

Paper Things

By Jennifer Richard Jacobson

“Is there laundry in your apartment building?” Janna asked Gage. “Are you going to make sure that Ari has clean clothes for school?”

I kept my head down but sat perfectly still. I’d asked lots of my own questions about our new apartment, but so far my brother had been vague with his answers. Mostly he’d said, “Wait till you see, Ari! You’ll be able to decorate *real* rooms in our place.”

“Who do you think did her laundry before we came here?” he said, and then bolted upstairs to his room before Janna could say anything more.

“I should call Legal Services,” she said, more to the air than to me. “I don’t care that he’s your brother. I don’t care that he’s nineteen. I’m sure they would agree that you should stay put.” She paced, but she didn’t call. Gage said that she couldn’t call, because if the truth came out about how she’d treated him and how she was trying to keep us apart, she’d lose any chance she had of ever getting me back. Not that he planned on giving me back, he’d been quick to reassure me.

By the time Gage had returned downstairs—with my duffel bag and his backpack in tow—I’d finished with the Pottery Barn catalog and stood by the sink, as if waiting for a bus. As soon as Gage was within earshot, Janna turned to me and said, “Who do *you* want to live with, Ari?”

I’d been dreading that moment. For days the two of them had been battling, fighting to claim me, like I was a goldfish and not an eleven-year-old person who has her own feelings.

But I was ready for it. I'd been practicing my answer: "I wish—"

"Don't do that to her!" Gage shouted, getting up in Janna's face. "Don't put her on the spot like that. You know she doesn't want to hurt you. But I'm her *family*! Not you. Me!"

"Your mother wouldn't want—" Janna started.

"Our mother said to stay together," Gage shouted. "Always! 'Stay together always!' Those were her exact words."

Janna had folded her arms and pursed her lips. It was a look that Gage often imitated to make fun of her—though I could tell that he was way beyond being amused at this point.

"Be reasonable, Gage. You're young. You've got things you want to do. Dreams for yourself. Do you really think you can do all of that while taking care of Ari?"

Once again, they were back to discussing me like I wasn't even there.

"What do you know about my dreams?" Gage yelled. "All you've ever cared about is Ari. And trying to make her love you. But guess what? She doesn't love you. She loves me. Her *family*."

Janna flinched as if he'd hit her.

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words escaped.

"Come on, Ari." Gage had said. "Time to go."

I begged Janna without saying a word: *Please, Janna, tell Gage you're sorry. Ask him to stay.*

Janna just stared at me, long and hard, like she was waiting for me to say my thoughts aloud. But I didn't—I couldn't—and eventually she went back to tidying up the living room. "I'll see you soon, Ari," she said

in her friendly voice. Like I was the run-away badger, Frances, who was going no farther than beneath the dining-room table.

I wanted to press a rewind button, but I wasn't sure how far I'd have to go back.

"Bye, Janna," I said as we walked out the door. I wanted to add "Thanks for being our guardian" or even "Love you," but I knew both of those things would upset Gage.

I'm pretty sure Janna didn't answer me.

Two blocks away from Janna's house, Gage cleared his throat. "Listen, Ari, there's something I need to tell you."

That's when I learned that Gage had lied.

We didn't have an apartment. Not yet.

We didn't have a home of any kind.

That was the beginning of February. This is almost the end of March. We still don't.