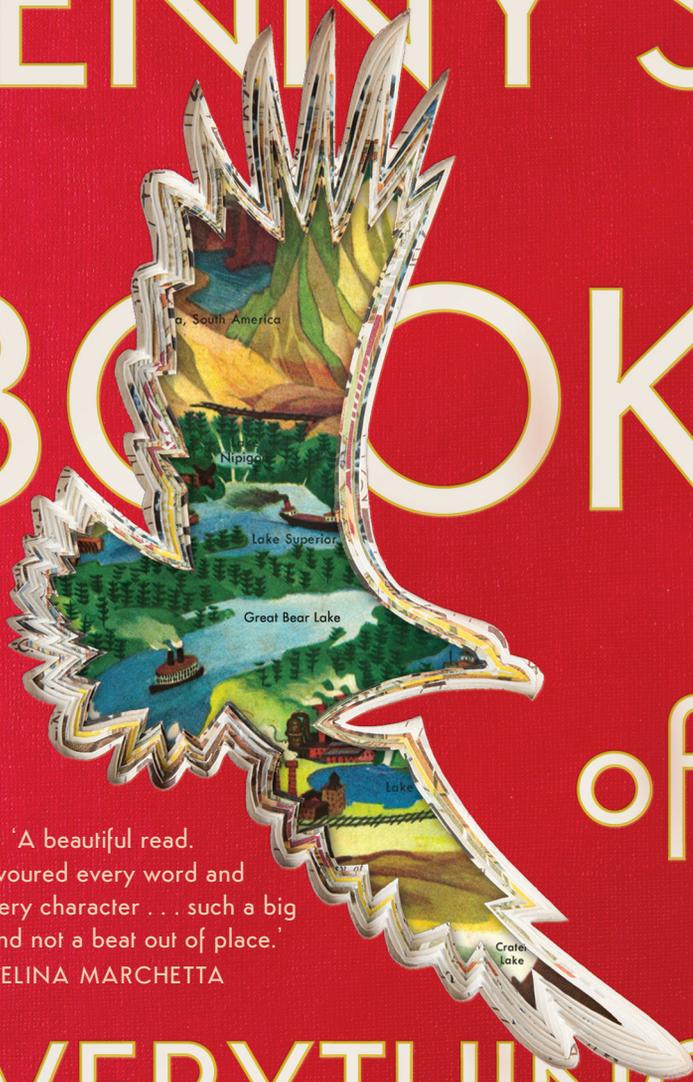


LENNY'S

BOOK



of

'A beautiful read.
I savoured every word and
loved every character . . . such a big
heart and not a beat out of place.'

MELINA MARCHETTA

EVERYTHING

KAREN FOXLEE

‘This bittersweet tale about heartbreak and healing has a sense of whimsy that never feels forced. Foxlee’s writing is brimming with perfectly constructed moments that merge into a truly sensational, heart-wrenching read. This is the kind of book that makes a reader feel grateful it exists.’

—*Australian Bookseller and Publisher* (5 star review)

‘*Lenny’s Book of Everything* is a tough, tender and beautiful piece of work that left me aching.’

—Glenda Millard, author of *The Stars of Oktober Bend*
and *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark*

‘You come to care so deeply for the characters that you want to move into their little flat and look after them. They are so alive, so full of heart, curiosity and imagination, that even when tragedy comes to stay, their relationships are illuminated by joy. Told with the piercing honesty and clarity of a child, this story holds life lessons for everyone. W is for Wonderful, and that is *Lenny’s Book. Unforgettable.*’

—Anna Fienberg, author of *Tashi*

‘Though I defy you to read it without tears, *Lenny’s Book of Everything* is warm, humorous, absolutely real and above all, uplifting. It’s also the best book I’ve read this year: Karen Foxlee, you’re a genius.’

—Wendy Orr, author of *Dragonfly Song*

LENNY'S
BOOK
of
EVERYTHING



KAREN
FOXLEE


ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

Perfectly Normal

7lbs. 3
20 inches
1969



Our mother had a dark heart feeling. It was as big as the sky kept inside a thimble. That's how dark heart feelings are. They have great volume but can hide in small places. You can swallow them with a blink and carry them inside you so no one will know.

"Something's not right," she said, when she brought baby Davey home from the hospital.

She rubbed her fingers over her chest and looked at him sleeping in the crook of her arm.

"I have a feeling," she said.

She was good at knowing the wrongness of things, sadnesses and sicknesses, and, in the park, she could always find the pigeon with one leg. She knew when Mrs. Gaspar was coming down with a wheeze before she wheezed. She knew my thin hair was caused by some undiagnosed malady. Some days were more wrong than others. Whole days. From the moment she opened her eyes, "Something's not right," she said.

"Does it hurt?" I asked her. I looked at my new baby brother and he was perfect as a walnut in its shell.

"No, it doesn't hurt," she said and she took my three-year-old hand and put it to her heart. I could feel her ribs through her

nightdress. “It’s not a hurting kind of feeling. Just a something-will-happen feeling.”

“A good thing or a bad thing?” I asked.

“It might be good or bad or somewhere in between,” she said. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Davey was born six days after Neil Armstrong took his famous step and everyone was still crazy with moon walk fever. Mother liked to tell the story if she was in a lying-on-the-sofa mood. An untying-her-hair mood. A tickle-my-feet-and-I’ll-tell-you mood. We knew all her stories by heart, word for word, so that we could have told them ourselves if we needed to. The story of the day her father died from a heart attack after blowing out his birthday candles. The story of her friend, Louis Martin, who was struck by lightning when he walked home from school in the rain. The story of the river and how she nearly drowned in it when she was seven, of the first dress she ever made, which her mother forbade her to wear because it was cherry red. The tale of the UFO she saw beside the highway when she ran away with Peter Lenard Spink.

“It was a perfect summer day when you were born,” was always how the Davey story started.

She must have noticed all the perfectness from the bus window because she couldn’t afford the cab fare: Second Street, glinting and shimmering in the heat, and ponderous summer clouds sweeping their shadows over the sunbaking cars, the marigolds growing in the park, children eating ice-creams.

I was left behind with Mrs. Gaspar in number seventeen. She had two Pomeranians with marmalade-coloured coats named Karl and Karla. The apartment smelled of them, and also

ashtrays, filled with white cigarette filters, each decorated with a ring of peach lipstick. Her apartment was a kaleidoscope of tan crocheted doilies and pumpkin-coloured throw rugs; even Mrs. Gaspar's orange beehive, which sat a little askew on her head, matched the decor. Her hand-knitted clothes were unravelling and her pom-pom slippers had the dishevelled look of something she had fished out of a trash can. She liked to bless me when my mother wasn't looking. She drew crosses on my tiny forehead and whispered in Hungarian.

"Yes, it was a perfect summer day," said Mother. "And I knew you were coming. I knew it and I hadn't had a single contraction. Not one. But something told me I had to go to the hospital. Something said, *Cynthia Spink, get to that hospital this instant.*"

"What was the something?" I asked.

"Hush now," she said.

But I wanted to know. She was thin with worrying, our mother. She combed out her long fair hair with her fingers, closed her eyes. She was made almost entirely out of worries and magic.

"Was it a voice?" If it was a voice, it would sound like dry leaves.

"I said hush, Lenny, it's my story. I took you across the hall to Mrs. Gaspar's and then I caught the number twenty-four. The voice said, *Get on that number twenty-four, Cynthia, because it doesn't do the loop to Safeway. It goes all the way down Second with only five stops.*"

I tried to imagine a voice like whispering leaves saying all that. I rolled my eyes at Davey but he ignored me because he loved his sudden-arrival story.

“You were a week late already. I sweated on that bus. I must have sweated a gallon. Then I stepped off that bus, down onto the sidewalk near that hospital and wouldn’t you know it, I get a contraction that bends me in half and then another one just a minute later. And I get two more and I haven’t even made it to the hospital front door, Davey. And there were people running from everywhere but I had you right there on the doorstep with everyone walking past.”

“Holy Batman,” said Davey.

But it wasn’t like we hadn’t heard the story before. He knew there was more to come.

“But the thing was,” she said, “when you were born, they told me you had a true knot in your cord. A true knot, pulled tight, and that’s why you came out so quick, because my body and your body knew you’d run out of air and blood if you didn’t.”

Air and blood. I always repeated that part in my head. *Air and Blood.*

“Gee,” said Davey.

“You almost might have never been,” said Mother.

“I’m glad you got the number twenty-four,” said Davey.

“You were a beautiful baby,” said Mother.

“Was I?” asked Davey.

“So beautiful,” said Mother.

But she didn’t mention the dark heart feeling to him, not ever, not once. That was always our secret. That was never in the story. She never told him how she asked Dr. Leopold if everything was fine.

“Why, he’s a perfect bouncing baby boy,” said Dr. Leopold.

“Are you sure?”

“Why, he’s perfectly normal,” said Dr. Leopold on the perfect summer day.

So she smiled and agreed.

“Father’s name?” the doctor asked. He was filling out the birth certificate.

“Peter Lenard Spink,” said Mother. “L. E. N. A.R.D.”

“Will Mr. Spink be in tomorrow to see his boy?” asked the doctor.

“Yes,” said Mother. “Yes, he will be.”



When I was older I liked to say his name in bed. *Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink.* His name rolled off my tongue like a punctured wheel. I said it until, in the darkness, Davey told me to be quiet. But it was a name that needed saying.

He did not come that day or the next. Whole weeks passed. Davey slept and my mother worried and fussed over his sleepiness. She worried and fussed over his poor appetite. She worried and fussed over his boy-ness. She worried over the bills and how she would pay them and who would look after us when she went back to work.

The weeks were sunshiny but sorrowful. Mrs. Gaspar came daily and tended to Davey and sang him mournful lullabies. Each afternoon thunderstorms came and washed the streets clean but they could not wash Peter Lenard Spink from our mother.

Until one night the key turned in the lock and Peter Lenard Spink appeared. He stood very still, as though he wasn't sure he was in the right place. He smiled his small whiskery smile. He'd been working. He'd had to take the work. He'd had to work construction a long way south. The reasons were offered up in various ways but Mother shook her head at all of them. She nodded to us.

"Little Lenny," he said, dipping his head to me.

"And baby David," said Mother.

Still we waited for the thing to happen. Mother's dark heart feeling did not go away. It found a tiny crack and climbed inside her. It took up residence. She carried it around with her, alongside Davey on her hip.

"Something's not right," she said. Sometimes when she fed Davey his cereal. Once when she watched him crawling behind me squealing through the small nest of rooms that was our home, crawling so fast he skinned his baby knees. When he took his first perfectly normal steps.

Sometimes it wasn't mentioned for months.

Sometimes ten times in one day.

"Something isn't right," she said quietly.

"What is it?" I asked. I put my hand on her heart the way she liked me to do. I knew it soothed her. I felt its beat beneath my fingertips.

"I just don't know," she said.

Peter Lenard Spink sat at the kitchen table turning the pages of the paper slowly.

"You worry too much, has always been your problem," he said. "There's work in Pensacola. What about this? Immediate start. Meals provided."

He read out the newspaper advertisement. That's the way his goodbyes began. I kept my hand on my mother's chest. She smiled at me but beneath my fingertips her heartbeat quickened.

Davey pulled himself up beside us using fistfuls of Mother's skirt. He smiled and it made us smile in return, it couldn't be helped. Baby Davey had the happiest smile in the world.



Peter Lenard Spink went to Pensacola. He went to Tuscaloosa. He went to St. Louis. He went to St. Marks and St. Cloud. He went north and south. He went east and west. Sometimes we were allowed to look from our bedroom window down at the Greyhound bus station when he went. He would wave up at us, just a small raise of his hand.

But other times Mother said, "No."

She said, "Don't you dare look from that window."

Peter Lenard Spink left and the door clicked and Mother went and lay very still on her bed like a stone princess on top of a tomb.

Peter Lenard Spink was a tan figure hunched over shoelaces. He was sideburns and a nervous smile. He was leaving sounds: rusty suitcase clasps and zippers. He was the belt-buckle jangle. He went to Marietta and Blacksburg and as far away as Buffalo, Wyoming. He gave me a sticker from there. I didn't stick it anywhere. I kept it pristine and unstuck in my jewellery box and Davey coveted it for many years.

Davey grew up. He tottered. He walked. He said his first word which was *Dada* and it made Peter Lenard Spink's small whisky

smile quiver. First birthday, second birthday, third birthday, fourth. Nearly his fifth . . . Mother got dressed each day in her pink uniform. She tied up her fair hair in a fountain on her head. She went to work at the Golden Living Retirement Home. She deposited us with Mrs. Gaspar and Karl and Karla. Mrs. Gaspar said, “My little dumplings,” and took us in. My mother wore her happy Cindy Spink smile but we both still waited for the thing to happen.

“He’ll come back,” Mother said each time Peter Lenard Spink left.

“He’ll come back,” she pleaded with no one.

The last time was no different from the others. The sound of him peeing, the faucet, a match strike, keys. A suitcase sound. A small cough. A belt-buckle tinkle. He whispered out of our lives at dawn, unlatched the door and clicked it behind him, and never came back again.

Davey turned five the very next day. There was a small cake and a cowboy shirt and a blue toy tractor that he adored. At the end of the day he had a tantrum. He bellowed and stamped his feet and threw himself to the ground over nothing. Mother said everyone always cried on their birthday when they were small, but it was a lie because I never did, not once. Davey bellowed for no reason and wore himself out to sleep and it was while he was sleeping that the thing happened. The thing we’d been waiting for. When Mother saw it in the morning, she made a noise like she had seen a ghost.

“Davey,” she whispered.

But then she sat down, plonk, on the sofa, as though she was glad it had finally arrived. She let out one long breath.

“What’s happened to you?” she said.

Swedes

5 and a half years

4' 3"

DECEMBER 1974



Each morning Mother woke us early in the dark. She said goodbye to us as the sun was coming up, a pale wash of light lifting on the green walls. It rose, that light, before my eyes as we waited for Mrs. Gaspar to open her door.

“What?” said Mrs. Gaspar in her shaggy tangerine bathrobe. “He is growing more?”

“No, he’s just the same,” said Mother, laughing. “He’s just the same, Mrs. Gaspar.”

But Davey *was* taller than me and I was a third-grader. Standing in the corridor, we could see his new pyjama pants were already knickerbockers again.

“Cyn-thi-a,” said Mrs. Gaspar, each syllable registering her disappointment. “Mrs. Spink! He must go to the doctor. This is not normal!”

“Oh, no,” said Mother, “he’s just big, there are big people in the family, my mama always said it, they came from Sweden.”

Mrs. Gaspar shook her head. She patted Davey’s head where his hair surged upward like prairie grass. As soon as Mother was gone to work, she blessed us like a round orange pontiff, very solemnly, her beehive wobbling on her head. Mrs. Gaspar had a very large Jesus painting in a frame above the television.

This smiling Jesus had red cheeks and wore robes the colour of a pastel Easter egg. Light beams shone from his fingertips. He looked friendly enough but was a little off-putting when we tried to watch cartoons. We ate our cornflakes beneath his benevolent gaze.

We prayed with Mrs. Gaspar. She made us close our eyes and hold her hands, one hand for Davey and one for me. I didn't like to close my eyes but she said, "No peeking, dumpling," like we were about to do something fun. Her hands were puffy and cool and slightly damp.

Mrs. Gaspar prayed for us. For our mother to be kept safe travelling to the Golden Living Retirement Home on the number twenty-eight bus, for the return of our wayward father, for my hair, for her wheeze, for her long-ago parents, for Karl and Karla, who meanwhile sat at our feet watching with shining black eyes. And she prayed for Davey to stop growing.

We ate breakfast in her little kitchen that was a shrine to Apollo 11. There were newspaper articles cut out and stuck all over her fridge, coloured *National Geographic* pages taped around the kitchen door with a triptych of the astronauts Buzz, Neil, and Michael up top. Davey was sad every time I was ready to go to school, as though it had never happened before, this business of me donning my jacket and clipping my schoolbag shut. He said, "Len-neeeeeee," long and slow. He grabbed me and pushed his big blond head into my stomach and cried all over my clean shirt.

He stayed with Mrs. Gaspar and they would watch *Days of Our Lives* together. "Like sands through the hourglass," Davey

said, “so are the days of our lives.” “Good boy,” said Mrs. Gaspar. She would make him pray three times a day, on his knees, and he would do it, very good-naturedly. But he’d have tantrums too. He didn’t like Mrs. Gaspar’s soup. He didn’t like the tea she made him drink to slow down his growing. It was exactly the same bitter yellow tea she gave me for my thin hair. “Drink it,” I whispered after school, “just drink it.” She wheezed when she was agitated. She said we were ungrateful. Where would we be without her? Would we stay with Mr. Petersburg in number sixteen? Would he make us breakfast? Would he make us hearty soup? “Just drink it,” I said, “it’s got nothing in it.” My hair was still thin. But he wouldn’t. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth and I waited for his bellow.

Davey bellowed like a wounded bull. Davey’s bellows shook the walls.

Mrs. Gaspar raised her hands to the ceiling and said a silent prayer. Karl and Karla hid under the sofa.

“I’m too old,” said Mrs. Gaspar to Mother. “I love my dumpling, but this crying. It makes it hard for me to breathe. There must be a kindergarten.”

All the way to school I tried not to think of him. Second Street, Grayford, Ohio was long and straight and its buildings were almost entirely the colour of moon rock: light grey, dark grey, and occasionally a strange light green. I knew this because Neil Armstrong had brought some rocks home to Earth and they’d shown coloured pictures of them on the television. I told Mother once that I thought Second Street looked like it was made out of moon rock.

She said, “I like that about you, Lenny, you always see the good in the bad.”

Moon rock smelled like spent gunpowder.

Second Street smelled like diesel exhaust and pigeon poo. It smelled like the popcorn at the entrance to the movie theatre and the rotten fruit at Mr. King’s “King of Fruit” Fruit Store and the cool gasping sliding-door breath of the bank, which had the aroma of suits and dollar bills and perfumed ladies.

I walked past the Greyhound bus station. I walked past the grocer’s and Mr. King’s “King of Fruit” Fruit Store. I walked past the movie theatre and the bank. I went past the Three Brothers Trapani, tailors, and Miss Finny, the seamstress. I went past Mr. Kelmendi, the shoemaker. Each day he said, “Aren’t you too small to walk to school alone, young lady?” and each day I frowned at him and said, “No,” which made him laugh so hard that the pigeons exploded into the air.

I went past the park where the trees shivered their grey fingers at the winter sky. I breathed out my foggy breath, puffed it in front of me like a dragon. All the way I could feel the ghost of Davey’s big hands upon me and smell his tears.



My third-grade teacher was Miss Schweitzer and her name sounded like the swish of a rag across a dirty table. She was tall and frostily blonde and her bell-bottoms were ironed with a crease. She made us sit tall, she pulled our ponytails into line, and she inspected the handkerchiefs in our pockets each day.

My mother said, “That Miss Schweitzer has too much time on her hands if handkerchiefs are all she worries about.”

But I worried about handkerchiefs incessantly. I worried about their cleanness and pressed-ness. I tended to the floral handkerchief collection, which my nanny Flora thankfully had sent me for a birthday present, like my life depended upon it. Matthew Milford had been shamed for having a handkerchief several days old and dried hard in places with snot. Miss Schweitzer discovered it during handkerchief inspection. She asked him what it was.

“It’s a handkerchief,” said Matthew Milford, although it took a lot longer than that on account of his stutter. He was on the *It’s* for a good minute and then, between the *a* and *handkerchief*, he jerked for an eternity. We all waited patiently. Matthew Milford had a big mole on his cheek. Hairs grew out of it. I liked to count them when he wasn’t looking. There were always five.

“No, Milford,” said Miss Schweitzer, “it’s not a handkerchief.”

Matthew looked confused. He stared at the handkerchief, which Miss Schweitzer held up as an example of what was not to come to school. Matthew Milford had a stutter and a mole *and* a terrible haircut so he didn’t need any more bad things to happen to him.

Apart from Matthew Milford there was a girl called Frankie Pepelliani who could tap dance and everyone coveted her tap shoes. There was a girl named Tara Albright who looked exactly like a doll. She was so shiny and her eyes so glassy and her hair so neatly tied back in tails that it made you want to poke her just to see if she was real. These were just a few. There was also

a girl called CJ Bartholomew and CJ Bartholomew was my best friend.

CJ Bartholomew didn't sound like the name of a girl in third grade. It sounded like the name of someone who wrote books about dentistry. CJ stood for Cassandra Jane which conjured up images of girls in long dresses in green gardens, but Cassandra Jane wasn't like that. CJ was a small wild slip of a thing. She had a blast of fair hair that wouldn't stay in the bunches her mother tied. Sometimes she had just one bunch left by the end of the day, like the handle on a teacup.

CJ Bartholomew got dirtier than other kids. Her eyes watered in the sunlight. She wiped at them with her palms so that two dirt trails formed on her cheeks like cheetah tear lines. She had a permanently snotty nose. She was Miss Schweitzer's worst nightmare.

"Bartholomew, go and wash your face!"

I liked her from the first. CJ ate her triangular sandwiches upside down, crust first, point last. She pushed her wobbly teeth in and out with her tongue. She screwed up her nose at things, squinted her eyes. CJ had five sisters and she recited their names to me until I could remember them: Bonnie-Anne, Nancy Jane, Lorelai Marie, Susan Louise, Josephine Claire.

"I only have one brother," I said. "He won't stop growing. Mrs. Gaspar said we should take him to the doctor. No schools will have him. But my mother said he's just big and that happens sometimes. There are Swedish people in our family."

"Like with Jack and the beanstalk, he just kept growing," said CJ.

“The beanstalk kept growing,” I said.

“Yeah,” said CJ, who was very wise, “but it’s the same thing.”



Davey had been to one nursery school for ten minutes. It was called the Sacred Heart Mary Street Nursery School, which was a very long name for no good reason. I had a bad feeling about the place before we even went there. I could tell Mother did too. She spent forever slicking down Davey’s hair with hair cream like it was his biggest problem. She used so much cream he said his head felt heavy with it. He didn’t like his scratchy new pants either. His new brown shoes were too squeaky. I could tell he was just plain scared. We walked along Second—all of us, a cloud of dark feelings. It got so bad I stopped still on the corner of Charlotte and Second because I knew it was wrong. We couldn’t take Davey to some place and just leave him there.

My fear sucked all the sound out of the day. All the cars and buses and trucks stopped making noise. The pigeons burst into the air without volume. The winter sun winked from behind a cloud. It sent a semaphore message. It said, *DON’T GO*.

Davey frowned at the winking sun too.

“What on earth are you two doing?” said Mother to us, stopped still, staring at the sky. “We’ll be late.”

Inside the Sacred Heart Mary Street Nursery School it was hushed, like the inside of a church. Sister Agnetha met us at the door. Sister Agnetha smiled and looked for our five-year-old. She looked behind us like he might be there. She looked over

the top of Davey's head. My mother showed her Davey. His hair held down with a gallon of Brylcreem. His scratchy pants and his new brown shoes shining. Sister Agnetha's smile vanished.

"He's too big," she said.

She was the first one to ever come right out and say it.

It wasn't *He's VERY big*. It was *He's TOO big*. He didn't fit. And the worst thing was we'd never tried to fit him anywhere else. It was our first attempt. It jolted two tears right out of my mother's eyes.

"He's just big for his age," whispered Mother.

"How can he play with children when he is twice their size?" asked Sister Agnetha. *Twice their size* was a stretch. He was approximately fifteen inches taller than the average five-year-old. Sister Agnetha tried to salvage her smile. Davey, who always smiled, didn't smile in return. He knew meanness when he saw it. He grabbed a fistful of Mother's skirt.

"It's just I wasn't informed of his size," said Sister Agnetha. "It isn't right. It might be dangerous."

Now my brother was strong. If my mother needed heavy furniture lifted he could do it, but he would never hurt anyone. The other children had stopped doing what they were doing at the word *dangerous*. Building with blocks and painting on easels and reading on beanbags. They were staring at Davey.

"I filled in all the forms," said my mother. "He *is* five. He *was* with me. They saw him. They would have said if there was a problem."

Davey's hands went around Mother's waist. My ears went numb with a feeling that something bad was about to happen.

I tried to hear. Sister Agnetha was saying something. She looked like she was trying to cover up her meanness. It was a patchwork affair and parts of it showed through. There was some kind of deal being struck. Her lips were moving but there was no sound. Then Davey had his tantrum.

His mouth opened up into a dreadful lopsided oval. The sound turned back on. It was a roar. His roar. Sister Agnetha leaned backwards, shocked. The glass, high up in the windows, rattled.

“No!” he bellowed.

“Don’t be silly, Davey,” said Mother into the brief silence that followed. Children’s paintbrushes wilted in their hands. A pile of blocks fell to the floor.

She tried to prise him from her waist. He gripped harder. She peeled his fingers backward and he reapplied them with more force. Sister Agnetha backed away. Her hand reached out for the red telephone on the wall. I watched it all unfold, as though I wasn’t really there, just the ghost of Lenny Spink.

My mother succeeded in removing Davey from her. She jumped back from him.

“Quickly,” she said to me and he looked at her with such desolation. She sobbed back at him with such despair.

Davey took off running. He ran in a great galumphing arc around the classroom. He overturned two book stands, hurling them to the ground, he reached out one arm and tore a painting from an easel. He picked up a beanbag and tossed it up to the ceiling. He splattered paint and crashed right through the teacher’s chair. His Brylcreemed hair came unstuck and rose in two gelled

horns upon his head, his face grew red, hot tears streamed down his cheeks, and glittering snot poured from his nose. Children screamed and cowered.

Davey completed his lap of infamy. He rushed back into my mother's skirt. He wept and bellowed into her lap at the terrible thing that he had done and the thing that had been done to him.

"Please leave," said Sister Agnetha, the red phone in her hand. "Straight away. Take your mon . . ." She didn't finish the word. "And leave."

I think she wanted to say *monster*. I was almost certain she wanted to say *monster*.

"He's not a monster," I cried, and my words were loud as cymbals, and it was much, much worse for my saying them.

But we left. We sat on the steps outside until Mother could walk. Her legs were shaking so. She held Davey to her and she held him like she would never let him go.



"How's Davey doing at school?" asked Nanny Flora.

It was raining. Icy rain falling past the window and all the pigeons shivering. The whole city was grey and my sadness flower had opened up inside my chest.

"He's not going," I said.

"Not going?" said Nanny Flora.

"They wouldn't let him because he was too big," I whispered. I didn't want Mother to hear. It still ruffled her. It made her spiky. It made her slam down our meatloaf. It made her say, "Too big?"

“Well, he’s certainly that,” said Nanny Flora on the phone.

Mother had sent her a studio photograph. In the photograph I was seated on a small cane chair with my feet daintily crossed and my white socks pulled up high. My yellow dress had turned my complexion the colour of canned franks. Beside me Davey looked as though he had stepped off a Viking ship. He was blond and huge, his feet planted apart in a sturdy stance and the buttons on his new red cowboy shirt straining over his tummy. He was grinning and I was frowning.

Nanny Flora lived far away and neither Davey nor I had ever met her in person. She spoke on the phone, once a month on a Sunday, twelve Sundays a year. She was an official regular event. There was a picture of her on the china cabinet, a tiny woman with a golden bowl of tight curls on her head and very white teeth. She wore a blue coat and she looked very clean, like someone from an antiseptic advertisement. On the phone she spoke down from somewhere high above, a cloud perhaps, perfectly white and sanitized.

“But there are big people in the family, you know?” she said. “Swedish people. In fact he looks a lot like Uncle Gus and he was from that side.”

I imagined them, a family of Swedish giants, with hands the size of dinner plates and jagged gap-toothed smiles.

“How’d you like those handkerchiefs?” asked Nanny Flora from her sanitized cloud.

“I loved them, thank you,” I said.

“Did you like the flowery blue one?” Nanny Flora asked. “Or did you have another favourite?”

I really hadn't paid much attention to the patterns, just adored their stiffness and cleanliness and resolved to never blow my nose into them.

"I liked the blue flowery one," I said.

"What about the yellow one?" asked Nanny Flora. "I thought it was very pretty, did you?"

It was like being interviewed by the secret handkerchief police. I wondered if she was trying to trick me. Maybe there wasn't a yellow one. It seemed like the kind of thing her voice might do.

"The blue one is the best," I said.

There was a small silence.

"So too big, you say?" she said finally, then "Well, tell me, how are you doing?"

It was a difficult question to answer. She didn't know me. She didn't know the holes in my stockings. She didn't know my ratty toothbrush. She didn't know the three warts in a triangle on my left knee that I called my holy trinity.

She didn't know how I pretended I was a dragon the whole way to school.

"Good," I said, heart beating fast.

She didn't know how sometimes rain made me want to cry, like there was something deep inside of me—the sadness flower that opened up when rainy days came, and blossomed inside me until I couldn't breathe.

"Tell me something new," she said.

It was a little threatening. I bored her.

"We entered a competition," I said, remembering. Oh, the

relief was sweet. I leaned against the wall, phone pressed to my ear, breathed.

“Really, now?” Nanny Flora said.

“For an encyclopedia set. A whole set. Completely free. If we win it.”

“Well, now,” said Nanny Flora from her cloud. “That would really be something now, wouldn’t it?”

“It sure would,” I said.

“Put your mama on,” said Nanny Flora, so I did.

Mother turned her back to us, cradled the phone against her neck. Ever since the Sacred Heart affair, her magic had been leaking out. She was made entirely of worries now. Her legs were thin, her arms too. She was worried thin. She worried about Davey’s constipation. She worried about whether I needed glasses. “How can I afford glasses?” she asked me, even though I didn’t need them and no one had even looked at my eyes. She worried about the box of oranges she brought home from Mr. King’s “King of Fruit” Fruit Store, and if she should have accepted them.

“I know,” I heard her say to Nanny Flora.

“I know, but . . .”

“Yes, I’ll take him to the doctor . . .”

“Mama,” we heard her say. “I don’t want to hear about Uncle Gus from Sweden right now.”

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January 5, 1975
Apartment 15, 762 Second Street
Grayford, Ohio 44002

*Dear Burrell's family,
Welcome to the Spink family. My name is Cindy and I have two children, Lenore and David. Their father died nearly a year ago. I raise them myself by working shifts as a nursing aide at the Golden Living Retirement Home. We get by, we have enough food and a roof over our heads. My children are the Love of My Life. They are both beautiful although Davey is very big for his age. I've taken him to the doctor and they are going to figure out why. Lenore is so good to her brother and so very smart in third grade. She reads very well. We're hoping for the encyclopedia set so that we can always have THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE in our humble abode.*

*Yours sincerely,
Mrs. Cynthia Spink*

February 3, 1975
Burrell's Publishing Company Ltd
7001 West Washington Street
Indianapolis, Indiana 46241

**OUR GIFT TO YOU IS
THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE**

*Dear Mrs. Spink,
Congratulations! We wish to inform you that you are one of the lucky winners of the Burrell's Build-It-at-Home Encyclopedia set. Our gift to you is THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE. Each issue is delivered direct to your front door and with this letter we are happy to include your first three issues. You'll have the A volumes built in no time! If at any time you choose to speed up the building of your set please contact our sales team, there are a range of payment plans available.*

*Yours sincerely,
Martha Brent
General Sales Manager*

A
African Civets
and the
Abominable Snowman

4' 5"

FEBRUARY 1975



My mother lied with gay abandon. She lied from the first sentence, *Welcome to the Spink family*. No one ever visited us except Mrs. Gaspar and Karl and Karla. If someone knocked at the door, our mother would be suspicious. She would peer through the peephole angrily. She would mutter to herself, “Who could that be?”

She lied about taking Davey to the doctor. She hadn’t taken him once, but only mentioned it, instead, every day.

“I’m taking you to the doctor,” she threatened, as though that would stop him growing.

“What will he do?” Davey asked.

“He’ll give you a needle to stop you growing,” said Mother.

“But I don’t like needles,” wailed Davey.

On the subject of our beauty, it was true, Davey *was* a handsome boy. He had blue eyes and long lashes and a dreamy gaze. But already he was leaning to the right. He’d grown as tall as a fifth grader and he was only five, but he was beginning to bend, just slightly, like a weed wilting in the sun.

I wasn’t pretty, there is no denying it. There were pretty girls at school. They had pretty hair and pretty faces and pretty dresses. They skipped easily, squealed easily, smiled easily.

They had names like Tara or Tabitha or Mary-Lynne. None of them had names like Lenny.

In that letter, my mother lied about Peter Lenard Spink.

Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink.

I whispered it in bed at night to remember him.

Peter Lenard Spink had nicotine stains on the first two fingers of his right hand. His skin was hard as a hide there, cracked and bright yellow. He was good at string tricks.

“Come over here, little Lenny,” he sometimes said and I knew he was taking the string from his pocket. It was an old frayed string. I knelt before him to watch.

I wanted to.

I didn’t want to.

I wanted to.

I didn’t.

He made a butterfly, quick, looping that string around his fingers and then he snapped it away. A cup and a saucer, a star, cat’s whiskers.

“Meow,” he said.

“Do you remember his string tricks?” I asked Davey in the darkness of our bedroom.

“Of course I do,” he said.

“No, you don’t,” I said to ruffle him.

Witch’s hat. Broomstick. Church steeple. Spider’s web.

“Put your hand in, little Lenny,” Peter Lenard Spink said.

I never wanted to. I wanted him to slow down so I could see how he did it.

“I can’t slow down, the magic stops working,” he said. “Put your hand in.”

It was always the last trick. The end of the show. I put my little hand in through the spider's web and he went to catch me, but in one flick the web was gone, leaving just one gaping ring.

"Peter Lenard Spink," I whispered, as though it might stop him from vanishing.

"Stop it," said Davey. "Mama, Lenny's scaring me."

"Go to sleep," she shouted from the living room.

"Peter Lenard Spink," I whispered in a scary voice.

In that letter my mother lied about me.

"Mama, she won't stop it," shouted Davey.

"Don't make me come in there," called Mother from the living room. "Whatever you are doing to scare him, stop it, Lenny. You'll wake Mr. Petersburg."

Mr. Petersburg was our neighbor in number sixteen. We hardly believed he was even real. No noises came from his apartment. None at all. I'd only ever seen him twice in all my years and on those occasions he was tall and pale and wore a suit. Quiet and whispery, he had glided up the stairs like a ghost. That's what I told Davey, who had never seen him.

I liked to remind him.

"Mr. Petersburg the ghost," I whispered.

"I'll tell," he said.

"Let's watch the buses," I said to stop him tattling.

His bed was near the wall but mine was near the window. At night the traffic slowed down but never really stopped. It hummed away below us, punctuated by the garbage trucks and the street sweepers and the truck that delivered fruit to Mr. King's "King of Fruit" Fruit Store. All night the pigeons

cooed on the ledge outside. Davey had named those pigeons Frank, Roger, and Martin. I told him for sure one would be a girl but he didn't agree.

Davey crept into my bed, beside me. We knelt and looked out past Frank and Roger and Martin at the Greyhound bus station across the street. We must have watched a thousand goodbyes from our bedroom window, Davey and I, maybe more. Small farewells and big farewells. Paltry farewells and grand farewells. Some people just couldn't leave a place without everyone they ever knew coming to see them off: aunts and uncles and grandmas with canes and every cousin and friend, girls in good dresses and boys in ironed pants. All the thronging and hugging and kissing and waving that went on. The faces made from the bus windows. The frantic gesturing. Other people just got on. They had nothing but the ticket in their hand. They climbed the steps and didn't look back to wave at anyone.

And we saw countless arrivals too, crumpled weary travelers ejected out onto the night streets. We watched them and wondered about where they were going and where they had been. Some had people come to fetch them, others no one. I searched the faces for him, each and every bus, even if I pretended not to.

"Do you even remember him?"

"Of course I do," said Davey. Up close to me he smelled soapy and clean and his eyes shone.

"No you don't," I said.



There were many interesting things that began with A. Aardvarks and aardwolves, albatrosses and African civets. African civets appealed to Davey in a way we couldn't understand.

"I love those cats," he said, between us in Mother's bed.

"It's not a cat, Davey," I said.

"It looks like a cat," said Davey.

"It's an African civet. It makes musk and they want to catch it and make perfume from it."

"Don't talk about that," said Mother. Her hair was out and her face scrubbed clean. "Please."

She didn't like sad things or hard things or mean things.

"They keep them in cages," she said. "Little wild things kept in cages."

"I'd keep one in a cage," said Davey. "For a pet."

"Hush, Davey," said Mother. "Let's read albatrosses instead."

Davey was sad to see the African civets go.

"Look at these birdies," said Mother. "Albatross," she read. "A sea bird of the order Procellariiformes and the family Diomedidae, closely related to storm petrels and diving petrels."

She spoke these words carefully and with her shining clean face she looked like a girl. Something in the way she spoke about albatrosses quietened Davey. I closed my eyes and listened. I saw storms and birds diving.

"Some albatrosses have wingspans eleven feet across and once the birds fledge some never see the land again for several years."

"Imagine that," she said. "Nothing but flying for years and years."

“Where do they fly to?” I asked.

“Oh, here and there, I expect,” she said. “All over the world.”

“Albatrosses pair for life,” she said and then stopped reading.

She was quiet but her thoughts filled up the room the way they often did.

Peter Lenard Spink did a trick with a coin as well. He twirled a dime between his fingers, then he disappeared it up his sleeve. He brought it back again behind my ear.

“You’re too serious, like your mother,” he once whispered to me.

Maybe if I’d laughed more he might have stayed. Or maybe it was that my hair was too thin. He mentioned it once. He said, “You’ve got that bad Spink hair, Lenny.” He smelled like cigarettes and toothpaste and hair cream.

He smelled like belt buckles and bus stops and newspaper ink. His cough was wet. He spat, spat, spat into our bathroom sink. I was glad he was gone and I wanted him back.

“Davey is asleep,” Mother said at last and closed up albatrosses. “And it’s way past your bedtime.”



My brother would not stop growing. Our mother measured us against the kitchen door frame. Me on one side, my brother opposite. She squished down Davey’s hair with her hand and drew the line in marker pen.

“Davey,” she demanded. “Slow down.”

“But I can’t help it,” he said.

Mrs. Gaspar wheezed into our apartment and sat on our sofa. Her beehive looked untended. It listed. She brought her own tea in a little silver canister and handed it to Mother.

“Stand up please, David,” said Mrs. Gaspar.

We were on the floor looking at the abominable snowman. The abominable snowman was our favourite entry so far in the *Burrell's Build-It-at-Home Encyclopedia*. Two new issues arrived each Friday in the mail and Davey and I rushed down the stairs, bumping each other to get there first, but we returned again and again to the grainy black-and-white image of the abominable snowman.

Davey stood up.

“Yes, it is true, then,” said Mrs. Gaspar. She slumped back into the sofa. “I had a dream last night.”

Mother returned with Mrs. Gaspar's tea.

We loved Mrs. Gaspar's dreams. They were colourful and wild and full of warnings. In her dreams birds spoke and the sea washed into the city streets and Mother got married in a blue wedding dress. Once Mrs. Gaspar even dreamed she went to the moon on Apollo 11. “I flew the spaceship,” she said, and it made us giggle so much, the thought of her sitting in there with Neil and Buzz, in her pom-pom slippers and her shaggy tangerine bathrobe, that even Mother started to laugh as well.

“What did you dream?” asked Davey.

“I dreamed you got taller and taller,” said Mrs. Gaspar.

“Mrs. Gaspar,” pleaded Mother.

“Cyn-thi-a,” pleaded Mrs. Gaspar back.

“You grew and grew until—bang—your head hit up on the ceiling,” she whispered.

“Please,” said Mother. “You’ll scare him.”

We loved Mrs. Gaspar’s dreams but sometimes she went too far.

“I’m not scared,” said Davey. He looked down at his feet.

“Anyway, I’m taking him to see the doctor next week,” said Mother.

“Good,” said Mrs. Gaspar and she took a long sip of her special tea.

I wanted to ask what happened next in the dream, after Davey’s head hit the ceiling. I wanted details. Mrs. Gaspar’s dreams were always lush with details. Clocks that called out her name and secret rooms and white horses thundering through the streets. Dream magical stews made with dream mushrooms she found on dream Second Street. But I knew I’d have to ask her later, when Mother wasn’t there.

“You can sit down, David,” said Mrs. Gaspar, now that she’d caused enough trouble. “What are you two dumplings looking at?”

“The abominable snowman,” said Davey.

“Pah,” said Mrs. Gaspar, and she waved her hand as though we bored her. “I saw him once when I was walking home from school in Hungary.”