

Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life

wendy mass



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Also by Wendy Mass:
A Mango-Shaped Space
Leap Day
Heaven Looks a Lot Like the Mall
Every Soul a Star

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by his father before his death five years earlier — that purportedly contains the meaning of life.

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The Tale of Two Wolves, in Chapter 19, is a Native American folk tale.

The American Museum of Natural History as described in Chapter 13 is a fictionalized version.

Preface

July 22

My sweat smells like peanut butter.

Since I'm such a picky eater, my mother feeds me peanut butter sandwiches at every meal, including breakfast and midnight snacks. I have a lot of midnight snacks because I like to be awake when the rest of the world is asleep (except for the people in other time zones who might still be awake, but you couldn't prove it by me). So now when I sweat, it smells like peanut butter instead of B.O., which I don't think is such a bad thing. I'd rather smell like a school cafeteria than a school gym.

Right now my best friend, Lizzy, is sitting next to me, holding her nose. Not because of the peanut butter, which doesn't bother her anymore. The offending odor belongs to that special combination of soggy marshland and rotting fish that Mosley Lake in northwest New Jersey is famous for.

It is the middle of a long, hot summer, and I, Jeremy Fink, a city kid born and bred, am sitting on a big rock in the middle of the lake, which, while certainly smelly, is also very serene. The sky is a clear blue, a light breeze blows from the west, and pale green water sloshes against the side of the rickety old rowboat that brought us here.

On my lap I am balancing a smooth box made of light-colored wood, the size of a toaster. The box has the words THE MEANING OF LIFE carefully engraved across the top. Underneath, in smaller letters, it says, FOR JEREMY FINK TO OPEN ON HIS 13TH BIRTHDAY.

Today is my thirteenth birthday. I never would have guessed, when I was given the box a month ago, that those instructions would be so impossible to follow.

Lizzy keeps poking me on the arm, urging me to hurry up and do what we've come here to do. Yes, my best friend is a girl, and no, I don't secretly have a crush on her. Lizzy and her dad moved to the apartment next door when she and I were one year old. Her mother had left the family and moved to one of the Dakotas with some guy who worked on a cattle ranch (which explains why Lizzy became a vegetarian as soon as she was old enough to realize what a cattle ranch was). So Lizzy stayed with us during the day while her father went to work at the post office. My mom used to change our diapers next to each other. You can't get romantic with someone after that.

Also, Lizzy is a notorious troublemaker. She has a lot of opinions, usually negative. For example, she thinks my collection of mutant candy is gross. I think she's jealous because she didn't think of it first. Some of the best are a square Good & Plenty, a candy corn with an extra layer of white, and my pride and joy — a peanut M&M the size of my pinky finger. I bet I could get a fortune for that one on eBay.

Our journey to this rock started a long time ago — before I was even born. If my father had been allowed to

spend *his* thirteenth birthday playing Little League with his friends instead of being dragged by his parents to Atlantic City, I wouldn't be sitting here, and the box wouldn't exist. Who ever would have imagined those two events would be linked?

All those years ago, while my grandmother was in a shop buying saltwater taffy, my father wandered down the boardwalk and wound up in front of an old palm reader. She picked up his clammy hand and held it up to her face. Then she let his arm fall onto the velvet-covered table and said, "You vil die ven you are forty years old." My grandmother arrived in time to hear the fortune-teller's declaration, and she yanked my dad away, refusing to pay. Whenever my father told the story, he laughed, so we laughed, too.

It turned out that the fortune-teller's prediction was wrong. My dad didn't die when he was forty. He was only thirty-nine. I had just turned eight. Dad must have taken the prophecy more seriously than he let on, because he prepared for his death, and this box proves it.

"What are you waiting for?" Lizzy yells into my ear.

Lizzy has her own way of talking. Usually she shouts. This is partly because her father is deaf in one ear from going to too many rock concerts when he was younger, and partly because she is on the shortish side and over-compensates.

I don't answer, and she sighs. Even her sighs are loud. The edges of the box are digging into my bare legs, so I move it to the towel that Lizzy has spread out on the rock

between us. This box has come to symbolize all my hopes, all my failures. Before I do anything else, I need to go back over everything that has happened this summer: the Big Mistake, the old man, the book, the lamp, the telescope, and this box, which started it all.

Chapter 1: The Box

June 22

“Did you ever notice how the colors seem brighter the first day of summer vacation?” I ask Lizzy. “The birds sing louder? The air is alive with possibility?”

“Huh?” Lizzy mutters, fingering through the comic books on the wall of my Uncle Arthur’s store, Fink’s Comics and Magic. “Yeah, sure. Brighter, louder, alive.”

It would bother some people if their best friend only half-listened to them, but I figure talking to Lizzy is one step better than talking to myself. At least this way people on the street don’t stare at me.

Over the next two months I plan on learning a new magic trick or two, borrowing the eighth grade textbooks from the library to get a jump on my assignments (but not telling Lizzy, who would make fun of me), and sleeping as late as I want. This is going to be a summer of leisure, and smack in the middle, the state fair and my long-awaited thirteenth birthday. Usually I love going to the fair, but this year I actually have to enter one of the competitions, and I’m dreading it. At least my birthday comes the same week. I am so tired of being considered a “kid” and am eager to officially become a teenager. I will finally learn the secret code of Teendom.

I hope there's a handshake. I've always wanted to belong to a club with a secret handshake.

"Run!" Lizzy whispers sharply in my ear. Lizzy saying *run* in my ear can mean only one thing — she has stolen something. She is lucky my uncle and cousin Mitch are in the back room and didn't see her. They do not look kindly upon shoplifters.

By the time I manage to thrust my comic back on the shelf, she is halfway out the door. In her rush, she's knocked over my backpack, which I had propped up carefully on the floor between us. All the stuff flies out the unzipped top for the other shoppers to see. I grab the bag and quickly toss back in my dog-eared copy of *Time Travel for Dummies*, a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich, a pack of Starburst, two bite-sized Peppermint Patties, assorted magic tricks that I've collected over the years, the bottle of water that I always have on me because one can never be too hydrated, the astronaut pen that allows me to write in all conditions (including underwater and while lying on my back), and finally my wallet, which always has at least eight dollars in it because my dad once told me that if a man has eight dollars on him, he can always get home. Then I take back out one of the Peppermint Patties, quickly unwrap it, and stick in my mouth. I blame my dad for my sweet tooth. His motto was *Life is short; eat dessert first*. How can I argue with that?

Slinging the backpack over my shoulder, I slip out the door and look up and down the street for Lizzy. Her red hair makes her easy to spot. She's leaning against the win-

dow of Larry's Locks and Clocks, admiring her newest treasure — an orange flyer advertising the debut of a *Betty and Veronica* double issue. Only moments ago it had been taped up to the wall in the store.

"Can't you use your talents for good instead of evil?" I ask, swallowing the last of my Peppermint Pattie.

She doesn't answer, just folds the paper haphazardly and tucks it in her back pocket.

"Why, Lizzy?" I ask as we start walking down the block toward home. "Why?"

"Why what?" she asks, popping a piece of grape Bazooka in her mouth. She offers me one, but I shake my head. Grape and peppermint just don't mix.

"Why steal something that has no monetary value?"

"Would you rather I'd stolen something that *does* have monetary value?"

"Of course not."

"Well stop complaining then," she says. "You know I can't explain the reasons for the things I take. I don't choose them, they choose me."

"What about all the customers who won't learn about the new *Betty and Veronica* because of you?"

She shrugs. "Nobody reads Archie comics anymore."

It's true that the Archie comics are always the last ones left at the end of the month. Archie was my dad's favorite when he was a boy, so he always made sure to stock them. Uncle Arthur doesn't know enough about comics to tell the difference between *Mutant X-Men from Outer Space* and *Richie Rich*, so he keeps ordering all of them.

“That’s not really the point,” I tell her.

“It’s not like you’ll cry over your uncle losing a sale or two. You can’t stand him, remember?”

“It’s not that I can’t stand him,” I insist, crossing my arms. “You try having an uncle who ignores you and who is the identical twin of your dead father and see how you like it.”

Lizzy is quiet now and entirely focused on picking the scab on her elbow. I shouldn’t have said that, about my dad. When he died, Lizzy was almost as upset as I was. He was like her second parent. As upset as she was, though, she still slept on the floor of my room in her sleeping bag for three straight weeks until I could sleep through the night again.

We manage to reach our apartment building in Murray Hill without either of us further depressing the other and without Lizzy stealing anything else. One of our neighbors, Mr. Zoder, is slowly heading up the steps. It’s Friday, so he’s wearing yellow. My parents always said that New York City is full of characters, and that’s why they wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. We’re about to follow him inside when our mailman, Nick, shows up wheeling his huge blue cart.

“Howdy, Nick,” Lizzy says, saluting him.

“Well if it isn’t Lizzy Muldoun and Jeremy Fink,” he replies, tipping his hat. All the mailmen in the neighborhood know us because Lizzy’s dad works at the post office.

“Let’s see what I’ve got for you guys today.” Nick reaches into his cart and lifts out a big cardboard box. To my surprise, it’s addressed to Elaine Fink, with our address

on it! I can't imagine what it could be, since Mom never buys anything through the mail. In fact, except for food and my clothes (which I insist have to be new, after a kid in my class told me I was wearing a sweater his mom had thrown out the week before), we don't own much of anything that wasn't from a flea market or found on the street on bulk trash day. It's not that we can't afford new things. Mom has a good job at the library. But she believes retail is for suckers and that recycling other people's belongings saves the environment somehow.

SO WHAT IS IN THAT BOX?

Nick is about to hand it to me when he hesitates and then sets it back in the cart. Instead, he hands me our regular assortment of bills and junk mail.

"Wait," I say after he hands Lizzy her mail. "What about that box? Isn't that for my mom?"

"Sure is," Nick replies. "But it's registered mail. That means it's gotta be signed for by an adult."

"But my mom's at work all day. I'm sure she won't mind if I sign for it."

"Jeremy is as tall as some adults," Lizzy states. "That should count for something."

Nick shakes his head. "Your mom can pick it up at the post office on her way to work tomorrow."

Not one to give up, Lizzy says, "That box looks heavy. You don't want to have to lug it around on the rest of your route, do you?"

Nick laughs. "It's not that heavy. I think I can manage." He starts to wheel his cart to the next building, and we keep pace with him.

“But Nick,” I plead, “tomorrow’s Saturday and our branch of the post office is closed. My mom wouldn’t be able to get the box until Monday. If it’s special delivery, maybe that means it’s really important —”

“Like *medicine* or something!” Lizzy adds.

“Right,” I say eagerly. “Something that can’t wait a whole weekend.”

“I thought I heard Mrs. Fink coughing this morning,” Lizzy says. “She could have that bird flu thing, or German measles, or —”

Nick holds up his hand. “Enough, enough. Soon you’ll have her quarantined for the plague.” He reaches over for the box, and Lizzy and I flash each other a quick grin.

I sign my name as neatly as possible on the slip and hand it back to him.

“Just make sure you leave it for her to open,” he instructs, laying the box in my waiting arms.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lizzy says. “Opening other people’s mail is a federal offense, we know the drill.”

“Bye, Nick,” I say, eager to get the package upstairs. It isn’t heavy, but it’s awkward to carry.

“Stay outta trouble,” he says in parting.

“Who, us?” Lizzy calls after him. We climb up the short flight of stairs to the first floor where we both live. Mom told me last week that a new family would soon be moving into the empty apartment at the end of the hall. I’m very curious to see who they will turn out to be. Circus performers? A minor league baseball player? Most kids would probably hope for more kids his age, but I

don't care about that. Why would anyone need more than one good friend?

Since my arms are full, Lizzy uses her copy of my apartment key and opens the door. I head straight into the kitchen and rest the box on the three-legged kitchen table, which is a big improvement over the two-legged one that my parents had to glue to the wall to keep it from tipping over.

"So?" Lizzy asks, that familiar let's-do-something-bad gleam in her eye. "Are we gonna open it?" At the same time we both lean closer to read the return address label. It's scuffed up and hard to make out. "Folgard and Levine, Esquires," she reads. "What does 'esquires' mean?"

"'Esquires' means lawyers," I explain. I pride myself on knowing many obscure facts. It's all those midnight hours of reading.

"Why would a bunch of lawyers send something to your mom?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe she robbed a bank," Lizzy suggests. "And the evidence against her is in this box!"

"Come on," I say. "As you can tell by our apartment, Mom isn't interested in having fancy things."

I watch Lizzy's eyes take in the curtains made from strings of beads, the tie-dyed sheet on the wall that hides a long crack, the collection of old black-and-white postcards all showing some breed of dog dressed in a tutu, the three-legged table. "Okay," she says, "so she didn't rob a bank. But hey, maybe she won something! Does she still enter all those crazy contests?"

“I’m not sure,” I answer hesitantly. Mom and I don’t see each other that much anymore. She has her job at the library during the day, and then she takes art classes three nights a week at the school where my Aunt Judi — Mom’s twin sister — teaches. My mother is also an identical twin, but unlike my dad and Uncle Arthur, she and Aunt Judi actually like each other.

Lizzy asks, “Remember when your mom had to come up with a ten-word description for apple pie and she won a different pie every month for a year?”

Ah yes. I recall the Year of the Pies fondly. Pies are not as good as candy, but they are still better than anything else Mom has tried over the years to get me to eat. We made that final pie — rutabaga, as I recall — last for weeks, taking only a bite at a time.

This box doesn’t look like it holds pies, though. Or vacuum bags, or Florida oranges, or packets of Jell-O, or any of the other things Mom has won over the years by writing jingles or collecting box tops or labels from cans. I examine the box itself. Thick cardboard, with a single layer of clear packing tape running down the center.

“You know what this means?” Lizzy asks, pointing to the tape.

“That we can lift off the tape without ruining the box, and then we can press the tape back down and my mother won’t know the difference?”

“Yup!”

“Not gonna happen,” I say, plopping down onto the one kitchen chair that Mom hasn’t managed to turn into an art project yet. The others are either covered in a

scratchy fake leopard fur, or have bottle caps (the actual caps of bottles, not the candy) running up and down the legs and across the back.

“If you’re afraid of that federal offense thing,” Lizzy says, “that’s only if it’s a stranger’s mail. I think.”

“We will wait till my mom gets home,” I say firmly. I expect her to continue the argument, but instead she just stands by the box, looking a bit too innocent.

Gravely, I ask, “Lizzy, did you do something?”

In a rush she blurts, “It’s not my fault! The end of the tape just lifted right up!”

I jump from the chair to see that she has peeled away a few inches of the tape from the side of the box facing her. I have to admit, it really *had* come up very smoothly, not ripping or taking any of the cardboard with it. “Okay,” I say quickly. “Let’s do it before I change my mind.”

Lizzy claps her hands and we set to work gently lifting the tape up from both ends. We eventually meet in the middle and lift the whole piece straight off. Lizzy drapes it over the top of a kitchen chair. I open the four flaps, and we look in.

At first all we can see is a bunch of crumpled pieces of newspaper. For a brief moment I think there’s nothing else inside. I’m afraid to touch anything, but Lizzy apparently has no such qualms because she digs right in and pulls out balls of newspaper with both hands. She tosses them onto the table and is about to reach back in for the next layer when I stop her.

“Wait,” I say, gathering the balls into a neat pile. “We’ll have to pack this back up later exactly how we

found it.” I’m about to lay a wad of newspaper onto the pile when a headline catches my eye. I smooth the crumpled page out on the table. My heart quickening, I hold the page out to Lizzy and say, “Look at this article.”

She shakes her head. “You know I don’t believe in reading the newspaper. Too depressing. Why would I start reading it now?”

“Just read it,” I persist. “It’s from the science section.”

She rolls her eyes and grabs the paper from me. “‘Scientists Believe Black Holes Might Be Key to Time Travel.’ So what?” she asks. “Just add this to your time travel file. Your mom won’t notice one piece of newspaper missing.”

“I don’t *need* to add it to my file,” I tell her, taking the paper back and rolling it back up into a ball. “I already have it.”

“Huh?”

“This newspaper is five years old!”

She grabs more pieces out of the box until she finds one with a date on it. With a sharp intake of breath she says, “You’re right! This page is from the week after . . . after . . .” Lizzy’s words trail off and she busies herself pulling more paper out of the box. I know what she was going to say. The paper is from the week after my father died.

Silently we pull out the rest of the newspaper until only two things are left in the box — a typed letter on business letterhead and a rectangular object the size of a shoe box, wrapped in tissue paper. We stare at each other, wide-eyed. Lizzy starts to reach for the letter and then pulls back. “Maybe you should do it.”

“But what if it’s something my mom wouldn’t want us to see?”

“We’ve come this far,” she says, then quickly adds, “but it’s up to you.”

I wipe my sweating hands on my shorts. As much as I don’t want to admit it, I’m drawn in by the mysterious package, and I can’t help myself. I square my shoulders and carefully lift out the letter, trying not to wrinkle it. The address on the top is the same as the one on the return label. The letter, at least, is not five years old because it has yesterday’s date on it. I read it out loud, trying to keep my voice steady:

Dear Laney,

I hope this finds you well. I know I wasn’t supposed to send it until later this summer, but we have shut down the Manhattan branch, and I didn’t want to take the chance of misplacing it in the move to our Long Island office. Another reason to send it early—and you won’t like this, I’m afraid—is that I seem to have misplaced the keys. I am fairly certain that you sent them along with the box to my office, and I have a vague recollection of hiding them somewhere quite clever. Alas, too clever, I’m sorry to say.

The locksmith I visited explained that the locking mechanism on the box is an intricate system of levers and pulleys. Each of the four

keyholes needs a different type of key, and an internal latch will prevent the box from being pried open. Figures Jack wouldn't settle for a normal box with one keyhole like everyone else. I am certain you and Jeremy will figure it out before the time comes.

I have nothing but fond memories of Jack from our college days, and I was honored to do him the favor of holding onto this all these years. All my best wishes to you.

Yours truly,

Harold

Lizzy takes the letter from my hand and reads it over to herself. "What does this mean?" she says quietly. Lizzy rarely says anything quietly, so I know she's as surprised as I am. I don't trust myself to speak, so I just shake my head. I can't recall my father mentioning a college buddy named Harold, although admittedly I tuned out whenever my parents started reminiscing about the old college days. But this Harold person must have known them pretty well since he called Mom *Laney*, which only her close friends do. So my mother sent this package to him and told him to send it back five years later? Why would she do that? And what does he mean about doing a favor for my dad?

Before I can stop myself, I reach in and lift the wrapped object out of the box. The tissue paper slides off and falls to the floor. I am left holding a smooth wooden box with keyholes on four sides. A clear varnish makes the wood seem almost alive. The first thought that strikes me is how

pretty it is. I had never thought that a wooden box could be pretty. Heck, I don't think I've ever even *used* the word "pretty" before, and if Lizzy ever asked, I'd deny using it now.

Lizzy bends down to pick up the piece of tissue paper at my feet. She stands up slowly and says, "Um, Jeremy?"

"Hmmm?" I'm unable to take my eyes from the box in my hands. I shake it gently and hear some muffled objects shift and knock against each other. It can't weigh more than two pounds.

"Um, you might want to turn that over," Lizzy says. I just keep shaking the box back and forth, mesmerized. She finally grabs it from my hands, flips it over, and hands it back. Staring up at me are the engraved words THE MEANING OF LIFE: FOR JEREMY FINK TO OPEN ON HIS 13TH BIRTHDAY.

I'd recognize my dad's handiwork anywhere.

Chapter 2: The Explanation

“Looks like the package wasn’t for your mom after all,” Lizzy says after a few minutes.

I don’t answer. My hands are shaking, and I set the wooden box down on the kitchen table. We back away about two feet and stare at it.

“So this is a birthday gift from your dad?” Lizzy asks.

I nod. My heart is beating so fast that I actually hear it pulsing in my ears.

We stare some more and the words float in front of me. *The Meaning of Life. For Jeremy Fink. 13th Birthday.* Mom has obviously known about this for at least five years. Why did she keep it from me? I don’t have any secrets from anyone. Well, I guess I haven’t told anyone about kissing Rachel Schwartz at her bat mitzvah last April, but that’s mostly because it wasn’t so much a kiss as it was our lips accidentally occupying the same space as we reached for the last Shirley Temple on the waiter’s tray.

“So what do you think is inside?” Lizzy asks.

I finally speak. “No idea.”

“Can the meaning of life be in a box?”

“Wouldn’t have thought so,” I say.

“And you never saw this box before?”

I shake my head.

“Your mom never mentioned it?”

I shake my head again and try to recall what I'm supposed to do to avoid having a panic attack. I've only had one, the time Mom and I flew to Florida to visit my grandparents last year. No matter what they say about how safe flying is, I think only birds and superheroes should be in the clouds. Deep breath in, hold it for four counts, deep breath out. I had never considered the meaning of life before. Why hadn't I considered it? What is wrong with me? Has everyone else thought about this except for me? Maybe I was too busy trying to learn about time travel so I could keep Dad from taking the car out on that fateful day. My time travel research is important though, if not *vital*, to all of mankind. How was I supposed to put that aside to ponder the meaning of life?

"Are you all right?" Lizzy asks, looking up at me. "You look a little green."

I do feel a little light-headed from all the deep breathing. "I should probably sit down." We head to the living room and sink down into the tan corduroy couch. I lean back and close my eyes. When I was three, I named this couch Mongo. It was one of the first pieces of furniture that my parents found during the height of their old collecting days, before I was born. Dad told me that objects people left on the street were called *mongo*. I think he must have told me this while we were sitting on the couch because somehow I thought he was saying the *couch* was called Mongo. The couch was old when they found it, and older still now. As the years went by, Mom kept covering up the holes with other pieces of fabric. At this point, the

couch is almost ALL other pieces of fabric, but she won't get rid of it because I named it. She's sentimental that way. Apparently not sentimental enough to tell me about the box though!

"You're starting to look semi-normal again," Lizzy observes. "Not so green anymore. A little sweaty, maybe."

Nothing like the appearance of this box has ever happened to me. Or to anyone I know. Or to anyone I have read about. I need to sort this out, to make a plan. I open my eyes and say, "Let's recap."

"Okay," Lizzy says, sitting forward eagerly. Lizzy loves a good recap. We saw a detective do it on TV once, and ever since then we've occasionally recapped our day.

I stand up and begin to circle the coffee table. "Okay," I say. "We were about to go into the building when Nick came by. We convinced him to give us the big package with my mother's name on it. We promised to leave it for her, and then somehow, without realizing it, we opened it."

"That's one way to put it," Lizzy says encouragingly. "Go on."

"Inside the box we found a letter from a lawyer who was an old friend of my father's. He said he lost the keys to a wooden box that my dad left for him to give to me when I turned thirteen." I pause here to take a deep breath. "I will turn thirteen in a month with no way to open the box."

"Maybe your mom has a spare set," Lizzy suggests.

"I doubt it. Harold sounded awfully sorry about losing them, so he must have been pretty sure they were the only ones."

"Or what if your dad built the box himself? Then

maybe the keys are with his old tools. No, wait, your mom donated all that, right?”

I nod, remembering how hard it was for her to get rid of his stuff. “It doesn’t matter, though. Dad was good at fixing things up, but I don’t think he could make something as intricate as this, with all the keyholes. He definitely engraved the top himself, though. He loved that engraving tool.”

“Yeah,” Lizzy says wistfully, no doubt recalling the weekend where Dad went around engraving his initials on every wooden surface until my mother took the tool away (but not before Lizzy got a plaque with her name on it to hang on her bedroom door). “Too bad you didn’t get his handyman genes.”

“True, but if I had, we wouldn’t have the hole between my room and your room from where I tried to hang those shelves.” Over the years Lizzy and I have made good use of the hole to pass notes back and forth. It’s lucky our bedrooms are back-to-back, or else the hole might have gone into the middle of the Muldouns’ kitchen.

“We’ll find a way to open the box,” Lizzy says decisively. “I promise.”

“No offense, but your promises tend to get broken, or at least bent, a lot of the time.”

“Not this time,” she says, jumping up from Mongo. “Come on, let’s put the package back together. Your mom will be home any minute.”

I follow her back into the kitchen and watch as she repacks each item in reverse order. I am impressed at how neat she is being, since Lizzy is the messiest person I know.

As she tosses in the last of the crumpled newspaper, I realize there is no way I can pretend to my mother that I don't know what's inside.

As Lizzy reaches for the long piece of packing tape, I say, "Don't bother trying to tape it back together. I might as well tell her I opened it. I'm not as good a liar as you."

Lizzy puts her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes. "I think I've been insulted."

"I just meant that if I were a spy trapped behind enemy lines, I would want *you* to explain why I was there. We each have our strengths, and making people believe you is one of yours."

"So what's *your* strength?" she asks.

Good question. What *is* my strength? Do I even *have* a strength? Maybe I have *too many* strengths, and that's why I can't think of just one.

"Oh, never mind," she says, heading toward the door. "I can see this is taxing your brain, and I have to get home to set the table for dinner."

We agree that I'll send a note through the hole in the wall once I've been punished and sent to my room, which, I'm positive, is what will happen. Our grandfather clock — mongo from 83rd Street and 2nd Avenue — chimes five times. This means I have twenty minutes before Mom comes home to do enough good things around the apartment that maybe she'll go easy on me for opening her package.

Grabbing the fish food off the shelf in the kitchen, I hurry into the hallway where the tank sits on top of a long marble table — mongo from 67th Street and Central Park West. The fish all swim to the surface to greet me, except

for Cat, the loner. All my fish are named after other animals because Mom won't let me have real pets due to the fact that she is still mourning her childhood rabbit. Cat is a striped tiger fish who keeps to himself. Dog is brown with white spots and not that bright. He spends most of his day banging his nose into the side of the tank. Hamster is a hyper, orange goldfish who swims back and forth all day like he's in an Olympic relay race. My newest fish, Ferret, is long and silver and sometimes hard to find because he blends in with the gray rocks on the bottom of the tank. I sprinkle in some food, and they quickly swim to the surface to gobble it down.

These fish and I are a lot alike. They swim around the same four walls, safe and secure in their familiar environment. That's how I am, too. Honestly, I don't see any reason to leave my neighborhood. Everything I could ever want or need is within a few blocks in any direction: Dad's store (I still think of it as his), movies, school, the doctor, grocery store, dentist, clothes, shoes, the park, the library, the post office, everything. I don't like change.

I grab the feather duster from under the sink and run around the apartment, swishing it over every possible dust-collecting surface. I swish the mirrors, Aunt Judi's many sculptures, the tabletops, bookshelves, and the spines of the books (almost all of which were discarded from the library or bought at flea markets). I dust the television screen and the beaded curtains that Mom made the summer she was pregnant with me and stuck in bed. I am tempted to dust myself even!

Running into my bedroom, I quickly throw my blanket

over the bed, not bothering to straighten the sheets first. The stuffed alligator that Dad won for me by knocking over old milk jars at the state fair is trapped underneath the blanket. Now it looks like I'm hiding something because of the lumps and bumps. I'm about to fix it when I hear the double knock on the wall that indicates a new note is waiting for me. I lift up the poster of the solar system that covers the hole and grab the end of the rolled-up notebook page. Our walls are about six inches apart, so when we first tried to stick notes through on small pieces of paper, they would fall into the hollow space between. One day, years from now, maybe someone will find them and wonder who we were. Now we only use notebook paper, folded the long way, so it reaches all the way through.

Inside the note are two jelly beans. Watermelon, my favorite. I pop them in my mouth and read the note:

Good luck! If you get punished, there are more where these came from.

Lizzy and I look out for each other that way.

I scribble a big *THANKS* on the bottom of the note, stick it back through the hole until I see it reach the edge of her wall, and knock twice. It soon disappears from the other end.

I am straightening the books and papers on my desk when I hear the front door open. I had planned on being in the kitchen next to the box when Mom got home, but now that it's time, I can't move. I sit on the edge of my bed and wait. I hear her key ring jingle as she hangs it on the

hook by the door. *Thud* goes her heavy briefcase onto the floor. Now she's walking into the kitchen to get a glass of iced tea. I know her patterns very well. Three more steps until she'll see the box. Two more steps. One. Now she'll be examining the package, wondering why it's open. Now she's reaching in past the newspaper and pulling out the letter and the wooden box. And now she'll call my name. Okay . . . now!

Now?

Why don't I hear anything? I expected, "Jeremy Fink! Get in here immediately!" Instead . . . silence. What does this mean? Another minute passes, and still nothing. Is she trying to make me squirm by dragging out the inevitable? Or what if she slipped and fell and is lying unconscious on the floor?

When I reach the kitchen I see that Mom isn't, thankfully, knocked out on the floor. Instead, she's standing by the table, staring down at Dad's box. I am familiar with that position, having been in it myself for quite a while. The letter is in her hand, hanging down at her side. Her face is pale. I can see some gray hair poking through the black, and for some reason it makes me sad. I have the urge to take her hand. Instead I just ask, "Um, Mom? Are you okay?"

She gives an unconvincing nod and sits down in the bottle cap-covered chair. "You should have this," she says, and hands me the letter. She runs her fingers over the words Dad engraved on the top of the box. "It was only a week after the accident when I mailed this box to Harold for safekeeping," she says, not taking her eyes off of it.

“Your thirteenth birthday seemed like a million years away back then.”

She looks so sad that I wish she were angry at me instead. Not that she has a bad temper or anything, but she’s big on boundaries. I know if the package had *my* name on it, she never would have opened it.

“Even though your dad insisted he would be here to give you the box himself, I knew that deep down he didn’t believe it. The instructions to send it to Harold were in his will.”

My throat feels like a snake is wound around it, but I manage to ask, “He believed that palm reader on the boardwalk, didn’t he?”

She lets out a big sigh. “I don’t know. I think some people have a greater sense of their mortality than others. He knew the number of years that were allotted to him.”

Neither of us speaks for a minute. Then I whisper, “I’m sorry I opened the package.” If I were a little bit younger, I would have blamed it on Lizzy.

Surprisingly, she smiles. “Your dad would have opened it, too. He was curious about everything. That’s why he loved flea markets and collecting so much. He was fascinated by what objects people kept, and what they threw away. Remember those stories he used to make up about each thing he found?”

I sit down across from her and nod. I do remember, but the memories are very foggy. After Dad died, it was like all the furniture was talking to me (but in Dad’s voice), and I had to make a conscious effort to remember that the hall table was just a table, not the very table on which the Dec-

laration of Independence was signed. Which of course it wasn't really.

She runs her hand over the scratches that burrow deep into the kitchen table. "Remember what he said about this broken table when we found it?"

I shake my head.

"When we found this at a tag sale, your dad said it belonged to an old woman who was very overweight. She was sitting at the table when she saw in the newspaper that her lottery numbers had come in. In her excitement she fainted and fell forward onto the table, breaking one of the legs underneath her weight." Mom gestures to the box and says, "He was so excited the day he got this box. He said it was the most unique one he'd ever seen, with all those keyholes. You were six at the time, and he starting filling it for you that very night. He didn't engrave it until a few months later."

My eyes begin to sting with the onset of tears, but I blink them away. "So you know what's in it?"

She shakes her head. "He was very secretive about it. He kept it at the comic store in the vault."

So that's why I never saw it around the apartment! "Do you have an extra set of keys?" I hold my breath until she answers.

She shakes her head. "There was only one set. It takes four different keys to open it, and I mailed them to Harold. I can't imagine what he did with them."

"Maybe Dad made an extra set and kept them at the store. I can ask Uncle Arthur if —"

She just shakes her head. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. I cleaned

out all your father's things from the store. There's no other set."

I pull hard on the top of the box, not really expecting anything to happen. It is sealed up tight. "How am I going to open it, then?" I ask.

"I honestly don't know." She stands up and takes the pitcher of iced tea out of the fridge. As she reaches for two glasses she says, "Lizzy's dad has some tools. We can ask him to saw through it if you haven't found a way to open it before your birthday comes."

I jump out of my chair, nearly knocking it over. Snatching the box from the table, I hug it to my chest.

"I'll take that as a no, then?" she says, sounding slightly amused.

"Yes, that's a no," I say firmly, tightening my grip. I can't let Dad's box get sawed in half after hearing how much he loved it. After five years, he has sent me a message with one instruction, to open this box on my thirteenth birthday. Somehow, no matter how impossible it might seem, I am going to do exactly that.