

NORMA FOX MAZER

MISSING

GIT


ALLEN & UNWIN

A FLOCK OF BIRDS

If the man is lucky, in the morning on his way to work, he sees the girls. A flock of them, like birds. March is a dismal month, and the man's spirits often fall during this month of wet clouds and short grey days. He is hard put to remember that soon spring will return, but the sight of a cardinal or a chickadee – or the girls – reminds him of this. He is not one of those strange people who watch birds through binoculars, but the twittering and calls of even the jays, who are abominably noisy, is refreshing to him. As is the twittering and chatter of the girls.

One, two, three, four, five. Five of them. *Five*. A gratifying outcome of changing his route to work. Without being unduly self-congratulatory, because he

is a modest man, he can take credit for this, as a result of his intelligence and careful planning. When his job description changed, he knew immediately that this meant he should no longer walk the same streets from his house to the bus stop to the store office. And though the route he had used for the past year was decidedly efficient, he changed it, proving once again that he was – he *is* – highly adaptable. It is the adaptable who survive in this beastly world.

It takes him seven minutes longer to walk the new way, but if one thing changes, then something else must change as well. This is a rule, the only way to maintain balance and order. The proof of the fundamental rightness of this rule is clear: changing the streets he walks to the bus stop each morning brought the girls into his life. An unexpected gift.

A reward, because he has been good for so long.

He has always liked schoolgirls, their open faces, their laughter, their innocence. Despite the fact that he has now seen these particular girls, his flock of birds, nearly a dozen times, not one of them has noticed him. Not one of them has flicked him so much as a glance. This is good. It's the way he wants it. He doesn't want to be noticed. It is safer to be, as he knows he is, unremarkable.

Slight of build, stoop-shouldered, wearing a grey coat, a grey scarf around his neck against the cold, his wire-rimmed glasses set firmly on his nose, minding his own business, he could be any man, any respectable, ordinary man.

Le Plan

Beauty Herbert, hurrying down the hill from Mallory Central School, sliding a little on the slushy sidewalk, considered her age. Today, the snowy fifth of March, she was exactly seventeen and one-half years. The time for *Le Plan* was coming ever closer. Maybe she'd tell Patrick it was her half-year birthday, and he'd insist that they have a latte from the coffee shop across the street to celebrate.

Patrick Jimenez owned Patrick the Florist, the shop on Costello Street where Beauty worked ten hours a week and where she was headed now. *Seventeen and a half!* enthusiastic Patrick would say. *Great!* The latte, and then work. Patrick had been in the flower business for twenty-five years, and his customers adored him. Beauty did, too, as though he were not only her boss, but almost an older

brother, the brother she'd always wished for to share the responsibility that came with being the oldest of five sisters.

The idea of leaving her little sisters, in fact, was the only thing about *Le Plan* that bothered Beauty. She wasn't too worried about Mim, who, at sixteen, seemed to be okay, but the newly fourteen-year-old sister who had just informed the family that she was changing her name from Faithful to Stevie, of all things, was something of a mess, drenching everyone in her out-there, high-speed, top-volume emotions and orders (*from now on, my name is Stevie and no one in this family better forget that*). As for Fancy and Autumn, well, they were both still kids, and that was the trouble. Who would look after them when she left? Fancy was twelve, had her period and little breasts, and should be growing up, but of course she wasn't. And eleven-year-old Autumn? Half the time the child was dreaming about something or other, and the other half crying over nothing. It didn't look as if she would ever make a plan for her life, as Beauty had done, but at least when she was here, Beauty could keep an eye on her.

Last September, when she had turned seventeen and also entered her senior year in high school, Beauty had rejoiced, as she was rejoicing today. Like mile-markers on a highway, each month brought her that much closer to

her eighteenth birthday, to the moment when *Le Plan* could become reality, when she was a legal adult, legally responsible for herself, legally able to do whatever she wanted – no, *needed* – to do.

Anyway, seventeen was, really, so much better than sixteen, which had been so much better than fifteen, which had been so much better than fourteen, which had been mostly a relief from the pain of thirteen. If there were a pill she could pop, like an aspirin, that would blot out thirteen and cruel seventh-grade humour, she would take it in a heartbeat. Although, she amended, crossing French Street against the light (sorry, Mom), she wouldn't want to forget Mr Giametti. So, okay, the magic little pill could scrub her memory clean of a certain drawing, a certain poem, and leave in the good stuff.

Passing Lawler's department store on River Street downtown, she caught a glimpse of herself in the window and quickly looked away. She'd hatched *Le Plan* when she was thirteen, and she'd been carrying it around all these years. By next March on this date, she'd be long gone. She'd have a place of her own, a new life, a new job, and a new name (although not a ridiculous one like Stevie). *Le Plan!* Like the two words, the plan was neat and simple. It was just this: as soon as she turned eighteen, she was getting out of Dodge.

Dodge, in this case, was Mallory, this town of 5,329 people in northern New York State, where Beauty had lived her whole life. When she left Mallory, it would be for Chicago, which she had first heard about from Mr Giametti, her seventh-grade language arts teacher, who grew up there. She was going to a place where no one knew her, a place where she could become whoever it was she was meant to be, whoever it was that she could never be in Mallory, where everyone had a tag, a label, a stifling little box into which they were shoved and where they were expected to stay forever.

The label on her little box? That ugly Herbert girl, poor thing, with the so-wrong name.

Bellyaching

What do you do when you don't want to go to school? If you're Autumn and you're eleven, only eleven, as you think of it, and the baby of the family, you shuffle into the kitchen, train your eyes on your oldest sister, and say, with just a little whine in your voice, 'Beauty. Beauty. I have a bellyache.' You hope you look sick. You sniffle up the night junk in your nose and let your mouth fall open a little.

You try to ignore Fancy, who says in her loud, eager voice that she'll save the funnies for you. 'I'm reading them all by myself this morning,' she says. You try not to watch as she takes too big a gulp of milk, burps, and sets the glass down with a thud to announce, 'Uh-oh! Your feet are bare. Uh-oh! Autumn alarm! Autumn alarm!'

You pay attention to Beauty, who's looking at you now and pointing out the obvious, that you're still in your pyjamas, that you're not dressed for school. 'Get a move on,' she says. You watch as she pours coffee into Mommy's cup, the one that says 'I ♥ MY MOM', and slides it over next to Mommy's ashtray.

You clutch your belly. 'I have a stomach ache,' you repeat plaintively. And you add, 'It hurts, it hurts,' and as you say this, your belly really does hurt.

You look gratefully at your sister Mim, who says, 'How bad is it, honey?'

'Bad,' you say pitifully, and you think how much you love Mim, love how everything about her is *less*, unlike the rest of them. You love how small she is, how neatly made, and you love how her voice is so quiet. And you think, not for the first time, how you wish you were like Mim and everybody listened when you talked.

Then Beauty is asking if you're starting your period, maybe, and you shake your head. You know about periods and pads and blood and all that stuff that Mommy calls 'the womanhood department'. And you don't want to get sidetracked, so you bend over, clutching yourself, and you say the truth. 'I don't want to go to school, okay?'

But Beauty shakes her head and says you have to ask

Mommy, which is really annoying, since Beauty is the one who always writes the excuses. Then you watch as she sits down, picks up her own coffee cup, and reaches for a piece of the newspaper.

You stand there, clutching your belly, but now none of your sisters is paying any attention to you. They're all busy reading different parts of the newspaper, and you know what they're doing – searching for good stories to tell Mommy later on. Because Mommy always says, 'Personally, I do not get this newspaper thing. Shit, I'm not going to read all the bad news. Don't do me any good. I got enough bad news of my own.'

You think how you love stories, love making them up and hearing them and reading them, and Mommy does, too. She loves true stories, like she can get on TV, and she loves to listen to anyone telling her a good juicy story they've read in the newspaper, like that man who chopped up his wife and kept all her parts in a trunk in the attic for years? Well, actually, you don't like stories like that. They scare you.

After a while you shuffle out of the kitchen and up the stairs, thinking how nothing is fair in this family, how Fancy is spoiled, how Beauty gets to boss them all around, how Faithful – oops, *Stevie* – scares everyone with her temper, and Mim is so quiet she can do whatever she

wants and nobody notices. You're the only one who has nothing special about you.

'It hurts, it hurts,' you moan. You bump your head against the door of your parents' bedroom, and you say, 'Mommy, I have to tell you something.' Then you go in, and Mommy is standing in front of the mirror in her underwear, combing her hair, getting ready for work. She's a lunch lady at that home for old people downtown that used to be a church. You tell her about your stomach, and she puts her hand against your forehead, then presses on either side of your neck.

'It's my stomach,' you remind her.

She says, 'No fever. No swollen glands. What's happening in school today?' And she taps you a little bit hard on top of your head, which makes you want to cry.

You say, 'Oral report. We have to tell a story about our family.'

You can always make up stories for yourself and for Fancy, but the oral report story has to be *true*. What are you supposed to say – that Mommy is fat and smokes too much and worries too much? That Poppy fell off a roof and hurt his back and can't do his regular work and is so grumpy? That Mommy and Poppy are mad at each other because of no work and no money?

'It's part of our social studies unit,' you tell her.

And right away you're sorry you said it, because Mommy frowns and says in a mad voice, 'Our family is part of your social studies unit? That's what we pay taxes for? So people can snoop on our family?'

You tell her it's an activity in the unit on 'The Family in America', and everyone has to do it. And in case she forgot, you add, in your most pitiful voice, 'My stomach hurts.'

Mommy bends, looking into your face, and says, 'You don't have a stomach ache.'

'I do,' you say, 'I really do.' You try not to smell Mommy's stale cigarette breath. You say, 'When are you going to stop smoking?' and you take a step back. You remind her that you learned in your civics unit that smoking isn't healthy, and she should stop.

Which makes Mommy say, 'You can be a regular pain in the butt.' Which she says all the time to Stevie and sometimes even to Beauty, so you don't mind too much. 'And,' she says, 'I will never see what ciggies have to do with civics.' So you tell her about the tobacco companies, and how they lied about cigarettes and the poison chemicals in them. And then Mommy says, as if she's never heard this before, 'They lied?' And you tell her yes, and it was in all the newspapers and on the radio and TV.

‘Maybe I forgot,’ she says. She’s pulling a sweatshirt over her head. It gets stuck, but she’s still talking. ‘Maybe I don’t want to remember. I love my ciggies, and I know I overdo them, but what can I do? I have to have my ciggies.’

Her head pops out, and she laughs a big hoarse laugh, which makes you smell her cigarette breath again. So you sit down on the edge of the bed and check the time. It’s late, way too late to even think about going to school and oral reports.

Then Mommy says, ‘How’s that stomach now?’ and you say it hurts and you put your hands over your belly again.

Mommy goes from laughing to coughing, and her face gets all red and sweaty. When she can speak again, she says, ‘That’s from overdoing the ciggies. Don’t be like me, don’t start with the habit. Once you start, you can’t stop yourself.’

You tell her she always says that. You say, ‘I am not going to smoke. And you should stop. Just make up your mind and do it.’ You like how you said that. Nice and firm.

‘Little Miss Dictator,’ Mommy says, but she’s smiling. You know you’re her favourite, because you’re the baby of the family, though you wouldn’t have been if

your little twin sisters had lived. But they hadn't, and you are.

'Oof,' Mommy says, buttoning her jeans over her fat stomach. She sits down next to you on the bed to pull on socks and sneakers. She stands up with a little groan, looks at herself in the mirror, pushes her hands through her hair, and lights another cigarette.

'So, can I go back to bed now?' you ask. Downstairs the door slams, which means your sisters are going off to school. 'I could rest in your bed,' you suggest, and you're careful not to look at the TV, but only at Mommy, who's taking her hairnet for work out of the top drawer.

'You're going to school,' Mommy says.

You're so surprised by this, you yelp, 'Mommy!'

'Your stomach ache ain't that bad,' Mommy says. 'I can tell.'

And even though you know you shouldn't, you start arguing. 'Where's Poppy? Poppy would let me stay home. He understands more than you. Mommy, it's not fair.'

'Never mind that stuff,' Mommy says, and her voice tells you she means business. 'Your father's sitting out in his truck, thinking things over, and he don't want to hear from you.' She puts her hands on your shoulders and walks you out of her room and over to yours, the room you share with Fancy and Stevie. 'Get dressed, you're going to school,'

Mommy says. 'You're not missing school for no reason. You're going to stay with it and graduate, not like me.'

You try to tell her you don't have to think about graduation stuff for a long time, you're only in fifth grade, but she doesn't want to listen. 'Hurry up and get dressed,' she says. She doesn't care that you'll have to run all the way to school, and you'll probably still be late.

That's the bad part.

The good part is that on the way to school – running, stopping to catch your breath, running again – you think of something you can say for your oral report. You can tell about Great-great-grandfather Ephraim Herbert, who came to Mallory from Ireland one hundred years ago. Or was it one hundred and eight? Well, whatever. Just say one hundred years, a *century*, and Mr Spiegleman will think it's fantastic. He loves to hear about old times and old people and, well, anything old.

You won't repeat, though, the other stuff Poppy told you with that funny look on his face. Like he wanted to laugh, but he didn't think he should? Poppy always gets that look when he's about to tell Mommy a story that will make her say, 'Huddle Herbert! Don't say them things in front of your girls.'

Great-great-grandpa Ephraim had been an outlaw, which meant he was a *criminal*, a bad guy. Not that he

ever hurt anybody – you would hate to know that about someone related to you – but he brewed bootleg whiskey in the woods, and once somebody shot him and he lived the rest of his life limping with a bullet in his leg.

‘Do you know what Ephraim looked like, Autumn?’ Mr Spiegleman asks when you’re done with your report in front of the class. ‘Do you have any family pictures?’

You shake your head and look up at the ceiling. It’s hard for you to keep looking straight at Mr Spiegleman. He’s so cute with his long ponytail.

‘No family stories about Ephraim?’ Mr Spiegleman says, almost as if he knows that you’re holding out, and for a moment, glancing at him, your face gets so hot, and you really want to tell him everything. But you don’t, because, like Mommy says, family business is family business and nobody else’s.

Later, at the end of the day, Mr Spiegleman reminds you not to forget your excuse for being late. You say, ‘Don’t worry, I won’t.’

‘I’m not worrying about you, Autumn,’ he says, and he gives you a big smile, like maybe you’re *his* favourite, too.

That evening Beauty writes the excuse for you. Mommy has Beauty take care of all that sort of stuff; she doesn’t want to be bothered. Besides, Beauty has beautiful handwriting. Everybody says so.

Mr Spiegleman:

Please excuse my daughter Autumn Herbert for coming late to school Thursday morning. She did not feel well when she woke up but recovered sufficiently to attend her classes.

Sincerely yours,

Blossom Lily Herbert

A TUNE in MY POCKET

Beauty my sister gave me this tape recorder. She said, Fancy my love, which is her best pet name for me, she said, Talk into it, tell it things when you get The Urge. I said, What is The Urge? She said, You know, honey, when you want to talk a lot, but everybody is too busy to listen – that's The Urge.

She said, Do you get what I mean, and I said, Yes, I do, and I love you.

And I love you, she said, and you can talk here and tell this little tape recorder everything. See, she said, you take this and push this button and talk all you want and when you're done, you push this button.

So I said, Okay, I will do it.

And so this is The Urge, and I pushed the button, and

I am talking all I want, like Beauty my sister said I could. They are all inside doing things like homework, and Stevie my sister, which is her new name, *Stevie* not Faithful, which she says is a girly name and she is sick of girly names in our family, and she is yelling *again* that we should have a computer, but my mommy said we don't have the money and I told you a million times, so shut up about it, and she said she is too fat and smokes too many cigarettes, and Stevie my sister said, You said it, Mommy, you are a walking bad habit, which was such a funny thing to say, but my mommy didn't laugh, she said, You are just too smart for your own good, Missy, and they were yelling *too much*, so that is why I am outside walking around having The Urge.

To say, uh, uh, I have a lot to say. That is what Mrs Sokolow my teacher says to me and she is sooo nice. She likes me. She loves me, and I love her. I am a good student for her. And I am the best, fastest-running runner in my class. Ha-ha! That's a halfway joke, because who would be a walking runner? I am not like Randy Parsons, who can never see a joke. *See a joke* is also funny, and I like funny things.

Funny things are my favourite things in the whole world, which is big, and Mallory where I live is small says Mim my sister, but I don't think so. I think Mallory is big

with a lot of streets and stores and houses and cars and big buildings like the opera house, which is where people used to get up on the stage and sing, and I think I would like to do that, because I like singing, it is my favourite thing in the whole world, but when I sing, Stevie my sister says, Shut up, you can't carry a tune! And you know what? That makes me *confused*.

Confused is what Mrs Sokolow my teacher told me, like when I get mad at Stevie my sister because she says a mean thing, but I laugh because *carry a tune* is sooo funny. I asked Mrs Sokolow my teacher can I say, You shut up, too, because I am not carrying a tune in my pocket. She said, Shut up is not nice, Fancy, but maybe you should try that next time and see what happens. So I did. I said to Stevie my sister, You shut up, too, I am not carrying a tune in my pocket, I am not carrying a tune in a bag, I am not carrying a tune in a box. And every time she says, Shut up, you can't carry a tune, I will tell her I am not carrying a tune anywhere!

And I am going to sing right now.

Goodbye!