



◆ “A story that shines with **HONESTY** and **HEART**.”

—PADMA VENKATRAMAN,

Walter Award-winning author of *The Bridge Home*

◆ **M**IDDLE SCHOOL ISN'T EASY FOR AUTUMN after her best friend moves away. Everything feels awkward—talking to new people, sharing a room with her little sister, video chatting with her dad. He left six postcards ago to join the Peace Corps and urged her to be fearless and get involved in one thing at school.

Turns out the school newspaper is looking for someone to be the secret voice of their advice column, “Dear Student.” Could this be her one thing?

Autumn is shocked and excited when she’s selected. She’s also nervous. What if people hate her advice? And when Autumn’s two new friends are on opposite sides of a problem and write to Dear Student for help, Autumn is really stuck. Can she give fair advice to both her friends when they want different things . . . and keep her identity a secret?

◆ “Tweens won’t be able to put down this heartfelt story with a fresh plot, vibrant characters, and even a recipe for whoopie pies.”

—Parents



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YEARLING

Ages 10 and up

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Also available as an ebook and on audio

Dear student

ELLY SWARTZ



A Yearling Book

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TO SCOTT and DANIEL—

Big brothers are the best! I LOVE YOU GUYS!



SIX POSTCARDS AGO

I thought making Dad's famous cheese eggs in our temporary home could make my life feel like it did before he left six postcards ago. Like cheese eggs for breakfast on my first day at Hillview Middle School could make everything feel normal.

But I was wrong. Nothing feels normal.

This morning, Dad video called. Another not-normal thing. I dragged my beanbag over to my computer. He looked like Dad, but not really. He was supertan and his usual short brown Dad-hair was in a ponytail.

I thought he called because he missed me. Because he wanted to wish me luck in sixth grade. But really it

was about seizing the day. He had on his no-kidding face. The same one he had on the day he told me he was joining the Peace Corps. He said he felt this was something he had to do. Something he'd always talked about doing and was finally brave enough to do. Mom said she supported him. But I'm not a hundred percent sure that's still true. Sometimes I hear her crying in her room late at night.

"Autumn, this year I want you to get involved in one thing at school," he said.

I stared at my dad. "Are you seriously parenting me from halfway around the world on my first day of school?"

"Just one thing," he repeated.

"You don't get to do this. You left. Remember?"

"No matter where I live, I'm still your dad."

"Dads don't leave," I said, staring at the cheese eggs I wasn't eating.

"This is temporary," he said, like that makes it better.

I was quiet for a bit. Then I asked, "Why do I have to do one thing? I'm not you. You made your choice. Your one thing. And it wasn't us."

He sighed. Loudly.

"It wasn't me."

"I love you, Autumn. I told you leaving was never about you or Pickle or Mom. It was about finding the

courage to do something that can make a real difference in the world.”

I didn't say anything.

Because what he didn't get was that he didn't have to leave to make a difference.

“Seizing the day will be good for you. I promise.”

I folded my arms across my sloth T-shirt. “What's good for me is having a dad who lives in the same home or state or country,” I said, his latest postcard tucked into my pocket.

“I'm sorry, Autumn.” His voice cracked.

And a sadness settled into my heart.

Because no matter how mad I am that he left, I'm sadder that he's gone. So I inhaled all my unspoken words and said, “Got it. One thing.”

My little sister, Pickle, sneezes, and my brain jolts me back to the nerves climbing up my spine as we walk to our first days of school. It's hot and my hand is sweaty, but Pickle holds on tight. Then I see it. A beautiful baby iguana sitting in the middle of the road. I wipe my sticky forehead and lean in.

“What's he doing here?” she asks, her lime-green cape flying behind her. I made it for her right after Dad left. She told me she was scared of the monsters living under her bed. So I found some fabric in the basement, cut out a cape, and told her it had superpowers

that could squash the scared-in-the-belly feelings that twist in your heart when you're supposed to be sleeping. It doesn't do anything for the feelings that come from being left behind, but I didn't tell her that.

"Not sure. But he has to be lost," I say, tucking the loose strands of brown hair back into my braid. "Iguanas don't live on the Cape."

"Where's his home?" she asks, her pigtails bouncing. Before I can answer, a kid on a bicycle speeds toward us.

"Watch out for—" I yell.

The blue bike brakes.

Tires screech.

Time slows.

But it's too late.

Pickle screams. My braid swings and my orange high-tops slap the hot pavement as I run into the road.

The boy on the blue bike stops. Pickle and I hover over the green iguana. Its long, striped tail is bleeding.

The boy looks at us. "I didn't see him." He's out of breath. His hands fly in the air. "I mean, what's an iguana even doing here?" His face is blotchy red and he smells like peanut butter. "I'm really sorry," he says, staring at his flip-flops.

Pickle hugs my leg and starts to cry.

"Is he yours?" the boy asks me.

I swallow hard. “No,” I say, looking down at my four-legged friend. His body is the color of kiwi, but his eyes are black with the tiniest rim of sunburst yellow.

“Is he going to be okay?” Pickle asks.

I bite my lip. The answer to that is knotted behind the mountain of fear shooting up from my sneakers. But I squeeze my sister’s hand and nod. “Don’t be scared, Pickle. We have your superpowers. Remember, superheroes come in all sizes.” I cross my fingers and hope she believes me. “But now, I need your cape.”

Snot leaks from her button nose as she unties her cape and hands it to me.

“We have to get him to Hillview Vet,” I say, carefully wrapping the iguana in the cape.

“How far is that?” the boy on the bike asks.

“Just a few blocks back that way,” I say, noticing his I LOVE CAPE COD T-shirt. Then I point in the direction we just came from. “Our mom’s the vet there. It’s next to Banana Splitz Ice Cream Shack.”

I hold my breath and hope that sounds normal.

Like something a sixth grader would say.

Not weird. Like something no one would ever say.

“I don’t know where that is. I’m not from here,” he says, pulling down his Washington Wizards cap. “But I’ll follow you.”

I nod and exhale.

Pickle wipes her tears, points to me, and says, “That’s my sister, Autumn, and I’m Gracie, but everyone calls me Pickle.”

Mom nicknamed her that after she ate an entire jar of sour pickles in one sitting. Without puking.

Pickle looks down at the bundle of cape. “What should we name this guy?”

“How about Superman?” I say.