

The background is a vibrant yellow, densely populated with small, scattered triangles in shades of orange, red, and teal. Interspersed among these triangles are several small, solid blue hearts. The overall aesthetic is playful and energetic.

SOMETIMES THE ONLY THING
STANDING IN YOUR WAY
IS YOU

TREMENDOUS THINGS

SUSIN NIELSEN
AUTHOR OF WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES

Other books by Susin Nielsen

PRAISE FOR *NO FIXED ADDRESS*

'Susin Nielsen is an amazing writer.
No Fixed Address is my book of the year'

Hilary McKay

'Susin Nielsen is the finest voice currently writing YA. Not many writers can put comedy and heartbreak in the same book, never mind the same page, but Susin does it effortlessly'

Phil Earle

'*No Fixed Address* tackles tough issues with endless humour and hope. A beautiful book'

Maximum Pop

'Susin Nielsen is warm, funny and doesn't write like anyone else'

Charlotte Eyre, *The Bookseller*

'*No Fixed Address* is another triumph from one of my absolute favourite writers'

Katie Clapham, *Storytellers, Inc.*

PRAISE FOR *WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES*

'A book to fortify readers against bullies and homophobes'

Sunday Times

'One to make you laugh, cry and read in one sitting'

The Bookseller

'Snappy and witty. A really fine YA novel'

Telegraph

'This is stellar, top-notch stuff'

Quill and Quire, starred review

'Unputdownable'

INIS

PRAISE FOR *OPTIMISTS DIE FIRST*

'Hilarious, heart-warming and beautifully unexpected – a real keeper'

Lisa Williamson

'Susin Nielsen has produced a richly comic story featuring
a cast of mismatched, engaging characters'

Guardian

'Entertaining but also poignant'

Irish Times

'*Optimists Die First* is both funny and heartbreaking.
Fans of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* will love it'

Red Magazine

PRAISE FOR *THE RELUCTANT JOURNAL OF HENRY K. LARSEN*

WINNER OF THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S LITERARY AWARD,
THE UKLA AWARD AND THE CANADIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S
CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR

'A realistic, poignant portrait of one teen who overcomes nearly
unbearable feelings of grief and guilt'

Kirkus

'A fantastic narrator, authentic and endearing . . . a memorable
read for all the right reasons'

BookTrust

PRAISE FOR *WORD NERD*

'Ingenious and warm-hearted, Nielsen's writing boasts
believable, unpredictable characterisation'

Guardian

'Ambrose Bukowski is the titular nerd and it's in his delightful,
disarming voice that *Word Nerd* unfolds . . . a funny, wry tale'

Globe and Mail

**TREMENDOUS
THINGS**

TREMENDOUS THINGS

A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2021 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Susin Nielsen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Susin Nielsen, 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 83913 061 8
Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 83913 088 5

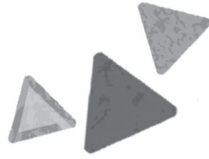
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

To every one of you who march to
your own beat: 'You are terrific.
Radiant. Some human being!'



THEN





The Mumps believe that we all have a handful of Defining Moments in our lives.

Their Number One Defining Moment was the night they met each other, sixteen years ago, at a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Vancouver. Dr. Frank-N-Furter had just declared, ‘A toast!’ Mum threw her piece of toast at the screen and hit Mup in the back of the head. The rest, as they say, is history. They’ve been madly in love ever since. It has a happy ending, which I think we can all agree is the best kind of story.

My Number One Defining Moment doesn’t have a happy ending.

In fact, it hasn’t even ended.

The moment in question happened two and a half years ago, on my first day of seventh grade. We’d recently moved to Toronto, so it was also a brand-new school.

Oh, and it was also my first school ever.

Aside from a disastrous few weeks in kindergarten, I’d been homeschooled my whole life. But when we moved

from Vancouver to Toronto, we made a family decision: it was time for me to get educated, and socialised, in an actual brick-and-mortar building filled with actual flesh-and-blood kids.

Mum and Mup – collectively known as the Mumps – walked me to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School that first morning in September. They hugged and kissed me and cried a little right out front as all the other kids streamed past, which now that I think about it probably wasn't the best optics.

What I remember most about entering that massive, old redbrick building for the first time was the noise. I'd been around other kids before, obviously; I'd had frequent outings and get-togethers with other homeschooled kids. But we're talking ten to fifteen kids at a time, tops. The halls of PET Junior School were packed, with *hundreds* of kids shouting, laughing, banging locker doors, running, even though there were signs telling them to walk. My first instinct was to turn around and march right back out. But I thought of what Mup had said the night before, when I couldn't sleep: 'Remember, Wil: new beginnings bring new experiences.'

So I kept moving.

My pits were dripping with fear-sweat by the time I found my classroom. Our teacher, Mr Markowitz, stood by his desk. I can still picture him in his brown suit, the shoulders dusted with dandruff. He gave us an assignment.

‘Write a letter to yourself. Describe who you are today. Then write a list of goals you hope to achieve by the time you graduate high school. Place your letter in the envelope provided, write your name on the front, and seal it. The letters will be locked into the school’s time capsule. And remember,’ he continued, ‘you can be completely honest. These letters are for your eyes only. They will be returned to you, still sealed, six years from now, on graduation day.’

I was determined to do exactly as I was told.

So I was completely honest.

After school, Mr Markowitz carried the sealed letters from our classroom to the time capsule, which wasn’t really a time capsule at all but the safe in the principal’s office. It was a short walk from our homeroom, down a flight of stairs and to the left.

But at the top of the staircase, according to a reliable eyewitness, Mr Markowitz stopped to scratch his balls.

This had a ring of truth to it, because as we learned that year, Mr Markowitz scratched his balls a lot. He did it so much, a rumour spread that he had pubic lice.

While he scratched, one letter fluttered, unseen, to the ground.

Mine.

Time Capsule Letter, Graduating Class of 2025

Name: Wilbur Alberto Nuñez-Knopf

Age: 11 and $\frac{3}{4}$

Describe Yourself As You Are Today: I am five feet four inches tall. Farah, one of my homeschool friends in Vancouver, told me I could play a young Marty Feldman if they ever made a biopic about him, which I thought was a compliment until we watched *Young Frankenstein*. Farah also nicknamed me 'Blubber' because a) I'm chubby, and b) I cry a lot. The Mumps keep saying that a) it's baby fat and I'll have a growth spurt soon, and b) there is no shame in crying and the world needs more sensitive men. They also keep saying I'll grow into my looks. I hope they're right.

I also hope that if I grow taller, Jeremiah grows with me, because right now he's the size of a tadpole. And I hope I can learn to control him better, because recently he's started popping up at embarrassing moments for no reason. Like right now. I've had to put a textbook over my lap.

What else can I say about me? I want to be a writer when I grow up. I write a lot!! Mostly short stories about dinosaurs and outer space. Boy, I can get really lost in my make-believe worlds, which is good because we just

moved to Toronto a month ago and I have a total of zero friends! I'm dying to get a pet, but the Mumps say I have to wait. I had a cat named Snickerdoodle in Vancouver, but he didn't come home one day. The Mumps said he probably found another family.

Farah said he probably got eaten by a coyote.

Goals You Would Like to Achieve by the Time You Graduate:

- 1) Grow taller.
- 2) Grow Jeremiah.
- 3) Learn to control Jeremiah.
- 4) Cry less! It may be good for men to show their feelings, but if I cry one more time at that SPCA animal shelter ad with Sarah McLachlan singing I will punch myself in the face - just thinking of it right now is making me tear up.
- 5) Make friends! I didn't have a tonne of friends in Vancouver except for Stewart Inkster, and once in a while another homeschooler like Farah. The Mumps keep saying they are my friends, but they are also my mothers, so I'm not sure they count.
- 6) Publish some of my writing! I know this is a long shot before the end of high school, and I also know every artist has to suffer some rejection, but as Mup says, 'Every dream begins with a dreamer.'

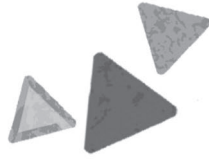
7) Have a Loving and Mutually Respectful Relationship (™ Mumps) with a special girl. Fall in love! And maybe, just maybe, once we are deeply in love, I could feel one of her boobs. Or both. But only with her Enthusiastic Consent (™ Mumps)!

8) Last but definitely not least: learn to be my best self. Try not to be so timid and nervous all the time. Be more willing and able to try new things. Put myself out there. Be confident and brave.

Like Mup says: 'He who takes no chances wins nothing!'

Signed,

Wilbur Alberto Nuñez-Knopf



At first I thought I was imagining things when I showed up at school the next day. Surely every single kid wasn't *actually* staring at me.

I was not imagining things.

Someone had opened my letter – *my personal, private letter* – and taken photos of it. Then that person had posted it on every social media platform known to personkind, where it had been liked by and shared with every single kid at my new school and beyond.

By ten a.m. I was hiding in the nurse's office, crying worse than I ever had during the SPCA ad.

By eleven a.m. the Mumps had been called in for an emergency meeting. I guess the principal decided I couldn't be more humiliated than I already was, because she let them read my letter off *her* phone. She assured them that the school would find the guilty party and they would be dealt with.

On the drive home I was still crying a lot, so Mum sat in the back with me and held my hand. She'd come straight

from the set of *Where There's a Wolf*, and she was in full special effects make-up; her hand was hairy. 'This isn't the end of the world, peanut. It may feel like it right now, but you will rise above it.'

'Mum's right,' Mup replied, peering at me through the rearview mirror of our new Hyundai. 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.'

I let out a sob. Mum pulled me toward her, and I felt her hairy cheeks. 'For what it's worth, I thought it was a lovely letter. Honest and to the point.'

'And trust us, there is not a boy in your class who hasn't suffered the indignities of a spontaneous erection,' Mup added from the front as I slouched even lower in my seat.

Mum stroked my hair. 'We do have one tiny bone to pick with you, peanut.'

Oh, no.

'Did you really have to use the word *boobs*? We've been so careful to teach you the anatomically correct names for body parts.'

'Ditto *Jeremiah*. It was cute when you were young, but I'm not sure it's still age-appropriate or healthy to be anthropomorphising your penis.' Mup sighed. 'I blame myself for playing 'Joy to the World' a lot when you were little.'

It was true that I'd lifted the name from the song, because Jeremiah looked like a bullfrog. And he was a good friend of mine.

‘To be clear, Wil: you want to feel a girl’s *breasts*,’ said Mum. ‘And you want a bigger *penis*.’ She smiled, revealing sharp, pointy werewolf teeth.

In case it isn’t obvious, I am an only child.



The Mumps did their best to stay upbeat that evening. They even pulled out the karaoke machine and tried to nudge me into singing ‘I Will Survive’ by Gloria Gaynor. (I refused.)

Later that night, though, I made a trip to the bathroom to pee, and I overheard them talking in their bedroom.

Mum: ‘I knew that school was a bad idea.’

Mup: ‘Norah, come on. How could you possibly know?’

Mum: ‘For the same reasons we chose to homeschool him, Carmen. One, he’s a preemie. Two, he’s young for his school year. And three – well, he’s not exactly socially adept, is he? Remember kindergarten? He cried every single day for three weeks until we finally pulled him out.’

Mup: ‘And maybe, if we’d left him in for a fourth week, he’d have stopped crying and started fitting in.’

Even though I couldn’t see them, I could feel the icy chill in Mum’s silence.

Mum: ‘I just want to do what’s best for our boy. And that school isn’t it.’

Mup: ‘Darling Norah. I think we can both agree that our boy needs to learn how to navigate this big, crazy world we

live in. Besides, what are our options? We can't homeschool him, not with your new gig and my work schedule.'

Mum: 'We could look into private school.'

Mup: 'And how on earth would we pay for it?'

Silence. Then:

Mum: 'My heart breaks for him.'

Mup: 'I know. Mine does, too. But let's give it a few days. I'm sure they'll find the person responsible, and when they do—'

Mum: 'We can string them up by their feet and pluck out their eyeballs with a spoon, then slowly disembowel them with a rusty old knife—'

Mup: 'Ooh, you are such a Mama Bear.' Then it grew silent again but this time I was pretty sure they were kissing. So I went back to bed and I tried to push all the bad thoughts out of my brain. I imagined instead that I was in the barn with the other animals in *Charlotte's Web*, because it was my favourite story of all time, and after a while it worked, and I fell asleep.



The school found the culprit almost immediately. Poppy, a girl in my grade, told the principal that after Mr Markowitz dropped the letter, she'd seen Tyler Kertz pick it up.

I'd had exactly one interaction with Tyler, when I'd sat beside him in homeroom. 'Nice hat,' he'd said.

‘Thanks. It’s a Tilley original.’ Then: ‘I’m Wilbur Nuñez-Knopf.’ I held out my hand.

He didn’t take it. ‘Do you have a condition or something?’

‘What?’

‘Your eyes. They bulge.’

‘N-n-no. They’re just my eyes—’

‘You look like a frog. Or a pug.’

Then Mr Markowitz entered, and that was that.

In spite of that – or maybe *because* of it? – when Tyler saw my name on the envelope, he didn’t simply hand it back to Mr Markowitz. He opened it, read it – then decided everyone else should read it, too.

When he was asked to explain himself, he told the principal that he’d done it ‘for a laugh’. He hadn’t meant any harm.

Kertz got a week’s suspension, and he had to write me a letter of apology.

Me?

I was sentenced to an eternity in hell.

Helpless. My life in free fall . . .

My inner thoughts revealed to all



From 'No Parachute' by Wilbur Nuñez-Knopf

'Time heals all wounds,' Mup likes to say. 'And time wounds all heels.' I love Mup with all my heart. But some of her platitudes are a total crock.

After Tyler Kertz was suspended, we had one of our Family Dialogues. 'We think you should try to stick it out for a bit,' Mup said. 'Running away from your problems is a race you'll never win.' Mum emitted a strangled sound, and Mup took her hand and gripped it, hard. I was pretty sure they had a difference of opinion but had agreed to present a united front.

'Just one month, pickle,' Mum said. 'If things don't get better after that, we'll get you out.' She made it sound like a jailbreak.

So I kept going to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School.
And it was a nightmare.

The cracks about Jeremiah were endless. Some kids tried to get me to cry on purpose, and I'm ashamed to admit they sometimes succeeded. Worse, nobody called me Wilbur any more. I had a new nickname. None of us – not me, not

Mum or Mup – had ever noticed the acronym my initials made: *W. A. N. K.*

I hated going to school. I made up my mind that when the month was up, I would tell the Mumps I wanted out.

Then, just before the end of September, we were buried in an avalanche of bad luck.



Mup came home from work one day looking shaken. ‘I was replaced by a robot.’ She worked full-time at a grocery store as a cashier. They’d recently installed a bunch of self-serve checkout kiosks; since Mup was last in, she was first out. A few days later, Mum’s TV show – her first starring gig, the whole reason we’d moved to Toronto – went up in flames. *Where There’s a Wolf* starred Jennica Valentine and my mum, Norah Knopf, as leaders of a pack of female werewolves. But just two weeks into shooting, the producer was arrested for something called money laundering, and production shut down.

The Mumps scrambled to get jobs, any jobs. I heard them talking late at night; they were terrified we might lose the house we’d recently bought in the heart of Kensington Market. ‘We counted our chickens before they hatched,’ said Mup.

They were Stressed with a capital *S*.

So when the time came to have our family dialogue

about school, I just said, ‘It’s fine. I’m good. School’s good.’ And all the little muscles in their faces relaxed, and I knew it was a huge relief, having one less thing to worry about, namely *me*.

I kept telling myself it was only two years. Then I would go to high school, where I could start fresh.

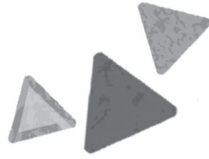
But I was an idiot.

Because Pierre Elliott Trudeau Senior School is right next door to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior School.

Meaning Tyler – and Wank – moved right along with me.

NOW





‘Hey, Frank, is that a half a pack of wine gums in your pocket, or is Jeremiah happy to see me?’ Kertz shouted in the hall this morning, our first day back after Christmas break. *Frank* is a new variation of my nickname; as he helpfully explained to me, ‘It’s a combination of *Wank* and *Freak*.’ So clever.

‘You’re slower than a sloth, Wan— I mean, Wilbur! Do another lap,’ our gym teacher, Mr Urquhart, said during gym, because, yes, even he has learned my unfortunate nickname.

‘Seat’s taken, Wank,’ said Poppy in English class; Poppy, who used to be nice to me until, as a welcome-to-Senior-School gift to me, Tyler had started a rumour that I liked to sniff girls’ bicycle seats. I mean, *come on*. I have never, not once, sniffed a bicycle seat. Or *any* seat, come to think of it. But some of the girls took it seriously, and they’ve refused to sit near me ever since.

‘Excuse me, Wank? Could I borrow a pencil?’ Jo Lin asked in math class. This one stung the most, because Jo

Lin is genuinely kind, to me and to everyone. She wasn't trying to be mean; she just thinks it's my *actual name*.

Even though I'm fourteen, a letter that I wrote when I was eleven – *eleven!* – still follows me like a bad smell. It's like nothing has changed in all that time. Like *I* haven't changed.

But I *have* changed. I'm much taller, for one. The Mumps were right; I had a massive growth spurt. It happened so fast, they joked that they could hear my bones creaking as they expanded. I literally had growing pains. Now I'm over six feet tall. But my height isn't an advantage; I don't play basketball or other team sports, because I'm a total klutz and I tend to duck whenever any type of ball is thrown in my direction. Also, even though I grew taller, I'm still pudgy and soft. And my hair is a weird wiry texture; Tyler likes to tell me it looks like a mass of brown pubes.

And, well, short of plucking them from my sockets, there is nothing I can do about my bulgy eyes.

Jeremiah grew with me, proportionally speaking. No one would hire him to be in pornos or anything. But he's average, like the person he's attached to. And the random pop-ups are (mostly) a thing of the past.

As for the rest of my list, I'm proud to say that I can now watch that Sarah McLachlan SPCA ad without crying at *least* forty per cent of the time. Better still, I have one excellent friend – two, if you count Templeton – and for a while Alex and I were friends, but I'm not so sure where we stand any more.

I still write all the time, although now I write mostly poetry; stories about dinosaurs and outer space was kid stuff (although, confession, I still love dinosaurs, but seriously, who doesn't?). And, no, I haven't published anything yet. But I try to tell myself that my personal suffering will make me a better writer. Tortured artist and all that.

Regarding number seven, no surprise, this has been an Epic Fail. I will never have a Mutually Loving and Respectful Relationship (™ Mumps) before I graduate. Kertz made sure of that. The girls at my school look at me with suspicion, wariness, or sympathy – sometimes a combination of all three.

And eight – trying to be my best self, be brave, *blab, blab, blab – as if*. My goals are much simpler now: just try to make it through each day. Head down, mouth shut. Don't attract any unnecessary attention. He who takes no chances may win nothing, but, *news flash*, maybe he won't lose anything, either! Cos I've already lost some pretty big-ticket items, like a) my dignity, b) my self-respect, and c) any confidence I once possessed.

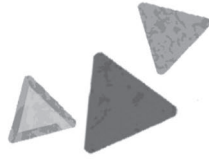
My only goal now: try to survive.

Who Am I?



When I look in the mirror, who do I see?
The person I think I am
Or the person they perceive me to be?
Which one is the truth?
Which one is a lie?
Am I Wilbur, or Wank? I want to break down and cry
If a tree falls in the forest
Does it make a sound?
If you're labelled, do you become the label?
(I know – that's profound)
No girl will ever love me
As long as I'm Wank
I'm viewed as an outcast, or worse
A blank
One person is to blame
For the state of my pain
He knows who he is, but I won't name his name
I dream sometimes that I push my tormentor
Into the path of a soul-sucking Dementor
Then I push him in front of a steamroller, too
So all that is left is a big smear of goo.

by Wilbur Nuñez-Knopf



‘Tell me about your first week back at school,’ Sal said to me on Saturday morning. We were at side-by-side lockers in the change room at the Jewish Community Centre, getting naked. I did my best to avert my gaze because a) it’s rude to stare and b) Sal is ‘eighty-five years young’, so he is very, very wrinkly, and I mean all over.

‘It was OK,’ I replied. ‘The Trudeau-Manias have been rehearsing a lot. Mr P wants us to sound good for our guests.’ Our bandleader, Mr Papadopoulos, had gone to a school orchestra conference over the summer, and he’d met a bandleader from Paris. Rumour had it that they’d had loads of s-e-x, and they’d hatched up an exchange trip so they could see each other again. The French students would arrive on Monday. ‘We got the name of our exchange students,’ I told him. ‘Mine is Charlie Bourget.’

‘*Charlie* doesn’t sound very French.’

‘I know, right? I was expecting an *Yves*, or a *Jacques*.’ I pulled on my red Speedo under the shield of a towel. I do not have a Speedo body; I would much prefer to wear baggy

swim shorts; but Sal gave me the Speedo for my birthday, and who am I to insult my best friend?

He held on to my arm for balance and we headed out of the changing room, walking at a slow but steady pace. Technically I wasn't supposed to be in this class, not for another fifty years, at least, but Sal needed my help in the changing room, so an exception was made.

Mup was already on the pool deck, her black curls tucked under a swim cap, her strong frame packed into a navy blue one-piece. The rest of her students – all women, all well past the age of sixty – milled around her. This is one of her three part-time jobs, and I'm pretty sure it's her favourite.

When the ladies saw us, they broke into grins. 'Our boys are here!' said Ruth Gimbel. Because we're the only men in the class, Sal and I are treated like rock stars. The ladies pinch my cheeks and muss my wiry hair and bring me home-baked treats, which is pretty awesome.

But if I'm the drummer in the band, Sal is the heartthrob lead singer. The ladies *love* him. At least four of them, including Ruth, flirt with him because they know he's a widower and also, he's just a spectacular human being.

Mup started up her music. 'All right, everyone, into the water!'

Sal and I hopped into the pool. For the next hour, I let myself go in a way I never did anywhere else. I flung my arms up and shimmied left to right and did the cancan with my legs underwater.

Aquacise for Seniors is definitely one of the highlights of my week.



Mup had to teach more classes, so when we were done, Sal and I slow-walked to the Royal Ontario Museum, also known as the ROM, just a couple of blocks away. (Sal gives me a student membership for Christmas every year, and I give him a senior membership for Hanukkah every year.) Sal peered into his canvas carry bag. ‘What loot did you get today?’

‘Nanaimo bars and chocolate chip cookies from the twins,’ I said. ‘You?’

‘Same. And also an entire chocolate babka loaf from Ruth.’

‘She *so* has the hots for you.’

‘I don’t disagree. But it’s too soon.’

‘Irma died three years ago.’ I’d never met Sal’s wife; she’d passed away before we moved in, but I knew he still missed her a lot.

‘Exactly. Too soon. Plus, if you want the truth, Ruth is a little handsy. She touched my *derrière* three times in the pool today.’

‘Whoa. Bold.’

‘My sentiments exactly.’

We entered the museum and made a beeline for Fulton,

our nickname for the enormous dinosaur skeleton that dominates the museum foyer. Our shared love of all things dinosaur was one of the things Sal and I bonded over when we first met. He loaned me some books, and I read him the stories I'd written about a friendly but shy T. rex named, rather unimaginatively, Tex.

Fulton is not a T. rex; he's a replica of a Futalognkosaurus that roamed South America. He is *huge*. His feet rest on two metal slabs that stand a few feet apart.

We stepped between the slabs and the two of us lay down on the ground, hands behind our heads. We gazed up at Fulton's bones. It's one of Sal's favourite things to do. 'Imagine, these creatures roamed this very planet millions and millions of years ago. It's incredible. Our lives are a blip! Tremendous! But still a blip!' he likes to say. 'What a marvel life is!' Sal is full of wisdom that way; having a best friend who is seventy-one years older than me is a gift.

'You manage to make any weekend plans with Alex?' he asked as we stared up at Fulton's massive ribcage.

'No. I tried, but . . . he had plans.'

'The boyfriend?'

I nodded.

'Ah. That's too bad. People can go a little nutty when they're in the first throes of romance.'

'It's OK. It just means I get to spend more time with you.'

'You need friends your own age too, Wilbur. *I* have friends my own age.'

‘Sal. Wilbur.’ José, the regular Saturday security guard, loomed over us. His muscles bulged under his uniform. ‘You know what I’m gonna say.’

Sal and José said in unison: ‘You can’t lie on the floor in here. You’re a hazard to yourselves and others.’ José reached down, took Sal’s outstretched hands, and pulled him to his feet. He handed Sal his fedora.

‘I have a treat for you, José.’ Sal reached into his carry bag and handed José one of his bags of goodies.

José’s eyes lit up. ‘Nanaimo bars. Thanks, Sal.’

We took the subway and a streetcar back to Sal’s place, which is right next door to ours, part of a series of narrow, attached brick homes in Kensington Market. Some have been painted eye-popping colours, like ours, which is mauve. Sal’s is the original redbrick. The insides of our houses are mirror images layout-wise, but the similarities end there: my family’s place is full of stuff Mum has found on Craigslist and at garage sales; Sal’s place is full of antiques.

As per our tradition, he made us grilled cheese sandwiches with Strub’s pickles for lunch. This was partly because we love grilled cheese and partly because Sal’s been retired for years and lives on a tight budget; I happen to know he eats a lot of grilled cheese, ramen noodles, and dented tins of soup.

At twelve thirty, he walked me to the door. ‘Here, take some babka for the road.’ He handed me two thick slices in a baggy.



I bid Sal goodbye and walked down to Foot Long Subs on Queen Street West. Over the Christmas holidays the owner, Mr Chernov, had promoted me from Submarine Sandwich Creation Engineer to Submarine Sandwich Creation Expert. It didn't come with a raise, but Mr Chernov reminded me that it did come with more responsibility, so I guess that's fair. Since Mr Chernov was hardly ever there – he managed three franchises – technically I was now the supervisor of the other employees, but I'm not sure they'd gotten the memo.

'Dmitry, it's your turn to clean the washrooms,' I told him early in our shift. Dmitry is new to Foot Long, short and sinewy with spiky hair, around my age; he's also what I would call a *problem employee*.

He was texting on his phone, and he didn't answer.

'Dmitry. You know the bathrooms need checking and refreshing once every hour.'

'Sorry, no can do, Dilbert,' he said without looking up.

'Wilbur,' I said. 'Why not?'

'Health reasons. I have psoriafungalis.'

I looked at him blankly.

'Skin condition. I can't use strong cleaning products, or I break out in a super-gross rash.'

I knew I couldn't make him do something he was medically unfit for – I'd read the eighty-page manual, obvs – so I cleaned the washrooms myself. I don't know if it's

unique to Foot Long or if it's a universal phenomenon, but there are tonnes of people who either don't understand *how* to flush, or simply don't *bother* to flush.

When Dmitry went on break, Mitzi sidled up to me. She's also around my age, one or two inches shorter than me, with a powerful build, long red hair and tortoiseshell glasses. 'You know he made that up.'

'Psoriasisfungatitis? No, I'm pretty sure it's a real thing.'

Mitzi whipped out her phone and punched in the word. She held it out for me to see. 'Nope.'

'Oh.'

We stood listening to the Muzak for a few moments. She checked her reflection in the window. 'God, who designed these uniforms? Pikachu?'

Our uniforms are hideous – one-piece banana-yellow zip-up outfits made from cheap polyester. I'm guessing they were made to match the cheap, yellow plastic tables and chairs that are bolted to the franchise's floor. 'For what it's worth, you look pretty good in yours,' I said. 'Like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*. Or Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*.'

'Meaning, kind of badass?'

'Definitely.'

That got a rare smile; most of the time, Mitzi looks disdainful and bored. I have no idea what she thinks of me.

If I am totally honest, I find her rather terrifying.

