

Name Names

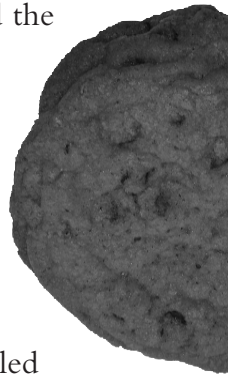
I don't like Mondays.

It has nothing at all to do with the weekend being over before you really started having any sort of fun. And that you're now stuck at school behind a desk with not one, not two, not even three, but *four* monster wads of gum stuck underneath it and one metal leg that is miles too short, so the desk wobbles every time you print your name, and the teacher squints and holds her finger to her lips.

That's not why.

It also, in case you're wondering, has nothing to do with hating to get up at 7:30 in the morning—especially after a weekend of sleeping until *The Garage Girls* comes on TV at nine. Okay, it has a little to do with that. But even if they canceled *The Garage Girls*—which they wouldn't, since every girl at Allencroft Middle School watches it every Saturday—even then I would not like Mondays.

When I'm a big yawner of an adult—although, really, I don't know how “big” I'll ever be since I'm the smallest person I know—I'm going to get a job where Monday



is a part of the weekend. Then I could only go to work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. It would have to be a short week because of *The Garage Girls*. And the place I work had better sell chocolate chip cookies, because I live

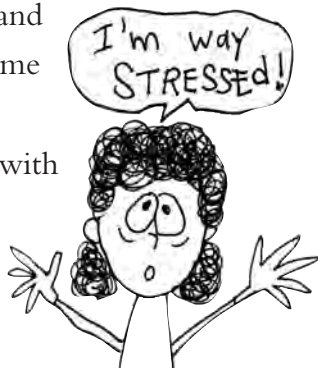
on chocolate chips and my grandma once said you should have a job you love. **And that's what I love.**

Chocolate chips.

The worst part of Mondays is that my mother goes to work crazy early. So I have to stand on a stool at the kitchen counter and line up Grandma's seven hundred tiny colored pills and sort them into a plastic container divided by the days of the week. Mom always puts too many blue pills into Thursday or not enough pink ones into Tuesday because, she says, "I'm way stressed from the juggling act that is my life."

Don't ask about my father. That would be rude, since I can hardly even remember when he was alive, and if *anyone* deserves to know *anything* at all about him, it's me. He died when I was four and the one and only memory I have of him has to last me the rest of my life.

So, anyway, that's the problem with Mondays.



This Monday happens to be Picture Day, which means I have more to do than usual. Not only do I have to sort out Grandma and worry that Mom will lose her keys again and be late for work and get fired so we'll have to live under a broken bus until I'm old enough to go out and support the three of us . . . but I have to get a class of twenty-six twelve-year-olds ready for the school photographer. **Last year, when I let them fend for themselves,** Pamela Peterman wound up wearing the same blouse as Corinna Lynn Binns, and Tall Paul and Small Paul forgot to change out of their gym shorts.

I didn't care so much about Tall Paul—he's last row, center, so no one can see his bony legs. But, since I'm not only shorter than any other human being in the seventh grade, I'm shorter than all of the sixth grade and exactly 76.6 percent of the *fifth* grade—because of that, Small Paul is always crammed next to me. And last year his scabbed-up knees took all the attention away from my sparkly hairband.

I can't risk it happening again.

I sling my backpack over my homeroom chair and pour a handful of plastic barrettes and colored rubber bands onto

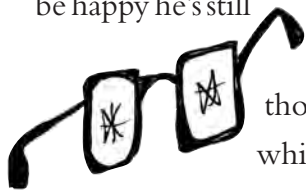
my desktop. The other kids will be here any second, and I'd like to be ready.

This much I'm sure of:

-**Alice Marriott's** mother will botch up her French braids and make her wear the vest with the prancing kittens. If I don't help Alice, her future husband will see this vest in a photo one day, and might think twice about reproducing with her. (And would you blame him? Seriously . . . prancing kittens.)

-**Martin Granitstein** will have maple-syrup stains all over his shirt, so I'll have to give him someone's smelly gym shirt from the bottom of their locker. Thankfully, I packed antibacterial wipes so I can disinfect later.

-**Avery Buckner** will have smeary glasses. Smeared with who-knows-what. I guess I should be happy he's still too young to have dandruff, because when he's older those glasses'll be covered in white flakes. You can just tell.



Again, the wipes will save me.

—And, for sure, for sure, for sure, **Sylvia Smye** will have too many cowlicks in her hair. Cowlicks are nearly as cruel an act of nature as making innocent people so small that strangers stop to talk baby talk at them, causing a certain short person to yell back, **“I’m Twelve Years Old and I Don’t Want Your Crappy Candy!”**

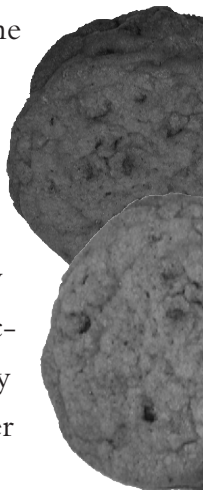
Okay, not all true. If Mom says it’s okay, I take the candy.

The bell rings and kids start pouring into the classroom. A line forms in the aisle in front of my desk and one by one they move toward me, stopping to twirl just like I showed them on Friday afternoon. Approach, stop, spin, and await your instructions. I take a baggie full of chocolate chips from my desk and gather a few for my first client, my number two BFIS.

Number Two Best Friend in School. Laurel Sterling.

“Happy Monday, O Zoë Lama,” she says, making a big embarrassing bow.

I make an I-hate-Monday face, mixed with my don’t-



call-me-Zoë-Lama face. This basically involves mad eyebrows, scrunched-up eyes, and one side of my lip in a sneer. It's not pretty.

I actually don't hate the Zoë Lama part as much as I pretend to hate it, even though **I didn't exactly sign up to be the ruler of nearly everyone around me.**

It started when I was just a kid. At home, it might have had something to do with not having a father around to do helpful fatherish things, like knowing when to up the bran in Grandma's cereal or how to use clear nail polish to stop a run in Mom's stockings.

With teachers, it just sort of happened. Wa-ay back in kindergarten.

Kindergartners, as everyone knows, are a mess. They've got runny noses, missing teeth, shoes on the wrong feet, and stubby bangs they've sawed off with safety scissors—just to see if it would work. Every time they pull off a boot they lose a sock, and if anyone, anywhere, is going to lick an icy handrail, you can bet your favorite underwear it'll be a kindergartner. Not only that, but they talk with a lisp and fall in love with their teacher.

Well . . . some do.

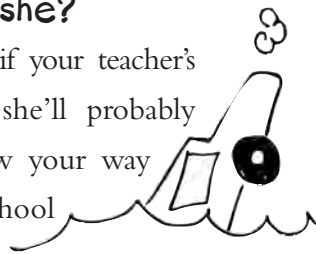
It's not that I thought Mr. Silverberg was going to leave

his wife to marry me. I wasn't stupid. Besides, I barely came up to his knees. I just liked being around him and invented all sorts of reasons to help him. I organized the washable marker bins, shined up the building blocks, and sorted my classmates' boots from biggest to smallest to teacher's.

After a while, he started to count on me to help and asked me to pass out papers, help on field trips, and, most importantly, watch the class while he popped out for a smoke—his one and only putrid habit. And when Ms. Narck, the elementary school principal, dropped by, I always had the perfect cover for him—he ran out of burnt sienna crayons, he accidentally stapled his tie to his thumb, his wife drove her car into a pond.

A six-year-old can dream, can't she?

I learned two things that year. First, even if your teacher's wife's Volvo lands in a pond, eventually she'll probably dry off and go home. Second, if you know your way around a teacher's ego, this whole school thing becomes a breeze.



How I became Zoë Lama to the students is still something of a legend. It all started at the top of the jungle gym when **I was still about the size of Thumbelina**, and it involved Patrick “The Raptor”

Hammens. Meanest kid in the school and, to me, about the size of a giant.

Patrick had cornered little pigeon-toed Leo Loomis at the top of the slide. Patrick had been stealing Leo's popcorn-fund-raiser money all week and was giving him misery for having empty pockets—even though Leo's pockets were only empty because Patrick had emptied them! Still, they weren't any emptier than Patrick's brain.

A crowd of us had gathered at the bottom of the slide, hoping to catch Leo if Patrick got pushy. **That was when Patrick said it.** He asked Leo if Mommy tied his shoelaces together as a baby to teach him to walk like a duck.

I was up that slide in half a second.

“What do you want, Flea?” Patrick said to me, one hand still holding the front of Leo's sweater. “You wanna to lose your popcorn money, or just your life?”

I ignored this and sat down. “I was just going to say . . . oh, never mind.”

Patrick squinted at me through his evil slits for eyes. “What?”

“Nothing. I can see you're busy.”

“Spill it or empty your pockets,” he growled.

Dropping a pebble down the yellow slide and watching how fast it tumbled, I said, “It’s just that **I guess you haven’t heard about the studies.** What researchers are saying about kids who push around other kids. What it says, loud and clear, about their pasts.” I leaned down to swipe some sand off my shoe.

By this time Patrick had let go of Leo, who was already sliding headfirst toward safety. Patrick squatted down across from me and sneered. “What do *they* know?”

“Just that bully types come from families where they never feel heard. From parents who spend their every waking moment launching their new vitamin company and hire English nannies to pretend to love their kids.” Okay, so my mother gossips about the neighbors. A lot.

It worked like magic. Patrick hid his face from me.

“Some of these parents even forget the little things that make a childhood special. Like the tooth fairy during the agonizing molar years . . .”

He sniffled.



“Or that the bike a certain little boy wished for on his seventh birthday was a shiny red mountain bike with a water-bottle holder, not a crummy blue one with a banana seat and streamers . . .”

He wiped his face with his dirty sleeve.

“That this boy never cared about all those train rides to visit Grandma’s penthouse in New York with a spectacular view of the park, all he really wanted was to play Little Red Riding Hood with his dad in the basement.”

The crowd below was silent, waiting for Patrick’s response. That was when the Raptor, previously known for crushing pop cans against his forehead and stuffing fourth graders through the basketball hoop, began to bawl.

Not wanting to destroy the stupid oaf, I put an arm around his hulking shoulders and gave them a squeeze.

“It’s okay, Patrick. Let it all out.”

“Grammie was never even home,” he sobbed. “I had to play Scrabble with her veiny old ‘gentleman friend!’”

“That’s right. Have a good cry. It’s how we heal.” Okay . . . so my mother had a few self-help books lying around. It wasn’t original, but it worked.

He looked up, his cheeks soaked with tears, and sniffed. “You think I can? Heal?”

“Absolutely. You know what you need?”

He shook his head.

“You need a safe place to fall. Someone to share your feelings with. Someone like me.”

Kids started whispering and pointing like mad, and from that moment on, they looked at me differently. **I had defused the Raptor and become a schoolyard celebrity** all at once.

And I liked it.

“Wow,” said Miss Noonan, the playground monitor, from behind the seesaw. She wormed her way through the crowd of gawking kids and squinted up at me, still at the top of the slide. “You’re like a pint-size Dalai Lama. Bringing freedom and the right to coexist in peace and harmony to the peoples of Allencroft Elementary School.” She shivered and pulled her cardigan sweater tighter around herself. “You’re the Zoë Lama.”

Of course, I had to race straight into the library to look up the word *Lama*. First I spelled it with two *l*'s and thought Miss Noonan was calling me a “woolly beast of burden.” Naturally, I was a little upset. But then the librarian told me *lama*, in some other language, means teacher.



It made perfect sense, since these kids really do need guidance.

And so it was. The Zoë Lama was born.

From that day on, requests came in almost daily for advice ranging from how to break in a new pair of flip-flops with minimal bleeding, to how to crush on a boy in a younger grade without destroying your reputation.

I soon discovered an added bonus. **Being the knower-of-all-unwritten rules automatically provides me with an untouchable reputation**—a happy side effect I'm thankful for every single day. As long as the Zoë Lama reigns, my status is safe. The day my reign ends is the day my peoples will drop the peace and harmony crap and eat me alive.

*L*aurel's skirt is pink corduroy. Her sweater is orange to match her tights, and her shoes are greenish with red laces. If it was anyone but Laurel wearing this rainbow of gross-osity, I'd have told them to fake sick and go home. Fast. But Laurel is working hard to change, and when someone works hard at something, they need a reward, don't you think?

Laurel is obsessed with the color blue.

Ever since I've known her, since we napped beside each other at Little Monsters Daycare, she's worn head-to-toe blue.

Always. Sometimes she even has to wear boys' stuff, because the girls' sections are mostly pink and red. Not only that, Laurel only *eats* blue stuff. The teachers at Little Monsters used to complain that they didn't have blue snacks for Laurel, except in blueberry season. So Laurel's mother brought snacks from home—blue, of course—in a special container. Blue.

So you can see why I just offer Laurel some chocolate chips (which she refuses, but I have to offer) and nod. Laurel punches me in the shoulder—our secret sign—and sits down behind me, whispering, “Your hair looks good today, not too frizzy and extra chocolaty.” **Every morning Laurel gives me the hair report**, whether I want it or not. And since I happen to have especially curly, especially brown hair that happens to be long enough for me to sit on, and it happens to be right there in front of Laurel's face all day long, she also tends to style it. **Whether I like it or not.**

“Thanks,” I say. “You can braid it into ten braids, if you want. I'd like to look like a Caribbean princess today.” I pass



back a few rubber bands to help get her motivated. “But not until after pictures, so I’m not a Caribbean princess forever in my mom’s wallet.”

Next.

Brianna Simpson is wearing white . . . when I told her specifically that it makes her look sick with her freckles. Now I’ll have to slap her cheeks before the camera clicks to make them look pink. Not too hard. Well, kinda hard. But she’ll appreciate it when she takes home proofs that make her look like she’s just gotten off her steaming pony in the hills of Ireland. Not that she has a steaming pony. Too much dander.



Next is my **number one BFIS. Susannah Barnes.** She looks great, as usual. **She’s wearing big dark sunglasses** and stops to lower them so I can see her eyes and know it’s her.

Susannah is the perfect best friend. She’s a snarky, mocking, complicated drama diva. And don’t ever play with her hair or ask to try on her shades, because both are off-limits. But she’ll give you her last M&M, she’ll remember exactly what you wanted for your birthday, and she’ll phone you

at 6 A.M. to remind you to wash your hair before school because today is the day Riley comes back from his two-week vacation in Cuba.

We'll discuss Riley later.

“Be prepared for note launch right after the announcements,” Susannah whispers, giving my clean hair the thumbs-up. “*Major news.*”

I pour her an extra-big handful of chips and wink. “Launch from the right. My left arm hurts from wrestling with Gram’s childproof vitamin jar.”

Her mouth tightens into a little ball. “I promise you this—if I ever get offered a vitamin commercial, I’ll refuse to do it on the grounds of injuries like yours. You should sue.” She slides her sunglasses farther up her nose and swoops on past.

Let me explain about the dark glasses. When Susannah was eight, she decided to become a World-Famous Child Star. Her mother thought it was an awesome idea, because everyone knows that World-Famous Child Stars’ mothers have nice cars and extra slim thighs. So Mrs. Barnes got all these pictures taken of her daughter and Susannah got an agent—



which is a special person who makes sure you get famous and get acting jobs and get to sign autographs. Sort of like the elephant keeper at the zoo on our third-grade field trip. He got the elephant all shined up and trained, and then took him out to get looked at and photographed by the public. Only, the elephant got paid in peanuts and Susannah got real coin.

Anyway, the agent's office is right above the doughnut shop, so every time Susannah has a meeting, she gets a Boston cream.

Lucky.

In about three seconds **Susannah got hired to do a real commercial**, and we celebrated by having a sleepover with five girls and a cake decorated with a movie camera made of icing. Then Susannah found out **the bad part**. The commercial that would make her world famous was about bed-wetting.

Bed-wetting!

It's obvious, of course, but I'll say it anyway: if you're planning to be a World Famous Child Star, the last thing you want to be famous for is wetting the bed.

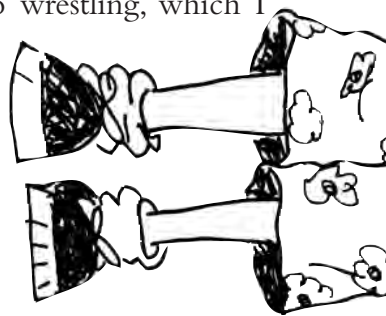
But Susannah did the commercial, because her Mom said, "It's money in the bank," and she hasn't taken off the

glasses since. Which is kind of dumb since we all know it's her. Also, she hasn't gone to the bathroom at school ever since, just to prove that she, unlike the character she played, has one mighty ferocious bladder.

Riley is next in line, and because he's a show-off, but a very cute show-off, he spins and then leans down on my desk real close. **Riley Sinclair doesn't know it yet, but he's the boy I'm going to marry.**

The trouble is, I never get to see him after school. He has to practice, he always says. And I always say, "Practice what?" And he always says sumo wrestling, which I happen to know is a major lie, since Riley isn't remotely fat and doesn't like being seen in a bathing suit any shorter than his knees.

Once I had a boyfriend I saw every day after school. Guy. Pronounced like Key, but with a G. And no last name. Well, probably he had a last name, but I never knew it, since I was about five and what five-year old knows anyone's last name? Guy was in my kindergarten class, and he used to call me on the phone every night and teach me how to say swear-words in French.



Ooh-la-la.

Anyway, Riley, who is not French but is still ooh-la-la, is wearing rumpled jeans and a shirt all shredded at the bottom from his falling off his skateboard. Also, his hair keeps flopping in his eye. He looks perfect, so that's what I start to tell him—

Suddenly Mrs. Patinkin, our language-arts teacher, glides in. “Good morning, scholars! Please take your seats. Are your minds open and ready to receive what the week has to offer?”

No one says it, since it would make Mrs. Patinkin cry, **but I guarantee we all think it. No!**

Somebody must have nodded or scratched themselves, because Mrs. Patinkin claps her hands and says, “Good. Let's begin by copying this inspirational quote I found in the Sunday paper. It incorporates three of last week's vocabulary words—*monarchy*, *pedicure*, and *canine*.”

As she turns to write the inspirational quote on the board, I quickly tap Riley with a handful of chips. “You look exceptionally perfect—”

“Ahem. Zoë Monday Costello?” says Mrs. Patinkin.

Okay, so there *might* be a little



more to this Monday thing than I've admitted to. But I'm twelve years old now. I'm way past asking why a perfectly intelligent mother would saddle her only child with a middle name of the *one* day of the week everyone can't stand. **I sure must have kicked and screamed a lot on my way out to make my mother that mad.**

I swipe all the hair accessories and chocolate chips into my desk and sit up tall. Well, as tall as I can.

Mrs. Patinkin smiles. "Would you mind enlightening the rest of the class as to the topic of your private conversation?"

She's faking like she's punishing me—to show the others it's wrong to whisper during class—but she and I both know it's a big act. She really *wants* to know what I whisper about.

I smile to show her I don't mind in the least, and stand up. "Mrs. Patinkin," I say. People *love* to hear the sound of their own names. **"I was simply informing my classmate that inspiring students is the hallmark of a great teacher."**

A slow smile spreads across Mrs. Patinkin's face. For a moment she doesn't speak. Then she takes a deep breath.

“You see, class? It is possible to use our vocabulary words in real life. It’s encouraging to see some students can reap the benefits of learning words like hallmark. Thank you, Zoë.”

Mrs. Patinkin has a big thing about expanding our lousy vocabularies. She also has a big thing about saying the word reap and a very, very big thing **about extra-small people who are extra slippery with compliments.** She also has a very big thing about Stewie Buckenheimer going through the—

“Garbage!” Mrs. Patinkin says. “How many times have I told you, Stewie Alan Buckenheimer, to leave the trash can alone?”

“But I lost my retainer again!”

“Oh, Stewie.” She sighs. “Didn’t we agree, as a class, that what the dentist puts in our mouths stays in our mouths?”

“My gums were itchy.” Stewie pulls his arm out of the trash can and by accident dumps the whole thing onto the floor. A puddle of liquid oozes toward Mrs. Patinkin’s desk.

Mrs. Patinkin closes her eyes. She tries really hard not to



be the screamer type, but it's not always possible with a class like ours. So every time someone drives her into the danger zone, she does this little meditation thing afterward, where she shuts her eyes and tries to pretend we're not here. I once asked her what she thinks about when she's trying to erase our rottenness from her mind, because if it were me I'd be thinking of three things, in the following order:

1. Chocolate chips
2. Horses with snow on their muzzles
3. The way Riley looks when he gets water all over his chin at the drinking fountain and wipes it away with his sleeve.

Mrs. Patinkin told me she thinks about absolutely nothing. But, honestly, I think that's a lie. I tried it once, when Jamie Savage shared my seat on the bus. It was one of those dripping, melting early spring days—too winterish for sneakers, too springish for mittens—and Jamie had one boot resting on his other knee while he drummed some crummy song on his ankle. Big clods of dirty snow dripped from the bottom of his boot, and I had to move my backpack out of the way or risk total backpack rot.

That's when he did it.

Took his grubby little finger, **scraped a clump of slush off the bottom, of his boot and licked it.**

I scrunched up my face against the window and thought as hard as I could about absolutely nothing. But it didn't work.

Now Mrs. Patinkin's eyes are open again, and she's smiling and pressing her fingertips together like a spider doing squats on a mirror. She says, "Let's pull out a crisp, clean sheet of paper and a sharpened pencil, shall we? We'll write down five sentences about what life showed us this weekend. Then each and every one of us will share our own unique and magical voyage. Try to incorporate one of the new vocabulary words written on the chalkboard." She taps the list with her wooden pointer. "We've got fifteen minutes, starti-i-ing now."

Stewie puts his hand up. "You said 'we.' Does that mean you're going to tell us about your unique and magical voyage, too, Mrs. Patinkin?"

"No, Stewie. I was simply speaking collectively to show you all we're traveling on this journey together."

Sylvia Smye stands up, crawling in cowlicks. "My mother says I won't be going on any class trips until I'm sixteen

because of the wickedness of today's society." She sits down and folds her hands on her desk.

Mrs. Patinkin's eyes are closed again. "Thank you, Sylvia."

Up goes Brianna Simpson's hand. "Mrs. Patinkin, is it okay if we use mechanical pencils?"

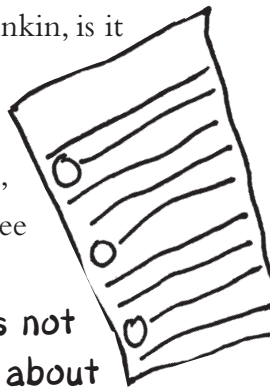
"That will be fine, Brianna."

Up goes Brianna's hand again. "Mrs. Patinkin, is it okay if my sheet of paper doesn't have three holes in it? Because I ran out."

Mrs. Patinkin looks up at the clock. **She's not thinking about nothing. She's thinking about 3:15.** "Yes, Brianna."

It turns out to be the quickest fifteen minutes ever, because she tells us to put down our sharpened pencils and read out loud, starting with the vocabulary word of our choice. I'm only halfway through my third sentence and still haven't even figured out how to work in the word mutilate.

Riley reads first. He reads real fast and doesn't stop for a breath until he's done, because he hates reading out loud. "Myvocabularywordisblister.ThisweekendIwentshoppingforweddinggownswithmyoldestsister.Shetriedonthi



rteen puffy gowns, which she said all made her look fat. I said it was probably a good thing she's getting fat *before* the wedding so her husband has a chance to change his mind before it's too late. She said she's never getting married now and cried and called me a Little Blister. Then the sales lady got all mad and made us leave because my sister's makeup got all over the dresses."

Mrs. Patinkin looks confused. Then she says, "Wonderful, Riley. Harrison Huxtable, it's your turn."

The whole class laughs and a few people snort like little pigs. Mrs. Patinkin swats at them in the air.

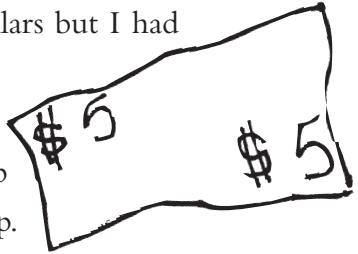
It takes Harrison Huxtable a minute to stand up. He seems to have his thigh wedged between his desk and his chair. By the time he gets fully upright, the kids are howling. This is not acceptable. Harrison cannot help it, and besides, **nobody who can draw perfectly shaded birds of prey like Harrison can should ever have to suffer torment from complete losers.** I spin around and hiss at the hecklers and they finally cut it out.

Morons.

"My name is Harrison Huxtable. My word is *luncheon*. On the weekend my family had a garage sale. I sold my old bicycle, which was broken, and my old computer chair,

which was also broken. I made 15 dollars but I had to miss luncheon. Thank you.”

Mrs. Patinkin claps her hands because the morons are laughing again. I stomp my foot and glare until the class shuts up.



“Not quite the proper use of the word,” says Mrs. Patinkin. “But thank you, Mr. Huxtable. It sounds like you’re turning into a real titan of industry.”

Harrison Huxtable looks pretty pleased about that part. He sits down and beams pure pink.

“Laurel, you can go next.”

Laurel stands up, nearly blinding us all with her colors. She reads, “My vocabulary word is *stupendous*. My title is ‘My Weekend, by Laurel Sterling.’ ” She pauses to cough. “I had a perfectly stupendous time. First, I organized my sock drawer. Then I told my sister to keep her hairy, half-dead cat away from my beanbag chair or all the popcorn will pour out and she’ll have to buy me a new one. And I happen to know the store’s all out. I was supposed to go to a birthday party, but changed my mind. That is the story of my stupendous weekend. Stupendous.”

Someone at the back laughs and calls out, “Why didn’t you go? Was the cake the wrong color?”

Laurel sits down and covers her face, which is getting more colorful than her sweater. Laurel cries sometimes. It gets to be too much for her, all the problems about the blue food. It's why she needs me.

I spin around to find Martin Granitstein snickering. **"Why don't you shut your sticky face, Smartin!"** I say.

"Zoë," says Mrs. Patinkin. Great. I slump down in my chair. See? You try to defend the masses—or even just your number two BFIS—and what happens? You are publicly shamed. Stripped of your dignity. **This is the kind of thing that makes me seriously reevaluate my entire Lama career.** I mean, Mrs. Patinkin is not and never will be a Lama herself, but I'd hoped she would know enough not to be dragged over to the dark side by defending Smartin, of all people! Why should I go to all the trouble—for no pay, I might add—if those in semileadership positions can't even see the self-sacrifice?

Seriously?

Mrs. Patinkin continued. "Mr. Granitstein is on his way to Principal Renzetti's office. And while I'm quite certain he knows the way, would you mind delivering the attendance book to Mrs. Delaney at the front desk? That way we can be

sure Martin won't get 'lost' like he did last week." Smartin groans and starts dragging his feet toward the door.

Oh. Never mind.

I shove the baggie into my pocket and stand up. **If I have to walk in the shadow of the Beast, at least I'm doing it with chocolate.**

Mrs. Patinkin stops me when I'm halfway out the door. "Zoë, wait." She shuffles to the doorway and leans closer to me. Then she smooths out her purple stirrup pants and her shaggy sweater and whispers, "For Picture Day . . . is this suitable?"

It isn't, but I'm a girl who knows the right side from the wrong side of a teacher's red pen. "It's hot, Mrs. Patinkin," I lie, and spin around.

The office is full of gym coaches yelling at basketball players, parents bringing forgotten lunch boxes, and fifth-grade babies getting their bruises iced. And while I'd like to deliver Smartin and then bolt for the sweet smell of a hallway without Smartin in it, I have to sit on a bench outside of Principal Renzetti's office and wait until his secretary, Gladys Stitt, gets off the phone to hand off my revolting



delivery, who is starting to stink like blue cheese. I slide to the farthest end of the bench, stick two chocolate chips together by licking the bottoms, and plop them onto my tongue. If I don't suck too fast, I figure I have enough chips to last me until Gladys finishes ordering her new curtains and her throw pillows.

I never said it was easy being me. Not that I can't handle this or anything, but **some days the load is heavier—and smellier—than others.**

My friends I'll deal with, since, really, what other option do I have? Without me, they'd still be playing with electronic puppies and laughing at knock-knock jokes. And the teachers I put up with for reasons of self-preservation and eventual college acceptance. You can never think too long-term. The pill-swallowing grandma, well, she's the closest thing I've got to my dad, so I never complain about her.

It's Mom. I could handle everything else if she only had some kind of helper. Then I'd never have to worry, did she forget the milk again? Is she late for work and going to get fired? That's exactly what **she needs . . . an assistant.**

Grandma's getting too old for the job. It's not really fair to ask a seventy-five-year-old lady to hand wash your

Garage Girls T-shirt so the glitter doesn't wear off, and I never get all the soap out. Mom needs a husband. Just think of it—two adults to do all the work! If one forgets to pick up butter, the other one chirps, "That's okay, honey. I'll get it on my way home!"

And when Grandma makes a huge mess in the kitchen by dropping her applesauce jar on the floor, there'd be no more "Zoë, can you grab a few towels and mop up? Watch out for the broken glass." No way. That would be the assistant's job. I'd be too busy drawing in my room or talking Laurel through Christmas dinner on the phone.

Life would be perfect.

As I balance a chocolate chip on my nose, Mr. Lindsay, the math teacher, walks into the office hallway and thumb-tacks a pink poster to the bulletin board. At the top, it says,


**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR
WINTER DANCE COMMITTEE**

Anyone up for a challenge and a laugh?

Sign up below!

A pen taped to a long string hangs from the poster.

Mr. Lindsay would make a pretty good assis-



tant for my mother. He's always got important-looking math tools in his shirt pocket, and he sure put up that poster nice and straight. Plus, **his face isn't completely hideous.**

Scrubbing my hands on my jeans, I jump up and write Zoë Costello on the first line. I'm definitely up for a challenge and a laugh. Can I help it if it happens to get my mom a husband and me more time for *The Garage Girls*? I think not.