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I dedicate the half of the book I wrote to the author of the half I didn't. I am a very lucky sister.

—Ann

For Ann

—Ben

(See how much easier that is?)

Let me ask you this: What's the worst thing you've ever done? Really think about it.

Well, multiply your thing by a billion and you don't even get close to mine. Sorry to brag. It's just . . . your thing? It's the Cheeto-dust thumbprint you left on the basement sofa. It's an ant's toe you stepped on. And then you said, "Sorry!" and the ant went, "No worries, mate!" Because the ant's British, I don't know.

My name is Henry Platt and I am twelve years old. I say it's "my thing," but I shouldn't take all the credit. There were others. Six of us, to be exact. We each had a role to play, all guilty. But it started with me, a decision I made, and for that I guess I'm the guiltiest. Again, it's not a competition. But, you know, if it were . . . I'd win. Woo-hoo.

So, why am I telling you this? I mean, if it's so horrible, wouldn't I want to keep it a secret? Normally, yes. But where we are now is so very, very far from normal.

We've done everything we can to fix the mess we made. In a few hours, we'll see if it worked. These words I'm writing now, they're like our trail of breadcrumbs. Because if somehow this doesn't go right, we need you, reader, to know what really happened.

BTW, Frances just read this over my shoulder and said my breadcrumbs suck and to do better. She's always been really supportive like that.

If all goes well, you'll never know about us. Life here in twenty-first-century America will seem normal to you. Nazi Germany will stay in the history books. You'll never know about Nazi America—or *Westfallen,* as it's called. The only evidence you'll have of what we did will be these pages you're reading right now.

If not . . .

bitte vergib uns.[1]

1. Please forgive us.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Always dig deep when burying a zombie gerbil.

Henry

Like all the best stories, this one starts with a rodent. A gerbil, to be precise.

Zeus died on a Tuesday. Or, I found him on a Tuesday. I know it was Tuesday because it was the day our class went on a field trip to the Empire State Building and I stayed home sick. And by "sick" I mean I really didn't want to go on the field trip. I don't do well with heights. Or . . . what's the opposite of heights? Depths? I do even worse with those.

At some point during my fake sick day, I decided Zeus needed a proper burial. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go through for a gerbil, but what was I going to do, flush him down the toilet like a goldfish? Throw him away? Put him in the freezer next to the waffles? There weren't a lot of great options. And, of course, if he needed a burial, he needed a coffin. That's probably where I went a little overboard.

See, Zeus didn't belong to me alone. He had two other owners: Frances Moore and Lukas Strohman. Frances lived in the house behind mine and Lukas in the house next to hers. One day in the summer before second grade, Frances saw Lukas and me building an underground roller coaster in my backyard and squeezed through the fence to tell us we were doing it wrong. She never left. (And we never finished our roller coaster.)

We were a gang of three, always together. When our second-grade class voted to replace our boring class gerbil with a chinchilla (BTW, super-soft + terrified + nocturnal = bad choice for class pet), the three of us banded together to rescue poor, unwanted Zeus. The day we brought him home—first to Lukas's house—we swore an oath to our new bond: In a world of fancy, super-soft chinchillas, we were gerbils. Proud. Scrappy. Somewhat unpopular.

Then something happened over the summer between sixth and seventh grade. Lukas went to a sports camp, Frances went to an arts camp, and I went back to bed. I mean, it made sense. Lukas was really good at baseball. Like, *really good.* Coaches said his "eye" and swing were even better than his older brother's (his brother had college recruiters lining up in eighth grade). Frances was super into drawing anime, and she was really good, too. I was really good at lying in bed. There wasn't a camp for that—I looked.

Anyway, Frances came home with new friends and her hair dyed purple on one side and black on the other. It did not look good. But I didn't say anything, partly because she was kind of scary now with the big boots and spiked bracelet. I don't see her much anymore. When I do see her at school, she usually says hi by jumping out at me and hissing with claw hands. I never really know what to do with that.

Her parents definitely don't know what to do with her. That's what my mom said. My mom loves Frances, but I can tell she doesn't like her parents very much—and my mom likes everybody. My mom once heard her dad say Frances was their "first pancake," as in when you make pancakes it takes a while to get

the heat right, so the first one's never good. Only thing is Frances was their *only pancake*. I always felt bad for Frances having those parents and not having siblings to help with hating them.

Then there's Lukas. Lukas Strohman had been my best friend since first grade when we both got the role of "coral" in the school play. It was *The Little Mermaid*. Normally they make the kids with zero acting skills be trees in school plays. And we were headed right down the forest path until Lukas very correctly pointed out that there wouldn't be trees in the ocean. So we were coral. And we were great coral.

We became best friends and probably still would be if his parents hadn't moved him to a private school, where he got all jock-y and started saying things like, "'Sup, brah?" Lukas's parents are the exact opposite of Frances's. His dad volunteer-coached our Little League teams for six straight years and taught us everything we "needed" to know about '90s grunge music and Japanese wood joinery. His kids were big fluffy buttery round pancakes and life was just a big sea of grade A organic maple syrup.

We'll all eventually figure out what we're good at. I hope. But Lukas had abs when the rest of us were still poking baby fat. He pretended not to be, but he was also stupid smart. He'd play Xbox all night and still get As on his tests the next morning. Add it all up and you get Lukas shipped off to private school and me wondering if I'll ever make another friend.

So, when I found Zeus on that Tuesday, I decided Frances and Lukas needed to know. Co-parents and all.

Frances didn't even remember who Zeus was when I texted her.

Me: Hey. Zeus died.

Frances (two hours later): The god of thunder?

Me: Our gerbil.

Frances: Ohhhhh.

Frances: That thing's still alive?!

Me: No, he's dead. That's why I said he died.

Frances: Oh, right.

It went even worse with Lukas.

Me: Hey. Just wanted to let you know Zeus died and I'm going to bury him later if you want to come by.

Lukas: Who dis?

Me: Henry.

Lukas: Henry T or Henry S?

Me: The one who had a gerbil named Zeus.

Lukas: Henry! Wuz good, dog!

I set the burial time for 5:00 p.m. and didn't totally expect either of them to show up. I carried the Nike size four shoebox and a shovel into our backyard, followed by my little brother, Eli.

"Can I see him?" Eli asked.

"There's not much to see, Eli. It's just a gerbil."

"It's dead," Eli said, staring at the box.

"Yeah, it's dead," I said. "*He's dead.*"

"I think, Hen, I think he died because . . . because he was old."

I handed the shoebox to Eli, if for no other reason than to calm his stims. Eli's autistic.

"Yup. He had a good, long life." I lied about the "good" part. Zeus lived his entire life alone in a small tank with a wheel. I barely remembered to feed him.

Frances and Lukas came in through the house, out the back door. Eli greeted them like nothing had changed. And, to their credit, they did the same with him. Eli loved Frances and Lukas. He didn't show it in an obvious way, but you learn to read the signs. They're all there, just different. Lukas, in particular, always read the signs right.

"'Sup, baller," Lukas said, as he put his fist out for Eli to bump. "Your boy Stanton's en fuego. Hope you're keeping that rookie card safe."

"I have three of them!" Eli shouted.

Lukas looked over at me. "'Sup, Hen."

"Hey," I said.

We settled on a spot back in the wooded part of the yard near the old garden shed. Lukas took the shovel and started digging. It was easier than making conversation.

"That oughta do it," Lukas said, one foot on the shovel, one hand on his hip, admiring the shallow hole he'd just dug. Like he was some kind of cowboy now?

Frances stood there staring at her phone. I wanted to punch them both. But this was a funeral. And with the dark clouds moving in fast, it was looking like we had to hurry.

"Anyone want to say something?" I asked.

"I'm going inside," Eli said.

"Okay, that's something," I said.

Lukas gave Eli a pat on the back as he left. Frances went right back to her phone.

"Let's just get this over with." I picked up the Nike shoebox and placed it gently in the hole.

"Wait . . ." Frances stepped forward and took the shovel from Lukas. She took a deep breath. "You were a good gerbil, Zeus," she said finally. "I hope you don't become a zombie gerbil and climb out of there and try to eat our brains. But if you do, we can all blame Lukas because that is one lame hole."

"What?" Lukas crowed. "That's a great hole!"

"It's fine," I said.

"*Fine. Your* house, your *Pet Sematary*," Frances said.

Frances knew I didn't sleep in my own bed for a week after watching that movie. I glanced down at the hole again, the image of a white-eyed, crazed gerbil burning into my as-yet-uneaten brain.

"Fine. I'll dig it a little deeper," Lukas said, saving me the embarrassment.

"Here's an idea," Frances said. "How about we take him out of the giant box so we don't have to dig such a deep hole?" She grabbed the box.

"Wait . . . Don't . . ."

Frances opened the lid. There was Zeus, nestled in his wood chips. His pointy face poked out from a swaddle of toilet paper.

"Did you mummify him?" Lukas asked.

"Mummy's better than zombie," Frances said. Then, noticing what else was in the box, she whispered, "Oh my God, Hen. This is the saddest thing I've ever seen."

"Just . . ." I made a half-hearted attempt to take it back.

Lukas peered over her shoulder. "Duuuude. No."

Propped up inside the box I had put a photo of the three of us in second grade. Next to that were old tickets from Millerton Playland, the night before it closed for good—and the last time we all three hung out together. And then there was the tricolor friendship bracelet. We made them together in third grade. Blue thread for Frances, green for Lukas, and red for me. This was a funeral for more than just Zeus.

"Aw, look at your chubby little cheeks, Lukas," Frances said, holding up the photo.

"Shut up." Lukas snatched it from her. He just held it, staring at it.

Frances and I inched closer to get a better look. It showed the three of us, playing with Zeus shortly after we got him. Zeus was in Frances's hair, and Lukas and I were laughing while trying to make ugly faces for the camera. It wasn't too hard. Lukas had a terrible bowl cut (courtesy of his dad) and I, apparently, had yet to discover the magic of toothbrushing. Or hair brushing, for that matter, judging by my tangle of curly black hair. We stood staring at the picture in silence for what felt like forever.

"Life is weird, bro," Lukas said finally, lowering the picture to look at Zeus.

"Death is weirder," I said, also looking at Zeus.

Frances peered into the box. "Why is there a turd in there?"

"That's not a turd," I said.

"That's a turd. Bro, dead gerbils aren't supposed to make turds," Lukas said.

"That's not a turd," I said, pretty sure now it was a turd.

But I'd clearly transported it into the box with Zeus somehow. In the wood chips. It was in the wood chips.

"Bro," Frances said. "We learned that in science. I specifically remember Ms. Lin saying, 'Dead gerbils don't turd.'" She pointed at the hole. "Dig it deeper."

Whatever was left of the sun disappeared behind a fast-moving cloud. Just as the world went dark, a growling rumble rolled across the sky and the church bells down the street started chiming. We all looked up at the sky and seemed to have the same thought: It was getting totally *Pet Sematary* out here.

"Dig it deeper," Frances whispered.

"Yup," Lukas said, grabbing the shovel. He slammed it down into the dirt.

"It's gonna pour," I said, looking up at the sky again.

"Deeper!" Frances yelled. "He could still climb out of that!"

Lukas struck with the shovel again. This time a *clink* sounded off the end of it.

"Not going deeper. I hit a rock," Lukas said.

"That wasn't a rock. Rocks don't sound like that," I said.

"It's a rock," Lukas insisted.

Looking back now, oh man, do I ever wish I had just let it be a rock. I could've so easily just let it be a rock. We would've dug in a new spot. But I didn't. I mean, of course I didn't, right?

U-Boat or Whale?

Millerton Eagle 25 April 1944
p. A.5 Don Donahue

A family picnic ended in panic Monday evening in Sea Bright after onlookers claimed to glimpse a German U-boat off the coast.

Samuel Spagnelli of Rumson claimed he and two cousins spotted the enemy vessel while lighting fireworks on the beach. "It just sat there, watching us," Mr. Spagnelli said. Officer William Stutz of Rumson declared otherwise. "It was a whale," he countered.

A summons was issued to the Spagnelli family for an unlawful fireworks display on the beach.