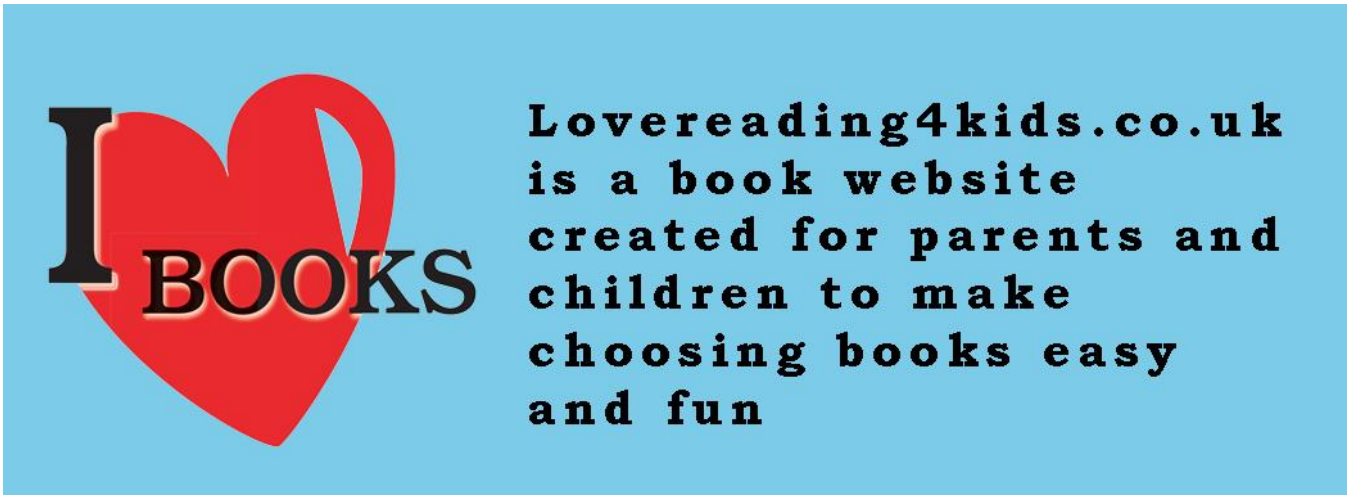


Opening extract from

Raymie Nightingale

Written by

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One

There were three of them, three girls.

They were standing side by side.

They were standing to attention.

And then the girl in the pink dress, the one who was standing right next to Raymie, let out a sob and said, "The more I think about it, the more terrified I am. I am too terrified to go on!"

The girl clutched her baton to her chest and dropped to her knees.

Raymie stared at her in wonder and admiration.

She herself often felt too terrified to go on, but she had never admitted it out loud.

The girl in the pink dress moaned and toppled over sideways.

Her eyes fluttered closed. She was silent. And then she opened her eyes very wide and shouted, "Archie, I'm sorry! I'm sorry I betrayed you!"

She closed her eyes again. Her mouth fell open.

Raymie had never seen or heard anything like it.

"I'm sorry," Raymie whispered. "I betrayed you."

For some reason, the words seemed worth repeating.

"Stop this nonsense immediately," said Ida Nee.

Ida Nee was the baton-twirling instructor. Even though she was old – fifty at least – her hair was an extremely bright yellow. She wore white boots that came all the way up to her knees.

"I'm not kidding," said Ida Nee.

Raymie believed her.

Ida Nee didn't seem like much of a kidder.

The sun was way, way up in the sky, and the whole thing was like high noon in a Western. But it was not a Western; it was baton-twirling lessons at Ida Nee's house in Ida Nee's backyard.

It was the summer of 1975.

It was the fifth day of June.

And two days before, on the third day of June, Raymie Clarke's father had run away with a woman who was a dental hygienist.

Hey, diddle, diddle, the dish ran away with the spoon.

Those were the words that went through Raymie's head every time she thought about her father and the dental hygienist.

But she did not say the words out loud any more because Raymie's mother was very upset, and talking about dishes and spoons running away together was not appropriate.

It was actually a great tragedy, what had happened.

That was what Raymie's mother said.

"This is a great tragedy," said Raymie's mother.

"Quit reciting nursery rhymes."

It was a great tragedy because Raymie's father had disgraced himself.

It was also a great tragedy because Raymie was now fatherless.

The thought of that – the fact of it – that she, Raymie Clarke, was without a father, made a small, sharp pain shoot through Raymie's heart every time she considered it.

Sometimes the pain in her heart made her feel too terrified to go on. Sometimes it made her want to drop to her knees.

But then she would remember that she had a plan.

Two

"Get up," said Ida Nee to the girl in the pink dress.

"She fainted," said the other baton-twirling student, a girl named Beverly Tapinski, whose father was a cop.

Raymie knew the girl's name and what her father did because Beverly had made an announcement at the beginning of the lesson. She had stared straight ahead, not looking at anybody in particular, and said, "My name is Beverly Tapinski and my father is a cop, so I don't think you should mess with me."

Raymie, for one, had no intention of messing with her.

"I've seen a lot of people faint," said Beverly now. "That's what happens when you're the daughter of a cop. You see everything. You see it all."

"Shut up, Tapinski," said Ida Nee.

The sun was very high in the sky.

It hadn't moved.

It seemed like someone had stuck it up there and then walked away and left it.

"I'm sorry," whispered Raymie. "I betrayed you."

Beverly Tapinski knelt down and put her hands on either side of the fainting girl's face.

"What do you think you're doing?" said Ida Nee.

The pine trees above them swayed back and forth. The lake, Lake Clara – where someone named Clara Wingtip had managed to drown herself a hundred years ago – gleamed and glittered.

The lake looked hungry.

Maybe it was hoping for another Clara Wingtip.

Raymie felt a wave of despair.

There wasn't time for people fainting. She had to learn how to twirl a baton and she had to learn fast, because if she learnt how to twirl a baton, she stood a good chance of becoming Little Miss Central Florida Tire.

And if she became Little Miss Central Florida Tire, her father would see her picture in the paper and come home.

That was Raymie's plan.

Three

The way that Raymie imagined her plan unfolding was that her father would be sitting in some restaurant, in whatever town he had run away to. He would be with Lee Ann Dickerson, the dental hygienist. They would be sitting together in a booth, and her father would be smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee, and Lee Ann would be doing something stupid and inappropriate, like maybe filing her nails (which you should never do in public). At some point, Raymie's father would put out his cigarette and open the paper and clear

his throat and say, "Let's see what we can see here," and what he would see would be Raymie's picture.

He would see his daughter with a crown on her head and a bouquet of flowers in her arms and a sash across her chest that said LITTLE MISS CENTRAL FLORIDA TIRE 1975.

And Raymie's father, Jim Clarke of Clarke Family Insurance, would turn to Lee Ann and say, "I must return home immediately. Everything has changed. My daughter is now famous. She has been crowned Little Miss Central Florida Tire."

Lee Ann would stop filing her nails. She would gasp out loud in surprise and dismay (and also, maybe, in envy and admiration).

That's the way Raymie imagined it would happen.

Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.

But first she needed to learn how to twirl a baton.

Or so said Mrs Sylvester.

Four

Mrs Sylvester was the secretary at Clarke Family Insurance.

Mrs Sylvester's voice was very high-pitched. She sounded like a little cartoon bird when she talked, and this made everything that she said seem ridiculous but also possible – both things at the same time.

When Raymie had told Mrs Sylvester that she was going to enter the Little Miss Central Florida Tire contest, Mrs Sylvester had clapped her hands

together and said, "What a wonderful idea. Have some candy corn."

Mrs Sylvester kept an extremely large jar of candy corn on her desk at all times and in all seasons, because she believed in feeding people.

She also believed in feeding swans. Every day on her lunch break, Mrs Sylvester took a bag of swan food and went down to the pond by the hospital.

Mrs Sylvester was very short, and the swans were tall and long-necked. When Mrs Sylvester stood in the middle of them with her scarf on her head and the big bag of swan food in her arms, she looked like something out of a fairy tale.

Raymie wasn't sure which fairy tale.

Maybe it was a fairy tale that hadn't been told yet.

When Raymie had asked Mrs Sylvester what she thought about Jim Clarke running away with a dental hygienist, Mrs Sylvester had said, "Well, dear, I have found that most things work out right in the end."

Did most things work out right in the end?

Raymie wasn't sure.

The idea seemed ridiculous (but also possible) when Mrs Sylvester said it in her tiny bird voice.

"If you intend to win the Little Miss Central Florida Tire contest," said Mrs Sylvester, "you must learn how to twirl a baton. And the best person to teach you how to twirl a baton is Ida Nee. She is a world champion."

Five

This explained what Raymie was doing in Ida Nee's backyard, under Ida Nee's pine trees.

She was learning how to twirl a baton.

Or that was what she was supposed to be doing.

But then the girl in the pink dress fainted, and the twirling lesson came to a screeching halt.

Ida Nee said, "This is ridiculous. No one faints in my classes. I don't believe in fainting."

Fainting didn't seem like the kind of thing that you needed to believe in (or not) in order for it

to happen, but Ida Nee was a world-champion twirler and she probably knew what she was talking about.

"It is just nonsense," said Ida Nee. "I don't have time for nonsense."

This pronouncement was greeted with a small silence, and then Beverly Tapinski slapped the girl in the pink dress.

She slapped one cheek and then the other one.

"What in the world?" said Ida Nee.

"This is what you do for people who faint," said Beverly. "You slap them." She slapped the girl again. "Wake up!" she shouted.

The girl opened her eyes. "Uh-oh," she said. "Has the county home come? Is Marsha Jean here?"

"I don't know any Marsha Jean," said Beverly. "You fainted."

"Did I?" She blinked. "I have very swampy lungs."

"This lesson is over," said Ida Nee. "I'm not wasting my time with idlers and malingerers. Or fainters."

"Good," said Beverly. "No one wants to learn how to twirl a stupid baton anyway."

Which was not true.

Raymie wanted to learn.

In fact, she *needed* to learn.

But it didn't seem like a good idea to disagree with Beverly.

Ida Nee marched away from them, down to the lake. She lifted her white-booted legs very high. You could tell that she was a world champion just by watching her march.

"Sit up," said Beverly to the fainting girl.

The girl sat up. She looked around her in wonder, as if she had been deposited on Ida Nee's property by mistake. She blinked. She put her hand on her head. "My brain feels light as a feather," she said.

"Duh," said Beverly. "That's because you fainted."

"I'm afraid that I wouldn't have made a very good Flying Elefante," said the girl.

There was a long silence.

"What's an elefante?" asked Raymie finally.

The girl blinked. Her blonde hair shone white in the sun. "I'm an Elefante. My name is Louisiana Elefante. My parents were the Flying Elefantes. Haven't you heard of them?"

"No," said Beverly. "We haven't heard of them. You should try to stand up now."

Louisiana put her hand on her chest. She took a deep breath. She wheezed.

Beverly rolled her eyes. "Here," she said. She held out her hand. It was a grubby hand. The fingers were smudged, and the nails were dirty and chewed down. But in spite of its grubbiness, or maybe because of it, it was a very certain-looking hand.

Louisiana took hold of it, and Beverly pulled her to her feet.

"Oh my goodness," said Louisiana. "I'm just all filled up with feathers and regrets. And fears. I have a lot of fears."

She stood there staring at both of them. Her eyes were dark. They were brown. No, they were

black, and they were set very deep in her face. She blinked.

"I've got a question for you," she said. "Have you ever in your life come to realize that everything, absolutely everything, depends on you?"

Raymie didn't even have to think about the answer to this question. "Yes," she said.

"Duh," said Beverly.

"It's terrifying, isn't it?" said Louisiana.

The three of them stood there looking at one another.

Raymie felt something expanding inside her. It felt like a gigantic tent billowing out.

This, Raymie knew, was her soul.

Mrs Borkowski, who lived across the street from Raymie and who was very, very old, said that most people wasted their souls.

"How do they waste them?" Raymie had asked.

"They let them shrivel," said Mrs Borkowski. "Phhhhtttt."

Which was maybe – Raymie wasn't sure – the sound a soul made when it shrivelled.

But as Raymie stood in Ida Nee's backyard next to Louisiana and Beverly, it did not feel like her soul was shrivelling at all.

It felt like it was filling up – becoming larger, brighter, more certain.

Down at the lake, on the edge of the dock, Ida Nee was twirling her baton. It flashed and glimmered. She threw it very high in the air.

The baton looked like a needle.

It looked like a secret, narrow and bright and alone, glittering in the blue sky.

Raymie remembered the words from earlier: *I'm sorry I betrayed you.*

She turned to Louisiana and asked, "Who is Archie?"