For Don, for always
I sit up taller in my wobbly desk chair and try to tune back in to Mr. O. talking about supply and demand. At least, that’s what he was talking about five minutes ago, before my mind drifted back, once again, to the night we left Janna’s.

Janna, our guardian had been on the phone with someone, tidying up the living room as she talked. “My daughter has always excelled,” she’d said.

Gage had been passing through the kitchen, searching for his phone charger. I’d looked up from the breakfast bar, where I was studying the Pottery Barn catalog, to see if he’d heard Janna. Sure enough, I saw him give a little shake of his head.
He’d turned to me, but I’d quickly looked down, as if the decorative pillows needed my full attention. I didn’t know if he was mad that Janna was bragging on me, that she had called me her daughter, or that she was pretending that nothing was wrong (probably all three), but my feelings were too much of a mishmash to give him the conspiratorial smile he was expecting.

When Janna hung up, Gage asked, loudly enough for her to hear, “Are you packed?”

I’d nodded, this time not daring to look at Janna. I hadn’t packed much: my school uniforms, socks and underwear, a couple of weekend outfits, pajamas, a picture of our mother when she was a girl, and my Paper Things. The shoe box I kept my Paper Things in wouldn’t fit in my duffel, so I’d carefully placed them in a double-pocket folder that I found in Janna’s desk. Gage said I should pack only the essentials—that we’d come back for the rest later. But I’d overheard Janna tell Gage that “the rest” were things that she had purchased and therefore belonged to her.

“Is there laundry in your apartment building?”
Janna asked Gage. “Are you going to make sure that Ari has clean clothes for school?”

I kept my head down but sat perfectly still. I’d asked lots of my own questions about our new apartment, but so far my brother had been vague with his answers. Mostly he’d said, “Wait till you see, Ari! You’ll be able to decorate real rooms in our place.”

“Who do you think did her laundry before we came here?” he said, and then bolted upstairs to his room before Janna could say anything more.

“I should call Legal Services,” she said, more to the air than to me. “I don’t care that he’s your brother. I don’t care that he’s nineteen. I’m sure they would agree that you should stay put.” She paced, but she didn’t call. Gage said that she couldn’t call, because if the truth came out about how she’d treated him and how she was trying to keep us apart, she’d lose any chance she had of ever getting me back. Not that he planned on giving me back, he’d been quick to reassure me.

By the time Gage had returned downstairs—with my duffel bag and his backpack in tow—I’d finished with the Pottery Barn catalog and stood by
the sink, as if waiting for a bus. As soon as Gage was within earshot, Janna turned to me and said, “Who do you want to live with, Ari?”

I’d been dreading that moment. For days the two of them had been battling, fighting to claim me, like I was a goldfish and not an eleven-year-old person who has her very own feelings.

But I was ready for it. I’d been practicing my answer: “I wish—”

“Don’t do that to her!” Gage shouted, getting up in Janna’s face. “Don’t put her on the spot like that. You know she doesn’t want to hurt you. But I’m her family! Not you. Me!”

“Your mother wouldn’t want—” Janna started.

“Our mother said to stay together,” Gage shouted. “Always! ‘Stay together always!’ Those were her exact words.”

Janna had folded her arms and pursed her lips. It was a look that Gage often imitated to make fun of her—though I could tell that he was way beyond being amused at this point.

“Be reasonable, Gage. You’re young. You’ve got things you want to do. Dreams for yourself. Do you
really think you can do all of that while taking care of Ari?”

Once again, they were back to discussing me like I wasn’t even there.

“What do you know about my dreams?” Gage yelled. “All you’ve ever cared about is Ari. And trying to make her love you. But guess what? She doesn’t love you. She loves me. Her family.”

Janna flinched as if he’d hit her.

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words escaped.


I begged Janna without saying a word: *Please, Janna, tell Gage you’re sorry. Ask him to stay.*

Janna just stared at me, long and hard, like she was waiting for me to say my thoughts aloud. But I didn’t—I couldn’t—and eventually she went back to tidying the living room. “I’ll see you soon, Ari,” she said in her friendly voice. Like I was that run-away badger, Frances, who was going no farther than beneath the dining-room table.

I wanted to press a rewind button, but I wasn’t sure how far I’d have to go back.
“Bye, Janna,” I said as we walked out the door. I wanted to add “Thanks for being our guardian” or even “Love you,” but I knew both of those things would upset Gage.

I’m pretty sure Janna didn’t answer me.

Two blocks away from Janna’s house, Gage cleared his throat. “Listen, Ari, there’s something I need to tell you.”

That’s when I learned that Gage had lied. We didn’t have an apartment. Not yet. We didn’t have a home of any kind. That was the beginning of February. This is almost the end of March. We still don’t.

I look over at Sasha’s desk—something I do about fifty times a day—but she’s not in her seat. My best friend is, at this very moment, down on Walnut Street, acting as one of the safety patrol leaders. She’s shy, but I know she’s doing a good job. She’ll smile at the kindergarteners who got overly attached to the previous group of patrollers, and she won’t try to boss the second-graders who mouth back if
you tell them to walk quietly. I know because we’ve been planning forever to be safety patrol leaders. It’s one of the fifth-grade leadership roles. You have to demonstrate leadership to get into Carter Middle School. Now Sasha has a chance, lucky girl.

Two months of school to go and I still haven’t been chosen to do any of the leadership jobs. Not safety patrol, not tutoring, not shelving books in the media center. And I have to get into Carter. Have to.

Only problem is, it’s a school for the starry gifted, and I seem to have lost all my shine.

So I shake off thoughts of Gage and Janna and try again to make sense of the supply-and-demand diagram Mr. O. has projected onto the whiteboard. I give myself hooks so I can remember what it means. Supply is how much of something is available, and the more demand there is for something, the greater the supply will be. Like always, I think of the products in catalogs. You can always find watches, luggage, and sheets in the Macy’s catalog, so there must be a steady demand for those. On the other hand, blue fuzzy slippers (like the ones Mama used to
wear) and air popcorn poppers have disappeared—probably because the demand for those stopped.

“Can you think of something that has a big supply but no demand?” Mr. O. asks.

I know from the way Mr. O. has asked the question that the correct answer is no, but I can’t help searching for an exception.

Cockroaches. Big supply, no demand. I start to laugh, but manage to stop myself by pinching my lips together. Still, a tiny choking sound escapes.

“Ms. Hazard?”

Now half the class laughs, as they always do when a teacher uses my last name. I’ve been in the same class with these kids since kindergarten; you’d think the novelty would have worn off by now. Holy moly.

“Perhaps you can tell us what’s so funny?” Mr. O. says.

But rather than turning to me to see how I respond, the class turns toward the door.

Mr. Chandler, our new principal, has walked into the room. Unlike our old principal, who was friendly and knew me by name and was forever...
congratulating me on my school successes, this principal slinks from room to room like he’s trying to catch someone in the act of wrongdoing. And sure enough, he has.

We are all frozen in position, staring at Mr. Chandler.

Daniel, a kid in my gifted class, gives my chair a subtle kick.

I turn back to Mr. O., who, despite the interruption, has kept his eyes glued on me.

“Sorry, Mr. O’Neil,” I say.

I look down at the graffiti carved into my desk (not by me), hoping Mr. O. won’t force me to explain what made me laugh.

He doesn’t. Instead, he gives Mr. Chandler a little collaborative nod, which seems to satisfy the principal. The principal leaves, and Mr. O. continues.

“It seems to me, Arianna, that you don’t have much room for fooling around.”

I nod vigorously.

It’s true; my social studies grade is the pits. I did lousy on both quizzes, and I haven’t been able to finish the outline of my biography (along with
a bibliography) on a famous nineteenth-century American. I’d promised it to Mr. O. today, but we had to meet up with West last night, so it was impossible for me to stop by the library to do my research. Without West, one of the social workers at Lighthouse, we can’t sneak in, and Lighthouse is the only shelter Gage will stay at. I think we’re at Chloe’s tonight. That will make Gage très, très happy. (See, Mademoiselle Barbary, I am using my French!) It will make me happy, too. And maybe I’ll even be able to get caught up on my homework.

I force myself to pay attention—to listen to Mr. O. talking about the poor imaginary bookseller who has bought a ton of books, but now nobody wants them.

I wish I hadn’t laughed in Mr. O.’s class, I wish I hadn’t been caught by Mr. Chandler, I wish I could be seen as shiny once again.
Sasha is waiting for me on the corner of Walnut and Washington, still wearing her patrol leader vest over her red puffy coat. Today, her so-blond-it’s-nearly-white hair is pulled back in a bun, like she has a ballet recital or something. All day, girls have been saying, “I like your hair, Sasha.” No one has complimented me on my hair in weeks. Janna was the one who could do the French braids and cool updos, not me. And definitely not Gage.

“Patrolling is so much fun, Ari!” She’s bouncing up and down like Leroy, the little terrier we had when Mama was still alive—four years ago now. I
can remember Leroy’s funny little face more than I can Mama’s, which makes me feel terrible. Gage says that I shouldn’t feel bad, that memories are strange that way . . . and besides, most people remember from pictures. We don’t have many.

“Were you on walker patrol or bus stop?” I ask Sasha.

“Walker!”

“Wow! Really?” I was expecting Sasha to say bus stop. On bus stop patrol, you tell each line when it can board and help the little ones climb the steps. But on walker patrol, you have to gauge traffic and direct kids to cross at the precise moment.

“Did you have to determine the safe gap?” I ask. The safe gap is the time it takes for a car to get from the intersection to the crosswalk.

“Yup. But there are lots of other responsibilities, too,” she says. “Like reminding bike riders to walk their bikes across the street.”

I nod, but I also keep my eyes peeled to the sidewalk for pennies. People don’t bother to stoop down and pick up the pennies they drop. You’d be surprised how a few pennies can start to add up.
We’re on our way to Head Start, where I help out after school. West told me about the job; he knew I was looking for leadership roles and said the teachers at Head Start could really use my help. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the only leadership roles Carter was interested in were the ones our teachers assigned us. Besides, the job sounded interesting—and it gave me access to lots of free catalogs!

“Wait till you see the kinders,” Sasha says. “They are so sweet!”

I’ve never heard her call kindergarteners that before. Maybe that’s patrol leader talk. To tell you the truth, I never thought Sasha would be patrol leader before me. For the millionth time, I wonder if things would have been different if I’d stayed with Janna.

I nod. “Like the Starters,” I say, trying out this new lingo. “They’re cute.”

“Sasha Skinny!” we hear Linnie yelling as she races down the hill toward us. She lives right here on Boyd Street. She stops fast, like she’s on the basketball court and just caught a pass.
“Sasha Skinny!” Linnie says again. “I cannot believe you are safety patrol leader!”

Leave it to Linnie to insult Sasha while pretending to compliment her. Who better than Sasha to be patrol leader? (Never mind that just moments ago I was thinking how surprised I was that Sasha was chosen before me.)

Sasha pulls the vest off as if she were caught at the end of a first day of school still wearing a name tag with the Eastland Tigers on it.

“Ari should have been patrol leader,” says Sasha quietly. “I’m sure she’ll be next.”

“Ari?” says Linnie, looking at me for the first time since she caught up with us. She singsongs, “I don’t think so,” then laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I say. I know that Linnie isn’t laughing because she’s jealous; she doesn’t want to be patrol leader. She didn’t even bother to sign the interest form, since she already knows that she’s going to Saint Anthony’s next year. “I’ll be patrol leader next. You’ll see!” I look to Sasha to defend me.

“She will,” Sasha murmurs. But instead of staring
Linnie down, Sasha’s looking at the ground.

That’s when I realize that Sasha’s just being nice. She’s no longer sure I’ll be chosen. Or maybe she’s no longer sure I *should* be chosen.

“I’ll call you tonight,” I say, and walk away.
As soon as I go through the door of Head Start, Omar looks up. He leaves his spot at the water table and barrels into me the way little kids do, wrapping his arms around my legs, the water from his hands seeping into the back of my pants. The happy sound he makes is a cross between a fire truck siren and a guinea pig squeal. Other kids leave the centers where they’ve been playing and come trap me in a kid cocoon. None of them worships me quite as much as Omar does, but they all love to greet me in the same way.

Carol is on the other side of the room, pouring milk into little metal pitchers for snack time. “So
glad you’re here!” she calls, like she always does. I look around the room for Fran, but I don’t see her.

Omar, who misses nothing, points to the drama center, the area underneath the loft. Today it’s been set up to look like a grocery store. There are shelves with empty food boxes, a bin with plastic vegetables, and a toy cash register. Fran, who is so small she sometimes looks like she’s one of the helpers, has a basket on her arm and is pretending to buy groceries. She says the word potato over and over: “Look, here is a potato! I like potatoes. I can’t wait to get home and cook this potato. You can make French fries with potatoes.” A lot of the kids in this class don’t speak English, and that’s Fran’s way of helping them learn new words. All the teachers are big on repetition.

“Buy the po-po-tato!” says Marissa as she stands in front of the cash register, making it ring.

“Ari,” says Juju, a serious three-year-old who always wears party dresses and talks in whispers, “go look in your cubby.” Some of the kids return to what they were doing, but a small group pull on my fingers, leading me to my cubby, a painted wooden
cube just like theirs. I know what I’ll find, but I’m as excited as they are.

A small pile of catalogs greets me. “Count them!” the kids shout. They count to four with me, and then, for fun, we count them all over again.

Four catalogs! Two of them are for women’s clothing, but there is the newest Pottery Barn, which will have pictures of furniture, and best of all, a Mini Boden catalog. In Mini Boden, all of the models are kids. I smile a thank-you at Carol.

“Is there a dog?” asks Omar, who, unlike the rest of the preschoolers, hasn’t run over to get his carrots and graham crackers. We take a quick peek inside one of the catalogs, and sure enough, there is a dog. I think it might be a beagle. “Six dogs!” he shouts.

I place the catalogs on the cutting table and sit with the kids at Omar’s table to have my snack. Carol has slipped me a peanut-butter graham-cracker sandwich. (The little kids aren’t allowed to have peanut butter because of worries about nut allergies, but luckily they don’t seem to notice that my snack is different.) As I take a carrot from the plate in the
center of the table, I wonder if it’s time to add a new paper family to the one I’ve already cut out.

I started my first paper family when Mama got sick. She spent a lot of time in bed, with books, magazines, and catalogs lying all around her. Sometimes she’d read to me, but when she got tired, she’d close her eyes and I’d look at the catalogs. At first I was just looking at the clothing, thinking, *Wow, wish I could buy striped puddle boots or a princess dress.* But eventually I realized that the clothes were laid out like paper doll clothes. That’s how Sasha and I got the idea of cutting the people out and making paper families. (Back then, Sasha had been my downstairs neighbor, and we spent a lot of time at each other’s apartment.)

In the beginning, there were just three people in my paper family—just like in my real family: Mama, Gage, and me. I started with the kids. You would think that finding pictures of kids to cut out would be easy, that I’d have a gazillion choices, but it’s not true. Catalogs usually show only part of the model; most of the time their arms or legs have been cut off
in the layout. In the first catalog I checked, which was an L.L. Bean kids’ catalog, I could find only one decent picture of a boy. He looked like he was around seven, and he was crouched, playing with a lawn sprinkler. But he would do. I cut him out and named him Miles. In that same catalog was a toddler girl with dark hair and warm brown skin. She had on a yellow dress with leggings and was cupping a toad in her hands. Best of all, she was smaller than Miles—which was good, since I wanted her to be the younger sister. I cut her out and named her Natalie. Finding their mom was much easier. Most of Mama’s catalogs were filled with women. I just had to find a mom that was about the right size: one who didn’t fill up a catalog page and wasn’t tucked in a tiny box in the corner, one who was the right proportion for my family. Luckily I found one who looked as fun-loving as my mom—before she got sick, of course.

While Sasha was choosing the people for her paper family, I decided to cut out furniture for mine. First I cut out a bed that was shaped like a boxy car for Miles. Then I found a white-lace canopy bed for
Natalie. Later that day, Sasha went home and cut out furniture from her mom’s catalogs. Before you knew it, we were creating whole rooms and outdoor patios and even parks with swings and slides and monkey bars. (The Home Depot advertisements that come in the mail have the greatest play gyms.)

My apartment was best for playing Paper Things. Since Mama spent so much time in bed, we would spread our paper worlds out across the floor of the living room. I showed Sasha that if you set up near a couch or chair, you could create an upstairs in your home. Sometimes Gage would complain that he was tired of stepping around scraps of paper everywhere, but mostly he just let us be. He was fourteen and we were seven, so he was probably glad we weren’t bugging him.

I shake my head and focus on the four catalogs in front of me now. I tear out the pages that I don’t want and set them aside for the kids to cut up. After snack is skills time at Head Start, and one of the skills the older kids learn is cutting with scissors. When I told Carol about Paper Things, she asked if I would be the helper at the cutting station. At first
I thought I could teach the kids to make their own paper families, but it didn’t take me long to realize that the best most of them can do is make scraps. However a few of them, like Juju, do an all right job cutting out shapes. Carol says I’m a good role model for them.

“Are you ready?” Juju asks. Omar might love me best, but Juju loves Paper Things as much as I do. She helps me throw away my napkin and paper cup and then walks me from the snack table over to the cutting station.

Omar comes, too, and reminds me to cut out the beagle for my family. My paper family has grown. Now there’s a dad (one that looks so kind and strong—one that matches my image of my own dad, who was a war hero, but who died before I was born), four more kids, and five dogs. Six with the beagle. I’ve thought of starting new families instead of continually adding on to the one I have, but part of me wishes I belonged to a big family. With a big family you’re likely to have someone watching out for you always.
“What should we call this dog?” I ask Omar. He stops his own cutting (ripping is more like it) and looks thoughtful. “Let’s call him—”

Claire sneezes.

“Gesundheit,” says Fran.

Omar’s eyes light up. “Let’s call him Sneeze.”
Paper Things
Jennifer Richard Jacobson

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