



An Anti-Grinch Gets Excited

I was born with a heart three sizes too big.

No, really. Like an Anti-Grinch. Like it was already shouting, *I'M JUST TRYING REALLY HARD OVER HERE.*

Mom tells me she was very, very scared for her baby girl. But twelve years later, I'm still here.

There were a whole buttload of other weird things happening to me when I was born, too. But it's not like that's what I go around thinking about all the time, especially on a day when my mom and dad tell me they have a surprise unbirthday present waiting for me after school.

This is what happened when I woke up this morning:

Mom made chocolate Malt-O-Meal for breakfast. That is my all-time favorite food.

Dad looked up from his book and grinned at me—a mysterious grin like he was hiding a secret.

Then Mom put a bowl of the delicious, steamy Malt-O-Meal in front of me and said, “Guess what, Libby.”

I was already on my third bite so I had to swallow before I could say, “What?”

“We’re not going to tell you what it is, but there is going to be a surprise waiting for you when you get home from school today.”

I put down my spoon. “You’re buying me a puppy, aren’t you?”

Dad laughed, looking back at his book. “Honestly, I think you’ll like it as much as that.”

So it was something good. Really good. Maybe a safari in Botswana? Maybe it had something to do with my big sister, Nonny, who lived in Chicago with her husband, Thomas. Maybe it was a pet iguana? A pet iguana would be one of the most unique pets ever. I would name her Rosalind after Rosalind Franklin. She’s a scientist too many people don’t know about. When I come across important, special, underestimated people like Rosalind, I collect them in my head and they become my

friends. Then I have a whole squad of friends going around with me wherever I go. I talk to them a lot. I ask them questions, I tell them what I'm worrying about, and I try to figure out what the best of them would do.

So Rosalind the Iguana would only be one of many awesome names I could choose from.

I rubbed my hands together. "I have lots of good guesses," I said.

"Yeah?" said Mom. "Like what?"

I tried to do the same mysterious grin that my dad did, and then shoved another bite of Malt-O-Meal in my mouth. Dad laughed again. Mom did a small hop as she walked back over to the sink. I bounced in my seat a couple of times, feeling almost like it really was my birthday.

I like watching my mom in the kitchen. It's like watching those YouTube videos of Michelle Kwan ice-skating in the Olympics. Mom has broad shoulders and round, strong arms and sometimes she says she feels "stocky" or "ungraceful," but she's not like that in the kitchen. In the kitchen she's a ballerina.

Mom also has:

1. Short, curly hair that's graying on the sides.
2. A wide smile.

3. Her own bakery that she started when I was four years old. She told me she'd wanted to start one for a long time, but she was scared. She didn't really know how to do the business stuff. When I was four, Dad told her she should just do it. Totally go for it. So she did.

Dad is an art teacher at the high school. Once I'm in ninth grade I could maybe take a class from him, except I'm probably the worst person at art in the whole school. I'm not so great with *fine motor skills*. That's okay, though. I'm better at using microscopes and not being one bit afraid that time we dissected cow eyeballs.

Dad also has:

1. A bald pate (*pate*, one of our Hard Reading Words from English that's basically a fancy word for the top of someone's head).
2. Round glasses.
3. At least twenty books about Vincent van Gogh.
4. A voice that is quiet but never, ever shaky.

My parents are pretty smart.

And good at knowing the best surprises.



My Best Friend Is a Room

On most days, I am a Front-Row-Sitter, a Note-Taker, a Volunteer-Whiteboard-Writer, an Answer-Knower. On most days I never have to be told to stay still, at least not more than once. Except on days when my mom and dad tell me that there is a surprise waiting for me. Then sitting still is like trying to wash a cat.

Except in Ms. Trepky's class.

Everyone sits still in Ms. Trepky's class. It's only the third week of school, but we all know that.

Ms. Trepky is tall. Taller than Mom and Dad by at least half a foot. And she is skinny. She has a long nose and long fingers and near-black hair cropped short in a very clean bob. Her face is smooth and pale white like porcelain, and she has

a way of looking at you like she's really seeing you, like she knows what you're thinking and what's really going on inside. So I stayed in my seat, even on After-School Surprise Day.

So it's not a puppy? Maybe a kitten? Maybe it's a vacation? A trip to NASA headquarters! A trip to Antarctica to see seals and penguins and—

“Libby!”

I jumped, and a couple of kids behind me giggled.

Ms. Trepky was standing right in front of me.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Trepky,” I said. “Could you please repeat the question?” I'd managed to stay in my seat, but the Attentive-Listener part of myself wasn't doing so great.

“Who said, ‘You must do the thing you think you cannot do?’”

The Answer-Knower wasn't her normal self, either. I had to say three words I don't like to say. I looked down and folded my hands. “I don't know.”

Ms. Trepky looked at me for a few seconds, then stepped to the front of the classroom, right in front of the world map.

In Ms. Trepky's class we do American history. History is a medium subject for me—not the best, but not the worst. I like that it's about remembering

and memorizing things. I'm good at remembering things like dates and presidents' names and every muscle in your leg. So that part is good, but it's not like in science, where it's remembering *and* discovering weird and surprising new things that might one day help the world. I'm not really sure what people can *do* with history.

But at least it's interesting most of the time. At least it means that there are new people to talk to in my head. Like that time at the beginning of last school year when my class went on a hike in Boulder Canyon. Even though most people in Colorado like hiking a lot, it's not something I'm super-awesomely great at, because if I go *too* hard my heart starts pounding and my lungs feel like they're in a steel cage. Basically, on that hike a lot of the other kids were going faster and faster, so I stayed toward the back where some of the slow adults could see me, and I talked to my friend Sacagawea. In case you didn't know, Sacagawea was an awesome woman from the Shoshone tribe who helped some Virginian explorers who didn't know where to go. Sacagawea is a very supportive hiking buddy.

So in Ms. Trepsy's class, I get even more new people to think about and imagine and talk to.

People to hike with or to help me when I have questions. And at least it's not math.

Maybe it's strange that I like science and not math, because a lot of people think they go together. And maybe they do, but when I see a math worksheet my brain refuses to budge. Sometimes it happens with writing assignments, too, unless the teacher has made it very clear what we're supposed to write about, like Ms. Trepky does. With science, though, it's not about guessing what the teacher wants, trying to figure out their sneaky expectations or what they *wish* you'd written about. In science, you simply follow the instructions and do the experiments. In science, you try again. In science, you have fun.

At the front of the room, Ms. Trepky folded her long, elegant fingers together.

"It's time to start discussing your semester projects," she said.

Groans from the back row. Dustin Pierce, the loudest groaner, said, "But it's the beginning of the school year."

Ms. Trepky stood still until the groans stopped. "I am aware of that fact, Mr. Pierce," she said. "However, these are not last-minute throw-together projects. You will have to work on these

consistently throughout the first half of the year if you're going to get the grade you want."

More groans. Ms. Trepky folded her long fingers together again and the scuffling and whispering stopped quickly.

"For your semester projects, you will each select a figure from our textbook. A person you find more than merely interesting. This will be someone you relate to, or admire. Someone you hope to emulate. For your final project you will write an essay and give an in-depth presentation on this person, giving us much more information than you have in your textbook. You will present this person to us in such a way that when we leave the classroom, we feel this person has become our friend."

"Hey, Abe Lincoln, wanna share your lunch?" said Dustin. The back rows burst into snickers again, but not for too long. This was Ms. Trepky's class, after all.

I could picture Abe Lincoln, at some afterlife podium, giving Dustin a sad and stern frown. And then probably half of his sandwich, too, since he was a nice guy.

"Your presentation can have, if you choose, a creative component," Ms. Trepky continued. "This could be a poem, song, piece of art, a dance, whatever

you choose. This creative component, or however you choose to present your chosen historical figure, will demonstrate what important things you feel you have learned by spending the semester researching this individual.”

Dustin Pierce raised his hand. A rare occurrence. “Can we make a movie?”

“Yes, you may,” said Ms. Trepky. Dustin high-fived the pudgy boys on either side of him.

Then it was my turn to raise my hand. I like to know about each assignment as far in advance as possible, so I can plan and prepare, and so I know how much time it’s going to take. “What will next semester’s project be?”

Ms. Trepky looked down at her hands and there was a flicker at the corner of her mouth that might have been a smile, although I didn’t think I’d said something funny. Then I heard the whispers behind me, and even though I couldn’t quite hear what they were saying because I don’t hear so great, they reminded me that probably nobody else cared about next semester’s project already. I thought I maybe heard Dustin mumbling something that started with an *F*, which is the first letter of the name he used to call me. Or maybe they

weren't talking about my question at all. It didn't matter. I looked back at Ms. Trepky.

"Next semester's project will be the same, except you will select someone *not* found in our textbook," she said.

I knew immediately who my presentation would be about next semester. Choosing someone *not* in our book was going to be even easier than choosing a textbook person, because I'd already started studying. I'd been reading about my person since I'd first heard her mentioned in a documentary on the National Geographic channel (the channel I always watch whenever I stay home sick). That's the way you learn about things they *don't* teach you in school, everything from vampire squid to this scientist from the early twentieth century. Her name was Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin. She was an astronomer.

"What?" Dustin said. "But how do we know who to study if they're not in the textbook?"

Ms. Trepky put her hands behind her back. "You have vast resources available to you, Mr. Pierce, including the internet and, dare I say it, the library." She put a hand on our textbook. "In fact, this project is inspired by a real-life scenario. The Smithsonian

Institution in Washington, DC, is hosting a contest, where students from all over the country write a letter about a lesser-known or underrated woman from American science history. They're creating a Women in STEM exhibit, with wax figures representing the underrated women. For the purposes of this class, I think it's a valuable exercise to research those whose contributions to our society are equally as important as the contributions of those who might get more acclaim."

I put the clicking-end of my pen between my teeth. The wax figure of Cecilia was beautiful in my mind, and I could see her smooth, dark hair and pale, piercing eyes. Writing a letter about her would be totally easy. I looked around at the other kids, wondering who they'd pick from outside our textbook. *We're already a step ahead, aren't we, Cecilia? What would you think of bringing in star-shaped Rice Krispies Treats for the presentation?* I could imagine those clear eyes twinkling in response.

Dustin opened his mouth, probably to complain again, and I opened mine to ask if seventh graders were allowed to submit a letter to the Smithsonian contest, but right then there was a knock on the classroom door. It was Ms. Lopez, the principal, and she had a girl with her. The girl had a round

face and the longest, thickest hair I had ever seen. She would be the tallest, and I thought the most beautiful, person in our class.

I rolled my pen around my desk, smiling. How many wonderful surprises could fit in one day?

“Excuse me, Ms. Trepky,” said Ms. Lopez. “May I interrupt for a second?”

“Please, come in,” Ms. Trepky said, and stepped behind her desk.

Ms. Lopez brought the girl to the front of the room. “This is Talia Latu,” she said. She said it with the LI emphasized, like TaLEEuh. Not TAH-lia. “She’ll be in Ms. Trepky’s homeroom with many of you, and in this History class. Please make sure she feels as welcome as you’d hope to be.”

Lucky for me, I was in Ms. Trepky’s homeroom, so that meant two classes with this new girl.

“We are excited to have you in our class,” said Ms. Trepky. The only open desk in the room was the one next to me, and Ms. Trepky motioned to it. “Please take a seat,” she said.

For a moment I was worried Ms. Trepky would assign Talia some kind of buddy or partner. Working with partners made my stomach flutter, because I always ended up worrying more about being a fun partner than about actually doing

the assignment. I shouldn't have stressed about it, though. Ms. Trepky simply made sure Talia was settled and had her materials, and then kept on with the lesson. She did ask Talia and me to swap phone numbers, so Talia could call someone if she needed help understanding her catch-up work or something, but that was it. I should have known. Ms. Trepky knew we were in seventh grade, not third.

Later, when the bell rang, Ms. Trepky spoke over the jostle and bustle of packing students. "Ms. Latu, if you will come see me for a moment or two, I will catch you up on the latest assignments. And Ms. Monroe." I stopped. She was looking at me down her long nose. "I suggest rereading the section on Eleanor Roosevelt. There's a quote there you might find interesting."

After History it was lunchtime, and I took my cheese-and-pepperoni sandwich into the library. I eat lunch in the library a lot. The librarian is Mr. Duncan, a smiling old man with deep copper, ashy-knuckled hands that always pat the top of the stack of books he hands me like it's a treasure, and I suppose it is. I don't know if eating lunch in the library is against the rules, but he never makes me leave.

In the library, there's a sign above the door with cartoon stars with big silly faces, and it says BRIGHTEN YOUR MIND WITH A BOOK. Real stars don't have five points like the cartoon stars, though. They're balls, big burning balls of fire. I wonder if we made up those five-pointed stars because then it looks like stars have a head and two arms and two legs, like we do. That's the kind of thing I think about when I eat lunch in the library.

A library as your best friend is great, but it *does* have some downsides. I can't text the library. I can't tell it the joke my dad told me about how the paramecium crossed the road because it was stuck to the chicken's butt. I can't go with it to parties, and it's not someone for me to talk to in the crowd.

Last year, one of the teachers asked me who my best friend at school was. I had a friend in third grade who would sometimes come over to play, but she moved away the next year. I told him that my new best friend was probably the library. It doesn't even bother me to read about spinal fluid or fungus (or sometimes Eleanor Roosevelt, who actually seems pretty cool) while I eat. When I told my teacher that he looked at me for a moment with a sort of sad-ish face, almost like he was going to

pat me on the head, and then he told me I should try playing outside with the other kids at lunch. That's what made me realize maybe I shouldn't tell people that the library is my best friend.

Even though it is.