



## CHAPTER

## I

Spring is a really big deal here in Boston, let me tell you. After all that snow and ice, the whole city goes a little crazy when the first warm weather shows up. So when my mother checked the thermometer on Sunday afternoon and announced it was time for our Annual Family Spring Walk Through Boston Common, I grabbed my sketchbook—I knew I’d see something interesting.

And I sure did, right away. At the “Make Way for Ducklings” sculpture in the Public Garden, where we always start our walk, I saw my friend

Margaret standing over the last brass duckling. She was wearing big rubber gloves and slopping soapy water on him with a sponge.

“Margaret!” I cried, running to her. “What are you doing?”

Although I knew: Margaret gets extra Margaretty when the weather turns nice. She runs around scrubbing everything in sight until it sparkles, even things that don’t belong to her, like the elevator doors in our lobby and the parking meters on the street.

“Spring cleaning!” Margaret shouted, and somehow she made it sound like “It’s my birthday!” and “Free candy for life!” rolled into one. She went back to scrubbing Quack’s head.

My parents followed my little brother to the edge of the pond, and I sat down beside the ducklings.

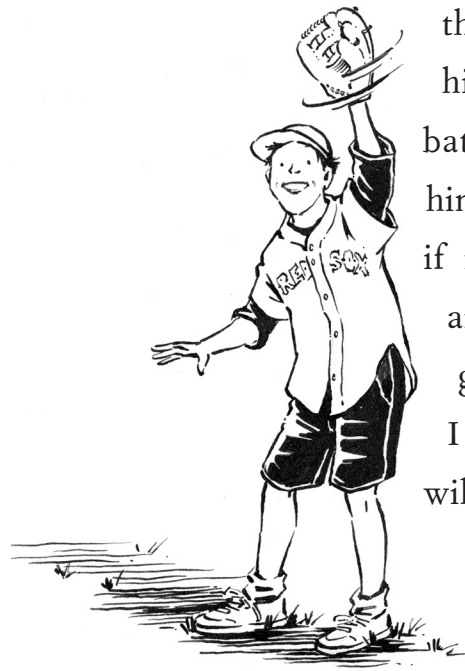
“Your mother’s letting you do this?” I wondered if maybe Margaret’s mother had gone a little crazy with the great weather too. I looked around

for her, because I would like to see Margaret’s mother going a little crazy.

Margaret pointed over her shoulder to a bunch of kids playing catch. “My mother went out to lunch with Alan. Mitchell’s in charge today. He said I could clean anything I wanted here, as long as I didn’t touch his baseball stuff.”

Margaret straightened up and shot a glare at her brother. From the way her fingers were twitching around the sponge, I could tell his rule was making her nuts. “Baseballs are supposed to be white, you know!” she yelled at him.

Mitchell pumped his glove in the air with a big smile, and went back to playing ball. Mitchell acts extra Mitchelly in the spring too. Not because of the weather, but because the Red Sox are back in town. According to Mitchell, the Red Sox are the greatest team in the history of the universe, and it’s just a matter of time before they



ask him to play for them. He carries his new baseball bat around with him everywhere as if it's a third arm, and he's always grinning so hard, I think his cheeks will crack off.

"Never mind," I said to Margaret.

"The ducks

look great, at least."

She looked down at them. "They do, don't they?" she said with a proud smile. "I think Mrs. Mallard must be really happy now. Doesn't it look like she's trying to lead them to the pond? She's probably been wishing all

these years she could just get her kids into the water and give them a nice bath, for heaven's sake."

I thought the story was more about her wanting to find them a home, but I didn't remind Margaret of this. Instead I held up my sketchbook and offered to do a drawing of the statue. "I'll put lots of sparkle rays on the ducklings to show how clean you got them. Maybe I'll put in a cow, too. It could be admiring the ducks."

"A cow?"

I nodded. "Farmers used to bring their cows here to the Common. I'm not even kidding about that, Margaret."

Margaret yelped and checked the bottoms of her shoes with a panicky look on her face.

"Not now," I explained. "In *Ye Olden Times*."

Margaret's face crumpled at the words *Ye Olden Times*. I knew what she was thinking about: our field trip to Plimoth Plantation coming up



on Thursday. She spread a dry rag over Mrs. Mallard's back and sank down with her head in her hands.

"They have dirt floors there, Clementine," she mumbled through her fingers. "We saw a video Friday. *Dirt!* The Pilgrims swept them every morning, as if that would make them less dirty! Those Ye Olden Times people were insane!"

Margaret raised her head and gave me a hopeful look. "Hey! You like getting dirty. You be my

partner on the trip. If we have to touch anything that looks filthy, you do it."

"Oh, all right." I said it in a draggy voice and added a tragedy sigh, although secretly I was happy—I *do* like getting dirty. "But then you have to protect me from the eating-sounds people."

Ever since we had learned that the third and fourth graders were going to have lunch together on the trip, Margaret had been reminding me that the fourth graders didn't allow any eating sounds. Every time I asked her what they did if someone made a noise, she turned white and began to quake, as if the answer was too horrible to say out loud. Which was enough of an answer for me.

Margaret thought about it. "If you make any sounds, there's nothing I can do to save you," she warned. "But I can teach you what to pack for lunch so you can do silent eating. Deal?"

I held out my hand so Margaret could air-shake

it, the way she invented, so she wouldn't feel crawly with germs.

Then Margaret pointed at my sketchbook. "You can do the drawing now. Extra sparkle rays. No cows."

Just as I pulled out my pencils, though, my family came over.

Margaret gave my mother's belly a suspicious look and took a step backward. My mother laughed and told her, "Don't worry. Still a few months to go."

No matter how many times we tell her it won't happen, Margaret acts as if our baby could be born at any second, in a big explosion aiming right at her.

Margaret said, "Oh, phew, good," but I noticed she didn't come any closer. Even when my dad took a picture of her beside the shiny statue, she kept stealing nervous glances at my mom.

My parents took off after my brother again and waved for me to follow. "What are you so worried

about anyway, Margaret?" I asked, as I collected my pencils.

"Babies wear diapers for a reason, you know, Clementine," she answered. "And I don't think they come with one on."

I didn't have a good answer for that, so I patted Mrs. Mallard's head and said good-bye.

It was a pretty good walk. I kept an eye out for cows, in case some farmer realized, *Hey, that was a good idea those historical people had. I'm going to be nice to my cows too, and let them have a stroll through the park!* Boston Common is a lot more interesting now, and I bet the cows would enjoy it even more. And so would I. Cows on swan boats, cows relaxing on benches, cows using Porta-Potties—I would really like to see those things.

I didn't, but there was a lot of other good stuff. We saw some kite fliers, and a woman on a unicycle, and about a million daffodils. Some



workmen were jackhammering up a curbstone, which made my brother so excited he looked like he was being electrocuted. Mostly, though, what we saw were things that seemed to be in a big hurry to get growing. Pink flower buds were bursting out of branches. Neon-green grass blades were zipping up through last year's tired brown stuff. And around each oak tree, dozens of little seedlings were shooting out of the acorns that had dropped in the fall.

And that reminded me: Last fall, I'd planted a couple of apple seeds behind our building. I hadn't checked them since the snow had melted.

As soon as we got home, I went out back to the brick wall I'd built to protect my tree when it grew up. The ground inside was covered with leaves, but when I carefully brushed them away, guess what I found!

A sprout! A real, live sprout with two sets of leaves!



I ran inside. “It’s born! It’s born, it’s born, it’s born!”

My dad shot a worried look at my mom, and my mom clapped her arms over her belly, as if they were both afraid that whoever was in there would

hear me and decide to get itself born now too.

“Who’s born?” they asked.

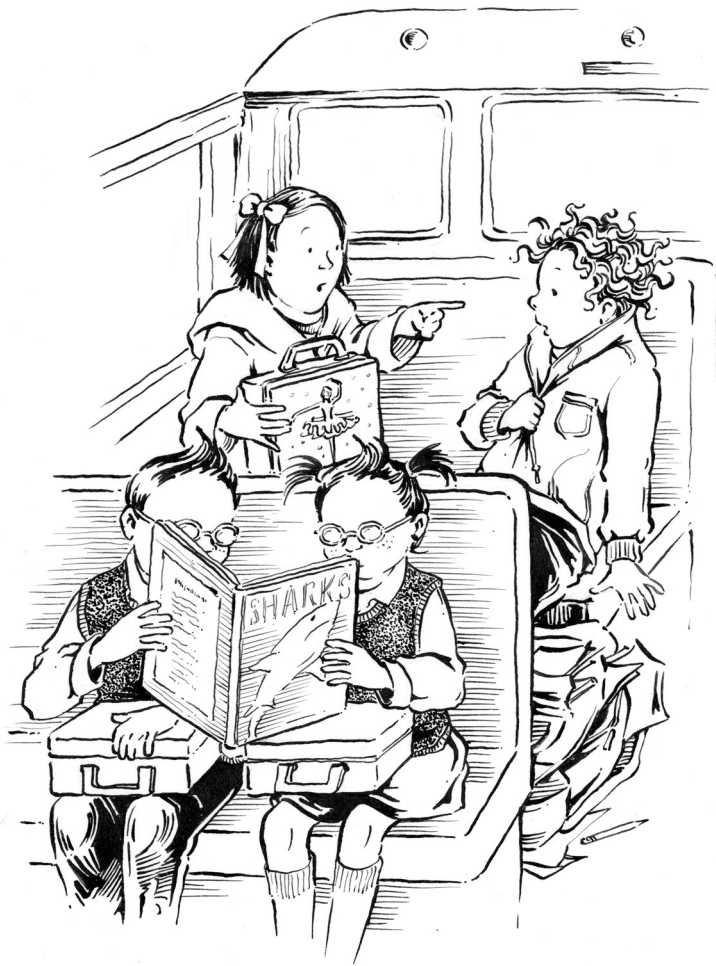
“Not a who,” I said. “Follow me!”

I grabbed my mom’s hand, and she grabbed my dad’s hand, and he scooped my brother off the couch. I led the family parade outside to my brick wall and swept my arms out. “Ta-da!” I cried. “My apple tree is born!”

My family clapped as if I had just performed an amazing magic act. Which, actually, I had.

“I’m going to water it, and take care of it, and it’s going to get really big,” I told them. “And then we can have apples any time we want to.”

I reached up and pretended to pick some fruit, and handed it out. Even Mung Bean got the joke and chomped down on his delicious pretend apple. And although my father insisted he found a worm in his, we all agreed they were the best we had ever eaten in our lives.



CHAPTER

2

As soon as I sat down next to her on the bus Monday morning, Margaret started warning me about silent eating. “No crunching, no smacking, no snicking. No slurping, no gulping, no—”

“Wait. I don’t even know what snicking is,” I interrupted. “How can I figure out how *not* to do it if I don’t know how to *do* it?”

“Snicking happens when you eat something sticky, like peanut butter, and it makes your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth,” Margaret explained. “When you *unstick* it,



that's snicking. So no peanut butter."

"Never mind," I said. "I'll just bring some yogurt."

Margaret bit her bottom lip. "I don't know, Clementine. Yogurt's tricky. It can't be the slurping kind. It has to be the biting kind."

"How about the drinking kind of yogurt?"

Margaret shuddered. "Glugging is the worst sound of all," she said. "It's even worse than slurping. I don't even want to think about what would happen to you if you glugged the drinking kind of yogurt."

She tapped her new ballerina lunch box. "Banana, string cheese, bread. This is what I bring every day for silent eating. Sometimes a cupcake. No frosting, though, of course, because of snicking."

"But you don't like bananas, Margaret. They're too mushy, remember? Plus, they have that gray part at the bottom tip you call the—"

"The mushroom. I know. I hate that." Margaret shrugged.

"And your mother doesn't think that's strange? That you don't like bananas but you ask her to give you one every day?"

"My mother packs my lunch, and then I unpack it and start over. Lately, she doesn't even notice. She's been acting weird. These days all of her sentences start with the word *Alan*. And he's always hanging around, trying to kiss her."

Alan is Margaret's mother's boyfriend. Margaret and Mitchell think Alan would be all right if it weren't for the kissing. "I bet I know what it is," I told Margaret. "Remember in *Bambi*, how in the spring all the animals went a little crazy about their boyfriend or girlfriend? I bet your mother and Alan are just twitterpated with each other. It happened to Rasheed and Maria in my class last week too."

"That's probably it," Margaret agreed. "They'll

probably go back to normal when it's summer. Anyway, it's a good thing, because now I can pack silent-eating food. Plus, I can take as many hand sanitizers as I want."

She opened her lunch box so I could see. A couple of sticks of string cheese and a banana looked as if they were napping on a mattress of hand sanitizer packets. This was a lot, even for Margaret, who uses a hand sanitizer wipe to sterilize the hand-sanitizer-wipe packet before she opens it.

"Hey, wait," I said after I'd thought about that for a minute. "How does that work?"

But Margaret had already snapped shut her ballerina lunch box and was bouncing off the bus.

When I walked into my classroom, I asked my teacher, "Yet?"

Mr. D'Matz shook his head. "Not yet." He tapped his watch. "Any minute now, though. I hope."

We have been doing this every morning for two weeks. My teacher's wife is overdue with their baby. This isn't like having a book overdue at the library, because nobody makes you pay a fine. But it's worse, because waiting is so hard. "Oh, sorry," I said, and then I hung up my jacket.

Instead of doing Quiet Journal Writing, everyone was running around, talking about Thursday this and Thursday that. This is because our school



goes a little crazy in the spring too. We take field trips, as if with all this good weather everybody wants to get O-U-T, *out* of this building.

The school splits up to go on three different field trips, all on the same day. This year, the first and second graders were going to the Aquarium, and the fifth and sixth graders were going to the Museum of Science.

The third and fourth graders were going to Plimoth Plantation. We had been preparing for it all year. In the fall, we raised money by having a talent show and a bike rally. This winter we read so many books and watched so many videos that we became experts about the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Native People. I still had some questions, though.

“So is this a looking place, or a doing place?” I asked as our teacher handed out the field trip permission slips.

“Looking or doing?” he repeated. “What does that mean?”

“Are we going to be *looking* at Ye Olden Times stuff, or *doing* Ye Olden Times stuff?”

My second grade teacher had been nuts about Ye Olden Days *looking* stuff. Let me tell you, I do not ever want to see another calico bonnet in my life. Only one thing last year was a *doing* thing, but even that was a disappointment. Here is the big johnny-cake lesson: *Make pancakes. Eat them without syrup.* That is all, and I am not even kidding.

“Some of both,” Mr. D’Matz answered.

“Okay, I pick the doing things,” I decided right away.

“Me, too!” said Waylon. “I’m on the doing things side.”

“Me, too!” said Willy and Lilly and Rasheed and Maria and Joe and Charlie and everybody else in the class.

Mr. D'Matz laughed. "Well, that's good information, I guess. Lots of hands-on activities for my class. I'll see that our guide gets the message. Now, I need these permission slips back by Wednesday. Plimoth Plantation is an hour away. We'll be leaving right at eight o'clock, so if you walk or get driven to school, make sure you are not late on Thursday."

Maria raised her hand to ask how we were going to get there.

"Buses," our teacher said. "You'll sit with your partner, on the same bus, both ways."

And then I thought of something important. "Which buses?" I asked. "Not Bus Seven, right?"

All at once, kids began to pretend-gag. "The Cloud! Gaaacckkk! Not The Cloud..." kids moaned.



“The Cloud?” Mr. D’Matz asked.

Kids were falling out of their seats now, pretending they were dying from just thinking about how smelly Bus Seven was. Well, all the kids except for Kyla and Charlie. They both put their heads down on their desks. They had to take Bus Seven every day.

I have only taken Bus Seven one time, but one time was enough, let me tell you. If you took all the terrible-smelling things you could think of and mixed them together and let them rot for a good long time, it would smell like roses compared to The Cloud. The smell gets worse with every step you take toward the back of the bus, except that it gets a little better at the very last row, but that might be just because at the very last row you can smell the exhaust. Bus exhaust smells like roses too, compared to The Cloud.

Our teacher raised his hand over his head, and

everyone finally quieted down. “We need to get a lot of work done this week if we’re going to go on a field trip Thursday,” he said. “Please take out your Fraction Blaster packets, and let’s forget about Bus Seven.”

We took out our Fraction Blaster packets, but nobody forgot about Bus Seven.

“I had turtles once,” Joe said as soon as we were out at recess. “When I forgot to clean their tank for a really long time, it smelled like The Cloud.



My mother made me give them away because of that smell. The only people we could find to take them lived in Connecticut,

but my mother said, ‘No problem! We’ll deliver!’  
I bet there are turtles on that bus.”

Charlie shook his head. “No. What it smells like  
is that cheese that smells like feet.”

“No,” said Waylon. “What it smells like is feet  
that smell like that cheese that smells like feet.”

I left my classmates arguing and went over to  
the pine tree in the corner of the playground. All  
that Bus Seven talk had made my nose want to  
smell something good. I sat on the pine needles  
under the tree, taking nice deep sniffs and thinking  
about my apple tree. Someday it would be as big  
as this pine tree. Someday people would sit under  
it and enjoy how nice it smelled, especially in the  
spring when it would be covered with blossoms.

Before I went back to the group, I gathered a  
few pine needles to keep in my pocket in case the  
kids weren’t finished talking about The Cloud.

They weren’t.



“No,” Morris-Boris was saying. “What it smells like is this: If you find cat throw-up lying on the sidewalk on a hot day and you wrap it in one of your socks after you’ve been out playing soccer, and then you accidentally stuff the cat throw-up sock into the chimney of your sister’s dollhouse, and then hide the dollhouse in the back of your closet for six months and then accidentally put it back in your sister’s room . . . that’s what it smells like.”

We all stared at Morris-Boris. I knew everyone was thinking the same thing: Morris-Boris was the nicest person in our whole class, maybe even the whole school.

“You did that? You?” I asked. “You really did that to your sister?”

Now Morris-Boris looked shocked. “Of *course* not!” he said. “I don’t even *have* a sister. I was just saying The Cloud smells like *if* you did all that.”

Just then the recess-is-over bell rang. The kids kept on arguing about the smell as we filed inside.

“No,” Adrian said as he hung up his jacket. “It smells like once, after my dog ate an entire—”

Our teacher held up both his *Stop!* hands. “Okay, okay, that’s enough. I get the picture,” he said. “I’ll send a note along to the bus company, have them look into the problem.”