

A girl with long brown hair, wearing a striped shirt and purple pants, is sitting on a large, light blue crescent moon. She is looking down and smiling. The background is a dark blue night sky filled with many small white stars and a few larger, stylized white stars. There are also some dark blue, cloud-like shapes in the background.

THE
list OF
THINGS
THAT WILL
not
CHANGE

Winner of the Newbery Medal

REBECCA STEAD

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First Light
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When You Reach Me

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For every kid who sees two moons

Prologue

The Sound of Corn

Just last weekend, my dad told me a story that explained one or two things about his wedding day. Not his first wedding day, the second one. The story was about him and Uncle Frank, when they were little.

They grew up in Minnesota, across from a cornfield where, every summer, the corn grew very quickly. Dad says the corn had no choice, because summers are short in Minnesota. It was either grow fast or don't bother.

Every year, Dad and Uncle Frank would stand together in the corn, listening to it grow. No one ever believed them, but they could hear the leaves squeaking, stretching for sun. They both heard the corn growing, Dad said, and no one else did.

"You never told me that before," I said. I liked thinking of them standing in the corn like that.

"I didn't?" Dad was flipping pancakes. We have this new

pancake griddle that covers two stove burners, so now he can make four at once. It's great.

"Did you hold hands?"

"Who?"

"You and Uncle Frank. In the corn. So you wouldn't lose each other."

Dad snorted. "No. Have you ever seen Uncle Frank holding hands with anyone?"

You'd probably never guess they're brothers. Uncle Frank is reddish-white, and my dad has a ton of brown freckles that give him a year-round face tan. Dad is a talker, and Uncle Frank . . . isn't. Dad loves food, every kind of it, and Uncle Frank says if he could live on one hard-boiled egg a day, he would be happy.

If you want to know what the sound of corn growing explains about my dad's second wedding day, I'll have to tell a longer story, about a lot of things that happened two years ago, when I was ten.

It's a story about me, but a *different* me, a person who doesn't exist anymore.

I have seen Uncle Frank holding hands with someone exactly one time that I can remember.

Angelica

The summer I turned ten, my cousin Angelica fell from the sleeping loft at our family's lake cabin. Uncle Frank says her head missed the woodstove by four inches.

She hit the floor with a bad sound, a *whump*. Then we didn't hear anything. No crying. No yelling. Nothing.

Until, finally, there was the sound of Angelica trying to breathe.

Dad got to her first. Aunt Ess, Angelica's mom, called from her room. "What was that? Dan? What *was* that?"

He answered, "It's Angelica—she fell, but she's okay. She got the wind knocked out of her, but I think she's okay."

From the loft, I saw Angelica sit up, slowly. Dad was rubbing her back in circles. Uncle Frank and Aunt Ess came crashing in from their bedroom, and then Angelica started crying these short, jagged cries.

The next morning, Uncle Frank said that if her head had

hit the woodstove, Angelica could have died. By that time, she looked normal. She was wearing her turquoise two-piece bathing suit and chewing her eggs with her lips sealed tight. No bruises, even—she landed on her back, Dad said, which is what knocked her wind out.

That summer, my parents had been divorced for two years already, but I still thought about when Mom used to come to the lake cabin with us. I could picture her red bathing suit on the clothesline. I remembered which end of the table she sat at for dinner. I remembered her, sitting on the dock with Aunt Ess, talking.

Mom and Dad told me about the divorce at a “family meeting.” I had just turned eight. We’d never had a family meeting before. I sat on the couch, between them. They didn’t look happy, and I suddenly got worried that something was wrong with our cat, Red. That they were going to tell me he was dying. A boy in my class that year had a cat who died. But that wasn’t it.

Dad put his arm around me and said that some big things were going to change. Mom squeezed my hand. Then Dad said they were getting divorced. Soon he was going to move out of our apartment, into a different one.

I said, “But I’m staying here, right?” I looked at Mom.

Dad said I was going to have *two* homes, and *two* rooms, instead of one. I was going to live in both places.

I could think of only one person in my class whose parents were divorced: Carolyn Shattuck. Carolyn had a navy-blue

sweatshirt with one big pocket in front. Until the family meeting, I had wanted one just like it.

I said, "What about Red?"

Mom said Red would be staying with her. "With *us*—you and me."

You and me. That made me feel awful. Because back then I couldn't think of Mom and me without Dad.

Dad said, "Things are changing, Bea. But there's still a lot you can count on. Okay? Things that won't *ever* change."

This was when they gave me the green spiral notebook and the green pen. (My favorite color is green.) In the notebook, they had made a list. The list was called Things That Will Not Change.

I started reading:

1. Mom loves you more than anything, always.
2. Dad loves you more than anything, always.

I skipped to the end, uncapped the green pen, and wrote:

7. Red will stay with me and Mom.

I said, "I want my rainbow to stay here, too. Over my bed." Dad painted that rainbow, right on the wall, when I was really little.

Mom said, "Yes, of course, sweetie. Your rainbow will stay right where it is."

I wrote that down, too. Number 8.

* * *

Dad moved into a different apartment a month later.

I go back and forth between them.

Here's how it works:

MONDAY is a DAD day.

TUESDAY is a MOM day.

WEDNESDAY is a DAD day.

THURSDAY is a MOM day.

FRIDAY is part of THE WEEKEND.

THE WEEKEND is FRIDAY and SATURDAY.

THE WEEKEND alternates.

SUNDAY is SUNDAY.

SUNDAY is its OWN DAY.

SUNDAY alternates.

Before Dad moved out, I thought of the weekend as Saturday and Sunday. Now I think of the weekend as Friday and Saturday. And I think of Sunday as SUNDAY.

Right after the family meeting, I found Red asleep in the laundry basket and carried him to my room, where I opened my new notebook. I looked at the list of Things That Will Not Change.

My parents had written:

1. Mom loves you more than anything, always.
2. Dad loves you more than anything, always.

3. Mom and Dad love each other, but in a different way.
4. You will always have a home with each of us.
5. Your homes will never be far apart.
6. We are still a family, but in a different way.

After that, I carried the green spiral notebook everywhere. I asked a lot of questions. I used the green pen.

Our first summer at the lake cabin without Mom, there were Mom-shaped reminders everywhere, like her blue Sorry! pieces and the chipped yellow bowl she always used for tomato salad. The Mom-reminders were all over the place, but I was the only one who saw them.

That summer, Dad explained to everyone at the cabin—Uncle Frank and Aunt Ess, and my cousins, James, Angelica, and Jojo—that he is gay. I already knew. My parents had told me at the one and only family meeting, when they gave me the notebook.

“Will you be gay forever now?” I asked Dad at the meeting.

Yes, he told me. He would always be attracted to some men the same way that some men were attracted to some women. It’s the way he’s felt since he was little. I uncapped my green pen and wrote it down right away on the list of Things That Will Not Change. It’s number nine: *Dad is gay.*

After Dad explained about being gay to everyone at the lake cabin, he asked if anyone had questions. No one did. Then Dad and Uncle Frank walked down to the dock and sat with their

feet in the water. I watched from the porch, where I was sitting on the edge of Uncle Frank's favorite chair. After a while, they stood up and jumped in the lake. They were splashing each other like little kids, laughing. I remember being surprised, because Uncle Frank never swims. He always says the water in that lake is too cold. Most of the time, he just sits on the porch, in his chair, in the sun.

"So, you live with your mom now?" my cousin James asked me that night in the sleeping loft. James is four years older than I am. I was eight that first summer without Mom, so he was twelve.

I explained to him about the days of the week. When I was done, we got into our beds, and Angelica tickled my arm for a while. (Usually, I tickled her arm, and then she would say she was too tired to do mine.)

Right around then, James started calling me "Ping-Pong."

He had really weird nicknames for his little sisters—he called Angelica "BD," which was for "bottom drawer," because she'd once stepped into an open dresser drawer to reach something on a shelf and fallen over, cutting her lip. And James called Jojo "Speaker," short for "speakerphone," because when she was a baby she used to cry if she heard Uncle Frank's voice but couldn't see him anywhere. The names were kind of mean, but I had secretly wanted a James nickname for a long time.

I couldn't remember doing anything Ping-Pong-related that James might be making fun of me for, but I didn't care. I actually *liked* the name Ping-Pong, until Aunt Ess heard him

down at our dock and told him to march himself up to the porch so they could “have a chat.”

“Aunt Ess, I don’t mind it!” I called after them. But she ignored me.

“You mean you *like* being a Ping-Pong ball?” Angelica said. Angelica is a year and a half older than me. We were trying to teach Jojo, even though she was only five, to play volleyball on the little beach where we kept the boats pulled up next to our dock. Now Angelica was tapping the dirty volleyball with the tips of her fingers. She had it trapped between a hip and an elbow.

“What?” I felt my eyes narrowing. I hated it when I didn’t understand something right away.

“You go back and forth, right? From your mom’s to your dad’s? Like a Ping-Pong ball.” She smiled.

I was on top of her in three steps. First, I yanked her ponytail, and then I smacked that ball off her hip, down to the dirt.

“*Bea!*” Aunt Ess shouted down from the porch. I guess she’d been yelling at James and watching over us at the same time.

Angelica just stood there smiling.

I stomped to the water and floated on my back with my ears under the water so that I couldn’t hear. Angelica was stuck waiting for me to get out because we were swim buddies. James didn’t call me Ping-Pong again. Or anything else.

When my parents were together, two weeks at the lake with my cousins was never enough for me. After the divorce, it felt about a week too long.

It felt too long the summer I was eight, when my cousin Jojo was finally old enough to stay up and play Sorry! with us after dinner. Green is Jojo's favorite color, too, so I let her have my pieces, and I took Mom's blue ones.

It felt too long the summer I was nine. That was the summer the chipped yellow bowl broke. I don't know how it happened; I just saw the pieces in the garbage.

It felt especially too long the summer I was ten. The summer Angelica fell. When those two weeks were finally over, I was in the back seat of our car even before Rocco, our dog, could hurl himself in there. And Rocco loves the car.