

6th in HETTY series

It's Me, Pippa!



Written and Illustrated by
Martha Sears West

PREVIEW

IT'S ME, PIPPA!

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by
Martha Sears West



CLEAN KIND WORLD
Los Angeles

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Text and Illustrations

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Edited by Page Mallett

IT'S ME, PIPPA!

Sixth in Hetty Series

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With love and gratitude to my grandchildren . . .

Stephen Guy, Ray, Andrew David, Brigham Adam, Gen,
Katie, Becky, Emma Colleen, Rick, and Jane Martha,

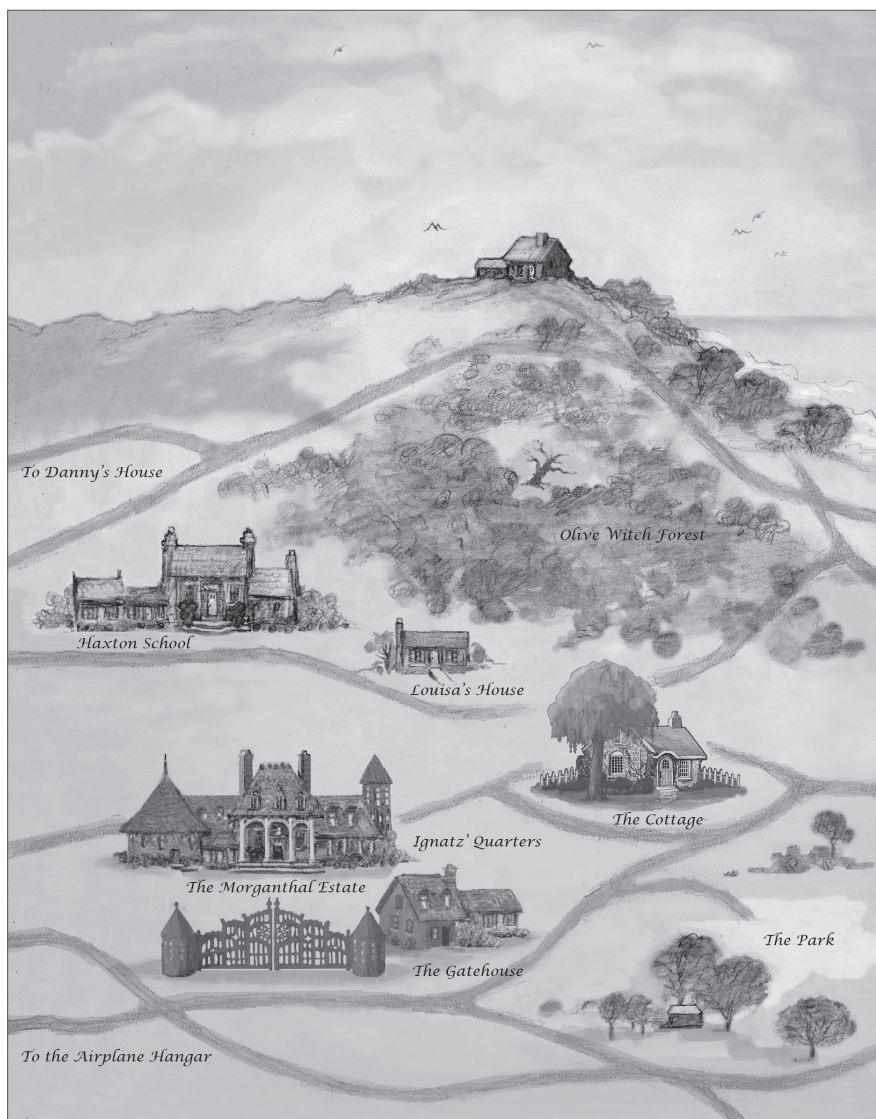
. . . who inspire the future with optimism.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	1
No Sissy Girl	
The Wind	
Natz Gorman at Your Service	
Watching Clouds	
Rosie	
 CHAPTER TWO	 25
I'll Get Hit by a Bus	
Something Fishy	
The Rescue	
No Piece of Cake	
 CHAPTER THREE	 35
Responsible	
Bop and Mucket	
Puzzle Pieces	
A Blank Screen	

CHAPTER FOUR	51
Half True	
Sticky	
Wondering	
Loneliness	
 CHAPTER FIVE	 65
Worms	
Down the Drain	
The Pallbearer	
Bittersweet	
 CHAPTER SIX	 79
Burma Shave	
Keeping Them Entertained	
Linked	
To Make It Happen	
 CHAPTER SEVEN	 91
Like Regular People	
Imagine	
In Business	
The Headache	
 CHAPTER EIGHT	 105
Bless Her Heart	
I Promise	
Boots and Buttercups	
A Soaking Rain	

CHAPTER NINE	120
Dangling	
Lemonade Powder	
Message from the Grave	
Revising the List	
CHAPTER TEN	135
In the Margins	
The Spaghettisburg Address	
Gone	
Farewell	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	149
A Good Sheepdog	
Dear Editor	
Game Plan	
Like I Promised	
CHAPTER TWELVE	159
Like Sweet Butter	
The Deep End	
For Her Own Good	
Zona	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	171
The Broken Nose	
So What?	
Home at Last	
Resplendent	



To Danny's House



Haxton School



Louisa's House

Olive Witch Forest



The Cottage



The Morgenthal Estate

Ignatz' Quarters



The Gatehouse

To the Airplane Hangar

The Park



ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Pippa found Natz needed more guidance than most adults ..</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Listen to the birds. Oh, how beautiful!</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Her rear end wagged, along with her tail</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Pippa had to admit Al was a pretty cool kid</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>It's not fair that other people are so happy</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Right away she saw what he was trying to hide</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>It worked better than she could have expected</i>	<i>183</i>

CHARACTERS

Pippa Morganthal, *age nine*

Danny Locke, *Pippa's eleven-year-old uncle*

Freydis Fairburn, *Pippa's great aunt, Danny's aunt*

Hetty and Morgan Morganthal, *Pippa's parents*

Max and Mimi Morganthal, *Pippa's grandparents*

Ignatz Gorman, "Natz," *chauffeur for Pippa's grandparents*

Louisa Norman, *Pippa's substitute teacher*

Katrinka Ostler, *Morgan Morganthal's former fiancée*

Alphonse Ostler, *age seven, son of Katrinka*

Mo Murphy, *Morris Murphy, Jr., a bully at school*



*Pippa found Natz needed more guidance than most adults,
but he was worth it.*

CHAPTER ONE

No Sissy Girl

The last day of third grade was over, and summer break had begun. Pippa Morganthal sat next to Danny in the back of the limousine, inspecting an envelope she was taking home to her mother. It was from the headmistress.

Holding it against the window, Pippa squinted. “All I can see is the word *responsible*.” Was it a report card?

Danny brightened. “We could steam it open.” He was two years older than Pippa, and he knew how to do things like that. They spent a lot of time together because Danny was her mom’s little brother.

Pippa sighed. “I can’t wait for fourth grade.”

“Why?” Danny scratched his head. “Fourth grade’s when you get long division.”

“It is? Well, . . . I’m real good at long division.”

“How do you know? You’ve never done it.”

Pippa knotted her hands together with absolute authority. “I just know. I’m good at things.”

Normally, they rode their bikes, but in case they had extra things to carry home today, Pippa’s grandparents, Max and

Mimi Morgenthal, had their chauffeur pick them up. He lived in the servants' quarters of their mansion, and he didn't always have enough to do.

The chauffeur's name was Ignatz. But *Ignatz* sounded too much like *ignorant*, so he wanted folks to call him Natz—at least for the time being, while he worked on becoming a new and better man.

Pippa found Natz needed more guidance than most grownups, but he was worth it. She locked eyes with him in the rearview mirror. "Which did you like best, third grade or fourth grade?"

He laughed. "Who, me?"

Sometimes grownups couldn't remember things, so she helped him out. "Well, which grade had the worst bullies?"

Natz didn't answer right away, so Danny spoke up about the bully he had on his mind. "Mo called me *Runt*, today. Then he wrote on the board, *Runt plays with sissy girls.*" Danny rolled his eyes and mumbled, "With pink chalk."

Pippa feared this might present a problem. Danny was her best friend. What if he didn't want to be seen with her anymore?

"You should have socked him," she said. "It's not your fault I'm taller than you. Besides, you're not short."

Natz laughed and looked over his shoulder. "I know one thing. This here Pippa ain't no sissy girl."

Pippa counted the telephone poles whizzing past and thought about the word *responsible*. The phone poles were all spaced evenly because *responsible* people put them there. And *responsible* workers filled the potholes in the road. Pippa had been *responsible* for reminding Aunt Freydis to take her prescription this morning.

Aunt Freydis was so frail that Pippa guessed she might be as old as seventy-five, but it felt disrespectful to ask. The pills were probably supposed to prevent another stroke.

When Pippa was three years old, Freydis had her first stroke. Morgan and Hetty, Pippa's parents, invited Freydis to live in the cottage with the three of them. From the time Pippa could remember, Freydis had rubbed her back to help her get to sleep. She sang quiet lullabies with a voice as thin as her fingers.

Freydis was really her mother's aunt—and Danny's. But like them, Pippa called her simply Aunt Freydis. *Great Aunt Freydis* was too big a mouthful to say.

Suddenly Pippa's cheeks became quite pink and she covered them with her hands. "Oh, no! I forgot to tell Aunt Freydis to take her pill." She sank back in the seat. If her teachers didn't think she was responsible, maybe they were right!

Of course, everything would be fine when they got home. Pippa was sure of it. And she would show Aunt Freydis her knee first thing, because the scab finally came off at recess while she was playing marbles with the boys.

"Natz," Danny asked, "how did you meet Aunt Freydis?"

"Well, the Morgenthals started gettin' me to drive other folks out and around . . ."

"I know. Aren't they kinda lovey-dovey? I guess they like being alone."

Natz harrumphed and said, "Anyways, they got me takin' Freydis for long drives. That's how come she's the most special friend I ever had in my entire life. Almost like my ma. Right from the start, I wanted to be smart like her. Most afternoons she tells me about Shakespeare, 'cause she's a real expert. Or we discuss the news—like whatever shenanigans President Nixon's up to."

He glanced at Pippa. "Wish I could stop in to see Freydis today, but I gotta hurry and drive the Morgenthals to the airport."

Pippa knew her grandparents were flying to Bermuda on another of their many honeymoons.

When they arrived at the cottage, Natz said goodbye at the picket fence and drove away. Pippa opened the front gate to the familiar squeak of its hinges. Danny followed her past the fragrant roses and up the smooth stone steps to the porch. He spent a lot of time here at his sister Hetty's home.

A family of sparrows lived in the ivy that arched over the door, but they were strangely silent as Pippa turned the key in the lock.

Just inside the entry, all was dark and still. On the oak bench was a note that said, *I'll be working late, but you can call me. I love you.* At the bottom were two overlapping hearts. *Love, Mother* was written in one. For Danny's benefit, *Love, Hetty* was in the other. Danny turned toward the kitchen. His sister always left them a plate of cookies if she couldn't be at home to greet them.

Pippa went straight to the sunroom. Near the window seat, she could see Aunt Freydis from the back, sitting in her comfortable overstuffed chair. The white organdy curtains framed her silhouette, and a soft glow played in her silvery hair. All around her, the sunlight danced through the leaded glass of the window and shimmered in specks of bright color.

Pippa ran up behind Freydis and touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Hi, it's me, Pippa!"

Without a sound, her aunt fell from the chair onto her face.

Her eyes seemed to stare without seeing, and Pippa wondered right away if she was dead. Dropping to her knees, Pippa wailed an apology. She only meant to show Aunt Freydis her knee.

Choked with sobs, she hugged Freydis around the neck and cried out for Danny. When he didn't come, she stumbled to the kitchen to find him. At the age of eleven, Danny was bound to know a lot more about life, and she hoped he would say Aunt Freydis wasn't really dead.

When Pippa got to the kitchen, she was too breathless to talk clearly. Danny's mouth was full of milk, but he gulped it

down and told her to explain it slowly. Then he asked, "Is this a pretend story?" As soon as he knew she wasn't making it up, they both went to the sunroom and knelt down to listen, hoping Aunt Freydis might be breathing.

She was not.

Danny moved her a little and put her glasses on straight. Pippa whispered, "That's better," but she didn't mean it. It was just something to say. Her lip quivered. Pippa pictured how her aunt used to smile with her eyes. Now, more than before, the lenses made Aunt Freydis seem to stare at nothing.

Aunt Freydis had tucked her slippers under the chair. They were just waiting like they still wanted to keep her feet warm and happy. Pippa couldn't get the left one to stay on.

Danny got quiet and serious—like he was sad but didn't know any more than Pippa. Then he said, "They give flowers to dead people."

Danny took her hand and led her through the front door to the rose trellis. The climbing roses were tangled with honeysuckle. She and Aunt Freydis used to sit on the bench and suck the nectar from the blossoms, so Danny pulled out some of the vines, and Pippa bent them around to make a wreath for her.

When something smells sweet like that, she didn't call it a weed. Pippa wanted to cry, but she tightened her throat to hold in the misery.

Suddenly Danny's eyes widened. "You were the first person to see her," he said, "so maybe the police will think you killed her. They might put you in jail."

Fear overtook her sorrow. "But Mom won't let them," she said. "All you get in jail is bread and water. I want to call Mom."

"No, you can't tell Hetty! Lawyers have to obey the law more than anybody."

"Then I'm calling my dad."

"Don't you get it? Morgan doesn't stop being a lawyer just because he's a congressman. Besides, what if he's having

lunch with President Nixon when you call? That would make them *both* accessories to the crime.”

“What are accessories?”

“That’s people who find out about a crime, but they don’t report it. And after that, their life is totally ruined.”

He crossed his heart and said, “I solemnly swear to protect and conserve you.” Pippa didn’t exactly know what Danny meant, and she was pretty sure he didn’t either, but important conversations need big words in them. He was in charge, and his promise gave her courage. Danny would defend her to the death. She could tell because red splotches came out on his face to match his red hair. That only happened when he got all worked up.

Well, Danny didn’t exactly have a plan, but he said he would hide her until he made one up. The pavement was hot, so they ran down along the footpath where the wind kicked up little eddies of dust. Nobody on the road would notice them there. Pippa couldn’t see too well. She said her tears were from getting something in her eye, so Danny pulled her along.

In about a mile they got to an abandoned delivery truck they had noticed about a week earlier. It was hidden down off the side of the road, so they weren’t sure how long it had been there.

Danny tapped on the Florida license plate with his finger. “It’s expired,” he said.

“So?”

“So, if they were planning to drive it, they’d have gotten a new one for this year.”

The way he lowered his voice Pippa knew it was serious. “It’s supposed to say 1970,” he added.

“Oh. Does that mean we’ll be, you know . . . accessories if we don’t report them?”

He shrugged and looked around. “Report who?”

The back of the truck was fastened tight with a board, and when they raised the board out of the slot, the doors fell open

at the middle. It was dark inside, and it smelled strange and musty. The dust made Danny wheeze because of his asthma.

Pippa wasn't feeling at all brave. Danny must have known, because he offered to stay with her a while if they could figure out how to fasten the door panels from inside. But they couldn't.

Pippa climbed inside because she couldn't think of a better place to hide and didn't want to go to jail. The only way she could hide was to close it. And the only way to close it was to lock it.

The doors were so heavy, Pippa had to pull the one on the right inward while Danny grunted and pushed the other one in place from outside. When the board scraped down into the slot, Pippa's throat felt like it was screaming, but it only made a squeak. Her nose ran, and she had to use the back of her hand to wipe it.

The doors didn't quite meet in the middle, leaving a space between them. The crack was just big enough to let in a little light.

With one eye to the crack, she could see the sweat on Danny's freckles, and the sun made his hair look redder. He grinned and moved close to the slit. "Guess what," he said. "I just remembered this rule, and I'll tell you how it works." He coughed before continuing. "After it's been long enough, and the police haven't caught you yet, the judge has to tell you never mind going to jail."

"Oh, you mean like calling *olly olly oxen free*, after hide-and-seek?"

"Yeah, like that." He poked a leaf in the crack, but she wasn't sure why. It was too dark to see if it was pretty like the ones they collected. He said, "I think you're the most fearless girl in the whole world."

"Don't leave me, Danny."

"I've got to. How else can I bring you food?"

Pippa didn't tell him about the cookie in her pocket, in case he wouldn't come right back.

She watched through the crack until she couldn't see him anymore. He was walking slowly, dragging a stick.

What if the truck wasn't really abandoned, and the owners came back? Pippa was good at imagining things, so she pretended to be fearless like Danny said. She wiped her tears with the hem of her skirt.

When her eyes got used to the dark, she explored the inside of the truck. It was foul-smelling and seemed about the size of a small garage. Down the middle were some newspapers and something that crunched under her shoes. Taking six steps, she felt her way to a mountain of dusty blankets in the corner—the sort moving men wrap around pianos.

Outside, she heard the muffled sound of birds. They sang like everything was normal, but Pippa knew it never would be again. She pulled off one of the blankets and sat on it.

I can pretend Aunt Freydis is still alive. She was supposed to have a birthday in two more days. The vase I made her is still at school, but I guess that doesn't matter anymore.

I can't do anything now, except for thinking.

The Wind

The hot wind blew in gusts against the walls of the truck, which seemed to whisper and shudder. Pippa remembered holding a seashell to her ear to hear the roaring ocean. The truck captured the hum of the wind like a giant conch shell.

Pippa was still damp from running, so she leaned back and pulled the blanket around her shoulders. I know . . . I'll think real hard about the rule Danny told me. The trouble is he didn't know when the judge is supposed to say never mind. How much time will be long enough?

If I were a grownup, I don't suppose I'd be hiding. I hope Mo Murphy never hears about this. It's humiliating when he calls me Baby Pippa. He says my mom and dad can't both go

to Washington at the same time because one of them has to stay home tending me. I wonder if it's true. Maybe I'm not responsible enough.

Mo and Danny used to be friends, but this year, Mo's meaner and a whole lot bigger. And he tells everybody my dad's the world's stupidest congressman.

While Pippa was thinking and waiting for Danny, she heard what sounded like two men in big boots. As they got closer, she remembered about the license plate and huddled under the blanket to make herself as small as possible. She mustn't see their faces for fear of being an accessory to their crime.

The loudest man snorted, "We're gonna make a killing!" His coarse laugh ended with a choking sputter, and he spat in the grass. Without opening the back of the truck, they walked straight to the front.

At first Pippa was relieved. Then they slammed their doors, started the motor, and drove off. Where were they going, and what would they do with her?

After about twenty minutes, Pippa gave up guessing how long they had been on the road. Rattled with every motion, Pippa clamped her hands over her ears to silence her fears. But the jarring echoes of traffic continued to pound the walls and ceiling. The enclosure seemed to tighten around her until she threw up.

On wobbly legs, she groped around for another blanket. Finding a stiff one, she spread it over the place where she had been sick and returned to her thinking. The roar of the wind was no comfort. She wanted her mom and dad. The last grownup she had seen was Natz, but he went to the airport. There was no one to rescue her.

Natz Gorman at Your Service

After delivering Max and Mimi to the airport, Natz returned to his living quarters at the Morgenthal estate.

The phone was ringing, and he answered it with his usual breezy humor. "F.B.I. central headquarters. What's your ID code?" He grinned and waited. The phone was quiet.

Maybe the caller couldn't take a joke, so he began again. "Uh . . . Gorman here," he said.

"Mr. Gorman?" It was a woman, and he was sure she sounded snooty on purpose. "My files indicate you're the gentleman who picks up Pippa Morgenthal."

"Sure thing," he snorted. "What's it to you?"

"This is Louisa Norman. I'm a substitute teacher at Pippa's school."

Natz wondered if he might have heard that name before. "Yeah?" Just in case it was somebody he should know, he looked in the mirror to smooth his hair. For the first time, he noticed a few gray hairs around the edges. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "I mean, what can I do ya for?"

"I've been remiss, Mr. Gorman."

Whatever that meant, she was obviously bragging. Still, he thought it best to agree. "Yeah, I'm sure you have, lady."

That approach did nothing to soften her up, and she continued in the same stuck-up voice. "Yes," she said. "I'm calling to request your assistance. Pippa made a ceramic vase last week. The art teacher brought it to me after it was fired. I was supposed to give it to Pippa before you picked her up."

Something about her voice reminded him of his high-and-mighty eighth-grade teacher. She was the reason he dropped out of school.

He knew he shouldn't blame a total stranger for his decision to drop out, but he felt like taking it out on someone. "Sounds like you been erroneous," he sniffed. "That what you're saying?"

The teacher cleared her throat. "I'm saying you came earlier than I expected, Mr. Gorman. I brought her vase home so it wouldn't be locked in the school all summer."

"Well, if that ain't just hunky-dory."

It wasn't *his* fault she forgot. Miss Norman could hint all she wanted. He would *not* offer to pick it up. "Hey then, can you bring it here?" he asked.

Was the phone dead? It wasn't a very good connection. He yawned and waited for some response.

At last she said, "I don't think so."

He pictured her with a hoity-toity face, sticking her tongue out at him. No doubt she had a mustache and smelled like garlic.

"I ain't got time for this," he said. "I'm busy doing party stuff for somebody real important. It's Mrs. Freydis Fairburn's birthday coming up."

"I know."

"Huh? How come *you* know about my Mrs. Fairburn?"

"She recommended me for this job. Mrs. Fairburn was my headmistress here at Haxton."

"No lie!" Natz felt his face get hot and red.

"That's right, Mr. Gorman. And about the vase—it's supposed to be a present to her from Pippa."

"Hey, I was just kidding around, see? Tell me where you live at, and I'll be on my way. It was real terrific of you, taking it home! The vase, I mean. I hope it wasn't too much trouble. Not that a vase would ever make trouble the way us folks can.

"I mean like here comes me, and I mess up real bad just trying to get a laugh outa you! Don't get me wrong, I was ticked off with you snalking so tooty. I mean . . . you know. But *you* were being jocular too, right? I mean I doubt you're near as bad as you sound! Anyways, how about me coming to get it? I mean if it's convenient, and you're not in the bathtub or anything."

He realized his mistake and said, "Whoa! I don't mean to . . . to implicate that you ain't clean to start with.

“Hello? Hello?” When had the line gone dead?

Rats! I shoulda asked where she lives and picked it up first thing. Now I made her a enemy.

Sounds like she won't be taking it to Pippa. She probably doesn't live as close to the cottage as me anyway, so I'll get there first. I better! I don't want her telling Mrs. Fairburn about me and my smart mouth.

Natz checked his pocket watch. It was only five o'clock. He would have time to head off Miss Norman at the cottage and still get to class on time. The watch was his most treasured possession. Freydis Fairburn gave it to him so he would never be late for school.

Before long, Natz would get his high school diploma, and he would do it specially for her. Then he'd be on his way to college—that was if he could pass his English class.

Freydis said she was sure he could, and she was always right. Even when she was mixed up. That's something he learned in the six years he'd been driving her.

When he met Freydis, she was the first person who thought he was a real somebody—and like the son she never had. With her help, someday he would become the man he wanted to be. In fact, she said she had an idea to tell him about later. Maybe tomorrow.

He grabbed his shiny black uniform cap but didn't put it on just yet. Why hide his gray hairs? They might get him a little respect without the trouble of turning forty.

In the garage, the Cadillac was still warm and ticking. Mr. and Mrs. Morganthal hardly ever let him drive the Rolls Royce or the Bentley, but it was nothing personal—they seemed to like the way he cared for their cars. And they didn't even mind that he was attending night school.

He drove toward the exit gate of the Morganthal estate and past the gatehouse where Katrinka Ostler lived. Max and Mimi were letting Katrinka live on the estate for life, like her father before her. Seeing Katrinka was always bad luck because of his past history with her. But luckily, she seemed to be away at work.

The guard saluted him on his way out the gate. Natz knew he should be happy about being treated with respect, but he didn't feel he deserved it, after being rude to the teacher. If Mrs. Fairburn should learn of it, she would be disappointed in him.

The taxi in front of him crept slow as a slug. Even so, Natz resisted the urge to honk. At every intersection he hoped it would turn off, but it didn't.

What a coincidence! They both ended up at the cottage. The taxi pulled up to the front gate with Natz close behind. It must be somebody from out of town. It appeared the teacher hadn't arrived with Pippa's vase yet. That was a relief. He would sit in the limousine and wait a while, but she'd better hurry or he'd be late for class.

Rolling down the window, Natz inhaled the scent of climbing roses. He and Mrs. Fairburn often sat on the bench and recited great stuff from Shakespeare. Mostly *Hamlet*. Sometimes she was waiting for him there when he brought Pippa home. He pictured her little smile—and the way she waved her white-gloved hand. He regretted being too rushed to see her now.

In front of him, the taxi driver walked to the trunk of his cab and fumbled with his keys. Was the passenger bringing a suitcase? Natz watched with interest as the driver grappled with something large and awkward. It was a wheelchair. Natz knew all about wheelchairs. Mimi Morganthal had been badly injured when she and her husband rolled over in their Dusenbergs.

Unfolding the contraption, the cabbie wrestled it toward the side door, but not quite close enough. Couldn't he see his passenger was struggling to get out of the backseat? Did he expect the lady to reach it by pole vault?

Not one to ignore a damsel in distress, Natz rushed to her side and lifted her with ease. The driver seemed grateful, but she protested, "I can manage quite well on my own."

“Yes Ma’am, I can see that. But the ground’s kinda wet here.”

“That’s all right,” she said, “I’m a competitive swimmer.”

He glanced at the mud underfoot. Then, seeing mischief in her eyes, Natz threw back his head and laughed with her.

For some unknown reason, she stopped protesting. It must have been because they had shared a friendly joke. Natz doubted if it was because of his distinguished sideburns. He didn’t dare look her in the eye, in case he had no right to.

She was light as a breeze and smelled sweet. She seemed suddenly awestruck at the sight of the cottage. “It’s even more charming than I remember!”

Her excitement pleased Natz, and he hoped for a reason to continue holding her.

She indicated a shady spot under the rose trellis. “Would you kindly help me to the bench for a minute?” That was the very excuse he hoped for. When he had placed her comfortably, she said, “Listen to the birds. Oh, how beautiful! And isn’t that a flying squirrel?”

He sat next to her and looked where she had pointed. “Yeah,” he said, “a flying squirrel, for real!” He didn’t see it, but she might like thinking he did.

Natz had a sudden thought. *Woeee! Am I stupid! She didn’t ask me to sit by her. I should have asked for permission.*

He jumped up and stood at a respectful distance. The silence was awkward, so he said, “‘Scuse me for asking, but why’d you come out here? Not that it’s any of my business.”

She didn’t exactly say. Her eyes were on the deep woods, and she sighed. “I was here years ago when Hetty and I were school friends.”

She talked like a real lady. Proper-like. He’d have to mind his words.

The cab driver lit a cigarette, but a light breeze carried the smoke away, so Natz could still enjoy the fresh scent of her. Was it Ivory soap?

She didn't seem eager to leave the bench, and he was glad. He would watch over her as long as possible, even if he had to miss his class. She looked a bit dreamy-eyed, but like she could use a good cheering-up.

Natz pointed to the cab driver and said, "Hey, know what? His meter keeps ticking, but I could drive you home for free. I mean if you want."

"Thank you. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you." Her smile was sincere, and Natz knew it meant *yes*. "That would be very kind," she said. "I'll try not to keep you waiting."

"No problem! I gotta wait here for somebody anyways. I'm not doing anything except for that. Should I move the limo?" he asked. "So's it don't . . . I mean, so it won't block the view."

"That's thoughtful of you, but I should go in now and see Hetty. That is, if you wouldn't mind returning me to my chair." Her smile gave Natz goosebumps. He had planned to bring the wheelchair over to where she was sitting, but she actually wanted him to carry her there! The thought of holding her again made him breathless with excitement.

"Yeah! I mean no, not at all." He grinned and saluted. "Natz Gorman at your service!"

"Who?" With a start, she blinked. Then she stared and folded her arms, forming a barrier between them. Gone was her smile. She said, "Thank you, Mr. Gorman. I can manage now."

He knew that cool and formal voice. It was the one he had heard earlier on the phone.

A distant crow disturbed the icy stillness between them. She turned away and beckoned to the cab driver, who pushed the wheelchair to her. A lumpy sack was on the seat of it.

Now Natz knew who she was. She was Miss Norman, and the lumpy sack was the vase Pippa had made. She would leave it with Freydis and would probably even talk about him. But he knew trying to stop her would just make things worse.



Listen to the birds. Oh, how beautiful!

Natz got in the limousine and slowly drove away, watching her in the rearview mirror until she disappeared from view.

Watching Clouds

Hoping to clear his head, Natz pulled off the road a short distance later to watch the clouds. If he scanned the sky, he might find a hippopotamus cloud to replace the picture in his head of Miss Norman. He didn't want to think of her soft brown eyes. Or to remember her heart-shaped face.

She had dark hair. And she used some sort of blue doodad to pull it back in a tidy little knot. He closed his eyes and tried to picture how the heck she did it.

Miss Norman was the genuine article—a real lady, like Freydis Fairburn. She made him want to use nice words and keep his fingernails clean. Natz sniffed his underarms. Yep, his deodorant was still working. He sighed with relief and let his mind wander.

I like it when Pippa shows me animals in the clouds, but I can't tell the legs from the tails. Clouds just look like . . . well, clouds, but I'd never say so.

Man, I'm stupid to get a instant crush like this . . . and on a teacher lady! It ain't dignified. Besides, I completely blew it with her.

Oh, well . . . for now, I better make it to my class before they call the roll.

Natz straightened his spine and made a general declaration to the world. "First thing tomorrow," he said, "I'll ask Freydis how do I go a-courtin' to a lady. Whilst we're at it, she could teach me stuff about manners." With dignity and resolve, he pulled down his cap and entered the road. "Yeah. It's time I got on with life."

As he drove along, Natz repeated variations of this conversation with himself. But it didn't last long. He slowed

at the sight of a boy on wobbly knees, stumbling by the side of the road. Could it be Danny?

It was. He was wearing the same blue shirt he had on earlier. Tripping on his own feet, he crumpled forward, with only a sack of potato chips to break his fall.

Natz came to a quick stop. He jumped out and knelt over Danny. "You okay?"

Covered with dust and grime, Danny choked and wheezed. "Sure thing," he said.

Natz carefully gathered him up and placed him on the back seat. "Well, I'm takin' you home." He got to thinking maybe it was hard on the kid's pride, getting rescued like that. But what else could he do? He figured when in doubt say a bunch of words, and some of them might work. "You allergic to potato chips?" he asked. "Maybe that's what done it. You know, the asthma." He looked over his shoulder. "Sorry to say, I left 'em back there on the road."

Danny sat up. "I had a blueberry muffin and an apple, too. I was taking them to Pippa, but she wasn't there."

"She wasn't *where*?" Natz asked. "I mean, where *is* she?"

"Well, we found this old truck. It looked like a great hiding place. We thought she could stay in it just . . . just for fun. The food was supposed to be like a picnic."

Danny was quiet for a time—just pulling on the hair behind his ear. The way Pippa did, when she was deep in thought.

"Um, Natz . . . I was just wondering . . . when people die, isn't there a law about something you've got to do? I mean . . . this guy at school says they had to *bomb* his grandmother or something like that."

Natz laughed, hoping to sound sort of cool and casual. "Yeah, that's *embalm*. But hey, think positive! Pippa's gonna be fine." But he didn't feel as sure as he sounded.

"Pippa?" Danny stammered. He gripped the back of the driver's seat. "Oh, I think maybe somebody drove the truck away with her in it." His knuckles were white.

Natz clenched the muscles in his jaw. "What!" He didn't mean to yell. "You talking about that delivery truck a quarter mile back? The one off the side?"

Danny nodded. "It was a real ugly old truck. What if they take it to get squashed? You know, like those stacks of old cars they flatten and take to the junk yard. Could they squash Pippa?" He took a gasping breath and asked, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

Natz turned with a scowl. "Nah! We don't need no cops. I'll handle it."

Danny's house was empty, but he said his mom would get home soon.

Confident he would be all right, Natz took him in, left him on the living room couch, and then rushed back to the car.

He glanced back at the house and saw motion through the kitchen window. Danny was lifting the phone to his ear. Was he calling the police?

Natz jumped into the limousine and sped away. He hadn't a minute to lose.

Rosie

Pippa felt the truck jerk to a halt. She stayed hidden until she was sure the men were not coming her way. Looking through the crack, she saw nothing but an empty parking lot. If she called for help, there was no one to hear. She smelled greasy food—maybe French fries. The men must be getting something to eat.

It would be past suppertime at home, and her mom must have found Aunt Freydis by now. Pippa knew she wouldn't be so scared if Danny had stayed with her. She wondered what he was doing. Hadn't he discovered she was gone yet?

I wish he was a real brother. I can usually talk to him about anything—except for the stuff Mo Murphy says.

Pippa's thoughts were interrupted by a muffled scratching sound somewhere behind her. She froze in place, holding her breath. A long silence followed. Then panting. Was fear making her imagine things?

"Who's there?" she whispered.

If it was real, it had to be coming from under the piles of blankets. Soon the sun would go down, and she wouldn't be able to see anything. While light was still coming through the crack, she would need to face whatever it was.

One at a time, Pippa spread apart the covers to expose a cage. Inside, a limp dog quivered in fear. Its tongue hung out as if thirsting for something in the empty bowl nearby. It had a black and white spotted coat, it stank, and its ribs stuck out. Had it been hit by a car? If the men had saved its life, they should have taken it to the vet.

Had it been in there since the truck was abandoned? It could have been a week ago. How odd that she hadn't heard it earlier. It must have been muffled by the blankets.

"Don't be scared. I won't hurt you."

Next to the cage, chains and empty dog dishes littered the floor. Pippa felt around, hoping it might be dog food that crunched underfoot. Dropping a piece through the wires of the cage, she was pleased that the dog ate it.

"You need water, but don't worry . . . maybe they just forgot." Pippa wiggled her fingers through the wires. The dog seemed frightened of the motion and cowered in the corner. "It's okay," she whispered. "Want some more?" She found another piece and approached slowly. This time the dog was cautious but took it from her fingers.

"Are you a girl? You need a good-smelling name. I could call you Rosie." Rosie sniffed her hand, and Pippa smiled. "You're welcome," she said and returned to the crack, hoping for a little clean air.

Something had to be done. She wanted to go home now. At the first sign of the men, she would bang on the doors to get their attention and tell them they were wicked to let Rosie go hungry. If they didn't bring food and water right away, she would report them. Pippa was sick of hiding and through being scared. Now she was angry.

In spite of her determination, she was startled at the sound of the men's voices. Rosie whimpered and curled up as if to protect herself. Why was she frightened of them? While wondering about this, the engine started, and Pippa knew she had lost her opportunity.

The truck traveled along a country road for a few minutes then slowly pulled into a building with a high ceiling and dirt floors. Were they in a hangar? Pippa and Danny liked to visit the hangar where her dad stored his glider. This place was crowded with noisy people and barking dogs. But no planes. Inside the entrance, the men stopped to argue with a bunch of people. While passing them, Pippa thought she saw a gun.

When the truck was parked, Pippa could see better through the crack. One of the men wore a red plaid shirt, and the other had a purple cap. She tried to keep them in sight, but they disappeared in the milling crowd.

Soon something blocked the light, and somebody slapped at the door. A nose pressed to the crack, then an eye tried to peer in. Pippa held still, hoping to remain undetected.

Purple Cap returned from nowhere. He seemed to know the person with the eye. "Long time no see," he said.

"What the heck you got in there," asked Eyeball, "a champ?" Pippa thought the voice sounded familiar.

"No such luck," said Purple Cap. "And don't you mess with my truck!"

"Wooee! Simmer down, Bugs. I'm just looking."

"Hope so. Hey, if you're fixin' to buy bait, I got a cur I can sell you real cheap."

“Naw, I don’t need no bait. Maybe next time.” Pippa realized who it was. It was Natz! If he was a friend, why would he be here with these people?

After another brief conversation, they left. Pippa watched Purple Cap shuffle through his wallet and elbow his way through the crowd. She could smell blood and sweat. There were dogs in crates and cages, and sawdust all around.

“We better get out of here, Rosie.”

Within minutes, Natz returned. And once again, his eye was at the crack.

Pippa remembered Danny once overheard the grownups talking about Natz. Back in the days when he went by the name of Ignatz, he was in trouble with the law. Maybe that’s why he didn’t like the police. Could she trust him?

Pippa wished Danny could be with her—to tell her she was brave—but he was far away.



It worked better than she could have expected.