

Shai Stern has always stayed ahead of life's curves—until now.

Thirteen-year-old nonbinary homeschooler Shai is an expert problem-solver. They've always been good at researching solutions and figuring everything out on their own. Well, almost everything. Shai still hasn't been able to logic their way through one thing: picking at the hair on their arms.

Since their mom lost her job, the two had to move in with family friends. Then the world went into lockdown, and Shai's been unable to control their picking. But now, as the difficult times recede and everyone begins to discover their “new normal,” Shai's hoping the stress that caused their picking will end, too—especially if they can create a foolproof plan to completely change their life, like starting public school, making new friends, and diving deeper into their Jewish heritage. But with each change, more surprises come, and Shai begins to realize that no plan is perfect—and that sometimes, the best way forward is with the help of family and friends.

This heartfelt novel will help readers discover that successes and setbacks can go hand in hand and that no path is meant to be traveled alone.

“Shai's tenderhearted first-person voice will keep readers rooting for them until the book's final pages. Moving and memorable.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

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WEEK ONE: MY NEW NORMAL

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 4

Looking back, it's hard to identify when the official first day of my new-normal plan began.

There are a few good contenders.

My new normal could have started the moment I realized I had a problem. (That happened in March.)

Or it could have begun the day I looked for ways to solve it. (Back in April.)

I grabbed my laptop that day, opened the browser, and clicked tab

after

tab

after

tab...

Okay, you get the idea.

I did lots of research
until I found the perfect solution:
a blog post that said creating a new normal
could fix almost any problem.

Then again,
Day One could've started when I created my plan.
Or a few weeks later when I checked off the first
to-do item.

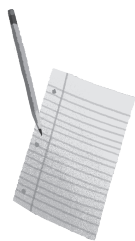
Each one of those moments was very important.

Then Mom got a phone call yesterday,
the last Sunday before school starts back up.

Now I think I've found the winner.

Because that phone call feels like
it changes everything for me.

And if that doesn't count as the best contender,
I honestly don't know what does.



CHAPTER ONE

DAY ONE OF MY new normal began on the Sunday before I started my first-ever day of public school.

I was getting my hair cut when Mom entered the salon. My best friend, Mille, and his older brother, Thomas, barreled in after her.

Blond strands of my hair fluttered to the floor under my chair. Behind me, the razor clicked off, signaling Thierry, the salon owner, was finished.

Thierry was also Mille and Thomas's father. His voice was deep and warm as he greeted them, like a cozy fire on a cold day in winter. "Welcome back, mes beaux fils!" he said. "How was your flight?"

Without my glasses on, the boys were a bit fuzzy around the edges. Although they both had brown hair and skin, they

were easy to tell apart. Thomas was a whole head taller than Mille, and his hair was shaved short. Mille's hair was longer, a mess of cowlicks that bounced with every movement.

My stomach swooped. This was my first time seeing Mille all month—and it was his first time ever seeing my new haircut.

“It was fine.” Mille brushed his hair out of his eyes as he made his way over to me.

“What he said.” Thomas dropped into the chair a few seats from mine while Mom sifted through her purse across the room. Panes of plexiglass separated me and Thomas. They rose from the floor, creating see-through barriers between each chair. They weren't needed anymore, but at some point, Thierry must've decided it'd be simpler to keep them up than take them down.

Mille stopped beside me. We exchanged half smiles, expressions you'd give a stranger you were being polite to. It felt like we knew each other but also sort of didn't every time Mille got back from Canada, where he and Thomas visited their grandparents and attended a summer camp for Indigenous kids.

I automatically reached for one of my arm sleeves, fabric that wrapped around my forearms but wasn't attached to my shirt. I rubbed the elastic band around my wrist as my gaze shifted to Mom. She had her phone up to her ear, like she was listening to a voice mail.

“How was camp?” I asked Mille.

“Good. I met some new kids, plus I saw a cool beadwork design I want to re-create as part of a T-shirt.”

I'd never been to Canada, had barely ever traveled outside of Wisconsin. But Mom promised that would change someday. If I worked hard and earned good grades, I could get into a great college out of state, if that was what I wanted. And it was. But college was still years away, since I was only thirteen and about to start eighth grade. Until then, I just had Mille and his stories of Canada and camp, plus postcards from my grandparents whenever they went on trips.

“It sounds like you had a good time,” Thierry said, joining the conversation from over my shoulder.

“Yeah.” Mille glanced under my chair, then back up at me. “You’re cutting your hair. Like, a lot of it.”

“Yep.” I slid my hand away from my sleeve, groping around for the edge of the cape. Once my arm was free, I lifted my hair away from one ear.

“Ooh, it’s an undercut.”

Thierry had given me my first undercut a month ago, so this was technically a touch-up. But Mille hadn’t been here to see that one. My haircut felt new again as he studied it.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Um, no.”

A lump formed in my throat. But the corners of Mille’s mouth quivered. His serious expression turned into a grin.

“I don’t like it, I *love* it.” He twisted around as relief washed over me. “Thomas, did you see?”

A few chairs over, Thomas glanced up from his phone. He nodded, then looked down again. Apparently, my haircut wasn’t all that interesting to a soon-to-be tenth grader.

My fingers returned to the band on my electric-blue arm sleeve. It was so very Mille to joke around like this, but it had also been over a month since we’d seen each other. I guess I needed a little more time to readjust to his sense of humor.

“No, seriously. It’s awesome.” Mille turned back to me. “Tons of influencers have this style.”

“I assume that means it’s fashionable,” Mom said.

We looked up as she approached. Thierry stepped out from behind my chair. He kissed one of Mom’s cheeks and then the other, just like they do to say hi in France, according to my research. (They also do this in Quebec, where the Martel family is from.)

“Thanks for picking up the boys,” Thierry said to Mom. “This week is always busy with Labor Day and the back-to-school rush. But it’s been even more hectic because Mira is still on vacation.” Mira was the other stylist at Thierry’s salon. “Things only calmed down enough to work on Shai here a few minutes ago. They’ve been very patient with me today.”

They. It was a simple word, but it still sounded new and beautiful to me. Every time Mom, my grandparents, or one of

the Martels used *they* or *them* or *their* pronouns to talk about me, it made my heart swell. They were the only people I had come out to so far, but that would change soon.

Because being true to myself and swapping home school for public school were both parts of my plan to create a new normal for myself.

Not that Mom or Mille or anyone else knew about that.

“You’re very welcome.” Mom smiled at Thierry. “Happy to help.”

I held still as Thierry stepped back behind me. Under my cape, I had on ordinary summer clothes: shorts and a tank top. But I was also wearing my special arm sleeves, which covered both of my arms from wrist to elbow. They concealed my sore, blotchy skin—a result of my picking.

I wasn’t doing it on purpose, but I couldn’t figure out how to stop, either. At least not at first. All I knew was that at some point after Mom lost her job, right around the time Thierry invited Mom and me to move in with his family to help save money, I’d started picking the hair on my arms.

And that wasn’t okay.

I was going to fix this, though. By creating a new normal, everything would reset.

My plan consisted of the following to-do items, organized by season:

1. Spring: Come out as nonbinary (genderfluid).
2. Summer: Get a haircut that expresses who I am.
3. Fall: Attend public school instead of being homeschooled.
 - a. Make friends.
 - b. Excel in classes.
4. Winter (or sooner): No more arm sleeves—or picking!

The list looked simple, but it'd taken me weeks to create—and even longer to check off any items. Some, like attending public school, had required lots of planning. Convincing Mom had sort of felt like writing an essay where I had to lay out all the evidence to support my argument. Mom used to homeschool me herself, along with Mille and Thomas, but she'd switched us to online classes last year because of her work. Mille and Thomas hadn't seemed to mind, but I missed spending time with her. If I was going to be taught by a different teacher, I'd rather it be in person than over a computer. Plus, public school had a routine, with classes at specific times every day, which I hoped would help with my picking.

Now things were falling into place nicely. Mille was back, and we still had a whole day to hang out and get things feeling more normal between us before school started.

The razor clicked back on. Mom's ponytail danced as she

took a step back. She'd once told me her hair used to be the same shade of white-blond as mine when she was a kid. Now it was light brown, making me wonder if that was how my hair would look when I got older.

Mille inched closer to me. Normally, he was a bit of a chatter-box, so I expected him to talk my ear off now, telling me stuff like how my hairstyle was super in according to the latest fashion blog, a perfect new look for my new school, and so on.

The moment I thought about school, a spark of excitement ignited inside me. I only had one more day before I started eighth grade. Labor Day was tomorrow, then classes began at Shoreline Middle School on Tuesday.

But Mille didn't say any of that. He didn't say anything at all. Our eyes met, then darted away, like they were playing a game of tag. As the razor kept buzzing, my spark fizzled out. I rubbed my arm sleeve as Mille shifted his weight between his feet.

Eventually, Thierry shut off the razor. "Tout fini!"

He passed me a handheld mirror and twirled my chair so I could see my hair from every angle. I squinted. Mille reached toward the counter, then passed me my glasses.

The top layer of hair was even shorter than it had been after my first haircut, falling just at my shoulders. Thierry's fingers tickled my ear as they brushed my hair away from my face. Underneath, the sides and back of my head were shaved short.

Something welled up inside me. A happy kind of teary. That was what Mom called it whenever she cried at the end of her favorite movies. I tilted my head from side to side, enjoying the way the top layer swished over the pricklier hidden layer. Then my eyes snagged on the phone that was still in Mom's hand.

"Did Grandpa and Nan call?"

"Oh, no, it was actually Shoreline's principal," Mom said. "She left a message while I was driving."

Something squirmed in my stomach. "Why would she call on the weekend?"

"I'm not sure." Mom's brows pinched together. "She asked me to call her back today, so I should probably go do that."

"Feel free to use the back office," Thierry said as he unsnapped my cape.

I hopped up fast. The bright blue fabric on my arms stood out in Thierry's salon, with all its maroon chairs and dark wooden wall panels.

"Hey." I spoke to Mille, but my eyes followed Mom as she headed toward Thierry's office. "I wanted to ask you about making me more sleeves, but—"

"—you want to know what's up with the principal first." It was sort of our thing to finish each other's sentences, a sign that even though things felt a bit awkward now, we were still best friends. The weirdness would melt away soon.

I nodded.

Mille waved me off. I reached the office right as Mom was about to close the door. She paused and looked down at me.

“Can I listen to the call?” I asked.

Mom considered. “I don’t see why not, if Principal Olsen is okay with it.”

She pushed the door open so I could slip in. While Mom took a seat in Thierry’s office chair, I perched on the edge of his desktop, legs swinging.

She lifted the phone to her ear.

“Principal Olsen? Yes, hi. This is Hannah Stern, Shai’s mom...” Mom listened to a response I couldn’t hear. “Actually, Shai is with me now. Is it all right if I put you on speakerphone?”

A moment later, Mom set her phone on the desk between us.

“Hello, Shai.” Principal Olsen’s voice made me sit up a little straighter. “I hope you’ve been having a nice summer. We’re all excited to have you joining us at SMS next week.”

“I’m excited, too.”

I continued to swing my legs as Mom and Principal Olsen made small talk about stuff like the weather and next weekend’s Min-Autumn Festival. I tuned them out, trying to imagine what my first day of school would be like. Just one more day, and then I would be walking the halls with hundreds of other sixth through ninth graders. I’d be taking classes with a bunch of kids, some who I knew from around town and others I didn’t. I wondered what they’d think about my new haircut. Or about me.

Excitement buzzed through my arms and legs, along with a hint of nerves.

“The reason I wanted to speak with you,” Principal Olsen said, pulling me out of my thoughts, “is because I hoped to discuss Shai’s academic preparedness for eighth grade.”

My legs stopped swinging.

“We evaluated Shai’s home-school records and placement tests when you first reached out about enrollment, of course. That’s standard procedure whenever we register a new student. This past week, however, we took an even closer look.”

I held my breath. Was she saying my records weren’t good enough? Did they think I should repeat seventh grade?

Mom stayed quiet, probably as confused as I was.

“I should’ve reached out sooner.” Principal Olsen sounded apologetic. “In all honesty, this was a bit of an oversight. There’s been quite a lot of prep work to ensure everyone is ready to resume in-person teaching after last year’s virtual classes.”

“I imagine that must be quite overwhelming,” Mom said.

My fingers slid under one of my arm sleeves, wanting to pick. I caught myself and gripped the edge of the desk with both hands instead, thoughts spiraling.

This couldn’t be happening. I’d completed all my school-work last year. I checked Mille’s work, too, sometimes and helped Thomas research a few things, even though he was two years ahead of me.

Principal Olsen continued talking, oblivious to my panicky thoughts. “That’s why we only went through the process of confirming Shai is at an appropriate academic level to thrive in eighth grade, rather than evaluating anything beyond that. Otherwise, we certainly would have called you sooner. I truly apologize.”

Wait, what was she saying now?

Mom’s expression clouded, like she was even more confused, too.

“I’m not quite sure I understand,” Mom said slowly. “Are you saying Shai isn’t academically ready for eighth grade? Because if so, I find that really hard to believe.”

There was a pause over the line. Then a quiet laugh from Principal Olsen. “No, no, not at all. I’m sorry to have given you that impression.”

I exhaled, relaxing a little. I wasn’t getting held back. Maybe Principal Olsen was going to suggest bonus work on top of my honors classes. That was something I could handle.

Principal Olsen cleared her throat. “What I was trying to explain—and got a little sidetracked, I’m afraid—is that we took a closer look at the coursework Shai has already completed.”

Another pause.

“Ultimately, we believe Shai would be better suited to attend Shoreline as a ninth grader.”