

BIRDIE'S BARGAIN



Two-Time Newbery Medalist

KATHERINE PATERSON

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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This book is for

Susan Cohen,
who loved the little nestling,
and

Karen Lotz,
who gently nudged the fledgling
to the edge of the nest,
and

you, her reader,
without whom she cannot fly.





If you're wearing a T-shirt that says in big capital letters **I ♥ JESUS**, you shouldn't be standing in the middle of the street bawling your eyes out. But that was exactly what Birdie was doing. She had raced out of Gran's house just in time to see the old Subaru swing around the corner. Mom must have been driving because Birdie got a last glimpse of Daddy sitting next to Baby Billy's car seat. They never looked back, and they didn't hear her yelling, telling them to wait—that she had changed her mind—that she wanted to go with them.

It was too late.



The Time of No Goodbyes

It wasn't until the volunteers from the Lions Club had left and they stood in the empty apartment looking at nothing that Birdie realized her bicycle was gone. The sofa, the kitchen table and chairs, all the beds—even the TV—had been carried to the truck. Daddy had finished stuffing the trunk of the Subaru and the tiny U-Haul trailer with all the boxes and baby furniture when she thought of it.

“Mom! Those guys stole my bike!”

“Oh, Birdie. No one stole your bike.”

“Then where is it? Daddy didn't put it in the car or in the U-Haul. You gotta call them. Tell them to bring it back! Now!”

“We can’t do that, sweetie.” Mom sighed. She’d been doing a lot of sighing lately, and it wasn’t her style. “I’m sorry. I should have told you, but it’s been hard to think straight, and they were so thrilled to get a bike. They said bikes always do well in their summer sale.”

“But it’s *my bike!*”

“There was just no room, either in the car or the U-Haul . . . Did you know everything they make from the sale goes to help blind people?”

As if that would make it okay.

“It was really too small for you,” Daddy chimed in. “We need to get you a new one, a regular-size one.” He studied Birdie’s grim expression. “I promise.”

“When?”

“As soon as we can afford it,” Mom said. Like never.

It was downhill from there. Birdie hardly spoke in the car on the way north even though Daddy was sitting in the back seat, too. The passenger-side front seat was piled to the roof with stuff, which meant that some grown-up had to sit in back. “Your mom’s the better driver,” he said as he climbed in with Birdie and Billy.

She was sure that before Billy was born, Daddy used

to drive a lot, and he never sat in the back even when he wasn't driving. She should have been happy he was in the back, but Baby Billy's car seat was plunk in the middle—right between them—and even if she felt like talking, which she certainly did not at the moment, how could she talk to Daddy across the stomach of a six-month-old baby who cried a lot and wouldn't even go to sleep in a moving car?

It was a known fact that every normal baby in the world just naturally passed out as soon as a car was shifted into drive and began to move. "I think something must be wrong with your brother," Melanie had said when Birdie complained to her friends that Billy never slept in the car.

During the whole week that Mom and Daddy and Gran tried to settle the family into their new quarters, Birdie watched soap operas. She hated the place, hardly bigger than a closet, that was supposed to be her new bedroom. She spent her days in the living room watching TV. They should have yelled at her for being lazy and selfish. They didn't even fuss at her for watching daytime soaps.

They just didn't care. Didn't they remember how they used to fuss about children turning into ignorant couch potatoes? Maybe she needed to scream like Billy so they'd come running. But seriously . . .

On Monday Mom had gone to the local Dollar Store and applied for a job. Daddy said she should take her time, try to find a better job, but she shook him off. They were hiring at the Dollar Store. She was sure she could get a job there. If she hated it, she'd try to find something else. Right now, they needed the money. She promised not to start before he left. No one suggested that Birdie start school before then.

They wanted as much time with Daddy as possible. But Birdie had pretty much ruined that, hadn't she? Moping around and pretending to feel sick for most of the week. Even Wednesday night, when Gran took them all out for maple creamies, Birdie had pouted. Chocolate was her favorite, not maple. Couldn't they bother to remember that?

Then the terrible last morning arrived. Mom came to wake her up, but Birdie just burrowed under the pillow and pretended to be asleep.

“Come on, sweetie. Get up.” Birdie didn’t move. “Birdie, please. We’re not going to see Daddy for a year. Even if you don’t want to go to the airport, at least get up and say goodbye.”

“I can’t.” Her voice was muffled by the thick duck-feather pillow, to which she was probably allergic, but who would care? “I feel awful. I might give him something.”

“Oh, Birdie,” Mom said in her don’t-be-ridiculous tone of voice. She stood in the doorway for a moment or two, then, sighing loudly enough for Birdie to hear it through the feathers, she left. Birdie listened to the click of her boot heels as she walked the short distance to the kitchen.

Birdie thought she could hear a whispered conversation, and then there was the sound of her father’s heavier step. “Birdie.” He said it quietly because he had walked right to the side of her bed. “I’ve got to go now, okay?”

What a stupid thing to say. It was not okay. It would never be okay.

“I want you to help your mom and Gran while I’m gone. No kidding, slugger. I really need you to step up to the plate.” Why did he say that? She hated baseball.

When she didn't answer, didn't even turn to look at him, he bent down, gently pulled the pillow off her head, and kissed her ear. "I'll miss you, baby," he said. And was gone.

The closing of the heavy front door made Birdie sit up straight. She put her hand right on the heart of her Jesus T-shirt. What was the matter with her? How could she let her daddy go to war without even a real goodbye? Jesus would never do that. Being scared that someone would die was not an excuse. At Bible Camp, Reverend Colston had told them that Jesus gave his friends a long, beautiful goodbye message the night before he died.

She jumped out of bed, stuck her feet into her bunny slippers, and raced out of the house . . . just in time to see the old Subaru swing around the corner. She was too late.

When she turned, still bawling, to go back to the house, Gran met her holding out her jacket.

"Sweetie, here. Put your jacket on. It's freezing today."

Without a word, Birdie shrugged on her old Salvation Army Store jacket. She couldn't talk. She'd already said

too many wrong words before she even got out of bed this morning.

Birdie went back into the empty old house, went to her tiny room, pulled off her jacket, and got into bed. Once again, she pulled the pillow over her head. There was nothing else to do. She lay there trying not to think, but the view of the disappearing car kept rattling around in her head. Mom was driving him to Essex Junction, where the guard was gathering for the ceremony. Then the soldiers would get on the buses to the airport, from where they'd fly to some base and on to Iraq, where they'd all die.

She grabbed the pillow with both hands and smashed it down harder against her face. She would never see her daddy again. She didn't cry. She was too scared and mad to cry, but the pillow kept her from screaming out loud.

Later—it might have been minutes or hours, who cared?—Gran came in. Well, it was her house, thought Birdie, so maybe she thought she had the right to come busting in, invading somebody's privacy. Birdie wanted to tell her to go away, but she just pinched her lips

together under the pillow and didn't say anything, even when Gran sat down beside her on the narrow bed.

“Elizabeth?” Her grandmother never called her Birdie. That was Daddy's name for her. In the story she begged him to tell her over and over again, he would tell her how much he and Mom had longed for their very own baby, so the very first sight of his own little birdie was the happiest moment of his life—right up there with the day he married Mom. It didn't matter to Birdie that he'd called her that because she was skinny and didn't have any hair and was always squawking to be fed. She loved that Daddy called her Birdie. Elizabeth was the name her parents used when they were unhappy with her. Gran said it wasn't respectful to call a beautiful, almost grown-up girl Birdie.

“Elizabeth?” Gran said again. “I made some cocoa. Would you like some?” From under the pillow, Birdie shook her head.

Gran patted her shoulder. When Birdie didn't respond, Gran sat there quietly for a minute before clearing her throat. “I'd like to make this room nicer for you while you're here—make you feel like it's really yours.

Would that help? I know it's small, but you could help me choose a new quilt or nicer curtains—something to make it look more like yours and not like the overflow space it used to be.”

Exactly. How were you supposed to make a closet practically under the staircase friendly? Even Harry Potter couldn't do that.

“Well, I'll be in the kitchen when you feel like getting up.” She gave Birdie another pat and stood up. “I think your mother will need cheering up this evening. I can't do that without your help.”

She was gone at last. Birdie yanked the pillow off her head and rolled over on her back. The ceiling had stains on it from a leak that had probably happened before Birdie was born. You'd think in ten years a person could scrape together enough money to fix a ceiling. But it was always money. That's why they were all in this mess. In fact, Daddy had joined the guard in the first place just to bring in a little money.

Then came September 11, 2001. Birdie shivered and pulled the covers close to her chin, squeezing her eyes to shut out the sight of the flaming towers she'd seen

on TV. And after that came not one but two wars, and neither of them was over yet. Daddy had already gone to war twice, and now he was going again.

Even if two different presidents said both wars were nearly over, people were still going there and still getting killed. Lots of guys can survive one, maybe two deployments, but number three and BOOM! Of course, it had been that awful Warren Matson in Brattleboro who had whispered it just loud enough for Birdie to overhear in the lunchroom. Oh, if she could only unhear it.

Her grandmother was back at the door. “You haven’t eaten all day,” she said. “Let me fix you something. What do you want?”

What did she want? It was what she didn’t want. First of all, she had never wanted a little brother. But mostly, mostly she didn’t want her daddy to go to Iraq and die. She hadn’t wanted terrorists to hit the twin towers, and all these years later, there were still terrorists everywhere.

Everybody said so.

She didn’t want to go to bed every night wondering if she’d wake up in the morning. She didn’t want to die.

And she would. Everybody did. People pretended that you wouldn't. Or they'd say, *only when you're really old and don't want to live anymore*. But that was a lie.

Why did grown-ups lie all the time?

Reverend Colston at Bible Camp said it was against the commandments of God to lie.

Gran was still waiting for an answer. "I'm okay," Birdie lied, and turned her face to the wall.

Well, God should know lying was different for kids. Sometimes they just had to lie.

She stopped herself. Suppose God was listening. Well, of course God was listening, stupid. God heard everything. She didn't mean she was so sick of the world that she wanted to die. No! She just wanted everything different.

Why couldn't God roll history backward as well as forward? Why couldn't He go back to September 10, 2001, and fix things so the next day was an ordinary sunny day in the fall and not the start of two wars and horribleness? If she was God, she'd sure run things differently.

Like press reset and let a new story take the place of the terrible one.

God wasn't going to do anything of the sort. Okay, so He wouldn't start over, like with Noah and the flood, but couldn't He just let someone in her family win the lottery or something so they'd have enough money and Mom didn't have to go to work while Daddy was overseas, so they wouldn't have to move to Gran's because rent on the apartment would be too high, and she wouldn't have to start in a brand-new school where she didn't have any friends?

At the thought of that—being alone and friendless, when God knew perfectly well that she was shy and had a hard time making friends (*remember that first summer at Bible Camp?*)—the rock inside her that had kept the tears dammed up broke loose. She began to cry like a baby, so loudly that she was sure her grandmother could hear her through the walls. She pulled the covers as well as the pillow over her head and cried into the black cave they made.

When the flood finally subsided, she wiped her nose on the pillowcase. Of course. That was it. That was what she had to do. Birdie sat straight up on the bed, then hesitated. Maybe with something this important,

she'd better kneel and show God she meant business. Reverend Colston always said it was good to kneel down when you prayed. It showed you were humble before God.

Birdie got down beside her bed. The covers tickled her nose, but she'd make the bed up after.

Now she put her hands together like that praying hands picture they hang in churches.

Okay, God. No. Dear Heavenly Father. That was better. Dear Heavenly Father, I'll stop acting like a jerk, if you'll start acting like God and take care of us for a change. No. Erase that last part. I'll get up right up now and start acting normal if you'll . . . I mean, I will love you and Jesus and be a witness in the world if—if you will just keep my Daddy safe. Okay? Deal?

Promise?

Love, Birdie. I mean, Amen.

Slowly she opened her eyes and stood up. Light was pouring through the one small window onto the floor. Light. "I am the light of the world." Jesus said that. It was like Noah's rainbow. A promise. God was telling her it was a bargain.

She sat down on the side of the bed. Her **I ♥ JESUS** T-shirt and pajama bottoms felt clammy, as though she'd been sweating as well as crying there under the covers. She grabbed her bathrobe and ran upstairs to the full bath. There was only a toilet and basin across from the closet room.

Under the hot shower she washed everything, her hair included. When she finished, she went back down to her room and laid out clean clothes. Although her **I ♥ JESUS** shirt wasn't exactly clean and was still a bit sweaty, she put it on anyhow. Her sweatshirt would cover it up so Gran wouldn't see it wasn't clean.

There, God, how's that? I'm doing my part. I'm clean and dressed. Oh, yeah, I mean, yes. Thank you for the sign. There. That should make God know she was really trying.

When Birdie appeared at the kitchen door, her grandmother was sitting at the kitchen table reading a book and drinking something from a cup—not a mug, a delicate china cup with a saucer under it. Gran was weird like that. She didn't have much money either, but she

liked things like cups with saucers and the good silverware she'd inherited from her own mother.

"You're up!"

"Yeah."

"Feeling better?"

"Uh-huh." Mom would have corrected her. She liked for Birdie to say yes or no, not grunt an answer—especially when she spoke to grown-ups, most especially when she spoke to Gran, who used to teach high school English and liked proper speech. But Gran chuckled and said she was retired and wasn't about to start grading her granddaughter's grammar.

Well, Birdie wasn't going to mope and cry anymore. She had made a bargain with God there on her knees in the closet room. If she'd be good, step up to the dadgum plate like Daddy said, God would be good, too. Wasn't that what He had promised?

"I think I'll just have a bowl of cereal, if that's okay."

"Of course." Gran stuck a marker in her book and started to get up.

"I'll get it," Birdie said. "You're busy."

Birdie took down the box of generic cornflakes

Mom had brought from home and got the milk carton out of the refrigerator. They were out of bananas. She'd eaten the last one yesterday, and no one had felt like going to the store when they had such little time left with Daddy.

It's hard to do ordinary things when you are tiptoeing around God, trying to be almost perfect. You can't even complain about generic cereal. Birdie put extra sugar in the bowl to make up for the lack of fruit and ate most of the flakes, her elbow on the table and her head propped up on her hand. As she ate, she stared at her grandmother's bent head, her hair almost totally gray now and cut nearly as short as Daddy's. She never wore makeup or fancy clothes. Maybe when your husband has been dead for years and years, you don't make a special effort to fix yourself up.

She wasn't beautiful like Mom. Daddy said the first time he saw Mom, he thought she was the most beautiful person in the world. No, Gran wasn't beautiful. Not that she was ugly. She had a really nice smile, and sometimes Birdie thought she was actually pretty. And she wasn't all that old, was she? Sixty something? Seventy?

When Birdie had finished all she could swallow, she took the still-half-full bowl to the sink and rinsed out the soggy flakes. “Um, Gran?” Gran looked up. “I think I’ll go for a walk.” She couldn’t think of anything else to do, and she didn’t want to go back to bed. Not after her bargain.

“It’s awfully icy out there.”

“I’ll be careful.”

She had hardly walked a block when she realized that walking in this weather was crazy. It was well below freezing, and even with her hood up and her warmest mittens, the January wind bit into her face and hands. But she didn’t turn back. And there, just ahead, she saw another sign.

Birdie gasped. It was a tree encased in ice. And even though the morning sun added no warmth to the day, it lit up the giant branches. They gleamed and sparkled. The thought came to her that the tree was singing, singing a hymn to the sun. She stood there looking at the great old fir, silvered and dancing, light sparkling from every branch. She caught herself listening for its song.

As cold as she was, and as anxious as she was, it was another message from God. She was sure of it.

Her grandmother heard the front door close and called out to her. “Ready for that hot chocolate now, Elizabeth?”

“Yes,” Birdie said. “Thank you.”



Alicia Marie Suggs

If Birdie had turned right at the corner instead of left, everything would have been different. Why had God let her do it? They had been getting along so well. He could have given her a little nudge when she got to the corner, but He hadn't. As it was, the first person she met that Saturday afternoon was Alice Suggs—or Alicia Marie Suggs, as she preferred to be known.

Birdie knew now that Daddy was really on the way to Iraq. Even with the bargain, though, it was too terrible to bear. She was trying not to cry. But when you're homesick and scared, it's hard not to. By the time she'd turned the corner and gone halfway down the next block, tears were freezing on her face. She rooted in her

jacket pocket for a tissue and ended up wiping her eyes and nose, too, on the back of her mitten.

“What’s the matter?”

Birdie jumped. The girl was sitting on the steps of a once-brown house, now badly in need of paint. “I said, what’s the matter? Somebody die?”

“No!”

“You don’t need to be so touchy. I saw you crying and I wanted to help. I’m often told I have a gift for helping people in trouble.”

Birdie stared at the girl. She was wearing a neon-pink jacket trimmed with grayish fake fur. Despite the cold, her knees were sticking out from under a flowered cotton skirt, and she was wearing badly scuffed high-heeled blue boots that came halfway up her legs. After a few moments filled with nothing but Birdie’s open-mouthed stare, the girl tossed the hood off her head and came down the short walk to where Birdie stood.

The girl’s hair was what Birdie’d heard someone call dishwater blond, and it hung lifelessly down the sides of her narrow face. Her eyes were sort of blue, maybe more

of a mixture that you'd think of as hazel. They were a little too close together and gave her the look of an irritated chicken.

"I said, what's eating you?"

"Uh . . . nothing," said Birdie.

The girl put her arm through Birdie's and smiled, revealing a mouthful of small, sharp teeth. If she could have, Birdie would have drawn back and gotten out of the girl's grasp, but she didn't know how to extricate herself in any way that wouldn't seem rude.

"I know who you are now," said the girl. "You're the one that's come to stay at Old Lady Cunningham's, right?"

"She's my grandmother," Birdie said stiffly.

"Oh. Right."

"It's just temporary—while my dad's overseas."

"No kidding! What a coincidence. My dad's overseas, too. What's your dad's rank?"

"I don't know. Corporal, maybe." Birdie had a vague memory of a promotion, but she wasn't sure to what.

"Oh. An enlisted man."

“He’s in the Vermont guards.”

“My dad—” The girl stopped a moment and examined her nails. She wasn’t wearing gloves, and Birdie saw that the bright purple polish was chipped and peeling. “My dad,” the girl continued, “is a full colonel—in—in the regular air force. You ought to see his medals. When I was little, I used to put them on—for dress-up, you know.” She gave a little laugh as if dismissing her play as a child.

How old was this girl? Although she was a head taller than Birdie, she didn’t have breasts yet, so she couldn’t be much older than Birdie.

“You haven’t started school here, have you?”

“No. No. Not yet. We just got here and my dad was leaving and it was the end of the semester and my—”

“What grade?”

“Huh? Oh. Uh. Fifth.”

“What a coincidence! I’m in fifth, too.” She gave Birdie an appraising look. “I figured you for younger. But, jeez, that’s good. Maybe we’ll be in the same class.”

Birdie fervently hoped not, but she gave a weak

smile. *Screebies*. It would be just her luck. She wriggled her arm but failed to loosen the girl's grasp. "I gotta go," she said.

"Not yet." The girl squeezed even tighter. "You haven't even told me your name."

"Elizabeth," Birdie muttered.

"Do you prefer Bets or Lizzie?"

Yipes. Would this strange girl try to name her as well? "Most people call me Birdie."

"Birdie? That's cute," the girl said. "A little too old-fashioned and babyish for my taste, but then . . . I'm Alicia Marie Suggs, by the way. Of course, that's not my stage name." She laughed, a high prissy little laugh. "Only one of those country western stars would go by a name like Suggs."

"Stage name?"

"I'll tell you more about it when you aren't in such a gosh-awful hurry. Are you Cunningham, too?"

"Yeah." Birdie tugged again, but though Alicia Marie had the face of a chicken, she had the grip of a hawk. "Excuse me, but . . ."

“You don’t have to be shy with me. We’re going to be best friends, I can tell. People often say I have a special gift for friendship.”

Birdie didn’t ask what people, though she was surely tempted to. “I really got to go.”

Alicia set her free with a final little pat. “Best friends, little Birdie!” She gave a wink. “I’m sure of it.”

Birdie tried not to run, since the sidewalk plow had missed a lot of the icy spots, but somehow she had to get away from the strange girl—the girl who was so sure that they were going to be best friends. Birdie had friends in Brattleboro, but she’d never had anyone she thought of as her best friend.

She and Heather and Jamie and Melanie had kind of hung around together since kindergarten. She liked them, but none of them had cried when she told them she would be gone for at least a year. None of them had begged her to keep in touch. It would be hard to anyhow. She didn’t have a computer, much less a cell phone, and the only letters she’d ever written were the thank-you notes Mom made her write to Gran for Christmas and birthday presents. Even if Birdie wrote one of them

a letter, she might not answer, and how awful would that feel? No. They'd be busy with their own lives. They might even forget all about her. It happened. She was sure of that. She snuffled. She was not going to cry again.

And she didn't. Because things were different now, weren't they? She stepped carefully around a little patch of ice. Yes, everything was different. She and God had an agreement, a bargain—what did Reverend Colston call it?—a covenant. Yes, that was what God called bargains.



First Day of School

On Monday morning Birdie got up, put on her **I ♥ JESUS** T-shirt, her best jeans, and the new green sweater Gran gave her for Christmas, and came to breakfast.

“You’re up.” Her mother put down her coffee cup and smiled.

“I thought I’d start school,” she said.

“I have to go to my orientation at the store this morning.”

“I know. I thought Gran could take me. It might help if they know I’m her granddaughter.”

Gran laughed. “Or maybe not. Most of my old students thought I was a pretty mean teacher.”

“You always secretly like the ones who make you work hard,” Mom said.

Her grandmother laughed again. “That’s a nice thought, Susan. Let’s hold on to that, shall we, Elizabeth?” Then she got up from the table and took one of those variety packages of little boxes of cereal from a cabinet. “Take your pick, love.” She put the box on the table and went to the stove to heat milk for hot chocolate.

Birdie tore off the plastic wrap. Her hand hovered over the assortment. How could she choose from among the dozen little boxes? Mom had a funny kind of smile fixed on her face. She never bought variety packs. They were more expensive than the big boxes. She even bought generic cornflakes and wheat puffs. Never anything sugared or frosted.

It was as though Gran with her back to them could read their minds as well as see what was happening. “Don’t worry. It’s just a first-day-of-school treat. I won’t make it a habit. When that batch is gone, it’s back to oatmeal.”

Gran loaded Billy into the stroller, and they walked through the cold and icy street to the school. It was old

and had lots of steps up to the door. Gran had to pick up Billy and carry him up the long flight and into the office.

Mom had been right. The secretary at the elementary school nearly fell over herself when she saw Gran, and she gushed over darling Billy and even smiled at Birdie.

“Mr. Taylor is on the phone right now. Can’t I get you something while you wait? Coffee? Tea? Juice?”

“Just a chair, please, Crystal,” Gran said. “This boy is heavier than he looks.”

The secretary rushed to get a chair from behind the counter and pushed it close for Gran to sit in.

“I don’t know why this call is taking so long,” Crystal said more than once while they waited. Finally, Birdie heard the principal say a formal sort of goodbye and hang up the phone.

“Nancy Cunningham!” He jumped to his feet when Crystal ushered them into his office. “It’s always such a joy to see you! And with not one but two lovely grandchildren!”

Why did grown-ups, even school principals, lie? People always thought Billy was cute when he wasn’t

bawling, which, thank goodness, he wasn't at the moment, but no one except Gran thought she was "lovely."

"Sit down, sit down. I am so glad to see you."

"Even if . . . ?"

"Yes, despite the grade on my senior paper." He chuckled. "Forgiven but not forgotten."

Mr. Taylor then spent time fiddling at his computer to determine which section of fifth grade Birdie should go into. "All three of our fifth-grade educators are new to the area, so they wouldn't have known you at the high school."

"That's probably just as well," said Gran.

"No," he protested. "Their loss."

Gran gave Birdie a wry smile and said to her, rather than to the principal, "I gave a lot of less than flattering comments on papers. No one in town seems to have forgotten."

"Merv Goldberg," he said finally. "He's your kind of teacher, Nancy. I think Elizabeth will fit in well there." He stood up again. "Crystal will have some forms for you to fill out. Do come back soon. It's always so good to see you."

Gran said goodbye to the principal and stood up, shifting Billy to her other arm. When they were in the outer office, she said, “Birdie, would you sit down and hold him while I sign you up? I don’t think I can manage both Billy and a pen at the same time.”

Birdie sat down and, reluctantly, took the heavy baby from Gran. *Don’t cry! Please.*

Please. Billy always cried when she was asked to hold him. This time, though, he looked up at Birdie wide-eyed, as though he was too surprised to cry.

Gran filled out what felt like endless forms. When Crystal asked about the records from Brattleboro, Gran dug around in her huge shoulder bag and retrieved Birdie’s health certificate and report cards for placement in what Crystal was calling her new “permanent records.”

Why would you call them permanent if they changed when you moved? That was the trouble with *permanent*. Nothing in this world was permanent—not friends, not jobs, not schools, not homes . . .

She tried to stop feeling sorry for herself, after all, but leaving Gran and Billy behind on the first floor and

following the secretary up the wide staircase to the third floor, she couldn't help it. What a baby she was! Daddy was off to war. All she had to face was a new school.

Fear not! That was always God's message in the Bible.

The staircase was stained and worn, and the stairwell needed a new coat of paint. The old paint was as gray as the stuff that pooches out of the neck of the vacuum cleaner bag. Why couldn't they paint the walls a bright yellow like a sunny day? Wouldn't everyone like school better if the walls weren't so goldurn ugly?

They finally stopped climbing. The secretary pulled open the heavy fire door at the top of the stairs and motioned for Birdie to go through. The hall was dimmer than the staircase as there were no windows. She waited and followed the secretary down almost to the last door.

"This is Mr. Goldberg's room," she said. "I called ahead. He's expecting you." The secretary smiled.

"Good luck." She turned to go.

So—she was supposed to take the last few steps completely alone, it seemed. Birdie pulled the door open and the light and warmth from the classroom engulfed her.

Okay, God. Here goes. She took a deep breath and walked in.

It was a large room with windows all across one side. The February sun was filling the room with light. There were no desks in straight rows, but round tables. The class was not as large as the one at home—twenty, more or less. She would count later. Mostly boys, though, drat it. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Alicia Suggs grinning like a commercial for false teeth and waving from a table in the back. Birdie pretended not to see.

The teacher was a man! Well, of course. Crystal had said *Mr. Goldberg*.

Pay attention, dummy.

“Why don’t you sit here, Elizabeth?” he said, pulling out a chair from a table near the window. Mr. Goldberg looked to be about Daddy’s age. He had a nice smile and a lovely voice. It was like music, soft and warm without any phony gush. After Birdie sat down, Mr. Goldberg put his hand gently on her shoulder. “This is Elizabeth Cunningham, class. She won’t remember everybody’s name right away, so please introduce yourselves to her and make sure she feels at home with us.”

There were four other people at the table. Three boys and one other girl. The girl, who was next to her, leaned toward her. “I’m Christine, but everyone calls me Christie,” she said. “And that’s Devon, Mark, and Wayne the Weird, but you can ignore them. I do.”

Birdie smiled weakly.

“Do you have a nickname?”

“Birdie.” She spoke in a whisper.

“Birdie?” Christie asked.

“You know, Chris, like in tweet, tweet,” the one Christie had called Devon said in a raspy whisper. The other boys snickered. Birdie was blushing; she could feel it.

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?” Mr. Goldberg was back in front of his own desk.

The boys ducked their heads and grinned behind their books.

Ignore them. Christie mouthed the words.

Birdie was going to like Christie. She was really nice and pretty, really pretty. She had dark curly hair and brown eyes and didn’t seem at all stuck-up. Maybe she’d become a friend.

But it all fell apart at lunchtime. Christie had brought her lunch and went to sit at a table with other girls from the class. As Birdie stood still, looking to see where the line to buy lunch began, she was grabbed from behind. “Over here, Birdie. I’m buying, too. We can eat together.” And Birdie was trapped. She couldn’t say to Alicia that she’d promised Christie to eat with her. She hadn’t. And Christie hadn’t really invited her to join her table when she’d found out Birdie was buying her lunch. So Birdie let Alicia drag her over to the line and stood there not really listening as Alicia prattled on about something. She couldn’t help but notice that Christie and the other girls looked over from time to time to where she and Alicia were sitting, but no one came over to say hi or to introduce themselves.

“You haven’t listened to a word I said!”

“What?”

“See? You’re doing it again.”

“Sorry. I guess I . . .”

“Just don’t do it again, hear?”

Do what again? How could Birdie not do it again when she had no idea what “it” was?

She tried to listen to what Alicia was saying, but all the time she could feel the stares from Christie's table.

After lunch, Alicia showed her where to take her tray back, and then she linked her arm through Birdie's and walked her back up to the classroom. She didn't let go even at the door.

Birdie saw Christie look up and then quickly down. Birdie slid into her seat. "I see you and Alice Suggs are friends," Christie said.

She wanted to say something to Christie about not being actual friends with Alicia Suggs, in fact, hardly knowing her at all, but she didn't know how. "Not really. I just . . ."

"Well, I guess you get to choose," Christie said. "It's a free country."

But I didn't get to choose. I wanted you to be my friend, not her. But she couldn't say that. She couldn't say anything at all because Alicia had come over to the table.

"It's great you can come over to my house after school. I can catch you up on all the stuff you're behind in."

Had she told Alicia that she would come to her house after school? She couldn't remember saying anything

of the sort. She started to protest, but the teacher was speaking.

“Alice, would you take your seat, please?”

“Alicia Marie,” Alicia mumbled, but she headed back for her own table.

When the bell for the bus rang, everyone from Birdie’s table got up and left. Indeed, most of the class left. Alicia wriggled her fingers at Birdie from across the room. As soon as the second bell rang, she came right to Birdie’s table.

“C’mon. Let’s break outta here.”

She followed Birdie to her cubby and waited while Birdie fumbled to get the books she had been given into her backpack.

“You gonna carry all that home?”

“I thought I’d better . . .”

“You’re even more of a teacher’s pet type than I thought.” She sniffed. “Oh, well, suit yourself. But hurry. I need to get going.”

“You—you don’t have to wait for me.”

“Remember? You promised to come to my house after school.”

“I did?”

“Have you got Alzheimer’s or something?”

“What?”

“Oh, come on. I’m just kidding. You’ve got to learn how to take a joke if you’re going to hang around me. I’m known for my great sense of humor.”

“I really can’t go home with you. My grandmother expects me to come right home after school.”

“We’ll call her. Believe me, she’ll be thrilled to know you made a friend already. She’s probably scared you won’t be able to make any friends here—you being so shy and all.” She yanked Birdie’s backpack up over Birdie’s right shoulder and grabbed her arm. “Let’s go.”

Birdie pulled the other strap over her left shoulder. The books were heavy. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought them all home. She’d probably get curvature of the spine or something carrying a backpack this heavy. Alicia didn’t even have a backpack, or if she did, she certainly wasn’t carrying it today.

Birdie didn’t want to go to Alicia’s house. She really didn’t, but Alicia was pulling her along the sidewalk, chattering away. She hardly breathed, so there was no

pause, no opening for Birdie to say anything. When they got within a half block of the brown house, Birdie made herself interrupt the endless stream of chatter. "Is anybody home?" she almost yelled.

Alicia looked at her as though Birdie had lost her mind. "*I'm* home," she said.

"No. I mean your mother, some grown-up. My mother doesn't let me visit when there's no grown-up in charge."

Alicia whirled on her, almost nose to nose. "Oh, for crying out loud! What kind of a baby are you, anyhow?"

Birdie shrank back.

"Besides," Alicia said, "who's going to tell her?" Alicia started walking again. "C'mon."

Birdie had to skip to keep up. All the *buts* that were in her mouth got stuck behind her teeth. She didn't want to do "it" again, did she? Besides, she would be eleven in May, plenty old enough to be trusted in a house without a grown-up. Heather, in Brattleboro, was already babysitting her little brother, and she was barely eleven.

Alicia had a string around her neck, which she pulled out, revealing a house key. She fitted it into the

lock of the doorknob and pushed the door open wide. “Go on in,” she said. She sounded impatient, so Birdie went in.

The house was dark and smelled moldy. “Do you always keep the shades down?” she asked shyly.

But Alicia ignored the question, throwing her coat on the hall floor. “Aren’t you going to take off your jacket?”

“I got to call my grandmother. She’ll worry.”

“Relax, will you? I got it covered.” Alicia started down the hall. “And shut the front door, will you? Want to let all the heat out?”

“I’m sorry,” Birdie said, although there wasn’t a lot of heat in the house to let out. She shut the door carefully and slid off her backpack. The floor didn’t seem very clean, and she hated to throw her jacket down, so she put it on top of her pack.

“What’s the phone number?” Alicia was yelling from a room down the hall. Birdie followed the sound into a kitchen where Alicia was standing with a phone in her hand. “The number?”

Birdie whispered her grandmother’s number. Alicia