimming with excitement and slightly out of breath, she held the book out to Klara. "It is part of Vedas called Upanishads. Old Hindu philosophy. Very wise. Happy Birthday, Klara."

On the cover was a painting of a large tree with people sitting underneath. They all sat on mats, except for an old man who sat on a pillow. The book was not heavy. It was not large. But holding it... “This book is enormous!” Klara clutched it to her chest. “It fills my bones!”

“The word ‘Upanishads’ is Sanskrit and means ‘come close and I will tell you something,’ which is to say the wisdom was passed orally from generation to generation and for a very long time. Nobody knows how long. This is why you will find many things in this book, Klara. My guru, for example, used to reference it when speaking of kindness. ‘We are all of one heart, Miss Ghaiwal,’ he would say. ‘Being kind allows you to see the part of yourself that others carry, so be kind in all matters; kind in ways that cost you little and in ways that take all your strength.’ Then he would remind me of his favorite passage from the Isha Upanishads: Those who know themselves to be all beings, hate no one. Some gurus say very little. He was not one of those gurus, and though I liked his words very much, they were not particularly easy to follow.”

“My grandpa Gompie says things like that. He tells me to see with my heart and seek fairness, not justice. ‘Fairness looks for middle ground,’ he says, ‘Justice does not. When you look to be fair you flow with the workings of the Universe: When you demand justice you close doors. Justice is rigid—the Universe is not.’ He says stuff like that. Not

wanting me to close doors and all.”

“You have a very wise grandfather.”

“Yes... though he might not be my grandfather. We meet on his spacecraft while I dream so it’s hard to tell, him being all transparent and flimsy and stuff.”

“I see...” Rani rubbed her chin. “I too have dreams where I am told things. With time I have learned to listen and I find that, when I do, magic happens. Like moving to Pennington and running into you!”

“You think so? You think meeting me is magic?”

“Absolutely! So now, why don’t you tell me more of your magical thoughts as we walk up to our apartments?”

3

Klara was getting warm in her jacket as she stood in the Tippins’ entryway trying to grasp her family’s indifference to her arrival; her brother’s music booming so loud it rattled her teeth.

Mother was in the galley kitchen doing dishes —as always. She did not look up. Klara peeked into the living room where Mr. Tippins sat by the fireplace reading his paper, a wool blanket over his knees. He also did not look

up. Drake?—Klara gave the rooms a quick scan—was probably in his room.

She placed the Upanishads on the wooden floor and unzipped her jacket. “Hello!”

Putting the paper down, Mr. Tippins removed his pipe from his mouth. “There you are,” he said, blithely stating the obvious. “Where did you go?”

“Where did *I* go? *You* were supposed to bring my telescope.”

“Oh that.” Mr. Tippins put his pipe back, leaving it to dangle from the corner of his mouth. “Drake and I tried it out on the balcony. Surprisingly decent quality. I would have called you, but mom told me you don’t have a cellphone.”

“Mother doesn’t think I need one as I don’t have any friends.”

“Oh...”

“More pressingly—apart from the telescope being decent—it’s MINE!” Mr. Tippins ducked behind his paper. “So where is it!”

“Klara!” Mother shouted. “No need to shout. Your brother is borrowing it, is all.” She gave Klara a wry smile. “Now, be a whale. Don’t be shellfish.”

“I’m not selfish!” Klara felt herself getting hot. “Besides, Drake never borrows—Drake takes, takes, TAKES!” She hurled Mother’s hat at the floor. It landed with a timid *thop*.

Glaring at it, Klara stomped her foot.

“What did I tell you!” Mother slammed a spatula into the kitchen sink, then stared appalled at her apron and quickly wiped off the soapsuds.

“NOT FAIR!” Klara bellowed.

“Klara?” Mr. Tippins dropped his newspaper. “Klara, don’t make your mother upset.”

“NOT FAIR!” Klara bellowed even louder. “I was to... I was to see my home!” Tearing off her jacket, an arm got stuck in the sleeve. She growled, then viciously pummeled the unassuming apparel to the ground. The boots came off easy. One sailed quite beautifully into Mr. Tippins’ office, the other crashed into the wall, barely missing the kitchen doorway.

“Klara Josefina Tippins!” This time a plate got hurled into the sink, splashing worse than the spatula. Mother leaped back. “Look what you made me do!”

Leaving the scattered boots and the crumpled jacket on the floor, Klara picked up her book and, rounding a corner, marched down the hallway towards her room. With head held high, she stomped past Drake’s room. “Curse on you,” she hissed. “A curse on all of you,” she added as she passed Mother and Mr. Tippins’ bedroom. Then she stalked into her room and slammed the door—WHAM!

Dark.

Very, very dark.

Now she'd done it.

Like most rooms, Klara's room had a light switch by the door (for situations such as these). Most unfortunately her switch did not connect to anything, as the lamp had been removed when her uncle rigged her teapot gondola across the ceiling. At that time, they'd also painted the walls and the ceiling a blue color—the darkest of dark blue color.

Of course, a sane person would simply open the door and let light in from the hallway (and technically she could do that), however, this wasn't just any closed door; this was a Slammed Door and slammed doors warrant a certain regard.

And so, sliding her socked feet along the floor, she made her way to her bedside table, zigzagging past the piles of books neatly stacked on the floor and making sure she did not accidentally trample her Japanese teahouse. Made from a huge cardboard box years ago, it was getting rickety and she'd never forgive herself if she ruined it.

As Klara pulled the cord on her bedside lamp, the room flooded with light. So much light she almost knocked over her twin-bell alarm clock, Frau Rudenclunk. Exhausted, she tumbled onto her bed. No wonder she didn't like birthdays. And how screwed up was that? Who doesn't like birthdays?

Old people—like thirty-year-olds!

Gazing at the rigged gondola-teapot dangling overhead, she waved to the starbeings inside: two dollhouse dolls and a tiny dragon—all found at a garage sale; all members of the Galactic Support Team, traveling from Headquarters to Earth in a space shuttle. The space shuttle being the aforementioned teapot; their ‘headquarters,’ an old chandelier that hung in the ceiling by her bed; and ‘Earth,’ a globe her grandma Nelly gave her, now standing on a dresser.

Even though she’d only paid fifty cents for the wooden dolls (a grandmother and a child) it was clear they were high-end. What with hair of real wool, clothes with handstitched hems, even bendable arms and legs and all.

She’d removed the apron and fluffed up the grandmother’s hair. It felt right, even if the doll still looked more like a grandmother than the legendary space captain Gompie Writtum.

The child wore denims and a knitted sweater and had Klara’s light-brown eyes and wild mousy-brown hair. Without being sure why, she’d named her Kalanna Boon.

The dragon, Dwinn, was her favorite. Though he was mostly red, his frills, spikes, and wings had tips of gold. The wings did not move; nothing moved—he was that small.

Three tiny dolls; more dear to her than her own family. With a sigh, Klara changed into her nightgown. Then she

slipped the Upanishads under her pillow, crawled into bed, and pulled the covers to her chin. “Goodnight, starbeings,” she said. “Goodnight, Earth-globe, goodnight moon... oh, and goodnight telescope, sorry I lost you to Drake. Someone should have told you I *always* lose.”

She turned the lamp off, closed her eyes and had almost fallen asleep when, through the wall, she heard Mother mention Klara’s name in the kitchen...

4

The convent had been built with thick, dense walls. All the same, the wall between Klara’s room and the kitchen was new construction and paper thin.

“That’s ridiculous!” Mother huffed. “I would never have agreed. Who ever heard of a thirteen-year-old with a telescope!”

Mr. Tippins murmured something unintelligible in reply.

“I don’t care that it was free! I don’t care that your cousin wanted it off his hands. I would not have agreed!”

“... ..”

“You thought I’d be pleased? Well there’s the problem

then—YOU THINKING. I'm the one to be out there in the frigging cold, putting the darn thing together—ME! Then stand there like some idiot looking at—stars? Did you think of that?"

"..."

"I'll tell you what *I* think. I think we should let our dear Drake keep the telescope." Klara pulled the cover over her head.

"You can't give it to Drake!" Even through the covers, Mr. Tippins' voice was audible.

"Why not?"

"Because we gave it to Klara."

"Well then, Bruce." Somehow, Mother's sharp voice managed to purr and Klara held her breath. "We'll have Klara give it to Drake. You know there'll be no peace until he has it."

"You're asking too much."

"TOO MUCH?" Mother snarled. "ME, asking too much? As if you took the telescope for Klara's sake. Please, you took it because YOU wanted it. Admit it. Not for a second did you think of how I'd suffer. You... you're so selfish it's sickening."

A loud slam, then the scraping of a chair.

"Go ahead!" Mother shouted. "Leave—it's what you always do."

Tossing off the covers, Klara stared into the dark room. Mr. Tippins got angry... who would have thought *that* could ever happen.

As her eyes were slow to adjust, the darkness remained dark—dark and kind. With nothing to orient herself with, she could be anywhere she wanted. Perhaps this bed was in a bedroom in Paris, that would be nice. While listening to the final quiet of the day she'd struggle to fall asleep, eagerly awaiting the next day's adventures with friends—there would, of course, be friends.

When she was little, she'd lay staring at the ceiling holding her breath. The day would have been cruel and she'd hope to leave the way Grandma Nelly had left. One minute, Granny was with her, the next minute the breathing had stopped and she'd been gone—just like that.

Klara had been four. A scrawny four-year-old with an uncanny ability to hold her breath.

5

PLANET EARTH

— Terra Firma —

44.5956° N, 75.1691° W

Saturday, February 13, 7:13 a.m. EST

As Per: Klara Tippins

Waking up, Klara lazily stretched to where her warm feet touched the cool parts of the comforter. It felt delightful, yet something else—her mind paused—a fluffy expansiveness of her being and a scent of... basil? Had she made a visit to Buxtin?

A knock on the door and Mr. Tippins' head poked in. He was unshaven and his gray stubble, along with his smudged glasses, made him look almost endearing. "Can we talk?"

Sitting up, Klara anxiously crossed her fingers as his long jerky legs bumbled their way around her teahouse. A near miss and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"About the telescope," he said, slowly sinking down to sit at the edge of her bed. "Don't you think you're too young for something like that. Something... that advanced?"

Klara opened her eyes. "Hard to say as I barely touched it, but... no... no I don't think so."

"Your mom says so and you know how she is." Mr. Tippins unsuccessfully righted his glasses.

Klara knew how Mother was, of course she did. She knew how obstinate Mother was but also how jealous she got when Klara spent time with Mr. Tippins. Yet here he was. And why? Because Mother was desperate for him to do her dirty work, that's why. Well—Klara smiled wryly as she pulled the Upanishads out from under her pillow—she and Mr. Tippins would have themselves a nice long bonding

then.

“I met a person yesterday,” she began. “Her name is Rani Ghaiwal. I mentioned my sky family and she has one too! She’s Hindu.”

“I see.”

“She gave me this.” Klara held up the book.

“Did she?”

“She gave it to me for my birthday and I told her all about my home planet.”

“You don’t say.” Looking out the window, Mr. Tippins bent his neck, making crunching noises.

“I told her I’m a Draconian starseed. A starseed is someone from a different star system, you see, who’s been seeded here on Earth.” Klara glanced at her father who made no acknowledgement. “I told her I’m from Otim Dorum which orbits the Aldibain star in the Draco constellation. Draco is latin for Dragon, Otim means ‘connecting love’ and Dorum means ‘planet,’ though some call it Oopsie Daisy after we allowed reptilians from Thuban to rule us. Thuban or Alpha Draconis, is another star in our constellation which, by the way, used to be the North Star.”

“The North Star?” Mr. Tippins unexpectedly lit up. “That was 4,600 years ago, if I’m not mistaken.”

Klara looked keenly at her father. “So, anyway, we thought they’d make good leaders and help us evolve. And certainly we evolved, but not by them being good leaders.

They sought chaos and mayhem like an unquenching thirst and were ruthless in their domination. Many, many generations suffered as it took a long time for us to bring our hearts together and focus back on our... our humanity, though we weren't exactly humans, more like dragons. And I know what you're thinking: Creatures from a constellation don't necessarily look like the constellation. I mean, what if beings from the Lyra constellation looked like harps!" Klara burst out laughing. Mr. Tippins did not interrupt. "Probably humans named the constellation Draco because we visited Earth from there a long time ago and people took notice. We were, as you might guess, the dragons that people talk about; some with long bodies, some with wings, some indeed breathing fire. The dragon society hosts many varieties and not all of us are nice like us, that goes for individuals as well as societies."

"Uh-hum."

"Our kind, those from Otim Dorum, have visited Earth since before the cretaceous period, some ninety million years ago. Earth is such a pretty place and soon others came. They came from Orion, Sirius and the Pleiades. Some of them thought dinosaurs would be a good idea while others weren't so sure. In the end the dinosaurs got to be a little much. I guess that happens sometimes, huh?"

"What?"

"You have a good idea, but it doesn't work out."

“Sure.” Mr. Tippins did not sound sure.

“I bet, with a proper telescope, one could see our star Aldibain from here.”

“I suppose.” Mr. Tippins monotonously tapped the tip of his elbows with his long bony fingers, his brows furrowed.

“We’re not full dragons anymore,” Klara pushed on, encouraged by his silence. “At least not those who travel through the cosmos. No fire-breathing allowed, that’s for sure, too much of a hazard, and the wings have pretty much disappeared from lack of use. All that said, my grandpa does have that long snake-like body and a funny way of sitting down on his coiled tail. I visit him sometimes on our spacecraft, Buxtin. It’s a bioship and quite sentient. Miss Rani found this interesting. She told me—”

“Your grandparents are dead, Klara, you know that.”

Klara’s heart gave a tug. She put the book aside, then stared out the window along with Mr. Tippins. A while they stared, the two of them, watching the pale morning light pussyfooting its way through the oak’s many branches. Somewhere in there, Owl sat cocking his head.

“Your mom is planning a birthday party for you. She called her brother and—”

“Mother called Uncle—No way!” Klara whacked her pillow in excitement. “For years Mother has refused to talk to him. All she ever talks about is how she won’t talk to him. He gave her an earful when he installed the dryer, didn’t he,

about Drake stuffing the cat in there?”

“You remember?”

“Of course!” Klara pointed to her Japanese teahouse. “That’s what the dryer came in.”

Mr. Tippins cleared his throat but said nothing.

“I can’t believe Uncle Otto is coming to celebrate my birthday,” Klara sighed.

“They haven’t called back yet, so don’t get excited.”

“They? Who are ‘they’?”

“Your Aunt Frida from Florida may also come, but not from Florida, she’s divorced. She and her son Pontus live with Otto now.”

“The ex was a Mohawk, right? And her son has long black hair and a proud nose?”

The back of Mr. Tippins’ neck flushed. “Pontus’ dad is Mohawk, but I have no idea about the nose. Don’t stereotype, Klara.”

“Okay.” Pensively, Klara listened as Mother banged pots in the kitchen sink. “She hasn’t called yet, has she?”

“What?”

“You made a deal with Mother to throw me a party if I gave up the telescope. She hasn’t called yet, has she?”

“I don’t... Getting hungry for breakfast, Klara?”

“No.”

“Me too.” He gave her knee a couple awkward pats, then stood up and left.

With Mr. Tippins gone, Klara pulled off her blanket, grabbed her book and went out into the hallway. Nothing was easy with Mother. Klara shook her head. What had it been like for Drake? Had Mother left him alone as a toddler the way she'd take off when Klara was little? Had she locked herself in the bathroom while he screamed? Klara had had Grandma Nelly—he hadn't.

In the hallway, the walls were lined with pictures of Drake; large photos taken at a studio and smaller snapshots to commemorate all his accomplishments, like walking and hitting at bat at little league. Klara thought of how Mother constantly bragged that Drake always had such a glint in his eyes, even as an infant. Yet, as Klara examined her brother's young face, all she saw was a terrified child.

With a sigh, she walked into Mr. Tippins' office where Mr. Tippins sat poised behind his desk staring out a window, absently clutching his briefcase. She cleared her throat. "That notwithstanding," she said, surprised at how composed she sounded, "I think Drake should have the telescope."

It was possible Mr. Tippins was taken aback. He could also be proud, or relieved—it was hard to tell. "Y-yes?" He stuttered.

"Seems like a piece of him goes missing when something doesn't belong to him. That must be hard."

"Hard?"

“For sure. Besides, I’ll never be as lost as he is.”

Mr. Tippins righted his glasses and blinked a few times. “That’s mighty big hearted of you,” he finally said. “Well then, I’ll make sure to get you a party.” Clenching his hands tightly over his chest, he smiled broadly. And though his smile never reached his eyes, the glasses stayed put, making him look almost composed.

Was it true? Might people come to her birthday? If so, that called for a celebration.

Klara eyed the welcome mat by the front door; a nautical ropy thing that might glide quite well on Mother’s polished floors. If she sprinted and landed just right on the mat, how far might she glide? She glanced back at Mr. Tippins. Fortunately, he was still staring out his window searching for some horizon.

She grabbed on tight to her book.

One—Two—Three... *Go!*

Holy potatoes, she almost reached the living room fireplace! With no one around, she ran one loop around the coffee table. “Hello Mr. Tippins’ pipe.” Bigger loop. “Hello outdoor balcony. Hello plants on windowsill. Primrose Number One, Primrose Number Two, Primrose Oops-not-looking-so-good.” Another loop.

She was on her fourth loop, when—

“Klara Tippins!” With hands on hips, Mother stood in

the doorway, a fur hat on her head. “Stop running like that, like... like some crazy person. Did you wash your hands?”

“Hands?” Klara pondered the foolishness of washing perfectly clean hands, and the strangeness of Mother’s hat. “Why is there a hat on your head?”

Mother’s face instantly burst with pride. “Your dad picked it up for me in Saint Petersburg. It’s made of Russian sable fur and was to be an anniversary gift, but I couldn’t wait.” She pivoted her head this way and that, showing it off from all its various angles. “When we go to the Ice Festival today, I want people to see it. It’s a little tight so I’m stretching it out.”

“The Ice Festival is *today!*” One of Klara’s favorite events, the Ice Festival was an occasion for people to make ice sculptures with chainsaws, then light them and walk around with snow creaking under their shoes drinking piping-hot cider saying, ‘Isn’t this amazing?’ How did she ever forget?

“There will only be you and me this year so I’ll have you all to myself.”

“Not... dad?”

“No, dear, he’s busy.”

“What about Drake and his latest girlfriend... Chrystal?”

“Drake refuses. Doesn’t want people to know you’re related to him,” Mother chuckled. “We’ll go once the company leaves.” Turning, she walked into the kitchen.

“Fuddeldum to him,” Klara muttered as she left for the bathroom to tend to her ‘dirty’ hands. As she passed the kitchen, she noticed Drake sitting at the table. She shot him an angry stare, but as always, he did not notice. However, a new, and very large gadget was on the counter. The size of a storage box, it boasted buttons and levers in all directions. “Whoa!”

Mother looked pleased. “You like it? It’s a Gaggia espresso coffee machine.”

“Who drinks coffee?”

“Our guests of course! Your dad picked it up at the Malpensa airport in Milan. It’s very expensive and sure to impress them.” Mother adjusted her hat. “People won’t like you unless you keep a pristine home. Remember that; always keep a pristine home.”

“People like you because you clean?”

“Klara Tippins. Go. Wash. Hands.”

“Advice magnifico, mamma!”

“And don’t forget to put the mat back!”

Klara was just about to wink at her mother, when the Gaggia machine shot a data-beam at her, hitting her right temple.

“Mother, that thing is broken.”

“But we just... how would you know!”

“It told me!”

“Hands! Now!”

6

Heading down the hallway to the bathroom, Klara noticed Drake's door standing ajar. Perhaps she should check on the telescope?

Peering inside, she got the weird sensation she always got around Drake's stuff. Like gunpowder. Like wet gunpowder getting stuck to the roof of her mouth. It only happened with him and sometimes with graveyards. All the same, there was the matter of the telescope. She set her jaw—gunpowder or not—she was going in.

One step in and she had nowhere to set her next foot. Wall to wall the floor was littered with crumpled papers, unfinished schoolwork, clothes (including undies and socks), dirty plates, empty pizza boxes and milk cartons—How unfair!

And the walls too were cluttered! Unorganized shelves took up some space, but mostly the wall was covered with old Halloween costumes, thumbtacked like bizarre mementos. She spotted Count Dracula, the Grim Reaper, a red devil costume, a vampire. And there on a shelf, nearly hidden among candy wrappers and dry pizza crusts, lay her telescope. "Sorry," she whispered and blew it a kiss. Then she snuck out the door and walked to the bathroom, all the

while massaging the roof of her mouth with her tongue.

As anticipated, the bathroom was a bleach endurance test. In fact, the stench was so noisome it caused Klara's eyes to water. Giving the Upanishads an encouraging pat on the back, she placed it on the floor and, standing on it for added height, looked in the mirror. Was there a glint in *her* eyes? She could not tell. What did it mean to have a glint? Would her life be different if Mother thought she had one?

An earsplitting *pfsssssssssss!* came suddenly from the kitchen, followed by—"DAMN IT! SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!"

Distracted, Klara splashed water on her nightgown. A lot of water. She hastily apologized to the gown, wiped her hands on its hem, picked up the Upanishads, and ran to the kitchen.

For the most part the kitchen was still a kitchen, even if, tantamount to an apocalyptic event, it was splendidly covered with froth. Froth was all over the cabinet doors, it dripped from the ceiling and dribbled, in long disjointed streams, from Mother's fur hat down Mother's face.

Clasping both hands over her mouth, Klara prayed she expressed dismay—not glee. She raised her eyebrows for added effect, but Mother was not looking, Mother was scrubbing foam off the coffee maker with the vigor of trying to resuscitate it.

Drake, meanwhile, was in his glory sprinkling the world with his nonsense while chowing down his usual bowl of *Cocoa Puffs*. With his hair buzzed short on the sides, it was only his curly bang that glowed in the morning light, his perfect cowlick making him look both boyish and classy. Klara couldn't see it, but people found him charming, outrageous, and so, so entertaining. Even Mother and Mr. Tippins hung on his every word. Like, how could there be a bowl of slimy cold oatmeal waiting for her when she'd repeatedly told Mother she hated the stuff? 'I don't like oatmeal—Sure you do—No I don't—Drake says you do—Drake doesn't know—Of course he does'—BLAH!

"You have to wipe with bleach-free deterrent," he informed, slurping the last of his cereal, "or it'll stain purple."

"Bleach-free *deterrent*?" Klara grinned. "Got any Drake-deterrent?"

"Not now, Klara." Mother grimly yanked the coffee maker's cord out of the socket and, holding the frothy contraption at arm's length, she exited the kitchen, leaving only a slight acrid smell behind.

One look at Klara's gown and Drake tossed his head back in mock laughter. "Hey, space cadet, did the faucet attack you?" Slapping his thighs like their uncle Otto, he shook his head. "Such a dimswitch, can't even wash her hands!" Leaving his dirty dishes on the table, he sashayed past her out the kitchen.

“Tilligumm to you, you snotfrat,” Klara grumbled as she watched him leave. “At least I’m not the kind of dimwit that can’t tell their words apart.” Putting the Upanishads on a chair, she sat on it and reluctantly began jabbing the oatmeal with her spoon.

She was busy turning it into a moon carter when Mother reentered the kitchen, grabbed Drake’s abandoned dishes and put them in the sink. “Done yet?” Mother snapped, her back to Klara.

Klara laid her spoon across the crater. “Done!” She slid off her chair and was just about to take her book when Mother snatched it.

“The Umpash? ... where did you get this?”

“Rani gave it to me.”

“What’s a rani?”

“A Rani is a person who lives below people named Tippins.”

“The apartment below us is empty Klara. You’re not reading it, are you?”

“Define ‘reading.’”

“You use it to reach things?”

“Sure.”

Mother seemed relieved.

“And I keep it under my pillow.” Klara sat back down. “It informs me while I sleep. For instance, did you know life happens *from* us, not *to* us?” Klara tapped her spoon against

the crater. “Which explains a lot, don’t you think?”

—thop, thop, thop—

With each thop Mother’s face tightened, so did her grip on the book. “Talking nonsense is like lying and you should not lie to your mother. There is no Rani. You made her up and I will speak to your teacher about letting you borrow books like this. Now go put on your birthday dress.”

“I have a birthday dress?”

“Smarty-pants. Keep this up and I’ll tell your aunt and uncle not to come. Do you know how lucky you are to have a mother like me to make such a fuss about your birthday?” The book fumbled in Mother’s hands and, taking a decisive hold, she slammed it onto the counter. “Get going!” she barked. “And put your dishes in the sink. I’m not some maid!”

Carrying her bowl, Klara walked to the trash where, with one spectacular *thop*, the oatmeal slid into the bin. Then, under Mother’s watchful eyes, she heedfully placed the bowl and spoon in the sink. She thought to grab the book, but Mother’s hand rested on it. All she could do was give it an apologetic nod.

Klara owned one dress and one dress only: a sleeveless thing made of flimsy yellow fabric. As soon as she put it on, she shivered. Rummaging through her dresser she found her pink unicorn sweater and pulled it on. Faded and

stretched, it might not be the most elegant apparel, but boy was it warm. Just as Klara did a pirouette, Mother walked in.

“For god’s sake, Klara, take that horrid thing off!”

“I’m cold.”

“You’re not cold. Take it off.”

“Then I’ll wear a pretend sweater and tell our guests all about it.”

Klara and Mother locked eyes.

“Fine,” Mother sputtered. “Wear it. But you’re putting your hair in a ponytail.” Twirling around, she strutted out the door, leaving a scuff mark on Klara’s floor.

Annoyed, Klara dug her eraser out from her school bag, then slowly placed it back in its pencil case, zipping the case closed. Scuff marks be darned, she wasn’t some maid.