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Opening extract from

Savvy

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For
Hannah
with love
as you blow
out thirteen
dripping
candles

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1

When my brother Fish turned thirteen, we moved to the deepest part of inland because of the hurricane and, of course, the fact that he'd caused it. I had liked living down south on the edge of land, next to the pushing pulling waves. I had liked it with a mighty kind of liking, so moving had been hard – hard like the pavement the first time I fell off my pink two-wheeler and my palms burned like fire from all of the hurt just under the skin. But it was plain that Fish could live nowhere near or nearby or next to or close to or on or around any largish bodies of water. Water had a way of triggering my brother and making ordinary, everyday weather take a frightening turn for the worse.

Unlike any normal hurricane, Fish's birthday storm had started without warning. One minute, my brother was tearing paper from presents in our backyard near the beach; the next minute, both Fish and the afternoon sky went a funny and frightening shade of

grey. My brother gripped the edge of the picnic table as the wind kicked up around him, gaining momentum and ripping the wrapping paper out of his hands, sailing it high up into the sky with all of the balloons and streamers roiling together and disintegrating like a birthday party in a blender. Groaning and cracking, trees shuddered and bent over double, uprooting and falling as easily as sticks in wet sand. Rain pelted us like gravel thrown by a playground bully as windows shattered and shingles ripped off the roof. As the storm surged and the ocean waves tossed and churned, spilling raging water and debris further and further up the beach, Momma and Poppa grabbed hold of Fish and held on tight, while the rest of us ran for cover. Momma and Poppa knew what was happening. They had been expecting something like this and knew that they had to keep my brother calm and help him ride out his storm.

That hurricane had been the shortest on record, but to keep the coastal towns safe from our Fish, our family had packed up and moved deep inland, plunging into the very heart of the land and stopping as close to the centre of the country as we could get. There, without big water to fuel big storms, Fish could make it blow and rain without so much heartache and ruin.

Settling directly between Nebraska and Kansas in a little place all our own, just off Highway 81, we were well beyond hollering distance from the nearest

neighbour, which was the best place to be for a family like ours. The closest town was just a far off blur across the highway, and was not even big enough to have its own school or store, or petrol station or mayor.

Monday to Wednesday, we called our thin stretch of land Kansaska. Thursday to Saturday, we called it Nebransas. On Sundays, since that was the Lord's Day, we called it nothing at all, out of respect for His creating our world without the lines already drawn on its face like all my grandpa's wrinkles.

If it weren't for old Grandpa Bomba, Kansaska-Nebransas wouldn't even have existed for us to live there. When Grandpa wasn't a grandpa and was just instead a small fry, hobbledehoy boy blowing out thirteen dripping candles on a lopsided cake, his savvy hit him hard and sudden – just like it did to Fish that day of the backyard birthday party and the hurricane – and the entire state of Idaho got made. At least, that's the way Grandpa Bomba always told the story.

'Before I turned thirteen,' he'd say, 'Montana bumped dead straight into Washington, and Wyoming and Oregon shared a cosy border.' The tale of Grandpa's thirteenth birthday had grown over the years just like the land he could move and stretch, and Momma just shook her head and smiled every time he'd start talking tall. But in truth, that young

boy who grew up and grew old like wine and dirt, had been making new places whenever and wherever he pleased. That was Grandpa's savvy.

My savvy hadn't come along yet. But I was only two days away from my very own thirteen dripping candles – though *my* momma's cakes never lopped to the side, nor to the middle. Momma's cakes were perfect, just like Momma, because that was *her* savvy. Momma was perfect. Anything she made was perfect. Everything she did was perfect. Even when she messed up, Momma messed up perfectly.

I often reckoned what it would be like for me. I pictured myself blowing out the candles on my cake and fires dying in chimneys across four counties. Or I imagined making my secret birthday wish – getting my cheeks full and round with air – then floating up towards the ceiling like my very own happy-birthday balloon.

'My savvy is going to be a good one,' I told my brother Rocket. 'I just know it.'

'Girls don't get the powerful jujubes,' said Rocket, running one hand through his dark shock of unkempt hair with a crackle of static. 'Girls only get quiet, polite savvies – sugar and spice and everything humdrum savvies. It's boys who get the earthshaking kinds of savvy.'

I had scowled at my brother and stuck out my tongue. Rocket and I both knew that there were plenty

of girls climbing round our family tree that had strong and sturdy savvies, like Great-aunt Jules, who could step back twenty minutes in time every time she sneezed; or our second-cousin Olive, who could melt ice with a single red-hot stare.

Rocket was seventeen and full of junk that I wasn't allowed to say until I got much, much older. But he was electric through and through, and that had always gone to his head. For fun, Rocket would make my hair stand on end like he'd rubbed it with a balloon, or hit Fish with a wicked zap from the other side of the room. But Rocket could keep the lights on when the power went out, and our family sure liked that, especially the littler Beaumonts.

Rocket was the oldest, with Fish and me following after. Born only a year apart, Fish and I were nearly the same height and looked a lot alike, both with hair like sand and straw – hair like Momma's. But while I had Poppa's hazel eyes, Fish had Momma's ocean blue ones. It was like we'd each taken a little bit of Momma, or a little bit of Poppa, and made the rest our own.

I wasn't the youngest or the smallest in the family; broody Samson was a dark and shadowy seven, and doll-faced Gypsy was three. It was Gypsy who started calling me Mibs, when my full name, Mississippi, became far too much for her toothsome toddler tongue to manage. But that had been a relief. That name had

always followed me around like one of Fish's heavy storm clouds.

The itch and scritch of birthday buzz was about all I was feeling on the Thursday before the Friday before the Saturday I turned thirteen. Sitting at the dinner table, next to Poppa's empty chair and ready plate, I barely ate a bite. Across from me, Gypsy prattled endlessly, counting the make-believe creatures she imagined seeing in the room, and begging me to help her name them.

I pushed the food around my plate, ignoring my sister and daydreaming about what it would be like when I got my very own savvy, when the telephone rang right in the middle of pot roast, mashed potatoes, and mighty-unpopular green beans. As Momma rose to answer, us kids and Grandpa Bomba too, seized the chance to plop our potato on top of our beans while Momma's back was turned. Samson tucked some of those beans into his pockets to give to his dead pet turtle, even though Momma always said he shouldn't be giving it any of our good food, seeing how it was dead and all, and the food would just go to rot. But Samson was sure as sadly sure that his turtle was only hibernating, and Momma hadn't the heart to toss it from the house.

We were all smiling to each other around the kitchen table at the smart way we'd taken care of those beans

when Momma dropped the phone with a rattling clatter and a single sob – perfectly devastated. She sank to the floor, looking for all the world as if she were staring right through the checked brown and blue lino to behold the burning hot-lava core at the very centre of the Earth.

'It's Poppa,' Momma said in a choked voice, as her perfect features stretched and pinched.

A gust of wind burst from Fish's side of the table, blowing everyone's hair and sending our paper napkins flying pell-mell on to the floor. The air in the room grew warm and humid as though the house itself had broken out into a ripe, nervous sweat, and the many dusty, tightly lidded, empty-looking jars that lined the tops of all the cupboards rattled and clinked like a hundred toasting glasses. Outside it was already raining Fish rain – drops hastened from a sprinkle to a downpour in seconds as Fish stared, wide-eyed and gaping like his namesake, holding back his fear but unable to scumble his savvy.

'Momma?' Rocket ventured. The air around him crackled with static and his T-shirt clung to him like socks to towels straight from the dryer. The lights in the house pulsed, and blue sparks crackled and snapped at the tips of his nervous, twitching fingers.

Momma looked at Poppa's empty chair and waiting plate, then she turned to us, chin trembling, and told

us about the accident on the highway. She told us how Poppa's car was badly crushed, like a drink can under a cowboy boot, and how he'd gone and forgotten to get out before it happened, ending up in a room and a bed at Salina Hope Hospital, where now he lay broken and asleep, not able to wake up.

'Don't fret, child,' Grandpa consoled Momma as though they were back in time and Momma was still a young girl sitting on his knee crying over a broken doll. 'Those doctors know what's what. They'll fix your fellow up in no time. They'll get his buttons sewn back on.' Grandpa Bomba's tone was soft and reassuring. But as the strobe-like flashes from Rocket's nervous sparks lit Grandpa's face, I could see the worry etched deep into all his wrinkles.

For half of a half of a half of second I hated Poppa. I hated him for working so far away from home and for having to take the highway every day. I hated him for being in that accident and for ruining our pot roast. Mostly, I realized that my perfect cake with its pink and yellow frosting was probably not going to get made, and I hated Poppa for wrecking my most important birthday before it had even arrived. Then I felt the burning shame of even having those thoughts about my good, sweet poppa and I sank low in my chair. To make amends for my hateful feelings, I sat quietly and ate every last unwelcome green bean from

beneath my mashed potatoes, as Fish's rain lashed against the windows and Rocket caused every lightbulb in the house to explode with a live-wire zing and a popping shatter, sending shards of glass tinkling to the floor and pitching the house into darkness.

2

Later that night, as I lay awake in the dark bedroom I shared with Gypsy, I listened to my sister's even breathing and to the steady patter of Fish's worried rain. I could hear Momma and Rocket moving around downstairs, sweeping up glass and replacing lightbulbs. And though Grandpa had gone to bed as well, every now and then the ground would rumble and the floor would shake as though the earth below us had a bellyache.

Momma and Rocket were leaving for Salina early in the morning and planning to stay in a motel near the hospital. I had begged to go, begged to go and see Poppa and stay in a motel and get some of those little soaps all wrapped up in paper. But the rest of us had to stay at home with Grandpa. Rocket got to go because his electric touch was the only thing that could make our old car run.

Nobody had said anything about my birthday. Nobody had said much about much. I lay awake most

of the night, unable to sleep, until Momma tiptoed in with the dawn to whisper a soft goodbye, kissing my cheek lightly with her perfect pink lips. Still upset that I wasn't allowed go with her and Rocket to Salina, I pretended to be asleep, and soon after I heard the car doors slam and the engine rumble to life at Rocket's spark as he and Momma drove away.

That Friday before my birthday, Fish was in charge of looking after Gypsy and Grandpa Bomba. It was my job to get Samson up and ready for school and to make sure we both made it up the three steep steps of the big orange bus that took Samson and me the fifteen miles to school in Hebron, Nebraska. I had to poke and prod broody Samson up the long, soggy boggy road towards our mailbox, which had fallen over in the night after getting pushed ten feet further to the west from all of Grandpa's worried rumbling. Samson didn't say much waiting for the bus, but Samson never did.

'It's Missy-pissy and her storm cloud,' Ashley Bing said every day when Samson and I climbed on to the bus. And every day Emma Flint repeated, 'Missy-pissy!' with a snorting laugh, like it was a new and funny joke each time. The kids at school had learned on my very first day that my real name was Mississippi, which had been unfortunate; we Beaumonts already got enough whispers and giggles as it was. The rumours were fierce, and I'd heard them all:

'Look, it's the weird kids. My mom said they had to move here because one of them got into some *huge* kind of trouble.'

'I heard the oldest brother got hit by lightning and now he's dangerous and hardly ever leaves the house.'

'That family ought to live in an ark. It's almost always storming at their place and one of these days they'll just wash away for good.'

I knew that after I blew out my own thirteen dripping candles, it'd be ah-dee-os and ah-lo-ha to Hebron Middle School, as well as to Ashley Bing and Emma Flint, and everyone else like them. After my birthday, my poor moody Samson would be a lonesome shadow in the back of the big orange bus while I grew moss in pickle jars with Fish and Rocket back at home.

It was hard for us Beaumont kids to make friends and keep them. It wasn't safe to invite anyone over with Fish and Rocket still learning to scumble their savvies; we couldn't risk someone finding out or getting hurt by sparks or storms if my brothers lost control. Like so many things, a savvy could take years to tame and Momma and Poppa said the ups and downs of growing up only added to the challenge.

My last day at Hebron Middle School was a slow, creeping crawl of a day. It was hard, hard, hard to

concentrate on $x+y=z$ when my thoughts were all tied up at Salina Hope Hospital. It was harder still to spell *accommodate* and *adolescence* and *arm-a-dill-o* (A-R-M-A-D-I-double L-O) when I thought of Poppa waiting for Momma to come and give him the fairy-tale kiss that would wake him up, and I couldn't imagine how often in my life it might be so very important to spell *arma-double L-dillo*. But, of all things, it was hardest to listen to Ashley Bing and Emma Flint whisper and stare when the teacher said, 'I'd like everyone to join me in wishing Mibs Beaumont a fond farewell. Today is her last day with us here at Hebron Middle School. Mibs will be home-schooled from next week.'

Everyone turned in their seats to look at me. Nobody smiled or wished me a fond sort of anything. Most of the kids just shrugged and turned right back around.

'Missy-pissy's going to stay home with her mommy,' Ashley said, as though she were talking to a baby – just quiet enough that the teacher couldn't hear.

'With her *mommy*,' Emma repeated.

'She's going to stay home so that no one can see what a friendless freak she is,' Ashley sneered.

'What a *freak* she is,' mimicked Emma like a spiteful parrot.

It was a good thing for Ashley and Emma that Momma kept us kids home once we had our savvy.

By the end of the day, I was hoping that mine might give me the muscle to turn nasty girls into slimy green frogs or to glue their mouths shut tight with a nod of my head.

When Samson and I got back home that afternoon, a shiny gold minivan was parked in front of our house and Fish was angrily blasting it clean with the garden hose. With its smiling angel air freshener dangling in the front window, I recognized the van immediately. It belonged to Miss Rosemary, the preacher's wife.

Momma made the whole family go to church in Hebron every Sunday despite any fears of savvy catastrophes, and Miss Rosemary was well-known to us all. She smelled like disinfectant and butterscotch and had her own matching set of rights and wrongs – like suitcases she made other people carry – and she took it upon herself to make everything and everyone as shipshape and apple-pie as she felt the Lord had intended them to be. Somehow, the news had already reached the preacher's wife about Poppa's accident and about the rest of us being on our own without a momma. Miss Rosemary had come to set things right.

Water spun from the hose in Fish's hand, swirling around the van like a cyclone in the winds churned up by his bad mood. The trees next to the house, bright yellow-green with leafy spring, bent and

swayed. Fish lowered the hose when he saw us coming, his face stormy black.

'If y'know what's good for you, you'll sneak in the back.' He nodded his head towards the house. We all stood and looked sadly at our own lovely house as though we'd just found out that a grizzly bear had moved in and pulled all the stuffing from the furniture and torn all the pictures from the walls and eaten all the special-occasion mini-marshmallows from the high top shelf above the refrigerator while we were gone. Then, like a break in bad weather, Fish smiled his cockeyed smile and sprayed the hose my way teasingly. 'Last day away to school, eh, Mibs?'

'Last day,' I said, dodging the water from the hose. Leaving Fish to finish his chore, Samson and I quietly let ourselves in through the back door – hoping to make it up the stairs before Miss Rosemary knew we were there.

'Your grandfather looked tired, so I had him lie down in his room for a rest,' Miss Rosemary said the moment we entered the kitchen. She was perched up high, with a spray bottle cocked in one rubber-gloved hand and a rag held ready in the other. She was taking the jars from the tops of the cupboards and cleaning their dust with a wrinkle in her nose, squinting at the faded labels. I held my breath as I watched her, hoping that she hadn't opened any of them. No one who wasn't family should have been touching those jars

– no one. 'Gypsy is also down for a nap,' Miss Rosemary continued. 'So I expect you two to be quiet and not wake her.'

'Yes, Miss Rosemary,' Samson and I both said, but Samson mostly moved his lips.

'Your mother should have called me the moment she found out about your poor father,' Miss Rosemary said, dusting the last jar with a flourish. Satisfied with her work, she clasped both the spray bottle and the rag to her chest and closed her eyes as though she was praying for the strength to clean up the whole wide world. When she reopened her eyes, she gave us a stern and solemn look.

'I ought to have been here sooner,' she said. 'Children need a mother in the house.'