

POLLY

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'I always get angry when anyone accuses me of lying. Especially when I'm lying.'

SEVENTH CHAPTER

ABOUT ME GETTING A LETTER WITH A HIDDEN POEM AND ABOUT WHAT YOU SHOULD DO
IN THIS WORLD

The next day, when I came home from school, I looked down the street to check if Spike was around. But he wasn't. I waited for a while, then I went inside. There was a folded piece of paper on the doormat. It was a letter.

My dear Polly,

I'm afraid to come over because I don't have a poem. Thing is, for you writing poems isn't hard. But it is for me. I never knew why. Now I do. Do you know the word talent? Talent means something like a knack. Some people are born with this thing called a knack or a talent. For instance, you could have a knack for music or for carpentry.

You have a talent for writing poems. You're a born poet.

When I was your age, I dreamed of becoming a poet. I thought I had talent. But I don't have any talent. I'm sorry Polly, but I'm not a poet.

You want to write poems, I wanted to be a poet. True poets don't want to be poets, true poets want to write poems.

When I was a boy I thought it would be great to be a poet. To live in the big, wide world, where all kinds of exciting things go on. I didn't want to live in a village and be a farmer. I wanted every day to be an adventure. I thought that a poet is a birdlike kind of person. That all he has to do is open his beak and sing. I didn't understand

that writing poems is work. That you have to practice for years first and that only then the poems start coming... if you have talent.

Both of us will have to get used to the fact that I'm not a poet.

But what I am, I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know. Maybe I'm afraid I'm nothing. I'm not saying that so you'll feel sorry for me. I'm a nice guy, I think. But I don't know what I should do in this world.

I hope this letter is good enough instead of a poem.

All the best,

your dad

P.S. Please say thanks to God for me for the clothes. I don't know where he lives.

Spike

I read the letter three times, then folded it up. I already knew I shouldn't always believe Spike. I didn't believe him now either. If he wasn't a poet, then what *was* he? And I'm sure all that stuff about talent was just an excuse.

A talent is something I've never seen

So it's just like God, if you know what I mean

But the letter made me sad anyway. 'I don't know what I should do in this world,' Spike wrote. Jeez! That sure is dumb! Really. What should you do in this world? Easy, just walk and play and learn and laugh and whatever. The question is what you **SHOULDN'T** do in this world. Shoot elephants dead for their tusks, that's something you **SHOULDN'T** do. Turn the light on when there's enough light. You **SHOULDN'T**. Write letters that make people sad. **SHOULDN'T**. There's a whole lot of things you **SHOULDN'T** do. But most things, you **SHOULD** do. So if anyone asks me: 'What should I do in this world? I say: 'Except for a couple of things, just about everything.'

I realized Spike knows that too and that's why I didn't believe him even more. All of a sudden not a poet anymore, huh? I thought angrily. Forget it!

Your head is like a cage

*with a bird inside, so weak
it's afraid to open its beak
because it thinks it sings so bad.
And that makes it very sad.*

You see, Spike? I got this poem from your letter! It was hidden in there, but I found it. It's your poem actually. You just didn't notice it because you have so much on your mind.

And that thing about God is so stupid! Does he think I'm an idiot or something? God doesn't live in a house somewhere! God lives everywhere and nowhere. God is homeless, just like him.

Oops, I can't believe I just wrote that. I didn't know I knew it, you know? That Spike is homeless, I mean. I thought I believed that he was sleeping at a friend's house, but it looks like I didn't believe it. I knew he was homeless before I knew it.

I went out. There was no one around, so I sat down on the curb. It was like in a movie. About a girl who was very sad and who sat down on the curb. The girl was very lonely. She didn't have anyone anymore, except a mother and a grandfather and a grandmother and a boyfriend and a best friend and a homeless father and a calf and a teacher. And anyone who saw that girl, would think: my, oh my, what a sad girl. Maybe we should organize a telethon for that girl. So she can buy a big bag of candy every day. Because we didn't know the girl had already gobbled up a whole bag earlier today.

'Hey, Polly,' I heard. 'Enjoying the curb?'

It was my mom.

Nice! Great! Just what I needed.

She propped her bike against the house. I heard the door open. 'Want a cup of tea?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'Not in the mood.'

'Okay,' she said. 'Enjoy the sit.'

Wham, went the door. And she was gone. You can always count on your mom! She didn't notice anything! Totally nothing! If I'll become a mother one day and I'd see my child sitting on the curb, I'd pick her up and carry her into the house. And then I'd comfort her all day long. If there were a World's Best Mother contest, I'd win it piece of cake.

A bit later, my teacher came. He said: 'Hi Polly.' With a dreary voice, I said: 'Hello, Mr. Woodward.' Then he sat next to me on the curb. He said nothing. He just sat next to me. I thought that was sooo nice of him!

So I thought: maybe it's time for a good talk. I said: 'Mr. Woodward, what should you do in this world?'

The teacher thought for a while. Then he said: 'Your best.'

I couldn't help it. My mouth started smirking all by itself. 'Your best!' Jeez! That kind of answer gets me all annoyish. But I thought: keep your cool, don't get snappy, he means well. I said: 'I know, Mr. Woodward, but I know someone who does his best but he still doesn't know what he should do in this world.'

'Oh,' Mr. Woodward said.

'Like, you're a teacher,' I said. 'Is that what you should do in this world?'

Mr. Woodward sighed. I looked at him and I saw he was giving it some thought. I liked that, because big people usually just say any old thing.

'You do your best,' I said. 'You try to be the best teacher in the world. A famous teacher the emperor of China for instance would come all the way over here to see.'

Mr. Woodward chuckled. 'China doesn't have an emperor anymore,' he said.

'The emperor of Japan, then,' I said.

'Not everyone who does their best becomes famous, Polly,' the teacher said.

'There's nothing wrong with that, your mother for example...'

'No, but,' I said, 'so you do your best and that's what you should do in this world and that's it?'

'Yep, that's it,' Mr. Woodward said.

'Like your dad when he hung out the flag?' I asked.

Mr. Woodward stared ahead and didn't answer.

I don't know why, but I got itchy all over. I started scratching my head like crazy.

'I hope you don't have lice,' Mr. Woodward said. He shifted away from me.

'NO,' I shouted. 'I DON'T HAVE LICE, BUT I DO HAVE AN ITCH.'

He stood up. 'Guess I'll go inside,' he said. 'If you have more questions feel free to ask.'

I nodded.

'Promise you will, Polly?'

‘Yes Mr. Woodward,’ I said. I shifted back and forth on the sidewalk. My rear end was suddenly so itchy!

It was getting hectic, because a bit later Mimoun showed up and sat next to me. He looked at me and said: ‘It’s Spike, huh?’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

He said nothing. For a long time. I thought: come on, say something, and then he started talking, fortunately.

‘Yesterday my dad said: “That Spike, he’s a good guy, in spite of everything.” I asked: “Why” “Well,” my dad said, “when we moved to this street, only one person came up to us. That was Spike. He said: ‘Welcome to the street, can I help?’ Then he helped us move.” My mom and dad never forgot that.’

Mimoun looked at me sideways, but I was scared to look back because I felt sure I’d start to cry. Bah! I’m such a crybaby! I scratched my head like crazy instead.

‘Are you mad at me?’ Mimoun asked.

Boys can be sooo stupid! ‘Course not,’ I said. But I kept looking the other way. ‘Say Mimoun, what do you think you should do in this world?’

He didn’t need to think about it. He said: ‘Work hard so your kids have a better life than you.’

It was a strange answer and I didn’t know what he was talking about.

‘In Morocco My dad went to first, second, third and fourth grade, that’s it,’ Mimoun said. ‘I can learn more and my children can learn even more than that. Maybe they’ll become a doctor or a lawyer.’

Now I got him. But it didn’t really help. It was like I was looking for a totally different answer. ‘You know,’ I said. ‘Without Spike, I would never have become a poet, but he doesn’t know what *he* should do.’

‘Sure he knows what he should do,’ Mimoun said.

‘What?’ I asked nervously, because I really already knew the answer.

‘Quit,’ Mimoun said.

I didn’t say anything, because what’s there to say when someone is so terribly right?

‘You have to tell him,’ Mimoun said.

And there I went! I couldn’t hold it back again. Boohoo! Boohoo!

‘If you don’t tell him,’ Mimoun said, ‘who will?’

‘No one!’ I sniveled. ‘No one in the whole wide world!’

Mimoun took my hand, just like that, in the middle of the street where everyone could see. Lin came out of her house and walked over to us. Mimoun didn’t let go of my hand. Lin stood in front of us.

‘Well, well, well,’ she said. ‘Having a nice cuddle? Did your mommy and daddy give you permission, Mimoun?’

‘Go away,’ Mimoun said.

I pulled my hand out of his. Lin was right. We weren’t being careful. Everyone knew that Mimoun and I were together. Mimoun’s parents weren’t mad about it anymore. But we still had to kind of keep it a secret. When he grows up, Mimoun will get married to a girl who still lives in Morocco. And they’re not supposed to know we’re together over there.

What should you do in this world?

NINTH CHAPTER

ABOUT SILENCE...

‘Dear Lord,’ grandpa prayed, ‘thank you for letting Polly come to us safe and sound from the bus. We pray to you to help her remain the cheerful girl she is, despite all her worries. Amen.’

Grandma coughed and said: ‘I have a prayer too.’

We folded our hands again and we closed our eyes.

‘Dear Lord,’ grandma said. ‘Where are you when we need you? Amen.’

I saw she was trying not to cry. She took her handkerchief and blew her nose. She was sad about Spike, I could see that.

‘Do you have a prayer too?’ grandpa asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

We folded our hands for the third time and closed our eyes.

‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ I prayed,

‘Thou art more lovely and more desperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds away,

And summer's lease has all too short a date

hocus pocus abracadack

I wish Spike would finally back. Amen.'

We opened our eyes and started to eat. I listened to the tapping of the knives and forks against the plates. In the distance, a cow mooed but it wasn't Polly because she sounds different. The clock on the mantelpiece struck once, because it was one o'clock in the afternoon. I thought: 'Is it always so quiet here? Weird that I didn't notice it before.'

'Those were nice words, Polly,' grandpa said.

I was glad someone said something. 'They're from a magic poem,' I said. 'Do you want to know what a magic poem is?'

'Yes,' grandpa said. 'You too, right Marie?'

'Yes,' grandma said. 'I'd like to know.'

'A magic poem has magic powers,' I said. 'If you say it out loud, you sort of float in your head. For instance, if you say *rough winds do shake*, you fly in the sky like in a tornado. When you fly so high in the sky you can see the world much better.'

Grandpa and grandma looked at each other. They look at each other all the time. It's like they're talking to each other without words. I think that's pretty neat.

'Polly, where do you get all that?' grandma asked.

I didn't know how to answer her. I said: 'Dunno, in my head.' I had to say *something*, right?

'You've got a lot of things in your head,' grandpa said.

'Yes, that's true,' I said. Because it's true. I've got so many things in my head I sometimes think it will explode. When I close my eyes I see all kinds of stuff all jumbled up. It's like a big garbage can.

'There's mostly silence in my head,' grandpa said. 'I'm more empty-headed.'

Grandma started laughing. 'William!' she hiccupped. 'That's absolutely not true!'

'There's a wonderful silence in my head,' grandpa said. 'Nothing in there to hassle me like thoughts and heavy stuff like that.'

'Grandpa is just talking nonsense, Polly,' grandma said. 'Sometimes he can't sleep at night because of all his thoughts.'

'No,' grandpa said. 'It's the other way round. Sometimes I can't sleep at night because the silence in my head is so deafening.'

Grandma roared with laughter. ‘Boy oh boy, you sure can talk nonsense!’ she called out.

Then it got quiet again. Outside the house, rough winds shook the leaves. I thought: I’ve never heard grandpa and grandma say so much to each other. If I don’t say anything, it’s usually quiet. I thought: you know what, I won’t say anything for a while, let’s see what happens.

But nothing happened. Grandpa and grandma chewed their sandwiches on and on and the clock ticked.

‘You’re talking without words,’ I said.

‘Uh uh,’ grandpa said. ‘We ran out of things to say years ago.’

‘Oh William!’ grandma said. ‘You’re so funny today.’

‘Listen, Polly,’ grandpa said. ‘We just happen to be quiet. We like hearing you speak, but if you don’t say anything that’s okay too. We don’t mind the silence.’

‘I agree with grandpa,’ grandma said.

I thought about it. I didn’t mind the silence either, but maybe it used to bother Spike when he was still living here. The clock ticked loudly.

‘I talk almost all the time,’ I said. ‘So when it’s quiet I think: whoa, it’s so quiet.’

‘It isn’t quiet,’ grandma said. ‘You can hear the wind.’

I listened. I heard the wind rustling in the trees. The house was creaking.

‘And the clock,’ I said.

‘When the children were still home, I didn’t stop to listen to the silence,’ grandma said, ‘but now I like it.’

We listened to the wind. Silence is a nice sound.

EIGHTH CHAPTER

ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RELAPSE AND RELAX

My mother hasn’t gone to work for three weeks now. She doesn’t want to leave me all by myself. She does volunteer work in an old people’s home. The first week, it felt

really good that she was home all the time. The second week too. But now it's making me kind of nervous. Your mother around you all the time, it's not that great.

I like to stretch out on the couch and lie around and daydream. Or read. Or think up a poem. But now she's there all the time. She was home alone all day, so now she wants to talk. I was at school all day. I don't want to talk at all.

'And? How was school?'

'Okay.'

'Aw, come on, tell me something!'

You see? It's sooo tiring.

So today I said: 'The old people probably miss you, mom.'

'Yes,' she said, 'but I can't go back yet.'

'Why not?'

'Because everyone says you're going to have a *relapse*. And when you do, I want to be there.'

I can't stand that relapse! The doctor started talking about it and now everyone's saying what he said. No one knows what a relapse is, but they're all waiting for it. I hope I get it soon so everybody will start acting normal again. But what if I never get it? Then my mother will never go back to work! Then Mr. Woodward will keep looking at me all day with a worried face. Then Lin won't stop being sticky sweet to me... ieww!!!!!! You want to know what Spike would do if he heard about it? He'd burst out laughing. Seriously. 'You know where you can shove that relapse,' he'd shout. I know for sure! (And I'm saying it nicely.)

'If I get a relapse, I can go to Consuelo,' I said. I shouldn't have said that. My mother looked at me like a um... have you ever seen a statue of Mary? She looked at me like a statue of Mary. She said: 'Consuelo isn't your mother. I'm your mother.'

Oops! That sounded like someone had beaten her up! So I said: 'You're the sweetest and nicest mom in the whole wide world.'

'Fine,' she said. 'So now tell me how school was.'

I let out a deep sigh. Here we go again. For the umpteenth time this week. I told her about exciting exercises and great grammar till I started seeing double. So when I was through, I said: 'I want to go back to Dr. Jenkins.' I could see it startled her. I'm sure she was thinking: oh no, here comes the relapse. 'Sure, Polly, no problem,' she said as calmly as possible. 'I'll make an appointment right away.'

‘Okay,’ I said. I could see she was worried. I felt sorry for her, but I had to do it:
‘But mom...’ I began.

‘Yes?’

‘...I want to go alone this time.’

It was silent for a while. It wasn’t nice for her, I know, but we couldn’t go on living like this, right? Do you see me waiting for a relapse my whole life? ‘That’s fine kiddo,’ she said. She went for the phone, her head all red, and made an appointment.