how to be a goldfish

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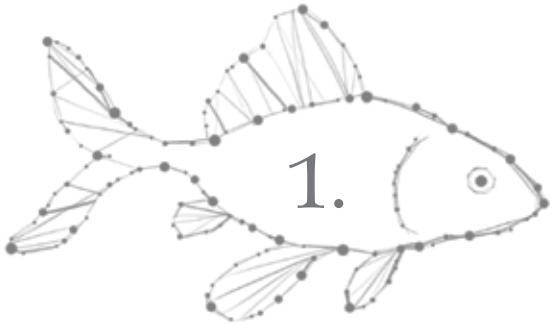
For Frédérique and Gabrielle



1.

Lizzie

I bet there aren't many kids who can say social studies changed their life, but it changed mine. It really did. If it weren't for social studies, Harry's farm would be history, and I would have never figured out who David was. He'd be just some city kid who passed through Scotch Gully one day in May.

It was last period and I was busting for school to be over so I could get outside. The grass was thick and green; the gullies, those hillside ditches that gave our town its name, were still fat with spring runoff; the sky was blue and cloudless; and at Harry's, the ewes were due to lamb any day. Harry was the closest thing I had to a grandfather, and great as he was, to him I was still a kid. So when he said I could name the first lamb born, I knew he expected a cute little-kid name like Curly, Fluffy or Snowflake, but I had my own ideas.

For a ewe lamb, I'd narrowed it down to *Baa*-rbra or Tina *Baa*-llerina. Harry wouldn't get it, but I thought it was hilarious. I grinned, just thinking about the look on his face when I told him.

That grin disappeared when I walked into social studies and saw the maps pulled down and covering both sides of the chalkboard. Those maps rolled down like that meant we were about to have a pop quiz. By the time I took my seat, kids were buzzing like a nest of angry yellow jackets.

"Settle down," Miss Gambacort said. "It is not a quiz."

"Then what is it?" Gordon McInnis asked.

"A special project."

Gordon groaned so loudly he sounded like a cow in a branding chute. "Ah, c'mon, Miss G," he said. "Please don't make us sit in the library. It's way too nice to be stuck inside."

"You won't need the school's encyclopedias for this project, Gordon."

Miss G walked to the world map. She pulled the chrome handle down, then let it go. The map rolled up into its case smooth as corn silk, and that's saying something since that map had been around so long that some of the countries had new names.

Underneath that map in blue chalk, it said, EVERY FAMILY HAS A HERO.

I guess that's true. Grandfather Ross — my

mom's dad — died fighting in World War II, and my grandma lost three uncles in World War I.

"I want you to discover firsthand that history isn't just dates and places in a textbook or encyclopedia. History happens to people. Each one of you," Miss G said, "will interview a family member. Your assignment is to find out what their life was like and uncover the challenges they faced."

I put up my hand.

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"Can we write about someone who's not alive anymore?"

"No. It has to be someone you can actually interview."

Reluctantly I pointed at the chalkboard. "But that says 'Every family has a hero.'" Miss G tipped her head to the side like she didn't understand. She was new to Scotch Gully so maybe she didn't know about me yet. I picked my next words carefully. "I've only got two people in my family — my mom and grandma. They're great and all, but they're not very interesting. Or heroic."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. I knew better than to draw attention to my family. I looked around the class expecting the worst. To my surprise, most people's heads were nodding, as though they were thinking the exact same thing about their families. I guess that

made sense. How were any of us supposed to find a hero in our tiny town, where most folks were farmers and have been for generations?

"I think you'll be surprised, Lizzie. Class, it's 1981. We have televisions and microwave ovens. Some of you may even have a VCR. But your parents were born in the 1940s, when those things didn't exist. Some houses didn't even have indoor plumbing. Ask your grandparents what it was like to use an outhouse when it was minus twenty degrees."

I didn't see how using an outdoor privy in the winter made someone a hero, but I didn't want to invite trouble by drawing even more attention to my family, so I kept my mouth shut this time.

"You look doubtful, Lizzie," Miss G said. "What do you think makes someone a hero?"

"I dunno," I answered. "Fighting in a war, I guess."

"Good. Any other ideas, class?"

"Pulling someone from a burning building," Gordon said.

Kids started calling out more answers: saving folks from earthquakes, tornados, tidal waves, and all manner of natural disasters, none of which had ever happened here in Scotch Gully. Like I said, this isn't a place for heroes.

"Those are all fine ideas," said Miss G. "Can we agree to call them action heroes?"

"Yeah! Like Han Solo," Gordon called, and the class started buzzing again. A whole year after *The Empire Strikes Back* came out, and the boys in my class were still nuts for Stars Wars. It's all they talked about on the school bus. That and hockey.

"Settle down, class." Once things got quiet, Miss G explained, "Not all heroes leap into the fray. There are quiet heroes too. People who take a stand to protect the weak or to right a wrong."

"Like on the news last night," Carolyn Cousins said. I like Carolyn. Her dad and grandad were the county vets, and she liked animals as much as me.

"Explain, Carolyn."

"Well, it said on the news there was going to be another rally in Toronto this afternoon, because of those three hundred men who got arrested in February for being gay, and because of how badly the police treated them. My dad said Margaret Atwood gave a speech at the last big rally. So people like that, who try to help, would be quiet heroes, right?"

"Exactly, Carolyn," Miss G said, then she pointed right at me. At least I thought so, but it wasn't me she was looking at. It was Bethany, in the desk behind me. Bethany Budge is what my grandma calls a piece of work. She's had it in for me for as long as I remember. I try to avoid her, but that's not easy. Scotch Gully is a small town, and our school is even smaller.

"Yes, Bethany?" Miss G asked.

"My grandmother says all the gays are going to Hell."

BAM. Just like that, in the space of a finger snap, the whole classroom went silent. All eyes were on Miss G, waiting to see what she'd do. She took a deep breath and held it in like she was counting to ten, which is exactly what my grandma tells me to do when I'm upset.

Finally, she spoke. "You've all heard of Nellie McClung, Rosa Parks and Gandhi?"

Everyone nodded.

"Well, they were also protestors, and now we call them heroes. But I think we've strayed, class. Let's get back to your projects."

I wished I could see Bethany's face right then, but I didn't dare turn around. Instead, I kept my eyes fixed on Miss G as she picked up a piece of chalk and wrote INTERVIEW on the board in big letters.

"A good interview will reveal something about your subject that you never knew before, and that is what I want you to write about. One student will be chosen to represent our class and share their report on Parents' Day."

Parents' Day is a huge deal. By the time everyone's brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins show up, it feels like all of Scotch

Gully is squeezed into the school gym. I couldn't imagine anything worse than standing up on that stage in front of the whole town, talking about my family and reminding folks of the very thing I wanted them to forget.

Nope. I could never do that. It would be like trying to put out the last coals of a campfire with a can of gasoline. But I had nothing to worry about on that score. My project would be dull as dirt — my mom was only a small-town lawyer, and my grandma was just a part-time librarian.

Miss G moved across the front boards to the map of North America and pulled the handle down. When the map rolled up into its case, new instructions were revealed, written in green chalk this time.

SHARE YOUR HISTORY: CREATE A FAMILY TREE.

- Trace your family back to when they came to this country (or as far back as you can).
- Show their names and explain how they are related to you.
- The Scotch Gully Mercantile has stocked poster board especially for our class.

That was thoughtful. It meant nobody's mom or dad would have to drive all the way to the Woodward's in Arbroath County.

Then I noticed the very last line.

- All family tree posters will be hung in the gym for the Parents' Day assembly.

Oh no!

"Psst. Psst, Lizzie Ross."

Bethany Budge. I fixed my eyes on the chalkboard, hoping she'd take the hint and leave me alone. Hard to believe now, but back in kindergarten I desperately wanted to be Bethany's friend. At church on Sunday, the Budges take up two whole pews. Bethany has five older brothers who always seem to be bossing her around, teasing her or ignoring her. But they stick up for her too. When she wears her hair Princess Leia–style, with her braids wrapped around her ears like two cinnamon buns, or on the school bus when she talks like Yoda, no one, not even Gordon McInnis, dares make fun of her. Those Budges might fight amongst themselves, but they take care of their own.

I wanted a big family like that so badly it hurt. Between polio and two world wars, there are only three people left in my family. I mean, I love my mom and grandma, I do, but it's always just the three of us at home, and sometimes the quiet feels thick and too heavy. Back in kindergarten, when I asked Bethany to be my recess buddy, she made a face and said, "My gran says I'm not allowed to play with you." Then she shoved me. It wasn't hard, but I was so startled, I fell down and landed on my backside.

"Hey, Lizzie Ross," Bethany said now in a voice

low enough not to attract the teacher's attention. "I'm talking to you."

I wished with all my heart that Bethany would just hush up, but I'd never been able to wish Bethany Budge away. It's like Grandma always said, "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

"I can't wait to see your family tree," Bethany whispered. "Do you even know who your father is?"

I tried to swallow, but my spit had dried up. When I didn't answer, she leaned so far across her desk that I could feel her breath on my neck. It smelled like warm egg salad with too many onions.

"My gran says you're a bastard," Bethany whispered. "She says your mom's hippie ways are a bad influence on the whole town."

I should have turned around and faced her then. I should have defended my mom and told Bethany to shut her mouth. But I didn't. Some dogs drop their tails and slink their bellies low when you catch them out. Other dogs are fighters, stand their ground, and growl like they've got angels behind them. Bethany was like that. A fighter. Calling her out would only have made things worse.

My hands clenched and unclenched. I tried counting to ten, but I only got to three before Bethany spit-whispered again.

"My gran says in the old days, bastards like you got adopted out to real families."

I knew I shouldn't let anything Bethany said bother me. I knew she was just being a mouthpiece for her grandmother. But I couldn't help it — it hurt. I blinked really fast to make the tears stop. Then, like it was the most important thing in the world, I opened my notebook and copied all the project instructions word for word.

When the school bell finally rang, I grabbed my stuff, shoved it in my backpack as fast as I could and ran for the school bus. I had to get a front-row seat. Not even Bethany Budge would dare pick a fight within earshot of Mr. Carson, our bus driver.

* * *

I'd been taking the same bus ride since I was five years old. Usually, I loved looking out the bus window and noticing the small things along the way; each fall as the leaves changed to orange, yellow and red; the way winter snowfalls left mounds like winter beanies on top of everyone's mailbox; and the return of the turkey vultures each spring circling high above the fields and gullies. But after what Bethany had said, I didn't see anything. All I wanted was to get to Harry's farm. I needed to feel the sun on my face and smell the grass and apple blossoms, the manure and new leaves.

The stop-sign arm swung out, and the school bus doors opened. As soon as my feet hit the ground, my chest started to fill with air like I'd been

holding my breath, and I could finally breathe. That first gulp tasted of apple blossoms. I drank it down. The petals had begun dropping the week before. Soon they'd be gone, and when that happened, Harry would announce that it was time to start making manure tea. The only thing I'd be smelling on the farm then would be sheep poo. Harry claimed that manure tea was the secret to his prize-winning vegetables, so every year I helped him by collecting bags and bags of ewe berries — a.k.a. sheep poo. Then we shovelled, stirred and strained that poo into manure tea.

"That's life on a farm," Harry always said. "Some things stink, but others are downright beautiful."

Today had been a stinker. I needed a little dog love.

"Expo," I called, as I walked to the farmhouse. *Where was he?* He usually met the bus, tail wagging, and walked with me up the long drive. "Hey, Expo!"

There was still no sign of him by the time I reached the front pasture. Just the ewes grazing, their bellies fat with baby lambs. It wouldn't be long now.

I was almost at the farmhouse by the time I spotted Expo, and when I did it almost made me forget about Bethany. Expo was riding behind Harry on the ancient tractor, tongue out and paws up on

Harry's shoulders as the tractor bounced, groaned and growled its way along. The tractor pulled an old trailer, the one Harry made ages ago, back when my mom was a kid and used to come here after school like I do now. Today that trailer was piled high with willow switches. I knew what that meant — Harry and Expo had been down by the creek.

Expo barked when he saw me, and Harry slowed the tractor way down. A few years ago, Expo would have just jumped off while the tractor was moving and raced toward me. These days he waited for it to almost stop before he climbed down, careful to look for footholds at every step. He was limping again, favouring his right side. My worry must have shown on my face because Harry called, "He's okay, Lizzie. He's been chasing rabbits all afternoon. He's just knackered."

Harry's good like that, saying things a person needs to hear. I smiled a thank you, then asked, "Did he catch any?"

Harry shook his head. "Those rabbits get quicker every year." That was to make me feel better too.

"Looks like a good willow harvest, Harry. I'll help you unload and sort." I wasn't ready to talk about school yet.

"First, we'll have our snack."

"On the porch?"

"Of course. Now off and wash your hands."

Harry put the tractor in gear. It moved, coughing and belching, round the back of the house to the old cast-iron bathtub that Harry found at the town dump a few years back and dragged home to soak his willow branches. He called that taking the spite out of the willow.

I left my backpack on the porch, then headed inside to the kitchen sink. Expo was close on my heels; he knew what was coming next. If the smell of fresh-baked zucchini bread made my mouth water, Expo would be leaving a snail-trail of drool all across Harry's clean floors.

In the kitchen, two fresh loaves sat on a wire rack beside the stove. After I washed up, I readied a tray with two plates, two glasses, a jar of last year's apple jam and a pot of butter. I cut three slices of zucchini bread and put them on a plate — one each for me, Harry and Expo. But Expo's never been much for waiting. He was headbutting my leg. Greedy old thing.

"I'd never forget you, boy," I said, scratching him behind the ears where he liked it best. "Aw, what the heck." I sliced him an extra piece and fed it to him quick before Harry got back. "Don't tell on me."

I took a carton of milk from the fridge, added it to the tray and carried everything out to the porch. By the time I got there, Harry was already climbing the porch steps.

I always liked this part of the day. Just Harry and me sitting together still and quiet, listening to the frogs and crickets. I didn't want to spoil that by talking about my trouble at school, so I said, "So, Harry, how long did it take you to get that old tractor started this time?"

"A little longer each year," he answered. "But nothing that a little duct tape, a lot of patience and one of Mrs. Macrath's hairpins can't fix."

Harry was always naming things around the farm for Mrs. Macrath. Those hairpins, the heavy black roasting pan that was big enough to cook a whole piglet, the beat-up white coffee percolator with three blue cornflowers on the side that he claimed made the world's best coffee, the upright piano in the parlour and even the enormous enamel tub we used when it was time to wrestle Expo into a bath. Harry called them all Mrs. Macrath's *this* and Mrs. Macrath's *that*. When I was little, I imagined that there was an enormous Mrs. Macrath Factory somewhere in the city that made it all.

"Better not lose Mrs. Macrath's hairpin, Harry, or you might have to use your bodkin next time you need to clean the spark plugs."

Harry pretended to look horrified, and I laughed some more. Harry's bodkin was precious. It's the tool he used to make his willow furniture.

"You know, Lizzie, I could teach you how to

make baskets. You could sell them with me at the farmers' markets. That's what your mother did back when she was your age and came here after school." One corner of Harry's mouth turned up in a half-smile. "That mother of yours," he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side, "was mad for horses. Making willow baskets was how she saved enough to get one. It could be a good way for you to start saving."

"Saving for what? I don't want a horse."

"There must be something you want, Lizzie. Everyone's got some secret wish."

I did, it's true. But I could sell a thousand baskets and make a pile of money and never get any closer. My secret wish wasn't something you could buy. What I dreamed about was sitting around a Thanksgiving table, elbow to elbow with brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. Or filling up an entire church pew with my very own family.

Thinking about my secret wish made me think about school and having to hang our family tree posters in the gym for Parents' Day. I hated knowing it would remind folks how different my family was from theirs, and I worried that Bethany's gran would start up her back-fence talking about Mom and me again.

I looked up at Harry. He was looking right back at me.

"Did something happen at school today, Lizzie?"

I nodded. Harry always could tell when I was chewing on a problem.

"I've got some trouble, Harry."

While I dug out my notebook from my backpack, I told him everything Bethany had said. Then I opened the book to the page where I'd written the instructions for the social studies assignment. I handed it to Harry. He read it. Slowly.

When he was done, he set it in his lap and said, "Oh dear."

"You see how bad this is, right? I don't know anything about my father or his family. Bethany Budge has already started taking pokes, and it's not like I can talk to Mom. She doesn't think there's a problem. She'd just tell me to hold my head high and say, 'Our family has nothing to be ashamed of.' But, Harry, I'm not that brave."

"You're plenty brave, Lizzie."

I shook my head. "Mom's brave. She doesn't care what folks say or think."

"That's true. But I sometimes wonder."

"Wonder what, Harry?"

"Well, has your mother been able to make those brave choices as an adult because of how safe and secure she felt growing up here?"

"You mean because she never had to explain why her dad wasn't around?" I shrugged. "I guess

you're right. Everyone in town knows that Grandfather Ross died in the war. Plus, it's plain as white bread that her parents were married. Grandma was a Sinclair when she left Scotch Gully and a Ross when she came back."

Harry didn't say anything at first. But his forehead got all wrinkly. He looked out over the fields, and I wondered if he'd spotted a ewe in trouble. Finally, he said, "I'm sad to say that around here, that still matters. Being different can be hard, Lizzie. That's something I understand all too well."

"Is that why folks around here don't know about how you grew up?"

Harry had told me his story not long after I started school and had my first run-in with Bethany Budge. He said it was the first time he'd told anyone in years. Not even my mom or grandma had heard it before then.

Harry nodded. "I wanted to fit in. I didn't want to give people in town a reason to talk. I suppose you and I are the same that way."

He was right, but I still had a problem. For kids in my class, making a family tree was no big deal. Scotch Gully was the kind of place where folks married right out of high school, and most stayed together even when they fought like cats and dogs. Here, family farms were passed down from generation to generation, sometimes with three

generations living under one roof. Not my family. Grandma headed west after high school, and her only sibling was an older sister with polio. There was no one to take over, so her dad sold off the land. Now all that's left of our farm is the house. And all that's left of our family is me, Mom and Grandma. I'm the only weirdo in town. Well, me and Harry.

"What am I going to do about this?" I asked, pointing to the page in my notebook where my family tree sat almost empty, but full as I could make it.

"I might just have an idea or two."

"Really? That would be great because the only idea I had was not doing it. But that's not an option. Can you imagine what my mom would say if I didn't hand in my homework?"

"I believe she'd have kittens," Harry said, chuckling. "Lizzie, remember those stories I told you about when I was a little boy in England?"

Mom says my face misbehaves before my brain kicks in. I guess she's right because I was halfway through what she'd call a teenage eye-roll when Harry started to chuckle. "I gather by that look on your face that you're not interested in hearing my story again."

"Sure I am, Harry. It's just . . ."

"It's just that you don't see what this has to do with your school project." He chuckled again. "Stay

with me, Lizzie. When I was very little, I travelled along with a pair of street performers. My job was to soften up the punters — the audience — so they'd loosen their wallets. All I needed to do was look like the pitiful child I was. My earliest memory is being propped up at the side of a road and given a tin cup to rattle while she sang songs or told fortunes and he played the fiddle or did magic tricks and, yes, even picked some pockets."

"I remember, Harry." I also remembered that this part of Harry's life was not nearly so cheery as he was making it sound now. I've heard him tell a different version of this story where he was cold and always hungry, all because his mom — the person who was supposed to protect him — traded him for a bottle of alcohol when he was just a year old.

Harry said, "I was with those performers almost three years. I knew their act inside and out. And while some of it became dull, like seeing the same skits and hearing the same songs over and over, I never got tired of watching them do magic."

"Harry, how does any of this help me?"

"Magic."

"Aww, Harry . . ."

I couldn't hide my disappointment. He smiled, then leaned forward and ruffled my hair.

"Do you know how magicians do what they do, Lizzie?"

"I know it's not magic."

"Fair enough," Harry chuckled. "But have you heard of misdirection?" He stretched his right hand to the side, reaching as far over the porch railing as he could go. "A magician will do something over here," Harry said, wiggling his fingers. Then suddenly, he pointed to the orchard, his eyes all wide and surprised looking. I turned around to see what he was looking at, but there was nothing there. When I turned back, he was holding the last piece of zucchini bread.

"Misdirection," Harry said and waggled his eyebrows. "While you were busy looking where I was pointing, I had time to take this." Expo's head was on Harry's knee, and he was staring at that zucchini bread, looking hopeful and pitiful at the same time. Harry broke off a corner and fed it to him. "Expo wasn't fooled, were you, boy?"

"Okay, Harry. I get what misdirection is, but how's that going to help me?"

"How about this for a start?" He took my notebook and turned to the page where I'd tried to fill in my family tree. Five names. That was all I had. Right beside the box labelled *Father*, Harry made a neat fold in the page, making my father's side of the family tree disappear.

I had to admit it solved a big problem. I couldn't have filled in those boxes. Even my mom didn't

know much of anything about my father's family.

"But, Harry, people are still going to notice. It won't stop the gossip."

"Then add more misdirection. Keep their eyes so busy and entertained looking at your mother's side of the family that they don't have time to notice what's missing."

"Entertained how? A family tree is just a chart with names and dates."

"It can be whatever you make it, Lizzie. To start, you could put in pictures."

Pictures were a good idea, but for the misdirection to really work, I'd need something more. Stories might work . . . if they were good ones.

I've always liked the story of Grandfather Ross. The way Grandma told it he was a real Scotsman, only one year off the boat and seeking to make a name for himself in this country when war broke out. Grandma had just left Scotch Gully and gone west to join her sister. When she stepped off the train in Vancouver on Dominion Day, July 1st, 1940, she saw Phillip Ross standing on the platform looking dashing in his uniform. Grandma said their eyes met, and they both just knew. It was love at first sight.

But Grandfather Ross had already enlisted. He knew he might have to ship out any day, so he didn't waste a minute, and just ten short days after they

met, he got down on one knee and proposed. They married at city hall the very next day. Soon after, he got his orders and shipped out overseas. And not too long after that, Grandma found out she was pregnant with my mom. Then, tragedy happened. Grandfather Ross's plane got shot down over Italy. He never got to meet his daughter, and my mom never got to meet her dad. Sort of like me — I've never met my father either. The difference was Mom's dad was a war hero. I'm pretty sure mine wasn't.

Grandma said my father got drafted into the American army but didn't want to fight in Vietnam, so he ran north to Toronto. My mom explained it differently. She said my father didn't believe in wars and fighting. She called him a conscientious objector. But I watched the CBS news, and that's not what Walter Cronkite called those guys. He called them draft dodgers. My dad must have been an expert dodger. He didn't just dodge the draft. When my mom told him she was pregnant, he dodged that too. My dad packed his bags and moved to Amsterdam. That was almost fourteen years ago. We haven't heard from him since.

That was definitely not a story I'd put on my poster board for the whole town to see. I knew stuff like that shouldn't matter in 1981 — at least that's what my mom said — but Scotch Gully was an old-fashioned, everyone-goes-to-church kind of

place. Still, I thought this whole misdirection thing might work if I could collect enough good stories about my mom's family. Grandma had some uncles who fought in World War I. I could work with that.

"Harry," I said. "You're a genius. I know exactly what to do."

"What's that, Lizzie?"

"I'm going to make little story scrolls and attach them to the poster board. Then people can unroll each one and read it. No, wait! I've got an even better idea!" I was getting excited. "I'll make little doors in the poster board that open, and behind each door will be that person's story. People will be so busy opening all the doors and reading all the stories they won't notice what's not there."

"I'd say you've got a winner of an idea there, Lizzie. Now, how about you take Expo and collect the eggs?"