

Other books by Susin Nielsen

PRAISE FOR *NO FIXED ADDRESS*

'Susin Nielsen is an amazing writer.  
*No Fixed Address* is my book of the year'

**Hilary McKay**

'Susin Nielsen is the finest voice currently writing YA. Not many writers can put comedy and heartbreak in the same book, never mind the same page, but Susin does it effortlessly'

**Phil Earle**

'*No Fixed Address* tackles tough issues with endless humour and hope. A beautiful book'

**Maximum Pop**

'Susin Nielsen is warm, funny and doesn't write like anyone else'

**Charlotte Eyre, *The Bookseller***

'*No Fixed Address* is another triumph from one of my absolute favourite writers'

**Katie Clapham, *Storytellers, Inc.***

PRAISE FOR *WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES*

'A book to fortify readers against bullies and homophobes'

**Sunday Times**

'One to make you laugh, cry and read in one sitting'

**The Bookseller**

'Snappy and witty. A really fine YA novel'

**Telegraph**

'This is stellar, top-notch stuff'

**Quill and Quire, starred review**

'Unputdownable'

**INIS**

PRAISE FOR *OPTIMISTS DIE FIRST*

'Hilarious, heart-warming and beautifully unexpected – a real keeper'

**Lisa Williamson**

'Susin Nielsen has produced a richly comic story featuring  
a cast of mismatched, engaging characters'

***Guardian***

'Entertaining but also poignant'

***Irish Times***

'*Optimists Die First* is both funny and heartbreaking.  
Fans of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* will love it'

***Red Magazine***

PRAISE FOR *THE RELUCTANT JOURNAL OF HENRY K. LARSEN*

WINNER OF THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S LITERARY AWARD,  
THE UKLA AWARD AND THE CANADIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S  
CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR

'A realistic, poignant portrait of one teen who overcomes nearly  
unbearable feelings of grief and guilt'

***Kirkus***

'A fantastic narrator, authentic and endearing . . . a memorable  
read for all the right reasons'

***BookTrust***

PRAISE FOR *WORD NERD*

'Ingenious and warm-hearted, Nielsen's writing boasts  
believable, unpredictable characterisation'

***Guardian***

'Ambrose Bukowski is the titular nerd and it's in his delightful,  
disarming voice that *Word Nerd* unfolds . . . a funny, wry tale'

***Globe and Mail***

**TREMENDOUS  
THINGS**

# TREMENDOUS THINGS

A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2021 by  
Andersen Press Limited  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA, UK  
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland  
[www.andersenpress.co.uk](http://www.andersenpress.co.uk)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Susin Nielsen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Susin Nielsen, 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 83913 061 8  
Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 83913 088 5

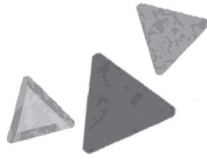
Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

To every one of you who march to  
your own beat: 'You are terrific.  
Radiant. Some human being!'



THEN





The Mumps believe that we all have a handful of Defining Moments in our lives.

Their Number One Defining Moment was the night they met each other, sixteen years ago, at a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Vancouver. Dr. Frank-N-Furter had just declared, ‘A toast!’ Mum threw her piece of toast at the screen and hit Mup in the back of the head. The rest, as they say, is history. They’ve been madly in love ever since. It has a happy ending, which I think we can all agree is the best kind of story.

My Number One Defining Moment doesn’t have a happy ending.

In fact, it hasn’t even ended.

The moment in question happened two and a half years ago, on my first day of seventh grade. We’d recently moved to Toronto, so it was also a brand-new school.

Oh, and it was also my first school ever.

Aside from a disastrous few weeks in kindergarten, I’d been homeschooled my whole life. But when we moved



from Vancouver to Toronto, we made a family decision: it was time for me to get educated, and socialised, in an actual brick-and-mortar building filled with actual flesh-and-blood kids.

Mum and Mup – collectively known as the Mumps – walked me to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School that first morning in September. They hugged and kissed me and cried a little right out front as all the other kids streamed past, which now that I think about it probably wasn't the best optics.

What I remember most about entering that massive, old redbrick building for the first time was the noise. I'd been around other kids before, obviously; I'd had frequent outings and get-togethers with other homeschooled kids. But we're talking ten to fifteen kids at a time, tops. The halls of PET Junior School were packed, with *hundreds* of kids shouting, laughing, banging locker doors, running, even though there were signs telling them to walk. My first instinct was to turn around and march right back out. But I thought of what Mup had said the night before, when I couldn't sleep: 'Remember, Wil: new beginnings bring new experiences.'

So I kept moving.

My pits were dripping with fear-sweat by the time I found my classroom. Our teacher, Mr Markowitz, stood by his desk. I can still picture him in his brown suit, the shoulders dusted with dandruff. He gave us an assignment.

‘Write a letter to yourself. Describe who you are today. Then write a list of goals you hope to achieve by the time you graduate high school. Place your letter in the envelope provided, write your name on the front, and seal it. The letters will be locked into the school’s time capsule. And remember,’ he continued, ‘you can be completely honest. These letters are for your eyes only. They will be returned to you, still sealed, six years from now, on graduation day.’

I was determined to do exactly as I was told.

So I was completely honest.

After school, Mr Markowitz carried the sealed letters from our classroom to the time capsule, which wasn’t really a time capsule at all but the safe in the principal’s office. It was a short walk from our homeroom, down a flight of stairs and to the left.

But at the top of the staircase, according to a reliable eyewitness, Mr Markowitz stopped to scratch his balls.

This had a ring of truth to it, because as we learned that year, Mr Markowitz scratched his balls a lot. He did it so much, a rumour spread that he had pubic lice.

While he scratched, one letter fluttered, unseen, to the ground.

Mine.

## Time Capsule Letter, Graduating Class of 2025

**Name:** Wilbur Alberto Nuñez-Knopf

**Age:** 11 and  $\frac{3}{4}$

**Describe Yourself As You Are Today:** I am five feet four inches tall. Farah, one of my homeschool friends in Vancouver, told me I could play a young Marty Feldman if they ever made a biopic about him, which I thought was a compliment until we watched *Young Frankenstein*. Farah also nicknamed me 'Blubber' because a) I'm chubby, and b) I cry a lot. The Mumps keep saying that a) it's baby fat and I'll have a growth spurt soon, and b) there is no shame in crying and the world needs more sensitive men. They also keep saying I'll grow into my looks. I hope they're right.

I also hope that if I grow taller, Jeremiah grows with me, because right now he's the size of a tadpole. And I hope I can learn to control him better, because recently he's started popping up at embarrassing moments for no reason. Like right now. I've had to put a textbook over my lap.

What else can I say about me? I want to be a writer when I grow up. I write a lot!! Mostly short stories about dinosaurs and outer space. Boy, I can get really lost in my make-believe worlds, which is good because we just

moved to Toronto a month ago and I have a total of zero friends! I'm dying to get a pet, but the Mumps say I have to wait. I had a cat named Snickerdoodle in Vancouver, but he didn't come home one day. The Mumps said he probably found another family.

Farah said he probably got eaten by a coyote.

### **Goals You Would Like to Achieve by the Time You Graduate:**

- 1) Grow taller.
- 2) Grow Jeremiah.
- 3) Learn to control Jeremiah.
- 4) Cry less! It may be good for men to show their feelings, but if I cry one more time at that SPCA animal shelter ad with Sarah McLachlan singing I will punch myself in the face - just thinking of it right now is making me tear up.
- 5) Make friends! I didn't have a tonne of friends in Vancouver except for Stewart Inkster, and once in a while another homeschooler like Farah. The Mumps keep saying they are my friends, but they are also my mothers, so I'm not sure they count.
- 6) Publish some of my writing! I know this is a long shot before the end of high school, and I also know every artist has to suffer some rejection, but as Mup says, 'Every dream begins with a dreamer.'

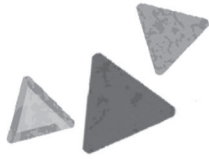
7) Have a Loving and Mutually Respectful Relationship ("Mumps) with a special girl. Fall in love! And maybe, just maybe, once we are deeply in love, I could feel one of her boobs. Or both. But only with her Enthusiastic Consent ("Mumps)!

8) Last but definitely not least: learn to be my best self. Try not to be so timid and nervous all the time. Be more willing and able to try new things. Put myself out there. Be confident and brave.

Like Mup says: 'He who takes no chances wins nothing!'

Signed,

Wilbur Alberto Nuñez-Knopf



At first I thought I was imagining things when I showed up at school the next day. Surely every single kid wasn't *actually* staring at me.

I was not imagining things.

Someone had opened my letter – *my personal, private letter* – and taken photos of it. Then that person had posted it on every social media platform known to personkind, where it had been liked by and shared with every single kid at my new school and beyond.

By ten a.m. I was hiding in the nurse's office, crying worse than I ever had during the SPCA ad.

By eleven a.m. the Mumps had been called in for an emergency meeting. I guess the principal decided I couldn't be more humiliated than I already was, because she let them read my letter off *her* phone. She assured them that the school would find the guilty party and they would be dealt with.

On the drive home I was still crying a lot, so Mum sat in the back with me and held my hand. She'd come straight

from the set of *Where There's a Wolf*, and she was in full special effects make-up; her hand was hairy. 'This isn't the end of the world, peanut. It may feel like it right now, but you will rise above it.'

'Mum's right,' Mup replied, peering at me through the rearview mirror of our new Hyundai. 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.'

I let out a sob. Mum pulled me toward her, and I felt her hairy cheeks. 'For what it's worth, I thought it was a lovely letter. Honest and to the point.'

'And trust us, there is not a boy in your class who hasn't suffered the indignities of a spontaneous erection,' Mup added from the front as I slouched even lower in my seat.

Mum stroked my hair. 'We do have one tiny bone to pick with you, peanut.'

*Oh, no.*

'Did you really have to use the word *boobs*? We've been so careful to teach you the anatomically correct names for body parts.'

'Ditto *Jeremiah*. It was cute when you were young, but I'm not sure it's still age-appropriate or healthy to be anthropomorphising your penis.' Mup sighed. 'I blame myself for playing 'Joy to the World' a lot when you were little.'

It was true that I'd lifted the name from the song, because Jeremiah looked like a bullfrog. And he was a good friend of mine.

‘To be clear, Wil: you want to feel a girl’s *breasts*,’ said Mum. ‘And you want a bigger *penis*.’ She smiled, revealing sharp, pointy werewolf teeth.

In case it isn’t obvious, I am an only child.



The Mumps did their best to stay upbeat that evening. They even pulled out the karaoke machine and tried to nudge me into singing ‘I Will Survive’ by Gloria Gaynor. (I refused.)

Later that night, though, I made a trip to the bathroom to pee, and I overheard them talking in their bedroom.

Mum: ‘I knew that school was a bad idea.’

Mup: ‘Norah, come on. How could you possibly know?’

Mum: ‘For the same reasons we chose to homeschool him, Carmen. One, he’s a preemie. Two, he’s young for his school year. And three – well, he’s not exactly socially adept, is he? Remember kindergarten? He cried every single day for three weeks until we finally pulled him out.’

Mup: ‘And maybe, if we’d left him in for a fourth week, he’d have stopped crying and started fitting in.’

Even though I couldn’t see them, I could feel the icy chill in Mum’s silence.

Mum: ‘I just want to do what’s best for our boy. And that school isn’t it.’

Mup: ‘Darling Norah. I think we can both agree that our boy needs to learn how to navigate this big, crazy world we



live in. Besides, what are our options? We can't homeschool him, not with your new gig and my work schedule.'

Mum: 'We could look into private school.'

Mup: 'And how on earth would we pay for it?'

Silence. Then:

Mum: 'My heart breaks for him.'

Mup: 'I know. Mine does, too. But let's give it a few days. I'm sure they'll find the person responsible, and when they do—'

Mum: 'We can string them up by their feet and pluck out their eyeballs with a spoon, then slowly disembowel them with a rusty old knife—'

Mup: 'Ooh, you are such a Mama Bear.' Then it grew silent again but this time I was pretty sure they were kissing. So I went back to bed and I tried to push all the bad thoughts out of my brain. I imagined instead that I was in the barn with the other animals in *Charlotte's Web*, because it was my favourite story of all time, and after a while it worked, and I fell asleep.



The school found the culprit almost immediately. Poppy, a girl in my grade, told the principal that after Mr Markowitz dropped the letter, she'd seen Tyler Kertz pick it up.

I'd had exactly one interaction with Tyler, when I'd sat beside him in homeroom. 'Nice hat,' he'd said.

‘Thanks. It’s a Tilley original.’ Then: ‘I’m Wilbur Nuñez-Knopf.’ I held out my hand.

He didn’t take it. ‘Do you have a condition or something?’

‘What?’

‘Your eyes. They bulge.’

‘N-n-no. They’re just my eyes—’

‘You look like a frog. Or a pug.’

Then Mr Markowitz entered, and that was that.

In spite of that – or maybe *because* of it? – when Tyler saw my name on the envelope, he didn’t simply hand it back to Mr Markowitz. He opened it, read it – then decided everyone else should read it, too.

When he was asked to explain himself, he told the principal that he’d done it ‘for a laugh’. He hadn’t meant any harm.

Kertz got a week’s suspension, and he had to write me a letter of apology.

Me?

I was sentenced to an eternity in hell.

Helpless. My life in free fall . . .

My inner thoughts revealed to all



From 'No Parachute' by Wilbur Nuñez-Knopf

'Time heals all wounds,' Mup likes to say. 'And time wounds all heels.' I love Mup with all my heart. But some of her platitudes are a total crock.

After Tyler Kertz was suspended, we had one of our Family Dialogues. 'We think you should try to stick it out for a bit,' Mup said. 'Running away from your problems is a race you'll never win.' Mum emitted a strangled sound, and Mup took her hand and gripped it, hard. I was pretty sure they had a difference of opinion but had agreed to present a united front.

'Just one month, pickle,' Mum said. 'If things don't get better after that, we'll get you out.' She made it sound like a jailbreak.

So I kept going to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School.  
And it was a nightmare.

The cracks about Jeremiah were endless. Some kids tried to get me to cry on purpose, and I'm ashamed to admit they sometimes succeeded. Worse, nobody called me Wilbur any more. I had a new nickname. None of us – not me, not

Mum or Mup – had ever noticed the acronym my initials made: *W. A. N. K.*

I hated going to school. I made up my mind that when the month was up, I would tell the Mumps I wanted out.

Then, just before the end of September, we were buried in an avalanche of bad luck.



Mup came home from work one day looking shaken. ‘I was replaced by a robot.’ She worked full-time at a grocery store as a cashier. They’d recently installed a bunch of self-serve checkout kiosks; since Mup was last in, she was first out. A few days later, Mum’s TV show – her first starring gig, the whole reason we’d moved to Toronto – went up in flames. *Where There’s a Wolf* starred Jennica Valentine and my mum, Norah Knopf, as leaders of a pack of female werewolves. But just two weeks into shooting, the producer was arrested for something called money laundering, and production shut down.

The Mumps scrambled to get jobs, any jobs. I heard them talking late at night; they were terrified we might lose the house we’d recently bought in the heart of Kensington Market. ‘We counted our chickens before they hatched,’ said Mup.

They were Stressed with a capital *S*.

So when the time came to have our family dialogue

about school, I just said, ‘It’s fine. I’m good. School’s good.’ And all the little muscles in their faces relaxed, and I knew it was a huge relief, having one less thing to worry about, namely *me*.

I kept telling myself it was only two years. Then I would go to high school, where I could start fresh.

But I was an idiot.

Because Pierre Elliott Trudeau Senior School is right next door to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School.

Meaning Tyler – and Wank – moved right along with me.