

# Chapter 1

**M**rs. Roberts had taught sixth-grade English in my school for about eight hundred years. She was famous for cramming educational experiences into every spare minute. So on the last day of school, while the other classes had parties or played out on the field, Mrs. Roberts's English class was busy sweating the final hours away on a "surprise" end-of-year essay: "Three Wishes I'd Like to Fulfill over Summer Vacation."

Another thing about Mrs. Roberts. Not only was her end-of-school essay notorious, but she never even changed the topic. So though it was supposed to be a surprise assignment for the last day of school, really every sixth grader with a normal IQ knew the question beforehand. And most had written the essay out and memorized it, because the rule in Mrs. Roberts's class was that when you were done, you could leave.

I had plenty of wishes for the summer after sixth grade, none of which I planned to share with Mrs. Roberts. So I wrote a fake essay for that last day, listing my wishes as:

1. See all the movies headlined at the Ace Theatre.
2. Learn to swim.
3. Visit Beth at summer camp.

None of which I wanted to do. But I did have three real wishes.

In fact, I liked Mrs. Roberts's idea so much that I'd been writing my three wishes down each summer since the year I first heard of her assignment—in second grade.

Here were my three real wishes:

1. Get tall.
2. Have an adventure.
3. Meet my father.

Of these three wishes, none had ever been fulfilled. And, being realistic, I realized they weren't going to be. First of all, I was short and, if Gran was any indication, likely to stay that way. Combine that with my short hair and flat chest, and I looked more like an eight-year-old boy than an eleven-year-old girl and usually had to tell people my name, Annie, to make them realize the truth. But Gran says that happens when you're eleven. And since I'm not pretty, but what people call plain, I

didn't think just growing my hair long would help me. Anyway, the point is, growing tall wasn't a wish that was likely to come true.

My second wish didn't hold much more hope of being fulfilled. Adventures were scarce in Sunshine, a small town of what Mrs. Roberts called "some two thousand souls," as if it were populated by ghosts. Its biggest employer was Enderfield, the state prison several miles from town; its second biggest was the local department store, Ratchett's, which was two stories high and filled with what my friend Beth liked to call Ancient Style, since everything they showed there was at least ten years out of date.

During sixth grade, the only excitement I'd had was on the few nights I got to sleep over at Beth's house and watch *The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage* on ABC. We didn't have a TV at our house, or even a radio. The only reason we even had a telephone was because I paid our bills down at the post office, with cash Gran pulled out of various hiding places in the house. She didn't believe in dealing more than necessary with banks, which she said kept records on everybody and were nosy. So it was only by going to Beth's house that I knew those crazy Iranians had kept people hostage for 227 days by our second-to-last day of school, June 17. I'd kept count right along with Mr. Koppel, and Beth liked to marvel at the

way those numbers stuck in my head. Privately, though, I thought it had more to do with only getting to watch the show three times. Things like that stay with you when you don't see them too much. Which is why my second wish wasn't exactly realistic, either. Since sitting on Beth's family-room couch and waiting for Ted Koppel to come on was the closest I had come to excitement all year, I had little hope that the summer, with Beth away at camp, would hold much adventure.

As for my third wish, I'm not even sure why I kept making it. But when you're in second grade, you don't yet know the meaning of *impossible*. And since I liked that wish best of all, I couldn't bring myself to change it, even as I grew old enough to know better.

I had no memories of my father, and not even a picture of him, since our house had no pictures. It didn't have many mirrors, either. Gran said, in one of her talkative spells, that mirrors made her uneasy. She didn't like looking into rooms she couldn't get to or at people she couldn't touch. So we had no photos, not of my father, and certainly not of my mother, who, Gran said, had run off when I was three and Rew just one.

I had one and a half memories of my mother. I say "a half" because whenever I tried to remember what my mother looked like, I saw a brown leather purse instead. That, and the sound of her keys clinking together —

that's what I remembered. And then there was the other memory, or maybe it was one Gran gave me and I made my own. That was of the night she left, when she set us down, along with our suitcases, in Gran's house. I can't see her face there, either, but I think she might have had brown hair, like mine. And I don't remember much of her voice, but I do know the words she used. "They were always his idea, anyway," she said, and left.

So I didn't miss my mother much. But my father — since I was, after all, his idea — him, I missed. And though I didn't know what he looked like, Gran said he was something like Rew, and that made a nice picture in my mind.

Rew looked like he had put his face up to the sky in a rainstorm of freckles. He was covered in them, mostly on his face, but practically every region of his body held a stray freckle or two. I envied him his freckles and his red hair, which made him stand out beside me. After they learned we were brother and sister, stupid strangers always asked me, "Where'd your red hair go?" As if I would love to discuss why I was boringly brown and the freckle god had been stingy with me.

So if Rew favored my father, as Gran liked to say, I could only imagine liking his face. And probably everything else about him. Genius and freckles must go together, because Rew got both. Rew had always

fascinated me. I did most of the talking, but he did most of the thinking. Even though he was only nine, most of the time he beat me at chess, a game Gran had taught us. He had a way of seeing moves ahead, so he'd trap me and checkmate me before I realized I'd been had. I won only when I could taunt him hard enough to make him mad. Rew stopped thinking when he got mad.

So I imagined my father was Rew grown big. Smart, thoughtful, freckled, red. And he was my third wish.

But that was the unlikeliest wish of all. Because even if I drank a magic elixir and sprouted a few feet, and even if angry revolutionaries suddenly stormed the streets of boring old Sunshine, making wishes one and two come true, wish three was impossible. I could never meet my father. My father was dead.

## Chapter 2

**R**ew could think better than I could, but I told the better story, probably because I was a good liar, something Gran had trained me in when I was little. We had moved to Sunshine when I was three and a half, and by the time I was five, when I could have started kindergarten with the other kids, Gran had decided to homeschool us. She didn't hold with institutions, she said, or being locked up in a big building all day. That was back when she talked more and brooded less, though she still brooded often enough even then.

I must have been about six when the truant lady, or so Gran called her behind her back, came to check on us. Actually, she was a social worker named Adele Parks, who had a gentle way of talking that I liked. But I didn't get to talk to her just then. The first time she came was on one of Gran's good days, and Gran had summoned

up the best of her old self, explaining to the woman, at length, her educational philosophy, which I heard her say included “lots of classics, field trips, and extensive hands-on work.”

After the woman left, Gran, staring out back at the Zebra Forest, said to me, “I’m a liar, I’ll admit. But I pride myself on being a real *good* liar. That’s part of my educational philosophy, too, Annie B. Mark that down. Lesson one: If you’re going to do something, make sure you do it with *excellence*.”

Gran’s name for me, Annie B., was short for what she liked to call me: Annie Beautiful. Since I already told you I’m not one jot beautiful, that was one of Gran’s lies, too. But it was one of her excellent ones. She said it so well, I sometimes believed it.

After that, Adele Parks came by most months to check in. As soon as I had learned to write, mainly by watching Gran do it and studying old *Life* magazines, I had dutifully filled out the homeschool forms she sent Gran. Of course, this only made Adele Parks a more frequent visitor, since a six-year-old filling out forms didn’t inspire much confidence in the homeschooling system Gran had told her about. And so I told her lots of lies, taking my cue from Gran, but eventually she sent me, and then Rew, to the local public school.

I began in second grade, which is how I heard about

Mrs. Roberts's essay one year later than the other kids. But I found I liked school well enough, especially when I sat next to Beth Mayfield.

While I was sitting hunched in my chair that first day, Beth leaned over and told me she liked the way I wrote my name. Beth is a girl who is not afraid to ask questions, and that day, she wanted to know everything about me. I quickly found out I didn't know much about myself. Not enough to satisfy Beth, anyway.

"Where'd you move from?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know," I said, feeling foolish. "The city. I'm not sure which one."

"Well, you've got to know where you're from," Beth told me. "Ask your mother."

"I have a gran" was all I said to that.

"Ask her, then."

And so I did ask Gran. On good days, Gran would tell me plenty, but none of it answered Beth's questions. She told me about her growing up in crowded apartments where someone was always cooking, about having lots of cousins and playing marbles in the street.

Gran didn't talk like anyone else. Maybe in Chicago, where she came from, everyone sounded like her, but no one else in Sunshine could pull their words out flat, the way she did. No one else had the gravelly sound she had, even in her singing voice.

“The whole family lived in a three flat,” she told Rew and me once. “That’s three apartments stacked one on top of the next. And I mean uncles and aunts and grandparents and cousins—everybody. Downstairs we all worked in the family grocery. We took turns behind the counter and delivering round the neighborhood. We went where we pleased, my cousins and me. They had no playgrounds in those days. We just had the streets. The streets were ours.”

“What about school?” Rew wanted to know. “Didn’t you go?”

“Up till the eighth grade I did,” Gran said. “Then I had to work. Everyone worked then, if they were lucky enough to have a place to.”

“Weren’t there truant ladies then?” I asked her.

“Oh, not then, not when I was old as that. People overestimate the amount of schooling a person needs to get by, I’d say. Look at my mother—look how she did!”

Gran’s mother had run the family—all three flats of it. Gran said she was a bear of a woman—Gran called her “substantial”—and she took no lip from anyone.

Privately, Rew said “substantial” only meant fat, and that anyone who could barely read couldn’t have been much of a success, but I didn’t agree. In my mind’s eye, Gran’s mother was like Gran, only more solid. Her face was the same: eyes the color of sunny water; white, white

hair; pointed nose. Wider, though. Definitely wider. Gran herself was thin, a bird of a woman, who had once been quick but who now, as the bad days grew more frequent, stayed in her chair by the window, sunk beneath her old newspapers, or upstairs, behind her closed door.

All Gran's cousins were gone now, she said, her being the youngest. There was no one left. Still, I liked to imagine her the way she must have been, a girl on the sidewalk, hair vivid red, shooting marbles and rolling pennies.

When Beth heard all this, she came the two miles from town to see Gran and our house, and she didn't mind the clutter or that Gran never threw anything out or that we mostly ate from dirty dishes or that, as time passed, I did a lot of the shopping myself, because it made Gran too tired to go into town. Beth thought our house was interesting, what with its old magazines and Gran's obsession with keeping things. And so we were friends.

That was enough for me. And Gran said I ought to be grateful and not wish the other kids would come by, or want to, even.

"I don't like people snooping around," she said. "We're enough for each other, aren't we?"

I always told her yes, of course we were. And on her good days, it was even true. But by the end of sixth

grade, I'd counted more bad days than good, more days when Gran didn't wake until noon, and then only got up to sit in the kitchen, staring through the windows at the Zebra, grinding the tip of her slipper into the linoleum until it left little bits of gray rubber scattered like eraser dust on the floor. So I looked forward to summer less than I had. But still, there was good in it. There was Rew, and there was the Zebra, where the two of us would go each day, and tell stories, and climb trees, and listen to uncluttered quiet that had no warning in it.

So as that summer began, while America counted hostage days and Beth learned to swim, I thought up good lies to tell and climbed trees and lay a lot in the shade. I didn't think any of my wishes would come true, not even the one about getting taller.

## Chapter 3

**W**e called it the Zebra Forest because it looked like a zebra. Its trees were a mix of white birch and chocolate oak, and if you stood a little ways from it, like at our house looking across the back field that was our yard, you saw stripes, black and white, that went up into green.

Gran never went out there except near dusk, when the shadows gathered. She didn't like to be out in full sunlight usually, and told me once she didn't like the lines the trees made. Gran was always saying stuff like that. Perfectly beautiful things—like a clean blue sky over the Zebra—made tears come to her eyes, and if I tried to get her to come outside with me, she'd duck her head and hurry upstairs to bed. But then it would be storming, lightning sizzling the tops of the trees, and she'd run round the house, cheerful, making us hot

cocoa and frying up pancakes and warming us with old quilts.

We had few rules in our house, but keeping out of the Zebra Forest in a storm was one of them. In fact, I'd be hard pressed to list any other rules at all, maybe because aside from that, we didn't think to do much that Gran would have minded. She never cared if we went to school, and lots of times I didn't. If I missed half a week, Adele Parks would come around, asking if I wasn't feeling well. And of course I'd hack and cough then, double over in pain and tell her I'd had a fever of 106 just that morning but that it seemed to be lifting and so I'd be back in a few days. And then I'd go back again, but only because I wanted to. Once I missed two whole weeks, because I happened to know Adele Parks had gone off to visit her sick mother out of town. Before she left, she made me promise I'd go to school while she was gone, but she probably knew that didn't mean much. I only did go back because Beth said she wouldn't visit after school if I didn't come at least once in a while.

Adele Parks liked to talk to me about responsibility, a topic that bored me. I figured as long as Rew and I each knew enough to pass into the next grade, we were fine.

"You need to buckle down, Annie," she'd say. "You could really do something with that mind of yours."

What Adele Parks didn't seem to realize was that I used my mind plenty. I used it to tell Rew stories.

Every day after school, once we'd gone out and settled ourselves in the Zebra, he'd look at me with expectation, and I'd have to think. That's how Rew was — it took thinking to keep him happy.

Since he'd been little, Rew loved two things: jokes and pirate stories. He'd gotten attached to jokes when he found an old joke book among Gran's stacks. And when he'd finished that, he thought up his own.

They were always awful.

"What did the limestone say to the geologist?" he'd ask me.

"That's not a joke," I'd say. "It's a riddle."

"You just don't know. Come on, what did it say?"

"I don't know. Tell me."

Rew would grin. "Don't take me for granite!"

He'd laugh at himself then, since I wasn't about to. "Get it? Granite?"

I would usually groan and fall back against the nearest tree. "How can someone so smart love such stupid jokes?" I'd ask him.

And he'd laugh again. "Actually, that was a riddle. Want to hear a joke now?"

"No!"

“Fine, tell me a story, then.”

He'd started loving pirate stories in kindergarten, when he found *Treasure Island* in Gran's bedroom. Or rather half of *Treasure Island*. The first seven chapters were gone from it, ripped out neat at the binding, and so we began at chapter 8, “At the Sign of the Spy-glass.” Rew was too little to read such a hard book himself, so I read it to him, and we both loved to hear about Jim Hawkins, treasure maps, and Long John Silver. After a while, I offered to get the book out of the public library so we could see how it all started, but Rew preferred to imagine how Jim Hawkins had got himself mixed up with pirates. So we started to tell ourselves new beginnings, out in the Zebra.

Each of us had our favorite people in the story, and we liked to imagine what they'd done before they all boarded the *Hispaniola*. Even when I grew interested in some of the other books I found in Gran's piles, about spunky girls who tamed wild horses or geniuses who used math to predict the future, Rew couldn't get enough of pirates, and he even wanted to hear stories about the terrible blue-faced Captain Flint, who'd killed his men and hidden the treasure.

I couldn't say I loved the pirates, exactly, but I loved the story, and so I'd take turns making things up

and going back to the book, where I never got tired of seeing Jim Hawkins get home with that treasure in the end.

As for Rew, he knew who the good guys were, and he liked Jim Hawkins all night, but he was most of all stuck on Long John Silver. I'd tried to explain to him, when we first read it, how bad old Long John was, but Rew wouldn't have any of it. He agreed, of course, that Long John was a bad man. But that old sea cook was just so *smart*, Rew kept coming back to him.

“You can't trust him, though,” I said.

Rew liked him just the same.

And of course, there were other things that drew us to *Treasure Island*. For one thing, we could never get enough of the way they swore. “Shiver me timbers” and “By the powers!” We loved that stuff. When those pirates got mad — which was a lot — they spouted “oaths,” as Jim Hawkins called them. Rew loved that word, too, because he thought it sounded like “oaks” — the kind out in the Zebra. But I looked it up in the dictionary and told him it meant “promises,” which stumped us.

“What's he promising to do? What kind of promise is ‘Shiver me timbers’ or ‘By the powers?’” he asked me.

I had no idea, but that didn't stop either of us from spouting oaths ourselves.

Rew loved pirates so much, he started seeing them everywhere.

“Do you think Gran was a pirate once?” he asked me one day, when he had just turned seven.

“Course not!” I said, surprised. “Gran? Why would you think so?”

“She keeps her treasure hidden. Just like Captain Flint on Treasure Island.”

I laughed. “She didn’t get it from being a pirate,” I told him. “Grandpa gave it to her, before he died.”

On one of her most talkative days, Gran had told me that. In the city that had no name, my grandfather had died, just before we came to Sunshine.

“He was a good man,” Gran had said that time. “But his heart couldn’t take it.”

“Take what?” I’d asked her.

“Living.”

Gran’s answers were like that sometimes, and when they were, the story was over. But I knew my grandpa had taken care of Gran, leaving her money to live on if something happened to him, because she’d told me so, told me he was a careful man who always took care. And so she’d gathered up Rew and me, and the money he’d left her, and come to Sunshine, far away from the place where living was too much for Grandpa Snow.

Rew didn’t want to hear about a grandpa with a hurt

heart, though. And so one day that year I agreed that our grandpa *had* been a pirate and that Gran got her treasure from a treasure box he'd left, which was still buried out on the edge of the Zebra.

"Is that why she lets everyone call her Morgan?" he asked me, thinking it over. "Like Adele Parks and them?"

When we had first registered for school, Gran had put us down under the name Morgan, which had been her name before she married Grandpa Snow, when she lived in Chicago. "My mother would have liked to be remembered that way" was all she said about it. And that was Gran. But at home, she never let us forget that we were Snows, and neither of us would have had it any other way. Snow had been our father's name, after all.

"That's right," I told Rew. "See, pirates never use their real names. You think Long John Silver's mother *named* him that? Course not. So Grandpa Snow's pirate name was Morgan, and he stamped that name right on his big treasure box, with the special seal pirates use. If Gran didn't use that name Morgan, that box wouldn't *budge* open. And so she keeps her pirate name, and that's how she gets at the treasure."

Rew grinned. "The old pirate Morgan. That's a great name. Where'd he sail? In the Atlantic?"

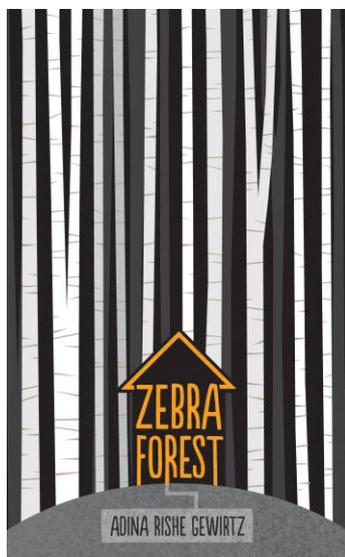
"He sailed down to the islands," I told him. "To the Bermuda Triangle, where ships get lost at sea."

“And is that what happened to him? Did his ship get lost?”

I nodded. “Absolutely,” I said. “It’s a mystery right to this day. His ship was swallowed up, and no one ever saw it again.”

# Zebra Forest

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