

CLOUD



AND



WALLFISH

• Anne Nesbet •

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

· chapter one ·

GOING, GOING, GONE

Noah knew something was up the moment he saw his mother that May afternoon in fifth grade. She swooped up in a car he didn't recognize—that was the first thing. And, secondly, his father was sitting in the other front seat, and in Noah's family, picking up kids at school was a one-parent activity.

There in the back was his raggedy brown duffel, the one with the duct tape hiding a rip, perched on top of a pile of suitcases. He had to sidle in carefully if he didn't want to topple any bags.

There wasn't even an extra inch left on that whole seat for his backpack—he just swung it around and balanced it on his knees.

“Um, hi,” he said to his parents. “What happened to our car? What’s all the luggage about?”

“Shut that door,” said his mother. “Rental car. We have to hurry. It’s a sudden adventure. And hand that backpack up to your father.”

The car pulled away from the curb so quickly that the tires let out a hint of a squeal (which was cool).

Noah’s father turned around and gave him a reassuring smile.

“You’re going to do just fine,” he said as he hauled Noah’s backpack into the front seat. (*Do fine?* thought Noah.) “Of course, we meant to give you a little more notice. What’ve you got in here, anyway?”

Apparently that wasn’t a question that could wait for an answer. Before Noah could go peep, his father had given the backpack’s searchlight-yellow zipper a tug, and everything inside tumbled out in a heap of pencils, erasers, and crumpled papers. Plus two books and a banana.

“Hey!” said Noah, leaning as far forward as the seat belt would allow. His mouth almost failed to make any sound at all, he was so surprised. His parents were tidy people, usually.

“Only what’s essential. That’s all we can take,” said his dad, while his hands went picking through the debris so speedily his fingers turned into an efficient blur. He had a trash bag at his feet, it turned out, and all the papers were

going right in there. Then he turned back with a wink. “What do you think—is this banana essential?”

“What are you doing?” said Noah. He didn’t care about the banana. It was everything else that mattered. “Take where? Wait, don’t throw *that* out—that’s my math homework.”

“Not anymore!” said Noah’s mother. “We’re getting on a plane—can’t take any extra junk.”

“We’re getting on a *plane*?” said Noah. “Right now?”

“Yep!” said his mother. “It’s that trip we’ve been talking about taking. Did you think those language tapes were just for fun? Hey, come on now, *German!* It’s your superpower, remember? *Der-die-das-die.*”

She sang the last bit. It was true that they had been listening to language tapes at home. There was a German grammar book that came with the tapes, and they had made up songs for some of the charts. The only way Noah could get through those charts was by singing them. German has way too many consonants—and way too much grammar, his mother liked to say.

Actually, however, Noah sort of liked all that grammar. His brain was very good at patterns, and learning to understand a language is all about recognizing patterns. His mother was almost not kidding about it being Noah’s superpower.

As superpowers go, though, it was a more or less

invisible one: Noah was a whole lot better at understanding than he was at speaking.

“But we can’t go anywhere *now*,” said Noah. “This isn’t vacation time. Vacations happen in the *summer*.”

Because it was supposed to be a vacation. That was the whole idea: they were going to go to Germany—*on vacation*—to go to the Black Forest, eat cake, poke at cuckoo clocks, and tour at least one castle.

“Plus anyway I have soccer tomorrow. I can’t miss soccer. And Zach’s birthday is Saturday!”

“Change of plans,” said his mother. “Sorry. Couldn’t be helped. And it turns out it’s going to be a different Germany. Not the *usual* Germany. The other one. We have a few hours for organizing and getting our stories straight, and then we fly.”

Flabbergasted. That was the word that filled Noah’s head, though he kept it safely inside. Flab-ber-gas-ted.

And for the birthday party, Zach’s mom was going to rent the first *Indiana Jones* movie on video. Indiana Jones! Noah opened his mouth, but before he could say one single useful, coherent thing, his father interrupted. Sometimes parents don’t notice when a kid has vital things to say. Sometimes they’re too busy sorting through that kid’s books, papers, and candy wrappers.

“Hey, look at this!” said Noah’s father. He had Noah’s current book in his hands—an old edition of *Alice in*

Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass that used to be his mother's. Noah had picked it off the shelf that very morning, because he always had to have something to read in his bag, just in case. This particular book looked battered but cheerful. It had lost its dust jacket years ago; rows of red-ink and black-ink rabbits trotted away on the cover in a diamond pattern.

Noah's father was staring at those rabbits; he looked doubtful.

"What do you think, Lisa? This okay?"

"That's not extra junk. That's my book I'm reading," said Noah, holding out his hand. He had only gotten through the first chapter or so in school today, but it was turning out to be a very weird story. Old-fashioned but weird. Noah liked it.

"No name written in it, yes? Then it's all right, I'd say," said his mother.

But as his father tossed the book back to Noah, it hit the side of the seat, and a card fell out of it, dislodged from all those pages where it must have been wedged in pretty tightly before.

"What's that?" said Noah's mother, and the car swerved a little to the right as she swung her head around to take a look.

"Don't worry," said Noah's father. "Eyes on the road. I've got this. Noah—"

But Noah was staring at the square in his hand.

“A photograph!” he said. A tiny girl stared out at him, standing very straight and upright by the knees of a large, wide-smiling man in an armchair. “Hey! Who’s this kid? Who’s that man?”

“*Oh dear!*” said his mother, and she swerved so abruptly off the highway into a rest area that Noah had to hang on to the seat in front of him. “*Oh dear!*” she said again. “*I shall be too late!*”

And the car screeched to a halt. There wasn’t much to see at this rest stop. The kind of gravelly asphalt that just sits there dreaming of taking the skin off some poor kid’s knees, a few sorry trees, a building with restrooms in it, and a couple of picnic tables covered with bird poop and future splinters.

Noah’s hands were trembling.

“Too late for what?” he said.

“It’s a quote,” she said, and at that very moment Noah remembered where he had heard those words before: that’s what the White Rabbit says at the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland*. Right as he leads Alice down the rabbit hole and into the world where everything’s weird.

That gave Noah the strangest feeling. What were his parents up to?

“Look,” said his mother cheerfully. “It’s all a surprise, I

know, but the good part is, we're going somewhere where almost nobody gets to go."

"Think of it as an expedition," said his dad. His smile was conspiratorial. "If someone invites you to the South Pole, what do you do? You say yes. Right? This is like that, only not the South Pole."

Noah's mother dismissed the South Pole with a wave.

"Back to facts," she said. "It's not going to be easy, maybe, Noah, but you can do it. Hand that photo over, though, please."

Noah stretched his hand out, but slowly, giving his eyes time to see the picture first. That tiny girl—she looked familiar around the edges. She was dressed up in party clothes, with a tiara on her head and a wand in her hand, and her eyes were dark and sparkly, like she had just figured out all sorts of things other people couldn't imagine. She was maybe four years old, that little girl, and it looked like she was noticing every detail of your clothing, your hair, the nervous twitches that meant you might be trying to get away with something.

It was the look of the eyes that gave her away: this little girl was his mother. No doubt about that. There she was, four years old, maybe, and already formidable.

"Mom, it's you!" he said. He had never seen a picture of his mother as a child before. He knew that was strange,

but some families don't have cameras. Or there's a fire and all the photo albums burn right up. These things do happen. "Is that your dad, then? Is that . . . Grandpa?"

A folded newspaper dangled from the man's hand—you could see about half the headline, in those big dark letters that newspapers use when they want to shout:

CORONA—

Something else Noah had never seen a picture of before: any of his grandparents.

"Come on, now. Let go of that thing," said his mother. He hadn't realized he was still hanging on to it, but it was a picture filled with data, a puzzle of a picture, and Noah's mind had woken right up as he looked at it.

So as Noah put the photo into his mother's hand, he did that thing he could do with his brain: took a picture of the photograph, so he could study it later.

He used to think everyone could do this, but in second grade after his koala report, which had lasted forty minutes and contained a gazillion details, his teacher had given Noah two thumbs-up and called his memory "practically photographic." It seemed to him true and not true, both at once. A "photographic memory" sounds like it should be just like a camera, but Noah's brain was a fussy, not-so-perfectly-working camera. He couldn't take a brain-photo of everything all the time—he could still forget plenty of stuff—but when the brain-camera worked, when Noah

heard that tiny, secret *click*, then that picture was tucked away in his brain-file forever. His parents knew Noah had a good memory, but they didn't know the truth, that Noah's memory was *perfect*—sometimes. Imperfectly perfect. Perfect in a not-so-perfect sort of way.

That was Noah's own secret. In a family as sharp-eyed as Noah's, it was good to have some secrets even your mother didn't know.

"Well, look at that," said Noah's mother, eyeing the photo with the strangest expression on her face. "Coronation day! I was a handful and a half, even then. Thought I should be queen of the world."

"And why not?" said Noah's father.

He smiled at Noah.

"Hey, look, there's a vending machine! Why don't you go ahead and get yourself a soda?" Noah's father said. He pressed some coins into Noah's hand. "And using the restroom's a good idea, too. It's going to be a bit of a long drive from here."

Noah opened the door, but he didn't yet get out of the car.

A horrible thought had swept down out of the clear blue sky and perched itself on Noah's shoulder like a ten-ton crow. Noah turned and looked at his parents, his usually less-bizarre-acting parents, and asked, just to be sure: "You didn't murder somebody, did you? Or rob a bunch of banks?"

His parents both laughed. His mom had a laugh that was like a sharp hoot of some wild, fast-flying bird, but his father chuckled in long, rolling rumbles.

“Nah,” said his father. “Nothing like that.”

“An expedition,” said his mother. “An urgent expedition, remember? So hurry.”

Secret File #1

WHAT THE MICROPHONE WOULD HAVE TOLD YOU

An important note: If you had been listening in to Noah’s family’s conversation, perhaps by having left a radio-transmitting microphone in the car they were driving, which is something people sometimes do, you would not have heard it the way I just wrote it out for you above. That is not only because conversations in real life are always jerkier and messier and more mumbly than the ones in books, but also in this case because everything Noah said always came out in shards and pieces, and that is very hard to portray in words. I have written down what he meant to say, and what his parents (who had years of practice understanding him) knew he was trying to say, but not what you yourself or your hidden microphone would have heard him saying.

Noah stuttered. Not just a cute hiccup around a “Denver” or

a “dictionary,” either. Any number of sounds could just knock him right down.

For Noah, talking was like riding a bike with a wheel that liked to freeze up, almost out of nowhere. He would be sailing along down a sentence (so to speak), and along would come a word with a *b* or an *m* in it, something totally everyday like “bunch of books” or “mummy,” and that wheel would simply stop short, like an invisible wall had suddenly sprung up in the road before him, and he and his bicycle would just bang right into that wall and stop.

When this happens over and over, it becomes very tempting to ride your bike like you wish it had training wheels: to pedal along very, very slowly and carefully. Maybe even not to ride at all.

But Noah didn’t want to stay still, and he didn’t want to be silent, so he kept opening his mouth and plowing on. That was the sort of person he was. He was not a training-wheels kind of kid.

“Noah never stops trying! His attitude is good! He’s very persistent!” said all his teachers. “He’ll surely outgrow his difficulties with time!”

But it looked like maybe not, on the outgrowing thing. Noah had peeked into the books on stuttering his mother brought home from the library, and from all those pages of tiny print he had gathered that although little tiny kids often outgrow a

stutter by the time they're medium-little kids, someone who's as old as eleven may — *may* — be a stutterer all his life long.

“But there's nothing you can't do!” his mother had said to him a hundred times. “Look at all those famous actors who used to stutter! Think of them! James Earl Jones, the guy who does Darth Vader's voice — I heard *he* used to stutter.”

It didn't always help, thinking of famous actors who *used to stutter*. They sure didn't seem to be stuttering now. Noah would have paid all the dimes in his dime collection to hear some famous movie actor open his mouth and get stuck. Darth Vader with a stutter! Noah would have liked to hear *that!*

Anyway, this is all just to say that much of what Noah said to his parents in the conversation in the car had a sort of explosive, machine-gun stop-and-start quality and would not necessarily have been understood by a casual bystander. But Noah and his parents understood each other, after long practice, reasonably well.

Let's be clear, though: understanding the words your parents say is not the same as understanding what they're up to when they announce out of the blue that you'll be leaving your old life behind this very minute, right now, today.

It turns out that even people who don't stutter at all can sometimes be thoroughly incomprehensible.

· chapter two ·

BATMAN, GOOD-BYE

When Noah came out of the restroom, he found his parents gathered around a trash can in the parking lot. His father was stuffing garbage bags full of who-knows-what into the trash can, and his mother was holding a match to the corner of something in her hands. It turned out to be the very photograph Noah had just found in his mother's old book.

“Stop! What are you doing?” said Noah. Or, rather, intended to say. He was so horrified that his voice stopped, too. He made a sound that was itself a little like fire hissing, and that was all.

The only photo he had ever seen of his mother as a child, and she was burning it up?

“Don’t wave your arms around like that,” said his mother as she calmly watched the flames eat away at the edges of the picture and then stamped the ashes into the pavement. “There, that’s better. One of those good rules for all travelers: don’t draw attention to yourself, ever.”

“It’s just a picture,” said his dad, but at least he sounded a little sad about it. None of this made sense. Then Noah caught a glimpse of a neon-yellow zipper in the garbage can.

“That’s my backpack,” he said. “It’s *new*.”

And it had excellent Batman logos on the many pockets. It was a terrific backpack.

“Can’t be helped,” said his mother. “It has to go. It has your name scrawled right across the top in indelible marker.”

Why was that a problem? If you didn’t have your name on your backpack, you couldn’t bring it on the aquarium field trip: his mom knew that. She had written that N. KELLER there herself, just last month. And now they were throwing the whole backpack out?

“It’s because of where we’re going,” said his father. “We have to be very careful about everything. Come on, let’s get back in the car.”

“People can’t have Batman backpacks in Germany?”

“It’s not just the usual Germany we’re headed to—it’s

East Germany,” said his father. “That’s the one behind the Iron Curtain.”

“East Germany?” said Noah. His mind was having trouble with the image of a curtain made out of iron. Curtains were supposed to ripple in the breeze.

“Remember the Olympics?” prompted his father.

That’s right. There had been two Germanies at the Olympic Games last summer. His parents had pointed that out to him then. One Germany was friends with the United States; the other Germany was somehow connected with Russia—now also called “the Soviet Union,” just to make things more complicated.

“Swimmers,” said Noah. “Didn’t they have a lot of swimmers?”

“You got it! East Germany—the Communist one—the German Democratic Republic. Home of some very strong swimmers! So here’s the thing. You know how your mother has been studying to be a teacher?”

“Sure,” said Noah. Secretly he thought she would be an excellent and terrifying teacher.

“And so she’s doing research on—?”

Noah knew this part, too: “Kids who have trouble speaking,” he said. “What does that have to do with swimmers, though?”

His mom hooted a little, like an amused owl.

“Nothing!” said his dad. “Stuttering, not swimming!”

“‘Differential Approaches to Elementary Education for Children with Speech-Production Impediments in East and West,’” said Noah’s mother. She said that title so fast it sounded like one impossible thirty-three syllable word. “Because I figured my thesis needed a comparative angle. A unique, comparative angle. Not just American schools. Schools from somewhere different, from a different system. So! Brainstorm! Bingo! *East Germany!* They’re quite interested in special education there, it turns out. And it’s hard to get more different than East Germany!”

They were all already back in the car. Noah’s mother turned the key with gusto, and the engine roared awake again. Noah looked back at the bright-yellow strap of his Batman backpack, poking out of the garbage can, and felt very strange about everything that was happening.

None of this sounded even the slightest bit like visiting the Black Forest and eating cake.

He was sorry about the cake, but on the other hand, Noah’s mother had been working on her graduate degree in special education as long as Noah could remember. Mostly that seemed to mean reading books with very plain covers and long titles, and sometimes using Noah as a guinea pig for all the various tests she had to learn how to give. Noah and his dad both took a lot of pride in being the Most Supportive Family Ever about Noah’s mother’s doctorate.

“There you go,” said Noah’s father. “It’s going to be an absolutely terrific thesis. But it turns out we have to go now.”

“Before schools let out there,” said his mom. “And other reasons: change being in the air, the visas having come through.”

“What’s a visa?”

“Official permission to enter a country,” said his mother. “Visas can be very hard to get for a place like East Germany. Lots of forms. And you can’t just jump up and decide you want to go there. First you have to apply to get a fellowship from this outfit in Washington, D.C., called the International Research and Exchanges Board—they’re the ones who fund this kind of trip. Did I mention I’m being paid? Actual money? To do research?”

“Well, it’s a great topic,” said Noah’s father. “Right, Noah?”

“Sure,” said Noah. His mind, however, was a great big tangle of swimmers and cake.

“Thanks!” said his mother. “So that’s how it went. First I got the fellowship, and then the East Germans needed to think about whether to give us our visas. They dig into everything. They ask all sorts of questions. But now we’ve got the visas, so we can go.”

“When are we coming back?” asked Noah. He didn’t want to miss any more soccer practices than he had to.

“We’ll have to leave the GDR in six months,” said his mother, with what seemed to be regret. “That’s when the visas run out.”

“*Six months?*” said Noah. “Did you just say *six months?*”

He couldn’t believe it. He could *not* believe it. It was unbelievable. He could feel his mouth hanging open, and he didn’t even care.

“Now, now, think of it this way,” said his father. That was one of Noah’s father’s favorite phrases, a signal that something over-the-top and extravagant was probably on its way. “It’s kind of like a trip to fairyland, right? I mean, because almost no one gets to go there, and it’s sort of sealed away behind tall walls, you know? Some people visit, sure, but almost nobody gets to live there, and certainly nobody your age from here. You are one hundred percent sure to be absolutely the only kid in the whole place who comes from Virginia.”

“*Fairyland?*” said Noah

“Not the kind of fairyland with fairies,” said Noah’s dad. “More like the places Alice goes in that book you’re reading. A fairyland with lots and lots and lots of rules.”

“East Germany, a fairyland? Hmm!” said his mother, swerving back onto the highway and making a beeline for the fast lane.

“It will be fun!” said his father. “It’s all about attitude,

people; we just have to learn to think about things a little differently.”

Noah’s mother winked at him via the rearview mirror. Noah’s own attitude was feeling a little battered and bedraggled just at that moment, to be honest.

“More than just merely fun,” said Noah’s mother. “Even those scientists going to the South Pole that your father’s so fond of don’t head off that way just because it’s *fun*. A trip like this to *the other Germany* is guaranteed to be better than fun: it’ll be *highly educational*.”

Better than fun?

Noah was highly dubious.

Secret File #2

“TWO GERMANIES? WHY?”

When Noah asked this question, which had been simmering in his brain ever since he had heard he was going to the “*other Germany*” instead of the “*usual Germany*,” his father told him the following story:

Once upon a time there was a very terrible war. . . .

In 1939 the Germans invaded Poland, and that was the beginning of the Second World War. Germany looked pretty

unstoppable at first, as it pushed on through Europe, occupying country after country, terrorizing and murdering those people who didn't fit into Hitler's warped ideas about "racial purity."

But once the Soviets and the Americans joined the war against Germany in 1941, the tide began to turn. Slowly the Soviets pressed the Germans back out of Russia and Ukraine and then back through Poland toward the German capital, Berlin. The Allies on the Western Front—the Americans, the British, and the Canadians—pushed east through France, which had been occupied by the Germans since 1940. In March 1945 the Allies crossed the Rhine River, which marks a stretch of the border between France and Germany. In late April the Soviet army reached Berlin from the east.

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945.

In Soviet Russia and in the United States—and in many other places around the world—people rejoiced.

Then things almost immediately got complicated again.

With Germany destroyed, the U.S. and the USSR (short for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) became the world's two great superpowers: the most powerful countries left standing. You might think that the Americans and the Soviets would get along better than they used to, now that they had won the war together, but in fact the tensions between the Soviets and the West grew and grew during the years right

after the war. Russia and the United States had very different opinions about how the world should be run. The U.S. believed in capitalism, in letting people's drive to make money push the economy forward, while the USSR was the world's leading Communist country, supporting state ownership of factories and industries as part of a "planned economy"—which just means everything's decided in advance by the government: how many cars and tractors to build this year; how many dentists the country will need three years from now; how many children of tractor builders, therefore, get to go to college now to study dentistry; everything. The idea was that with perfect planning, history would no longer be full of surprises, and everyone would be happy and safe.

The other countries of the world more or less lined up behind the (Soviet) Communists or the (American) capitalists. These decisions were not always made in a very democratic fashion: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, for example, countries in the eastern part of Europe, found themselves—not by choice—on the Soviet side of the great divide. Austria and Greece fell under the influence of the Americans.

As for occupied Germany, the superpowers eventually decided to split the country into two. In 1949 the British, French, and American occupation zones in the western parts of Germany united to form the Federal Republic of Germany, and the eastern part of the country, which had been occupied

by the Soviets, took the name “German Democratic Republic” and became part of the Communist group of countries known as the East Bloc.

That’s how that story seemed to have ended, but the two new Germanies did not exactly live happily ever after. With time that new border between them turned into a bristling line of mines and fences and watchtowers: the Iron Curtain.

And slicing across the city of Berlin, eventually: the Wall.

· chapter three ·

THINK OF IT THIS WAY

Back in the car, Noah put his book in the boring blue knapsack (no indelible ink anywhere) that his parents had brought along as a replacement for Batman. It was already almost full: there was a jacket in there, too, and socks. Nothing that Noah could see in that new backpack, except for *Alice in Wonderland*, had any character whatsoever. Would somebody come along and notice that there was a perfectly good Batman backpack abandoned at the rest area? Somebody who wouldn't mind an N. KELLER in block print near the handle? Maybe there were other Keller families on their way somewhere; maybe they would stop at that very same rest area; maybe—

“So, Noah, the thing is,” said his father, interrupting that tangled mess of thoughts, “that there turn out to be some complicating factors.”

You could say that again. His parents had practically kidnapped him, had crumpled his math homework and thrown away his Batman backpack—that was definitely a lot of “complicating factors.” What, in all that had just happened in the previous two hours of Noah’s life, was *not* “complicated”?

“The age thing first,” said Noah’s mother from her confident place behind the wheel.

“Yes,” said Noah’s father. “See, like I said, there are many rules in this place we’re off to, and one of them is that they’re very fussy about people matching their papers. That means, if your birth certificate says one thing, then that’s what you’ve got to go with. So here’s the deal—it’s about your birthday.”

“It’s going to strike you as strange, and we’re really sorry about this,” said his mother. “You have to believe us that there isn’t another way.”

“*What about my birthday?*” asked Noah. And the word “birthday” came out with all sorts of extra stops and starts, as if it had a bunch of extra joints or something.

This was all getting weirder and weirder. His birthday hadn’t been that long ago—March 23. A bunch of kids from school had gone bowling with him, and there had

been cake and eleven candles and presents and all the usual stuff. He didn't see how even a trip to "the other Germany" could threaten a birthday that had already safely happened.

"Well, the thing is," said his father, "to tell the truth, you were actually born in November."

"*What?*" said Noah. "No, I wasn't. March twenty-third. We went bowling for my eleventh birthday, don't you remember? Joey got in trouble for throwing his shoes at Larry, and we ran out of—"

Pepperoni pizza. Why was something so tasty so impossibly hard to say?

"Of course we remember the *party*," said his father. "The point is, that wasn't in fact your birthday."

"November eighteenth," said his mother briskly. "That's when your birthday actually is."

"No way," said Noah. Perhaps he just gaped from the backseat without saying anything out loud, but all of his inside mind was shouting in disbelief: NO WAY!

Birthdays are fixed dates. They do not just jump around.

"It's partly because you were such a smart young thing," said his father. "And the school had a silly super-early cut-off for kindergarten for boys. So we just worked a little documentary magic and voilà, new birthday for you."

"No way, no way. You couldn't do that. Even *you* couldn't."

“You’ve never seen your mother wield her extraordinary forgery talents? You’ve never seen her write notes in my handwriting? You’ve never seen her sketch ridiculously accurate-looking pictures of dollar bills when she’s bored or waiting in line?”

“Oh,” said Noah. Of course he had. But changing a birthday? Wasn’t that illegal?

In the rearview mirror, Noah’s mother smiled a satisfied, not-very-modest smile.

“Practice,” she said, “makes perfect.”

“Wait,” said Noah. He was beginning to feel ill, and not just because his mother was taking every curve about ten miles per hour too fast and a foot or two closer to the curb than was reasonable. “Are you telling me I’m *not even eleven* yet?”

“Exactly,” said his mother. “Technically, you’ll be eleven in November. Lucky for us! A child coming in through the Wall to stay with a parent on a research visa has to be *young*—ten’s already stretching it.”

“Moreover,” said his father, “there’s the business about your name.”

A great pool of icy numbness was swallowing up Noah’s legs and arms.

“*What about my name?*” Noah asked.

“More paperwork,” said his mother. “A graduate-school-meets-border-controls-paperwork thing.”

“Here’s the deal,” said his father, turning to look back at Noah. “People’s lives change. So, which only makes sense, their names change, too.”

“They do?” said Noah.

“Sure, they do. Names change *all* the time. Some people change names when they get married. Some people write books under a pseudonym. Some people just always wanted to be called Rainbow Stormchaser, and one day they decide to make it so. Some people emerge from their wild teenage years and decide it’s time to settle down to a quiet life in Oasis, Virginia, under different names entirely—”

“That would be us,” said Noah’s mother.

“You guys have two different names?” said Noah to his mother. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Bingo,” said his mother. “We all changed our everyday names when we moved to Oasis. That was actually kind of the point of moving. To start over.”

“Because you were in the picture,” said Noah’s father. “Look, think of it this way: a tiny sweet baby, born into a family of, um, let’s say, wild adventurers—that’s your mother and me. Magicians, trapeze artists, mountain climbers—”

“Trapeze artists?” said his mother. “Don’t get carried away!”

She was grinning, though, Noah could see. She would be a pretty awesome figure, catapulting from a high trapeze.

“*Wild adventurers,*” said his father again. “But let’s see. When *wild adventurers* have a baby, sometimes they decide it’s time to turn over a new leaf and start right over, do you understand me? To begin a brand-new life, somewhere quiet and peaceful. Because they’re nice people, even if they’ve been wild adventurers all those years, and so they’re going to do *whatever it takes* to make a nice, safe life somewhere for their sweet baby boy. Right? Am I right? They’re going to do whatever it takes.”

The rental car shuddered as Noah’s mother overtook another truck.

“So that’s what we did,” said his dad. “We gave up all our old names, and we became the quiet Kellers. We picked a quiet little town. We took you to play in the quiet little park. We became super normal, quiet, ordinary people for a few years.”

“Ten,” said his mother, as if that had been a very, very long time. “Ten years.”

“A great ten years. It’s been good, living normal lives in Oasis, right? But now this amazing opportunity for your mother’s research has come up! We have to grab that. The thing is, our Oasis names are lovely and useful, sure, but not technically official. So it’s simple: we have to leave those Kellers behind for a while. Just until we return to Oasis, of course. Then we can be Kellers again.”

“*What are you saying?*” said Noah, who had been stunned

into complete, total silence for the whole one minute and fifty seconds of this extraordinary speech. Now he felt his lips going dry, his heart beating fast. *Leaving themselves behind?* “What are you even saying? Are you saying we’ve been *hiding*? Is this like the Mafia’s after us or something? Are we in *danger*? Because every day I go to school. That’s the opposite of hiding.”

“Well,” said his father in his mild-mannered way, “going to school could be a way, actually, of blending in, if you think about it.”

“The *Mafia!*” Noah’s mother laughed to herself as if it were the funniest thing anyone had ever suggested in the history of suggestions.

“Point is,” said Noah’s dad, “we came to Oasis to start our lives over as the nice, calm Kellers. People do that. They start lives over. But to pull off this trip to East Germany, our names and our birth dates have to match up with our documents. That’s just how it is. So what if the names are different from what we’ve gotten used to? It’s a matter of wearing the appropriate costume for the occasion. Think of it this way: Does Cinderella go to the ball in her ordinary rags? Does she ride to the ball in an ordinary pumpkin? No! She puts on a special ball-going gown, and she rides in a transformed golden carriage, and every part of that outfit of hers has to be just so, so that no one looks at her and says, ‘Hey! I think that’s that kid Cinderella from back in Oasis!’”

“Dad!” said Noah.

“That’s what we’re saying: all the data we show the East Germans—the birth certificates and marriage licenses and passports and everything—it all has to match up.”

Noah’s father used words like “data” because he himself was a “data analyst” for some big company in Virginia that probably did things with stocks or graphs or money or something. Noah was a little vague on the details of his father’s job, but it was the kind where you had to wear a tie and went early in the morning and came home when it was already a little bit dark, and to tell the truth, it was very peculiar that his father was in the car with them at this moment at all, so early on a Tuesday afternoon.

“What about your job?” asked Noah.

“I quit,” said his father. “This is worth it, I figured. Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go live behind the Wall. Exciting! And I’m finally going to get to write my novel about mink farmers.”

Wait. Wait. Noah was beginning to feel downright head-spinny. He’d heard his father joke about writing a novel before, but *mink farmers*?

“So there you have it: that’s why there’s all this business about the paperwork being just so,” continued his father. “Everything has to line up right for the East Germans or we won’t be let over the Wall.”

“It’s the kind of wall you climb *over*? Like with ladders?”

His parents laughed for a moment, and then both seemed to have some sudden serious thought and stopped laughing.

“Sometimes people try—from the East German side,” said his father. “It’s been twenty-eight years already since the Wall went up in Berlin—”

“Summer of sixty-one!” said his mother. “We couldn’t believe it at first. No one could believe it.”

“—and people are still trying to get out.”

“Why?”

“Well, all sorts of reasons. You know, maybe they’ve got family on the other side. Maybe they want to be able to travel freely, not be told where they can go and who they have to be and what they have to do—”

“*Ahem,*” said Noah, who was being dragged off by his parents to some Communist country he had basically never heard of, four days before Zach’s birthday. “*GET IN THE CAR, NOAH! YOU ARE ONLY TEN! NO MORE SOCCER FOR YOU! NO CASTLES! NO CAKE!*”

The Astonishing Stutter made him sound even madder than he was, but that was okay with him.

“Hmm,” said his father. “I see your point.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said his mother, and there was a wicked glint in her reflected eye. “Our family is not a Communist country. Besides, like your dad said, this will be *fun.*”

And when she said the word “fun,” she gave the steering

wheel an extra little yank, so that the car jiggled left across the lane.

“Well, anyway,” said his father, “in order to get through the Wall—to get us all through the Wall and into East Germany—you’ll just have to be a good sport and play along. That means using the birthday and the name that the birth certificate we sent the East Germans says you have.”

“My name is just Noah,” said Noah. “I’ve never been anything other than Noah.”

“Well, yes, of course, for us you’ve always been Noah. But I’m afraid officially that isn’t your name at all, so we’re all going to have to adjust to the change.”

“It will be an adventure,” said his mother. “Something different! Like putting on a new mask!”

“You’ll get used to it pretty soon, I think,” added his dad. “It’s just like any new habit. Do it for whatever amount of days, and it becomes normal. You’ll be totally adjusted to it sooner than you think. And anyway, there’s a sort of nautical relationship between your real name and the one you’ve been using all this time; you’ll see: one builds ships and the other sails in whales.”

“What?” said Noah. “What what what?”

It can be hard to breathe when people who ostensibly love you pop a new mask right onto your face.

“Your actual real name, dear,” said his mother as she

sped that rental car up to chase down the next tractor-trailer on the road, “is—and I do think you’ll like it once you get used to the whole thing—Jonah Brown.”

Secret File #3

AND THIS ISN'T NOW, EITHER

The mathematically inclined reader will already have added twenty-eight to 1961 and discovered that Noah (now Jonah) is having this conversation on the way to the airport with his parents not “now,” but quite long ago, in 1989. Noah (Jonah) does not realize, however, that he is living long ago. He thinks of himself, as all of us do, as living in the present. So we will not trouble him with this added bit of confusion just at the moment.

After all, he is still thoroughly flabbergasted by the news that not only is he younger than Zach Blumberg, which is really galling and a shock, but that his name is Jonah and not Noah. That’s just one extra letter and a tiny bit of rearranging’s worth of difference, but you’d be surprised how disorienting an itty-bitty change like that can feel.

It made him feel sick inside, almost like someone coming down with the flu.

Cloud and Wallfish

Anne Nesbet

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