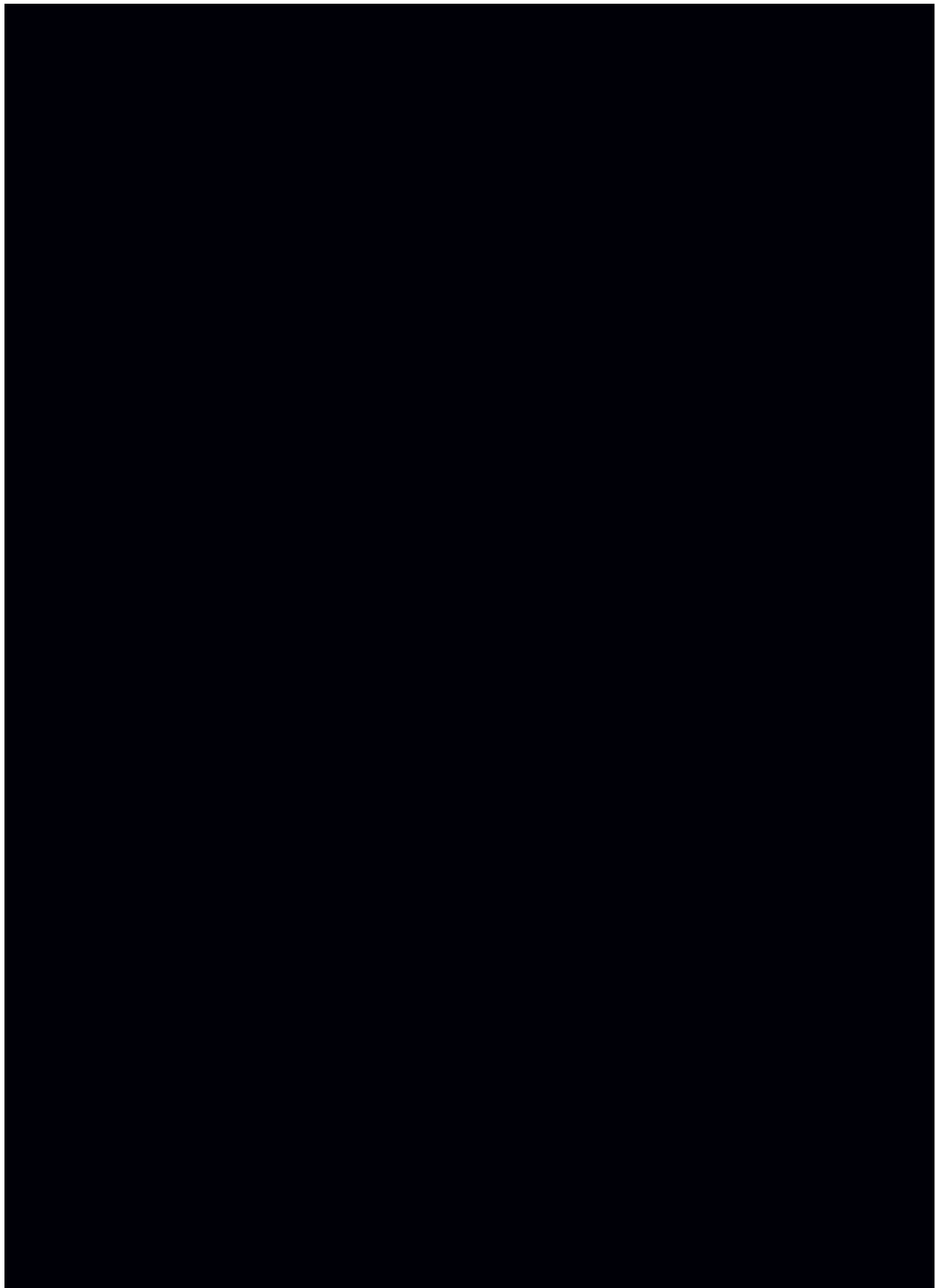


If you could see into the future—
would you look?

A Year
Without
Autumn



Liz Kessler
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

This book is dedicated to Judith Elliott, to say thank you for eight years of sharing your wisdom, patience, ideas, kindness, and inspiration. It's been a privilege to work with you and to learn from the best.



And in today already walks tomorrow.

— Friedrich von Schiller



“Stop the car!”

“What?” Dad swivels around in his seat. The car swerves.

“Good grief, Tom!” Mom squeals, gripping her armrest as she pulls a wad of tissues out of her purse.

“Stop the car!” I repeat. It’s going to be too late in a minute. I grab the tissues and shove them over Craig’s mouth.

Dad pulls over just in time, and Craig lurches out of his seat, runs to the side of the road, and doubles over.

The car stinks for the rest of the trip.

I sniff pointedly. “Mmm, get a load of that fresh country air.”

“I didn’t even do it in the car, Jenni,” Craig mumbles as I open my window and stick my head out.

Welcome to the Green family vacation. Green by name, green by nature, if my little brother’s face is anything to go by. Mom’s isn’t much better, either. But then she is eight months pregnant, so she’s got an excuse at least — especially when Dad’s behind the wheel.

Honestly, I could predict this journey with my eyes closed. It’s the same every year. An hour of Dad driving too fast around the bendy back roads, during which Mom will ask him to slow down at least ten times and Craig will puke at least once, followed by three hours of crawling up the highway with ten trillion other families who have suddenly realized there’s only one more week of summer vacation left.

Then we’ll arrive at our time-share, which will look exactly the same as it does every year, and exactly the same as all the other condos at Riverside Village: big open-plan living room and kitchen, both beige and cream, both spotlessly clean and tidy. No dirty stains on the brown leather sofa. No finger marks on the TV. Microwave, toaster oven, dish rack, fruit bowl. Everything labeled and sitting neatly in its place, checked off in the Guest File. In the place it’s been when we’ve come into the condo on the last Saturday of August every year, ever since I can remember.

But we like it like that. That’s the thing about my family. We like order; we like to be in the right place at the right time. We don’t like surprises or change very much. I guess that’s why we have a time-share — so we know exactly what to expect. Same thing every year. I could even tell you which leaves will have started to turn red. It’s always the same ones. Every year.

“Perfect,” Dad says with a satisfied nod as he pulls into the parking lot. “Fourteen hundred hours.” Which is two o’clock for normal people. The exact time we’re allowed into the condo.

“Right on time,” Mom says with a smile. “Well done, darling.”

That’s what they like to be, my mom and dad. Right on time.

There’s a strange comfort as we unpack the car and settle in. It’s sort of like when winter comes and you dig out those big fluffy sweaters that you haven’t thought about all year but you suddenly remember you love, and you’re glad you’ve got the chance to wear them again.

There’s a huge TV in the middle of the living room that swivels all the way around, so you can watch it from anywhere in the room. And there’s a bed that folds out from the wall, which you’d never notice unless you knew it was there; it’s like something you’d see in a James Bond movie. Not that we ever use it — but just knowing it’s there feels exotic and mysterious. And there’s always a tray of candy on the table to welcome you. I let Craig dive into the candy while I take my bags to the room we share so I can get the best bed by the window.

I hate sharing a room with Craig. For one thing, he snores and grunts all night, and I have to creep around in the dark when I come to bed so I don’t wake him up. And then he babbles about all sorts of nonsense in the morning, telling me about his dreams of monsters made from jelly. And for another —

“Watch out, sis.”

Right on cue, the little monster barges in, plonks his backpack on the other bed, and starts pulling out its contents.

Approximately thirty seconds later, his bed and half the floor space are completely buried under a pile of clothes, a small mountain of LEGOs, five packs of candy, three pairs of dirty sneakers, and about fifty model cars, buses, and tractors.

“Done!” he says, shoving his backpack under the bed and folding his arms.

“Done?” I say. “Done what?”

“Unpacked,” he says simply. He grabs a handful of LEGOs and heads for the door.

Once he’s gone, I stare at the bomb site he’s left behind and take a deep breath.

Like I said, I *hate* sharing a room with Craig.

I guess I’m quite mature for my age. Everyone says so. “Twelve going on twenty,” my dad says. I’m the oldest in my class at school and the oldest child in the family. Sometimes it gets a bit annoying always having to be the older, sensible one — but I suppose that’s just how I am.

There’s a *thump-thump-thump* along the hallway, and Craig appears in the room again.

He grabs another handful of LEGOs, then rifles through various jean pockets till he finds a bag of candy left behind goodness knows how many eons ago. He picks a lemon ball from the bag and hands it to me. While I’m looking at it and wondering exactly where it’s been, he unwraps a chewy lollipop for himself.

“What goes ‘Ha-ha, bonk’?” he reads from the wrapper.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“A man laughing his head off.”

There’s a pause as he lets the joke digest. A second later, he falls forward on his bed and guffaws in his inimitable half-choke/half-hyena giggle that I can’t help smiling at, despite my irritation.

That's the thing with Craig. He's the only person who really annoys me, the only one who can make me want to scream with frustration, but then sometimes he can make me laugh so much I cry. The only other person who can do that is Autumn. She's the funniest person in the world and the brightest and smartest and all-around fabulousest! And she's my best friend!

Dad pokes his head around the door. "Fancy a walk, Jenni bear?"

"Yeah, why not?" I reply, wincing slightly at the pet name he's had for me since I was about three. I haven't got the heart to ask him not to use it; he'd be all hurt, and that would be even worse than being called baby names.

I put the last of my clothes into a drawer and shove my backpack into the closet. On the way downstairs, I pull my hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie. It's driving me crazy — it falls all over my face in loopy ringlets if I don't pull it back.

"Depriving us of your lovely curly locks again?" Dad says with a wink as I join him and Mom in the living room. If they had their way, I'd let it grow down to my knees, but I'm determined to get it cut, once I can persuade them it's not the end of the world. They're scared it'll be the start of a slippery slope. I've tried to explain that a change of hairstyle doesn't automatically lead to two-inch-thick makeup, multiple piercings, and a tattooed neck, but they're not convinced yet. So I just smile and discreetly pull my scrunchie a little bit tighter.

Craig is sprawled out on the living-room floor, making an incredibly complex-looking robot out of LEGOs. Mom's propped up on the sofa with a magazine and a cup of tea.

"Take it easy," Dad says, reaching over to kiss her forehead and pat her eight-months-pregnant tummy.

He ruffles Craig's hair on his way across the room. "See you later, kid," he says. Craig doesn't look up. He's concentrating too hard on the robot, his tongue poking tightly out the side of his mouth.

Dad takes my hand while we walk along the gravelly path. I stop myself from pulling away and reminding him that I'm not five years old. Instead, I let him hold it for a minute, and then pretend I have to scratch my neck so I can let go.

We walk past the second building of the complex. Together with ours, it's the modern part of Riverside Village. These two buildings were added on only about ten years ago. The other two buildings have been here for nearly a hundred years. One of them, the reception building, is ahead of us, an elongated cottage with a thatched roof and bushy green ivy all over the walls. Autumn's building is across the way from reception and the grandest of the lot. Autumn's family has one of the fancy condos on the second floor. They were updated at the same time that our building was added, and they all have huge bedrooms, massive terraces, and Jacuzzis in all three bedrooms!

We're just walking between the two buildings when the sound of a loud horn behind us nearly makes me jump out of my skin. I spin around to see a red Porsche roaring toward us.

"Autumn!" I run over to meet Autumn and her family as they pull up in the parking lot.

Autumn waves madly from the tiny backseat, where she and her little brother, Mikey, are both scrunched up with their knees practically behind their ears, suitcases on their laps, and most of the window space taken up with bags.

Autumn's dad is an artist, and her mom is the manager at the gallery where he sells his work. He bought the car as a present for himself when they sold one of his paintings for a whopping amount. He wouldn't tell us how much it went for, but

Mrs. Leonard said it could have bought them a new kitchen. So that was what he bought as *her* present when they sold the next painting!

Autumn's parents are totally fabulous. It's always crazy at their house. Lots of people are always coming by to visit, and her parents are always throwing dinner parties and having loud conversations where everyone talks at once, and no one ever tells Autumn or Mikey it's time for bed, and Autumn gets to do things like bake bread and paint on the walls. We even helped her dad make cocktails once for a party they were having. That was so cool. Bright red-and-green drinks, and we served them to all their artist friends in glasses that we frosted with pink sugar.

Their house always smells of incense that they've brought back from some exotic vacation. I feel like I'm on vacation myself when I'm over there. It's *so* different from our house. Nothing changes from one day to the next at home, and nothing's ever a mess. Although I kind of like that, too. At least you know where you are.

I guess Autumn's folks must like having at least one week of the year where life is a bit more ordered. I can't think of any other reason why they'd come to Riverside Village — except to see us, of course! Although I don't understand that one, either. Sometimes I wonder why Autumn would want me as her best friend. I'm nowhere near as interesting as she is. Whenever I tell her that, she just laughs and says I'm being stupid and we're best friends forever. And even though I still don't get why she chose me, I know it's true. She'd never lie to me.

Mrs. Leonard peels herself out of the car and smiles at me. "Hello, Jenni love," she says. "How's your mom?" She comes over and kisses me on both cheeks.

"She's fine," I say, blushing at the exotic greeting. "She's back at the condo with Craig."

"Putting her feet up for once," Dad adds.

Autumn's mom and my mom are best friends, too. While Autumn and I were splatting paint at each other and sharing books way back in kindergarten, our moms were swapping recipes and gossiping about our teachers outside on the playground. Dad and Mr. Leonard have become friends as well.

Autumn and Mikey tumble out of the car. Mikey doesn't look up from the video game he's more or less attached to. Autumn runs around the car to me, red hair flying.

"Jenni!" she yells, and we fling our arms around each other and jump up and down.

Mr. Leonard gets out of the car and gently closes the door behind him. "Watch the car, girls," he says, warding us away from his pride and joy. He reaches out to shake Dad's hand and nods over at us. "Wouldn't think this pair only saw each other yesterday, would you?" he says with a smile.

"*Yesterday?*" Dad replies in mock horror. "But that's a whole *day* ago. That's practically a lifetime!"

"Ha-ha, very funny," Autumn retorts. "For your information, there are a *million* things Jenni and I need to share since yesterday. Aren't there, Jenni?"

I giggle and grin at Autumn. "At *least* a million," I say. "Maybe even a million and a half."

"Well, they'll all have to wait because I need a hand with these," Mr. Leonard says as he pulls the last of their suitcases out of the car.

I stare at the pile of matching designer suitcases next to the Porsche.

"How on earth did you get it all in?" I ask.

Autumn beams at me. “It’s a clown car!” she says, her eyes glinting with mischievous delight. She does a silly walk while humming circus music.

Mikey looks up for the first time. “A clown car?” he says. “Where?”

Mrs. Leonard strokes his cheek. “Your sister’s joking, sweetheart,” she says. “It’s not a clown car. It’s a Porsche. Otherwise known as a middle-aged man’s midlife crisis.”

Mikey screws his nose up and looks at his sister. “What’s that?” he says.

Autumn smiles affectionately at her brother. “Just boring grown-up stuff. Nothing for us to worry about, kid,” she says, ruffling his hair.

Mikey shrugs off the ruffle and goes back to his game.

“Little brothers,” she says with a dramatic sigh. “Don’t you just love them?”

She’s joking, but I know she means it, really. Mikey brings out Autumn’s love and protectiveness like no one else can, just like Craig does with me. We love them to death — but we wouldn’t tell them in a million years!

Mikey’s two years older than Craig, so they’re not best friends or anything, but they hang out a bit when we’re here, which makes Craig feel very grown-up. Although “hanging out” might be a slight exaggeration. It’s generally a case of Mikey sitting around playing his latest video game and Craig being given the privilege of watching. But it works for them.

“OK, come on,” Dad says, reaching for my hand and pulling me away. “Let’s leave so they can unpack. I’m sure the million and a half things can last till later. See you guys at the welcome meeting?”

The welcome meeting is when the Riverside Village people tell us what activities there will be during the week. There's a little movie theater inside the reception building where they show a different film every night, and there are always lots of other things going on every day: everything from bird-watching to hot-air balloon rides.

“Absolutely!” Autumn's parents say in unison.

Autumn jumps to attention and salutes. “Aye, aye, Cap'n. See you there,” she says, and blows me a kiss as she runs off to help her parents with their bags.

I can't help wondering what crazy activity Autumn will rope me into at this year's welcome meeting. She always tries to drag me off on some zany trip — and I usually end up going. I can't imagine saying no to Autumn over anything. I think it's got something to do with the gleam in her eyes and the smile on her face. You always know that if she suggests something, it'll probably be half crazy, half goofy, but one hundred percent better than anything else — as long as you do it with her. She could even make bricklaying seem exciting! Don't ask me how; she just could.

If it wasn't for Autumn, I'd avoid any of the adventure trips. I prefer to visit museums. I know that sounds boring, but I don't think it is. Museums open my mind, and my imagination runs away with itself. All those old objects and strange artifacts make me think about all the people who used them and wonder what their lives were like.

And Dad usually drags us out on at least two mammoth walks while we're here. Walking is Dad's big thing. That and writing. He's — well, he'd say he's a writer, but that's just because he's been going to this creative-writing class and the teacher told them they all have to call themselves writers. She says that's the first step. Personally, I'd have thought the first step would be putting words to paper, but that's just my opinion.

He's really a math teacher. Assistant head of math at the same school I go to! How embarrassing is *that*? Actually, sixth grade wasn't too bad. I wasn't in his class, and as long as I never get him as my homeroom teacher, I don't mind *too* much. Mom's a therapist at the university in the next town. She doesn't talk much about her work — she pretty much pleads the Fifth every time someone asks her anything about it.

Dad and I take a walk beside the river. A great big swan and two fluffy brown cygnets are paddling in the water, swept along sideways by the rush of the current. It's flowing by faster than I've ever seen it.

"The river's high," Dad says, swinging my arm as we walk.

"It's in a hurry," I say.

Dad stands back from me and stares for a second. "That's good," he says. "I like it." Then he gets out his notebook and scribbles down what I said. You have to be careful around Dad. When he's in one of his "creative" moods, pretty much anything you say could get jotted down and saved up for the day he writes his best-selling novel.

I say "novel." What it really is, if we're honest, is a notebook that he's had for years, stuffed with scraps of paper and napkins where he's scribbled tiny half-ideas and the odd line of poetry.

He says that's the mark of a real novelist, the fact that he carries this notebook around. I've tried telling him the mark of a real novelist is a real novel, but he just closes his eyes and smiles to himself in that way that means he knows the real truths about life and I'll understand when I'm older.

I write, too, but only in my diary. I've never shown it to anyone. I'd die before doing that, although I sometimes read snippets to Autumn. She always points out

hidden meanings in what I've written, picking up on every little thing to tell me something about myself that I hadn't noticed when I wrote it. She makes me sound much more interesting than I really am!

Autumn doesn't keep a diary. She wouldn't have the patience. Everything she does has to involve moving, preferably outside, even when it's raining. She can't bear to sit still. She goes rock climbing with her dad and takes a weird dance class that a friend of her mom's runs. She's tried to get me to go to it with her, but I can't dance. I've tried, but I just freeze up. I turn so stiff, I feel as though I'm wearing a suit of armor.

You might be wondering what exactly we have in common. I do, too, sometimes. But it's as if we're two different halves of one whole or something. I can talk to her about absolutely anything, and she's the same with me. We never get bored of each other's lives. We share everything — every last detail.

Dad and I stand watching the water foam and fight as it rushes to get under the bridge. A couple of boys in sneakers and shorts climb onto the wall, and we watch them prepare to jump into the swirling water.

"I tell you," Dad says, shaking his head as the first boy splashes loudly into the water, "if either of you kids ever thinks about doing that —"

"Don't worry, Dad," I say, laughing. "I wouldn't dream of it!" We have the same conversation every year. How he even thinks I might consider it, I don't know.

"GERONIMO!" Another splash as the next boy pounds into the river.

I shudder as we move on, down to the weir. One year we'd had a really hot summer, and the weir had completely dried up. You could see a wall running across the river, only a tiny layer of water covering it up. Autumn skipped across it and dared me to do the same.

I tried to say no, but like I said, Autumn doesn't really do "no." In the end, she held my hand and practically dragged me across. I clutched her hand so tightly, she had red marks from my nails in her palm for a week.

It felt amazing once we got to the other side, so I was glad she'd insisted — as I usually am. I'd never do something like that of my own accord, though. Never in a million years. It's not that I'm a complete wimp. It's just that, well, it's dangerous! It might *look* safe, but you never know what's underneath or how slippery it is, or if the river will suddenly change and you'll get washed away and knocked unconscious on the rocks below. Too risky by half, and the Green family doesn't do risky.

We like things to be ordered, safe, predictable. That's why we come here. It's *always* predictable here. At least it always has been up to now.



Dad points to the mist swirling above the weir as we pick our way across moss-covered rocks. The water's crashing down so hard, we have to shout to hear each other. It's like Niagara Falls.

“Not surprising after all the rain we've had this summer!” Dad yells in my ear.

I stand back as some of the spray splashes a rock below us. “Let's go back!” I shout.

We pass Mr. Andrews, one of Dad's friends, on the way back to the condo. I study the woods on the other side of the river as they chat. Row after row of tall, sturdy trees — they look proud and aloof, as if they know more than we do. They've seen it all. The leaves on a group of them have turned red. The same trees every year, just one small section of the woods. How do they do it? How do they know?

“Come on, cupcake.” Dad nudges me, and I give Mr. Andrews a quick wave and an embarrassed smile as we set off. Will Dad *ever* realize I've grown out of his pet names? Will I ever have the heart to tell him?