

GROWING PAINS

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Next-Door Neighbour

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I STAND ON THE BACK STEPS of our new next-door neighbour's house and ring the doorbell. Through the glass of the storm door I see a girl walking down the hallway towards me. When she reaches the storm door, she opens it a crack and presses her face through the opening.

"Hi," she says.

Her shoulder-length brown hair is parted down the middle, and two blue plastic barrettes hold her long bangs back. She has spaghetti sauce around her mouth.

"Are you one of the kids who lives next door?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm Lizzie."

"I'm Tina."

I know that already. My mother went to visit the Paraccis this morning while I was at kindergarten. When I came home at lunchtime my mother told me about them.

"I'm eating," Tina says.

"Oh. I guess I'll go."

She shrugs. "That's okay. You can come in."

The house smells new: of sawdust, and varnish, and linoleum, and rubber-backed carpet. The stairs leading up to the kitchen are still bare wood, just like the stairs in our house when we first moved in. On the kitchen table sits a green glass bowl filled with oranges and yellow pears. Tina takes the chair in front of a plate of rigatoni, and I sit on the chair opposite to her.

Tina picks up her fork. "My mom says there's another kid at your house."

"I have a brother, Fausto."

"How old is he?"

"Ten."

Tina impales three pieces of pasta with her fork and shoves them into her mouth.

"Why do you eat so early?" I ask.

She chews twice and then talks over her food. "My dad comes home at four-thirty."

"Why?"

"He works in construction. They can't work when it starts getting dark."

Her wisdom amazes me. "Why are you eating by yourself?"

"I was out playing when my dad came home, so they ate already. I just warmed this up."

I never make food for myself. Tina has more independence than any girl I know. I wish I was in Grade Two like her.

"We eat at six," I say.

"We don't." She pushes a stack of rigatoni into her mouth. "We eat at four-thirty."

The kitchen table is covered with a clear plastic sheet. Beneath the plastic is a tablecloth with artificial-looking green and orange flowers like a page in a colouring book. We have a plain brown square cloth on our kitchen table.

I'm sitting on the curb in front of my house and looking for rocks in the gutter. A rock catches my attention, and I pick it up out of the dust. It's an orange pebble flecked with black spots and tiny white crystal chips.

"What are you doing, Lizzie?"

I turn around. It's Tina. The spaghetti sauce from yesterday's supper has been cleaned from her face.

"Collecting rocks."

"Rocks?" She looks at the yellow margarine container I'm holding. It's filled with rocks and cloudy water. "Why are you collecting rocks?"

"Because I like them."

My friend Wally introduced me to rock collecting. We usually pick together, but today at school he told me he couldn't because he had to practise piano. Lately we haven't gone as often as we usually do because he has to practise. I got mad at him today

when he told me he couldn't. But I'm not mad now. I can collect rocks by myself.

I stand up and hold out my new pebble in my left hand. "See?"

"It's pretty."

"I put them all in here." I jiggle the margarine container. "Then I take them inside and change the water. I put them in water because they look nicer wet."

She peers into the container. "What do you do with them then?"

"I find out their names. I have a book on nature and it tells all the kinds of rocks."

She points at the pebble in my hand. "What kind of rock is that?"

"Igneous." Once I asked Fausto how to pronounce "igneous," and he looked it up for me in the dictionary. Then I practised until I could say the word perfectly. "It comes from lava. Most of my rocks are igneous. Do you want to see the other ones?"

"No, I can't. I had to stay after school, and my mom's probably wondering where I am. I have to go. You can show me another time. Okay?"

I say goodbye and watch Tina walk up the sidewalk and go around to the back of her house. She seems to like my rocks. No one in my class likes rocks, except for me and Wally. Even Wally seems more interested in piano than in rocks now.

I'm in our backyard reading a book when I hear the ice cream boy ringing his bell. My mother gives me a quarter and I run outside to the street. The ice cream boy has parked his cart by the sidewalk, and he is reaching inside the cart for ice cream. Cathy Castaglioni and Tina are standing there. When I get to the cart, I say hi to them.

"Hi, Lizzie," Tina says.

"Oh, do you know Lizzie?" Cathy asks Tina.

"She came over last week."

The ice cream boy gives Tina a Fudgsicle and he digs into the cart again.

"What are you getting, Cathy?" I ask.

The ice cream boy brings out an orange Popsicle. Cathy takes it and shakes it a little in front of my face. "This."

Cathy goes to the same elementary school we do. She's in Grade One, but she's in a split Grade One and Two class with Tina.

I ask the ice cream boy for a Fudgsicle, and after he gets it for me I give him my quarter. Then he pedals his cart down the street.

"What are you doing now?" I ask.

"Going somewhere," Cathy says. She sucks on her Popsicle, and her lips turn orange.

Tina twists the paper wrapper around her Popsicle stick so that the ice cream doesn't drip on her hands. "To the park."

"Can I come?"

Tina shrugs. "Okay."

Cathy bites off a chunk of her Popsicle. "Ask your mom first."

I run home and tell my mother I'm going to the park with Tina and race out front again. Cathy and Tina have already started walking. I run to catch up with them.

We arrive at the park by the elementary school and sit in a circle on the grass. The grass has already begun to turn yellow. Seagulls strut around the baseball diamonds farther down the field. Tina pulls grass out of the ground and pats the plucked grass into a doughnut shape.

I ask, "What are you doing?"

"Making a nest for the seagulls," Tina says. "In case one of them needs to lay an egg, and it can't find a nest."

Cathy and Tina talk about what they think of Conrad McFee in Grade Three. I don't know who he is. I pull grass out of the ground and start to make a seagull nest.

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I'm walking to the store to buy some candy when I see Tina and Cathy and Tina's cousin Marguerite riding down the street towards me on their bikes. Tina has a new three-speed. The body is painted a deep red. It has a banana seat with a sparkling white cover and shiny handlebars that curve out like two question marks. Tina's old bike was green, and the paint was peeling off.

They slow down when they see me and switch to my side of the street. They stop and put their feet on the curb to balance themselves.

"Hi, Lizzie," Tina says. "Do you want to go bike-riding?"

I don't know how to ride a bike. I've tried to learn, but I can't. My dad tried to teach me, but it's too hard. I can't balance.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Just to the farmer's field."

All the other kids on our street go nearly every day to the edge of the neighbourhood and ride around in the farmer's field. I've never been there.

"I don't know how to ride a bike," I say.

Cathy says, "You don't? How come?"

"I don't know."

"I was six when I learned how to ride a bike," Cathy says.

Tina gives Cathy a look. Then Tina says to me, "Well, you can ride double with me."

The policeman who visits the school every month says riding double is dangerous and against the law. I don't want to break the law. But I want to go.

"Okay," I say.

I sit on the seat of Tina's bike, and Tina stands up on the pedals in front of me. She starts to pedal, and I stick out my legs to the side so they don't get in her way. Tina hunches over the handlebars as we glide down the street. Behind us, Cathy rides her ten-speed and Marguerite her three-speed.

"Wanna race?" Tina shouts at Cathy and Marguerite.

"With her on your bike?" Tina says. "I'll cream you!"

Tina starts to peddle fast, and so do Cathy and Marguerite. But even with me on the bike, Tina is way ahead of them. Maybe she likes to race Cathy with me on the bike to show how fast she is. Tina's good at sports. So is Cathy, or at least Cathy likes to think she is. But Tina's better. I'm not good at sports.

Tina sits on the edge of the seat and we coast down a decline. Her hair is longer than it was when she first moved here, and the wind blows it into my face.

10

I walk to Cathy's house. Cathy has a new puppy, and I want to see it. When I get there, Cathy and Tina are sitting on the front steps, and Cathy is holding the puppy on her knees. I start up the front walk, but an invisible force slows me down, and I stop halfway to the front steps.

"Can I play with your puppy?" I ask.

"I don't know," Cathy says. "It's not good if too many people hold her when she's so young."

I ask, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A girl," Tina says.

"What's her name?"

"Diamond," Cathy says.

Diamond is chubby and black. We used to have a little black dog named Piccolo who died of a bad heart. People used to like to walk by our house, because if Piccolo was outside, he would run up to meet them and lick their knees.

"Plus Cathy's going out pretty soon," Tina says. "So am I. We have the same godmother, and we're going to see her."

I think maybe they're lying. I wonder if they were sitting here, waiting for me to come by, so they can say these things to me and see if I believed them. But it doesn't matter whether I believe them or not.

"Okay," I say.

I walk home.

11

I'm sitting on a bench in the park reading a book on wolves. It's quiet. The sky is cloudy, and the air is damp and chilly, so there are hardly any kids around. I hear the hum of bicycles, and I look up. Three boys on five-speeds whiz past me like dragonflies. They're laughing. I recognize them as boys in Grade Seven, dirty, swearing boys. They probably have nothing better to do than ride bikes, buy junk food at the store, and hang out by arcades like a bunch of bums. I lay my book out flat and hope they see it. Then they'll know I'm too smart to have to go around in gangs.

Tina and Cathy are walking slowly along the cement path towards me. I haven't seen them for a long time, since they're in junior high school now. I lower my head and pretend to read.

"My mom says she was fourteen the first time it happened to her," I hear Tina say.

"Fourteen!" Cathy says. "I'm twelve!"

Tina stops in front of me. "Oh, hi, Lizzie. How's it going?"

"Okay."

Tina and Cathy sit down on the bench next to me.

"What's this?" Cathy lifts my book so she can see the front cover. "*Wolves of North America*." She frowns. "You like wolves?"

"Yeah."

Cathy frowns deeper.

"Want a jujube?" Tina holds out a white paper bag. I reach inside and take a few, two blacks and a red. Tina gives the bag to Cathy and says, "My mom says girls mature faster now."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

Cathy smiles secretively. "Nothing."

"Growing up," Tina says.

At school the nurse talked to all the girls in Grade Five about sex education. My mother tried to talk to me about it, but we were both embarrassed, so we didn't get very far. I knew already anyway from a book I'd read. It was about some kids in a poor neighbourhood who spend their entire lives together. In one scene, the girls talked to each other about sex.

I look down at the two tiny bulges on the front of my shirt. "My breasts hurt," I say to Tina.

Tina looks surprised, and Cathy smiles a little. Finally, Tina says, "I know. It hurt for me, too."

"When does it stop hurting?"

"Grade seven," she says. She looks at Cathy.

Cathy nods. "About then."

We sit in silence for a few seconds. Then Tina gets up and says they have to go. I watch them walk away, and I eat the jujubes. I look at the ground to see if there are any good rocks here.

My mother is taking me to visit Mrs. Paracci because we're moving tomorrow. At the back door my mother rings the doorbell. I stand on the top step and jump off onto the lawn. I used to jump off these stairs all the time while I waited for Tina to come outside when I called on her. The stairs seemed farther away from the ground then. I used to fall down when I landed.

Mrs. Paracci comes and lets us in. We go into the living-room and Mrs. Paracci brings me cookies. I haven't been in this room very often. Most of the time I stood in the back entrance while I waited for Tina, or outside on the back steps. Or usually I would be sitting in the front, reading, and Tina and Cathy would walk past me on the way to the park, and I would join them.

"Where's Tina?" my mother asks.

“Oh, she went somewhere with Cathy,” Mrs. Paracci says. She sits down on the couch opposite me. She’s wearing blue knitted slippers with no socks. The slippers must scratch her feet. “Shopping, at Northgate.”

I think it’s ridiculous that we’re visiting here before we move. We aren’t moving far. Next year I’ll be going to the same junior high school Tina is going to. It’s not like we’re leaving town.

I reach for the plate on the coffee table and take another cookie.

12

The front doorbell rings and I go upstairs to answer it. It’s Amy. We’re going Hallowe’ening together tonight. She’s dressed like a mouse. I hold the door open for her and she comes inside. The sun has just set, and no lights are on upstairs, so everything looks purplish and hazy. I have to move closer to Amy to see her. She is so little, and her short pale hair makes her look like a little girl. I smile at her and ask her how long she can stay Hallowe’ening, and I say I hope she can stay long enough to watch TV together after we’re finished. It’s probably going to be the last time I go Hallowe’ening, and I want it to be fun.

My stomach does a little twirl. I hope she has a good time. I want her to be my friend. This is the first time Amy has been over. If she doesn’t have a good time, she might never come over again.

13

I’m sitting against a tree behind the grandstand at St. Francis School. My school made it to the district finals in track-and-field, and the school bussed everyone to St. Francis to watch. There’s a hamburger stand nearby, and the smell of grease mixed with the warm wet spring air makes me queasy. I hate track-and-field. I can’t do track-and-field because I’m too fat. But my homeroom teacher said everyone had to go unless you had a note from your parents. I didn’t want to ask my dad for a note because I knew he would ask why I didn’t want to go, and I couldn’t tell him.

I look down at the grass. A green caterpillar is dragging itself towards my hand. I stare at it for a long time.

Someone says, “Hi, Lizzie.”

I catch my breath and look up. It’s Cathy Castaglioni.

She smiles down at me, revealing her new braces. "What are you doing here sitting by yourself?"

I shrug.

"Why don't you come sit with us in the stands?"

She's trying to be nice. Why? But she is. "Okay."

I get up and walk behind her to the stands. She stops at the lowest bench where some people I don't know are sitting. They must be from St. Anthony's, where most of the Italians go. There are some Italians at my school, but most go to St. Anthony's. I don't know anyone who goes there.

Cathy sits down, but I stay standing in front of the bench.

"This is Lizzie," Cathy says. "And this," she adds, pointing in turn to the strangers, "is Pat, Diane, Yolanda, Joanne, Rob, and Tony."

They say hi. I smile at them and try to look friendly. Cathy moves over, and I sit next to her on the end of the bench. I look at the track. Some girls are hunched in the starting blocks with their hands pressed hard on the brick-red track. A gun goes off, and the runners jump out of the blocks and run past us.

I see that Tina is one of the runners. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she is wearing black shorts and an orange T-shirt, like everyone else on our school track team. Her hair is sticking straight out behind her as she runs. I haven't seen Tina in a long time. She's going to be out of junior high this summer, and she's going to a different high school than I'll be going to.

The race is over. Tina won. Everyone on the bench claps and cheers her name. Everyone here must know her, besides Cathy and me. Cathy looks at me, smiles, then cheers for Tina again.

Another race starts with a different group of girls.

"Isn't that Carmine's little sister running?" a girl asks.

"Yeah," a black-haired boy answers. "Mirella."

A boy at the end of the bench says, "Carmine's got a new car. A Corvette."

Cathy says, "Mirella's going out with Joe Kravjec."

"Really?" another girl says. "Isn't she going out with that headbanger anymore? Winston, or something?"

I don't know who they are talking about. I stop listening and watch some people in blue sweatsuits stretching out their legs at the edge of the track. I wish I was a little kid, or an animal, so I couldn't understand what everyone on the bench was saying.

After my Physics 20 class I go to the cafeteria and look for a place to sit. I usually go home for lunch because I have a spare afterwards, but it's too cold today to walk home. I scan the cafeteria quickly so that I can avoid eye contact with people I recognize. There are no empty tables. I have to share a table with somebody. I see some people from junior high, Tilda and Judy and Cathy Castaglioni. I feel out of place when I'm with them. But if I have to sit next to someone I don't know, I might as well sit next to them.

When I get to their table, we say hi to each other, and they move their chairs forward so that I can get through to an empty seat. I sit down and take out a sandwich from my lunch bag. They're looking at pictures that Cathy has brought. I look over Judy's shoulder at them. They're pictures of Cathy and her family: her brothers Berto and Louie washing a car, Louie's birthday party, Cathy at a park. Then I see a picture of Tina and Berto at a dance at the Italian hall.

Judy asks, "How long have Berto and Tina been going out now?"

"Five months," Cathy says.

"Wow," Tilda says. "That's a long time."

"She's so pretty," Judy says.

"I know," Cathy says, "she could be a model."

Tina's hair is still long, still light brown, but now it's permed. I didn't know Tina and Berto were going out. But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I'm always the last to know these things. I can't remember the last time I saw Tina in person. Maybe at church, one day, from far away.

"Isn't she pretty?" Cathy says to me.

"Yes," I say.

"She's the prettiest."

I don't know why Cathy is going on about this. I wish I had sat by myself like I usually do. I hate these kinds of discussions. I look at Cathy, and I see that maybe she wishes she were as pretty as Tina, because Cathy is not pretty. She's thinner than me, but not as thin as she used to be.

"Don't you think?" Cathy says again.

"Yes," I say.

I look down at my lap. I start thinking about the exams I have next week.

18

Tina winds through the tables in the Italian hall and chats with the wedding guests, her bridal party trailing behind her. Cathy is holding up Tina's train to make sure it doesn't get tangled in chairs and table legs. I haven't seen Cathy and Tina for a long time. But I still recognize them, of course. For some reason people don't forget faces easily, even if they forget the names of the people those faces belong to, and other details, after a long time has passed.

Tina nears our table. I'm sitting alone here. Out of the corner of my eye I see my parents sitting with some people at another table. Far away, Fausto and his girlfriend pick their way to the bar. I hope someone gets here before Tina does.

No such luck. Tina and Cathy smile at me and ask if I'm enjoying myself. I say yes.

"I can't sit." Tina gestures at the train in Cathy's arms.

"It's a nice dress," I say.

A lock of hair has escaped from the tight, shimmering pile of gelled curls on Tina's head, and she pushes the lock away from her eyes. The tiny white flowers braided into her hair are beginning to flake off.

"So what are you up to these days?" Tina asks.

"I just started university."

"What are you taking?"

"Geology."

"Wow, that's cool," Tina says. "Berto had to take a geology class when he was at university. He said it was a lot of fun."

"It is," I say. I don't ask what they are doing, because I know. All my mother has been talking about lately are the Paracci and Castaglioni families, because this is an important wedding for the Italians in town. Tina has just finished a diploma in business administration and is working at a placement agency. Cathy helps her father in his construction business.

"Things sure have changed since we were kids, huh?" Tina says.

"I know."

"How we all used to live next to each other when we were in elementary school." Tina shakes her head and smiles with forced ruefulness.

Cathy says, "And everyone says you were such a brat, Tina."

Tina laughs. "I know. I was always talking back to the teacher and getting into trouble."

"Such a pest," Cathy says.

"I remember once when we were at the park," Tina says, "and, I don't know what I did exactly, but Lizzie got mad at me, and I had this brand new hat, and she took it off my head and jumped up and down on it."

I smile. I don't remember the incident. I try to imagine what I looked like when I did this, and in my mind I see a little girl jumping up and down on a yellow straw hat and grimacing, her hands curled up into fists. With a shock I realize that the image rings true.

We say nothing for a long time. "Well," Tina says, "I have to go make the rounds. Talk to you later!" Tina moves to the next table, with Cathy following, Tina's train nestled in a shining white heap in her arms.

As they recede from my table, I realize that Tina isn't the same as I remember her. This woman in the wedding dress is so ordinary. Didn't Tina have a mystical glow to her, like embers in the bed of ashes of a dying fire? I sense nothing like that in her now.

We're leaving the reception. It's one o'clock in the morning. We walk through the lobby of the Italian hall, and my mother pauses at the portrait of Tina and Berto set up near the guest-book table.

My mother says, "Tina always looks the same, like a little girl."

I disagree. She doesn't have spaghetti sauce around her mouth.