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opening extract from

Love, Aubrey

written by

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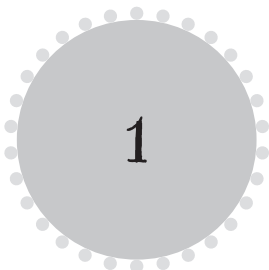
published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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1

It was fun at first, playing house.

I made all my own meals. Crackers and cheese, three times a day.

I watched whatever I wanted on TV, all day.

It'd been a good three days: crackers and cheese for breakfast, TV; crackers and cheese for lunch, TV; crackers and cheese for dinner, TV, bed. Nothing to think about but TV and cheese. A perfect world.

Then I ran out of cheese.

There wasn't anything left in the freezer. The veggie drawer in the fridge had drippy brown lettuce and stinky carrots. A container of milk sat on the shelf. I opened it. It smelled awful too, so I put the cap back on and shoved it to the back of the fridge.

I checked my room for snacks. I peeked at the lower shelf of my nightstand, where I had set a plate with two chocolate-covered cookies for Jilly, the way Savannah always did. Jilly's cookies used to disappear, but I couldn't seem to get her to come round any more. Savannah probably ate the cookies herself. I picked one up and bit it, but it was hard stale.

I had to go shopping. I needed a break from TV anyway. I got some money from my sock drawer, taking just two of the twenty-dollar bills left over from my birthday. It was so long ago, my birthday. On the day I turned eleven, I didn't think I would be using the money in Gram's card to buy my own groceries.

Everything was different now.

I didn't want anyone at the store to notice me, so I put on a hat and sunglasses, like a movie star walking around a city.

I put my backpack on and set out for the grocery store. It was nice to be outside for a change. The summer air felt really hot, though, and soon there was sweat under my hat and running down my face behind the glasses. The disguise wasn't as glamorous as it had seemed.

I was excited to pick out anything I wanted at the store. I went to the aisle with the SpaghettiOs and lifted my sunglasses to examine the cans. I wanted the ones with meatballs. *Savannah likes the plain ones.* No, she liked – Savannah had liked the plain ones—

I suddenly felt very sick, there in the canned-goods aisle.

But I needed food. I put five cans of SpaghettiOs with meatballs into my trolly.

Because I wanted to run a healthy household, I figured I needed some vegetables. I got two cans of corn and one of green beans. I picked out a box of Cheerios and a carton of milk, a loaf of bread, packs of sliced turkey and ham and a bag of apples. I realized my backpack would feel heavy and figured that that was enough to eat, for a few days anyway.

I paid and made it out of the store without anyone recognizing me. I stopped at a bench and zipped the paper grocery bag into my backpack. I adjusted my hat and sunglasses and started to walk home, but that's when I noticed the pet store next to the grocery.

I wasn't on a schedule or anything. I had time to go inside.

A bell jingled on the door as I opened it. The store had a heavy smell of animals and the sounds of many noisy birds chirping.

There were three puppies in glass cages. I pressed my hand to one of the windows and the baby dog jumped against it.

That would be fun, to have a dog.

I took the wad of leftover money out of my pocket and looked at it. The puppies cost hundreds of dollars each. Even the rest of the money in my birthday card wouldn't have been enough.

In the back of the store were tanks of fish. In front of the

tanks were rows of individual little bowls, each with one colourful fish inside. The sign said BETTA FISH $3.99.

On the very end of the row of bowls was a blue fish with purple-edged fins. He was looking right at me and waving one of his fins.

I wiggled my finger back at him, and looked at the money in my hand again.

I carefully carried the bowl to the counter. The lady there saw me coming and slapped a container of food down.

'It's two dollars extra,' she said.

'That's fine, ma'am.' I watched as she moved my fish into a plastic bag, tied it and handed it to me.

'What's his name?' she asked.

'Sammy,' I said.

I held his bag carefully in my hand the whole way home.

I had everything I needed to run a household: a house, food and a new family. From now on it would just be me, Aubrey, and Sammy – the two of us, and no one else.

We'd had a fish before, a goldfish. I found her old bowl with blue pebbles under the kitchen sink. I hummed as I rinsed the pebbles without soap to keep Sammy's water suds free. I made the water a little warm and dumped Sammy into it with his old water. I set him on my dresser.

'Welcome home,' I told him.

Footsteps sounded on the porch. I froze and listened.

Mail pushed through the slot. The metal flap slammed shut and I jumped. I caught my breath and tiptoed to the door to look at the mail. It was starting to pile up. I hadn't touched it in four days. A lot of it was still addressed to Gordon Priestly. Dad. A kid's magazine came for Savannah. *Highlights*. I gave the mail a good kick and went back to the kitchen to make a sandwich.

The phone rang. It hadn't done that recently. I stared at it. Two rings. Three rings. On the fourth I grabbed it.

'Mom?'

'What's that, dear?'

'Hello?'

'Aubrey, honey, it's Abigail Marshall, from church.'

Oh. Church. Those stupid church ladies were always in our business. They called Mom all the time. We'd been to those social events they insisted we go to. At least, we went until I shoved my chocolate-ice-cream cone onto Pennie Layne's white dress when she kept asking me to play and wouldn't leave me alone when I said I didn't want to. And one of those church ladies kept leaving us a gross casserole on the front porch every week, even now, three months after the funeral. Last week it was egg-plant. Eck.

'Is your mother there? I've been meaning to catch up with her, see how you two are doing. We haven't seen you two since the Fourth of July picnic.'

'No, she's gone out for a little, ma'am,' I said.

'Will you tell her I called? We're trying to organize a

bake sale, and thought she might like to be involved. She used to love our community projects. It might help.'

I didn't see how it would help. What in the world would help?

'Yes, ma'am,' I said.

'So you'll have her call me?' Mrs Marshall asked.

'Well, actually, we're going on vacation here in a few hours. She'll call you when we get back.' I had just come up with a perfect story, as there was no car parked outside any more.

'Oh, wonderful! It will be good for the two of you to get out of the house. Give a holler if y'all need anything now, you hear?'

'Will do, ma'am,' I said. 'Goodbye.'

I slammed the phone down. No more answering the phone; it was too risky. I fished a red Sharpie out of the kitchen junk drawer and wrote on a piece of paper, ON VACATION. I got tape and stuck it on the outside of the front door, and slammed that too. I knew the rules: I couldn't let anyone, *anyone*, know that I was alone. I'd seen it on TV. Kids found alone had to go to foster homes. I wasn't going to be one of those kids. I was staying right here.

Maybe the sign would also keep away unwanted casseroles.

The phone started ringing all the time. It rang and rang. I didn't have anything to say to anyone who would call on the phone. I didn't answer it.

Cheerios for breakfast, half a can of SpaghettiOs for lunch, half a can for dinner.

Sometimes I stopped actually watching the TV and just lay there on the couch, watching the cobwebs on the ceiling dance in the fan's breeze, thinking nothing.

I was glad my bedroom was downstairs, off the kitchen. It meant I didn't have to go upstairs, to see the bedrooms with the closed doors.

Savannah's room hadn't been changed at all, I knew. No one had even made her bed. It was still strewn with tangled blankets and stuffed animals. Dirty clothes filled her wicker hamper. Crayons and coloured paper lay scattered on her artwork table.

The door to Mom and Dad's room was shut too, but it had been used since the wreck. Mom had tried to sleep there. I knew she really slept on the couch downstairs most nights, if she slept at all.

I was very glad to have Sammy, who needed his food pellet every few days.

I blew across the surface of the water in his bowl, making ripples that made him wiggle his fins.

'Good night, Samkins,' I said. 'I have everything the way you like it. See. The lava lamp is on. The blinds are down. The ceiling stars will glow. And the music's all ready.'

I turned off the light and climbed into bed. Then I listened to the waltzes Dad had bought for me and watched

Sammy swimming, swimming, swimming in his bowl. It wasn't hard to sleep, listening to the circles of music and watching the circles in the water. My eyes got tired. I knew I wouldn't dream.

I was lying on the couch again, in the daytime. What day was it? I wasn't sure.

'Sammy! What do you wish, you lonely blue fish?' I called.

I listened.

'Me too. But I want mine with ice cream!'

Poor Sammy. I wondered if he missed all the other fish from the store. Probably not. It had seemed crowded. Betta fish like their own space.

Me too, Sammy.

At least it was summertime. No one to take my attendance in the morning. No stupid kids to stare at me all day, or to treat me funny. No one to care a thing about me, and I didn't have to care about anyone else, either. That felt good, the way crackers and cheese had felt good.

I was watching TV again and the doorbell rang. It rang and rang. I ignored it. But it didn't stop. The doorbell kept ringing.

Do not answer that, I told myself.

But the bell kept ringing.

I thought maybe I could go crazy. I could go crazy listening to that *ding-dong, ding-dong* over and over and over and over and—

My head told my feet to stop, but they were running from the couch. My arms reached for the door and flung it open.

And there was Gram, standing on the porch, her eyes red but fiercely determined.

'Gram,' I said. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to check on my girls,' my grandmother said.

'Why?' I asked.

'I've been calling on the phone, and no one answered.'

'It's broken,' I lied.

'I was worried. I'd heard from you two every week, and then, nothing . . .'

'So you came all the way down here from Vermont? How?'

'On the train,' Gram answered. 'And in a taxi.'

I saw that Gram held a small travelling bag. She must have put just a couple of things in it. A few changes of clothes. Some pyjamas. A toothbrush . . . Gram hated travelling.

She opened her arms, and I fell into them. For the first time since I'd been on my own, I was crying.

We sat on the couch, Gram running her soft fingers over my scalp. Her fingers stayed away from the scar above my

temple, which is a word I didn't even know until I had the makings of a scar there.

'Where's my Lissie?' she asked.

Lissie. My mother, her daughter. Where was she?

'Just out for a little. She'll be back before dinner,' I lied again. I hadn't known that living alone would make me a liar, but it did. I couldn't tell her the truth, no way.

'Gram, read to me?'

'Okay, darling, like when you were little? You always loved a story . . .' Gram didn't finish her thought, but I heard it finish in my head. She used to say that a lot, and the same words always came next: *'Savannah, she wouldn't ever sit for a story . . .'*

'Let me get my book.' I went to my room and got the book I was reading and brought it to Gram, whose soft voice made me want to sleep, forever. I curled against her, using her stomach as my pillow.

Sunset would be late, but the light began to change to golden orange as Gram read. The afternoon was ending. Dinnertime. The time Gram expected Mom to come home.

'Maybe we should go start some dinner,' she said, putting my bookmark back between the pages. 'That way, your mom won't have to worry about it when she gets in.'

'Right,' I said. I continued to lie on the couch, afraid that if I moved I was going to have to ask for a bucket to be sick in.

'Come help me. I've never been good in other people's kitchens,' Gram said. I got up slowly, carefully, and followed her into the kitchen. I was behind her when she saw my

cans. The eight of them, some still full, some empty, sitting in a line on the counter. She must have known then. Maybe she wasn't ready to believe it. I'd had ages, but I didn't believe it, either. Her eyes wandered to my open bedroom door, then through it to the dirty underwear, jeans and T-shirts on the floor.

'Well, let's see what to fix.' She went to the fridge, where the only food besides mustard and relish was the packs of turkey and ham. She took out the meat, got the bread and made three sandwiches, on three plates. She opened the can of green beans, and heated the contents in the microwave in a glass bowl with a cover. She nodded to me to bring everything to the table as it was ready, and I did. I filled three glasses with water and set them out. When everything was on the table, we eyed the third place setting. For several long moments, I glanced at the digital clock on the stove: 7:20. 7:28. 7:33. 7:38. 7:42. Cold green beans.

'She's not coming, is she?' Gram asked.

I looked down at my plate, my throat tightening. 'No,' I whispered.

Gram sighed. 'Aubrey.'

Pause.

'Do you know where she went?' Gram sounded as if she still hoped Mom was just out doing errands.

I shook my head.

'How long has it been?'

I stared at my uneaten green beans, counting them: one, two, three, four, five . . . fifteen, sixteen . . .

'Aubrey.'

'A week.'

'A week! You've been by yourself for a week?'

The phone rang. Terrific. Gram watched me not answer it.

'The phone?' she asked.

'Not so much broken,' I answered.

'Not so much,' she repeated. Then she jumped out of her chair and hurried to the phone. 'Hello?' she said. She sounded desperate, panicky. 'Oh, no, thank you, I'm not interested in a music survey.' She hung the phone up again, and turned round slowly. She walked back to the table and sat back down. It looked like she was thinking and thinking and trying to pick something to say. Then she seemed to forget that she was trying to think of something to say, and covered her face with her hands. She put her head on the table. She stayed like that, shaking, for a long time.

'Please don't be mad,' I whispered.

'Aubrey, why why why why didn't you call me?'

I didn't know why. I hadn't even thought of calling her. I couldn't look at her. I felt the reason start in my toes and work its way up into my chest, and finally it creaked out of my mouth.

'Don't be mad at Mom, either. Please.'

'Aubrey . . .'

'She's had such a hard time.' I was crying again. I wished Gram hadn't come.

'I know, honey, I know.' Gram came to my side of the

table and put her arms round me, rocking me, pressing my head against her, covering my scar with her palm.

'Why did she leave me?'

'I don't know. No matter how much we love someone, or think we know them, we can never know what it is like to be inside them. I'm so sorry, so, so sorry. I thought the two of you were going to get better together.'

'She's not sick!' I shouted, pulling away. 'She's just sad! You don't know.'

Gram looked like I had slapped her. But her eyes met mine, and they weren't mad. They were melting. She pressed me to her again, so we weren't looking at each other any more. She held on so tightly.