

preview

Just Me.

Morley.

Jacquelyn Johnson

All Morley Star wants is to be allowed to adopt the kitten she rescued and for her mother's boyfriend to come home. That is all it will take to bring the good luck and the love back into their lives.

Can making armloads of wish bracelets, baking carloads of cookies, standing up to mean girl Julia and volunteering at the pet shelter possibly help?

Or is it going to take something even more powerful than all this for Morley to make her wishes come true?

A heartwarming story about a modern girl who dreams big in a small town, the true meaning of friendship and families and how they can change, first in a new series of contemporary novels.

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“OK, kiddo. Dinner’s almost ready. Time to pack up your stuff. Go call your sister!”

It’s a Friday. That’s sloppy joes night at our house. Mom’s at the stove, stirring the sizzling hamburger mixture around a fry pan. Just the smell is making my stomach rumble.

It seems like not even five minutes since I started drawing. But now I need to stop because that’s a rule in our house. We always eat dinner together at the table.

The drawing I’ve been working on is a picture of my friend Jayden riding Spirit. That’s his horse. This picture has to be especially good because it’s a gift for his birthday. He’s having a trail ride party, just like every year. His party is tomorrow.

Mom gave me a frame for this picture. It’s one of her yard sale finds. I’ve already sanded the frame and painted it. And cleaned the glass. We bought a new mat for it. It’s ready to put together and wrap as soon as this drawing is finished.

She already said that after dinner she’ll help me frame it, which is why I need it to be done. But something still isn’t right. Is it the way Spirit is raising his head?

Or is it Jayden's face? Or is it the background?

I can't decide what's wrong. It looks like Jayden and Spirit, but it also sort of doesn't. It's really bugging me that I don't know what's wrong with it. Not much use asking my mom, because all she'll say is, "Oh, I'm sure Jayden will like it because you're such good friends."

That's no help at all.

I totally hate quitting in the middle of doing something, especially when it's a drawing or painting or a story I'm writing and I'm trying to get it to be *brilliant*. Exactly the way it was in my head when I first thought it up.

But it seems like the more I try to fix it, the worse it gets. And it needs to get done. That's what I'm thinking about as I pack up my markers and pencils, load them on a chair to take to our room, and start setting the table.

"Morley, leave that," Mom says and I can hear the impatience and edgy tiredness in her voice, which happens a lot more lately. But it's a Friday. She's probably just tired of being at school all week. I know I am. "Go call your sister!"

I have no idea where Crazy Daisy is right now. But, as Mom is always saying, I'm almost eleven and the Big Sister. That means Daisy is My Responsibility.

I hope she's in the room we share, but that isn't very likely for two reasons. Reason One is I can't hear her making noise anywhere and Daisy is one of those people that you can *always* hear. It's amazing how

much noise she can make. Reason Two is she hasn't interrupted me, like a million times to get her a snack or make the remote work or let her use my markers or help her find her *green* fairy wand or *who knows what else*.

There are four people in our family. Or three, right now. Me. Mom. Daisy. The fourth one is Danny, who's my mother's partner, but he left in February. Mom says he's gone to the city for his job. I don't know why he can't find work here, like he used to. But when I say this, Mom just says, "Not now, Morley," and I know when I'm being told to just shut up.

Something Daisy never does. But then, I usually try to tune her out. Not right now, when I'm listening for her, but all I hear is the upstairs renters moving around. Right at this moment the messy room we share and our whole part of the house is quiet, meaning no Daisy.

She must be outside. Winter is almost over, but it's April. Still wet out. And cold. But at least all the snow has finally melted away, leaving the ground brown and squishy. The trees are just standing around waiting to get dressed in their new neon leaves. The skies are sad looking and it's started to drizzle.

Out back, Daisy is nowhere in sight.

Our backyard is not much wider than our house and garage, but it slopes down and goes way back, all the way to what used to be the train tracks, but that was long ago, before I was born. Now it's been turned into the rail trail for walkers and hikers. Beyond that there's flat land, where the settlers farmed. And then,

of course, the ocean.

In summer there are flowers and a vegetable garden just beyond the patio, then a patch of grass and a row of lilacs.

Beyond that, there's the trampoline, then a lot of empty space that's more like a wild meadow with a path through it and little secret places with benches to sit. Mom wanted to have a goat and maybe some chickens, but we live at the east end of town, just inside the town boundary, so they don't let you.

Which I think is just another stupid rule.

At the very back there are more trees and then a little trickle of a stream, too small for swimming in or fishing or anything useful. But it looks pretty. There are frogs and minnows in it. And sometimes Daisy, in her princess rain boots, but she's not there right now.

Next to the stream is my favorite thing about our yard. It's a huge apple tree, all rough and gnarly because it's ancient. It might be 200 years old, or even older, Danny says. This old tree has a falling-down treehouse that somebody made before we lived here. The treehouse is as high up as the upstairs balcony on the front of our house.

From up in the treehouse you can see all our back yard and garden, all the way up the slope to the house.

Last summer my mother helped me fix up the treehouse. I put a few old cushions up there and some of my books and a couple of my drawings are pinned to the walls. There's a tin with cookies in it, and some

juice boxes. In summer, sometimes I go up there to hang out with Sam and Jayden. It's a good place to get away from Daisy.

Mom is the one who taught me how to hammer in nails and how to sand and paint things, so they look new again.

This summer Mom says Danny might be coming back. *Might*, she says. That would be exactly one half of my secret wishes magically coming true! And when they do, it will be a sign that the good luck is coming back to our family. Thinking this makes me smile.

That's what I'm thinking even though I'm getting wet, trudging all the way to the back of our yard, calling Daisy's name, telling her come on, supper's ready. And getting soakers because I forgot to put on my boots.

Daisy doesn't answer.

And now it's really starting to rain. I reach into my pockets. I find old used tissues. A folded piece of paper. A quarter. Pocket fuzz. That's all. My gloves aren't there.

I'm getting wet. And cold. And hungry.

"Daisy," I keep yelling. I'm all the way at the very back of our property now, where I know it isn't possible to see from where Mom's probably watching out for us from the kitchen window. Or trying to, even though you can't see all the way down to the end of our yard from there. "Come on, where are you?"

She giggles, and I look up.

And there she is, up in the apple tree, sitting on the very edge of the little deck of the treehouse. "Fooled you, Morley!" she calls down to me. "Bet you didn't know I can get up here, but I can. Just like you!"

"Come on down!" I yell, but all she says is, "Can't!"

I look around for the rope ladder, but there's no sign of it.

"Come on," I holler. "Get the ladder and climb down! Mom says we have to come for supper right NOW!"

Daisy just laughs and stands up, right at the edge, holding the rope ladder. It's broken, so now it's just one rope, with some sticks hanging off it. I don't know how she could have used it to get up there or how the ladder got broken but I don't stop to figure it out.

I have no idea how she got up there. Right now, Daisy needs to get down. That's all that matters.

But how? There aren't any low branches on the apple tree, so there's no way to climb up to the treehouse without the ladder.

Or a ladder.

Then I remember that there's one in the garage. It's one of those metal ones, too long and heavy for me to carry all this way, but I can balance it on the wheelbarrow and push it back here. Or get Mom to help.

"Sit down RIGHT NOW!" I shout up to Daisy. "STAY THERE. I'll get the ladder from the garage and get you down. But you need to WAIT till I go get it."

"Don't want to!" she says, in her sing-song-y voice.

"Silly old Morley. You're not the boss of me!" and she's standing up now, dancing around and trying to do a handstand on the little deck above me.

Even though it's raining and that treehouse deck must be slippery.

She's really starting to frighten me. Daisy is always what Danny calls, "a real little dare-devil." She isn't afraid of heights, or the dark, or monsters under the bed, or witches hiding in her closet, or getting a bad report card.

Or anything.

Daisy usually has band-aids on her somewhere but she doesn't seem to care. With all her dare-devil stunts like trying to hold her breath underwater for longer than me, or do skateboard tricks, or when she jumped off the top bunk, so Mom made Danny take the bunk beds apart, she never gets hurt. Scrapes, of course, and bruises sometimes but never anything serious.

Mom is always telling Daisy to just behave, missy, or she'll be sorry.

Danny always just laughs and says Daisy is like him, easy-going and up for anything. She's got his Irish luck by the boatload, he says.

"Look at me, Morley!" Daisy shouts now. "I'm a famous acrobat! I'll do a trick and you can catch me, just like Daddy does!"

That's her thing, being an acrobat. A famous one. It started after she saw some acrobats on *America's Got Talent*. Before that, she wanted to be a ski jumper in

the Olympics, or an ice dancer and do all those spins and jumps and leaps and throws through the air and win prizes.

Or a race car driver. Or an astronaut. Mom says she'll grow out of all that foolishness eventually.

Danny thinks it's hilarious.

He'd get her down. Or catch her.

But he isn't here.

I am.

And I know this is crazy dangerous.

"No, Daisy. Don't. Please. Just wait. PLEASE. Sit down and stay still! I'll get you down, as soon as I go get the ladder! Just STAY there!"

"NO-oooooooooooooh" Daisy shrieks.

As I turn to go back to the house, fetch the ladder, tell Mom, then hurry back here, working out in my head how fast I can possibly do all these things, I look back and Daisy isn't on the deck anymore.

She's flying through the air, arms and legs spread out, like a snow angel pasted on the sky. And she's laughing like crazy.

It's as if she's flying.

Without even thinking, I try to catch her.

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