

Erica S. Perl

When Life Gives
You O.J.



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CHAPTER 1

The whole mess started with a note:

KID,
SEE ME IMMEDIATELY WHEN YOU GET
THIS. DO NOT SPEAK OF THIS TO ANYONE,
NOT EVEN YOUR PARENTS OR YOUR
BROTHER.

ACE

P.S. I HOPE YOU ARE READY FOR THIS.

I found the note on my nightstand, attached to a jug that definitely hadn't been there the night before. I had to put on my glasses to read it. On closer inspection, I could see that the jug was a plastic one, like the kind that milk comes in.

The note was attached to the neck of the jug with a green rubber band.

Even without his name on it, I would've known this was Ace's work. The rubber band was a dead giveaway. Ace is the proud owner of the world's largest rubber band collection. He doesn't trust Scotch tape.

Ready for what? I thought. I sat up in bed, staring at the jug. If Ace was behind this, I was definitely *not* ready for it.

Ace is my grandpa. His real name is Abraham Diamond, but he likes everyone to call him Ace. My name is Zelda Fried, but I like everyone to call me Zelly. Ace doesn't call me Zelly, or even Zelda. He calls me "kid," so I call him Grandpa to get him back.

I studied the note, then turned my attention to the jug. It was a big white plastic orange juice jug. Before Ace moved in with us, my mom always made pitchers of orange juice from small cans of frozen concentrate. Now she buys it premade in plastic jugs like this one because Ace drinks a lot of orange juice. He mixes scoops of powder into it, which he says keeps him "regular," whatever that means. Ace is about as far from a regular person as anyone could possibly be, and I can't imagine how any powder is going to change that.

I read the note again. *I HOPE YOU ARE READY FOR THIS.* I picked up the jug, which turned out to be empty, and unscrewed the bright orange cap. The faint scent of oranges wafted out.

Okay, fine, I thought, getting out of bed. *Let's go find out what this is all about.*



I left the jug where it was and went to the bathroom. The same owl eyes and freckle-strewn nose, framed by an especially frizzy halo of morning hair, stared back at me. I showed my teeth to make sure they were still, thankfully, pretty straight. When you already have crazy hair and glasses, the last thing you need is braces.

It seemed like everyone in the house was still asleep. Except maybe my little brother, Sam, who sometimes gets up super-early to build things in his room with his LEGOs or his blocks. He always forgets that when you wake up, you need to go pee, so after he's been building for about thirty minutes, he'll shoot down the hall to the bathroom.

I went back to my room and got the jug and the note. I carried them downstairs to Ace's room, which is also our TV room. Having the TV there makes my mom super-happy because Sam and I watch a lot less TV than we did a few months ago, when we lived in Brooklyn and the TV was in our living room. We practically never want to watch TV bad enough to hang out in Ace's room. True, Ace likes some of the same shows we do. For example, old *Star Trek* reruns. But he always ends up yelling at the TV so much that it isn't worth it.

I knocked quietly on Ace's door. No reply. The sign hanging on his door says GONE FISHING, but it's just for decoration. I don't think Ace has gone fishing once since we moved to Vermont and Ace moved in with us. GONE TO HENRY'S DINER

OR GONE TO BEN & JERRY'S OR GONE TO BATTERY PARK TO A BAND-SHELL CONCERT WEARING MY LUCKY FISHING HAT? Yes, yes, and yes. But GONE FISHING, not so much.

I looked at the jug. It didn't make any sense. Maybe Ace had finally completely flipped out. It seemed pretty likely. It occurred to me that maybe I should go upstairs and tell my parents. That thought made me feel all worried and nervous, though. What if Ace had gone crazy, and he got really mad at me for getting him in trouble? What if they dragged him off to the loony bin and he started yelling, *THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT, KID!*

Which it kind of would be.

I took a deep breath and knocked again, harder this time. "Grandpa?" I called in a loudish whisper.

"WHA?" boomed Ace through the door.

"Grandpa," I whispered again. "It's me, Zelly."

"STOP WHISPERING ALREADY. I'M AWAKE. COME IN."

I entered the room and immediately tripped on something and fell flat on my face. I had a feeling it had been one of Ace's many pairs of golf shoes. That's another thing about Ace. He stopped playing golf years ago, but he loved the shoes so much that he started wearing them all the time. He probably has about twenty pairs. If anyone asks about his shoes, he launches into this lecture about how they "give excellent arch support."

"WHO'S THERE?" yelled Ace. I was on all fours, feeling my way over to the wall, where I knew there was a light

switch. I had dropped the jug when I fell. Before I could make it very far, Ace switched his bedside lamp on.

“WHAT IN THE NAME OF—?” said Ace.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just tripped, and, I mean, I got your note.”

“NOTE? WHAT NOTE?”

Okay, he’s definitely gone crazy, I thought to myself. *Just back up and out and go see Mom and Dad*. But there’s something about the way Ace talks. His voice practically requires an answer.

“The note you, uh, put on the orange juice jug?” I spotted the jug lying on its side on the floor, but I left it where it was. Instead, I walked over to Ace and handed him the note.

“OH,” said Ace, putting on his glasses and swinging his legs out of bed. He looked it over carefully, as if seeing it for the first time. “THAT NOTE.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, getting ready to make my exit.

“SO?”

“Sorry?”

“SO, ARE YOU?”

“Am I what?”

“ARE YOU READY?”

“Ready for what?”

Ace looked exasperated with me. “DO YOU WASH YOUR EARS WITH CHOPPED LIVER? READY TO GET A DOG, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!”

“Oh! I mean, of course,” I said.

Beyond ready was what I thought. I had been begging my

parents to let me get a dog for years, and especially since April, when we moved to Vermont and Ace moved in with us. I am, to put it mildly, a dog lover. Okay, I'll admit it: I am obsessed with dogs. All of my notebooks have dogs on the cover and are filled with dog doodles. I cut the *Dogs*, *Cats*, *Pets* column out of the newspaper almost every day, and I've read every dog book ever written (*Shiloh* is my favorite). In three months, Ace had probably heard me ask about getting a dog at least three zillion times.

But what did that have to do with the jug? Or Ace's mysterious note?

Ace smiled. He put one hand on his bedside table and lifted himself out of bed. He took the cane that he was supposed to use but never did and turned it around so the hook side was pointed at the ground. Then, using the cane, he hooked the handle of the orange juice jug, picked it up, and carried it over to me. I unhooked it from the end of the cane.

"KID," said Ace, "MEET YOUR NEW DOG."

I stood there, holding the jug and staring at him. I knew crazy people sometimes heard voices in their heads or saw things that other people couldn't see. Did Ace think there was a dog there in the room with us?

"Um, where?" I asked.

Ace reached out and thumped the orange juice jug with his hand.

"RIGHT THERE. YOU'RE HOLDING HIM."

"I . . . This?" I held out the jug with both hands to make

sure I understood what he was saying. “You think this is a dog?”

“NO, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD. WHAT KIND OF A MESHUGGENER DO YOU THINK I AM?”

Meshuggener is the Yiddish word for “a crazy person.” Ace says it a lot when he reads the *New York Times*. Also when he watches the news on TV. According to him, most politicians are meshuggeners. He also thinks Captain Kirk acts like a meshuggener. Especially when he gets himself beamed down onto planets without checking them out first.

“No, Grandpa, I just . . . I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“ENOUGH WITH THE ‘SORRY.’ VEY IZ MIR, KID.” Ace shook his head. Clearly, he was disappointed in me. Ace lapses into extra Yiddish when he wants to make a point, which is often. He’ll say *Oy vey!* Or *Vey iz mir!* which is like an *Oy vey!* and then some. He pointed to the jug and spoke slowly.

“THIS,” he said, “IS NOT A DOG. OKAY?”

“Okay,” I said.

“IT’S NOT A DOG, SO WHAT IS IT?” he demanded.

“Um, it’s an orange juice jug?”

“WRONG!” yelled Ace. “THIS IS NOT AN ORANGE JUICE JUG. THIS IS YOUR NEW PRACTICE DOG. THIS IS WHAT YOU USE TO SHOW YOUR PARENTS THAT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO GET A REAL DOG.”

“Practice dog?” I asked.

“RIGHT! EVERYTHING YOU DO FOR A REAL DOG, YOU DO FOR THE PRACTICE DOG.”

“Yeah, but Grandpa, you can’t do dog things with an orange juice jug.”

“IT’S NOT AN ORANGE JUICE JUG. DON’T CALL IT AN ORANGE JUICE JUG! I TOLD YOU, IT’S A PRACTICE DOG.”

“Okay, well, how do you walk a practice dog? It doesn’t have any legs.”

Ace smiled like he had been waiting for this question. He went over to his bedside table and opened the drawer. Out of it he brought a long nylon leash with a metal ring on one end. He threaded it through the handle of the jug and put the nylon hand loop at one end through the ring at the other. He then pulled the leash tight and let go.

“WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A DOG THAT HAS NO LEGS?”

“Sorry?”

“I TOLD YOU, KID, ENOUGH WITH THE ‘SORRY’! WHAT YOU DO WITH A DOG THAT HAS NO LEGS IS, YOU TAKE HIM OUT FOR A DRAG.”

“You what?”

“IT’S A JOKE. BUT WITH YOUR PRACTICE DOG, THAT’S WHAT YOU DO. TWO, MAYBE THREE TIMES A DAY, YOU PUT ON HIS LEASH AND TAKE HIM FOR HIS WALK.”

“Outside?”

“OF COURSE OUTSIDE. UNLESS YOU WANT HIM TO DO HIS BUSINESS IN THE HOUSE.”

“His business? An orange juice jug can’t—”

“LOOK, KID. THIS IS NOT GOING TO WORK IF YOU KEEP SAYING ORANGE JUICE JUG. PRACTICE. DOG.”

“A *practice dog* can’t go to the bathroom.”

Ace smiled again. He went back to his bedside table and opened a drawer. He returned carrying a bag of dog food.

“WANNA BET?” he said.

Ace went on to explain to me how a practice dog worked. Every morning, I would take my practice dog down to breakfast with me. I would pour water into the neck of the ju—*practice dog* and then add a couple of spoonfuls of dry dog food. After breakfast, I would put the leash on and take the practice dog out for a walk. At some point on the walk, I would unscrew the cap and pour out the contents to let the practice dog relieve himself. Then I would take a plastic bag—which I would bring along on the walk—and use it to scoop up the wet pile of *practice doggy doo* and get rid of it. I would do the same thing for the practice dog’s dinner and evening walk.

“You said three walks a day. What’s the third walk for?” I asked, immediately realizing that I probably shouldn’t have brought it up.

“THAT’S THE AFTERNOON WALK. FOR EXERCISE,” said Ace.

“Exercise?” I pictured myself throwing a stick, then dragging the jug to “fetch” it.

“EXERCISE,” repeated Ace firmly. Case closed.

“Okay, so how long do I have to do this?”

“YOU HAVEN’T EVEN STARTED DOING YOUR PART OF OUR PLAN YET AND ALREADY YOU’RE KVETCHING AND HOCKING ME ABOUT WHEN CAN YOU STOP?”

“I’m not kvetching or hocking you,” I protested. I knew *kvetching* was Yiddish for “complaining,” and I was pretty sure *hocking* meant “nagging.” “I just want to know how long this might— Wait a second. ‘Our plan’?”

I suddenly remembered a conversation I’d had with Ace several days before. It was after dinner and after another argument with my parents about getting a dog. I was in my room rereading *Shiloh* when Ace shuffled in.

“LOOK, KID,” Ace had announced. “YOU’RE GOING ABOUT THIS ALL WRONG.”

“Thanks,” I said, without looking up from my book. I had no idea what he was talking about, but it was fairly common for Ace to get an opinion in his head and need to bombard someone with it.

“I KNOW THIS STUFF,” continued Ace. “IN ALL MY YEARS ON THE BENCH, I’VE SEEN A LOT OF LAWYERS.” *On the bench* meant “being a judge,” which was a major basis for Ace’s authority on many topics. “YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR PROBLEM IS, KID? YOU ARE ONE LOUSY LAWYER.”

“Thanks,” I said again. I hoped that when he noticed I wasn’t arguing with him, he’d get bored and leave.

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO THANK ME, KID.” Ace grinned. “BUT TELL YOU WHAT: I’M GONNA DO YOU A FAVOR.”

“Uh, no thanks,” I said quickly. A “favor” from Ace usually involved him telling you a long story or an unfunny joke. I wasn’t in the mood for either one.

“YOU WANT A DOG?”

“What?” I put down my book.

“DO YOU WANT A DOG?”

“Yes.”

“SO? YOU WANT A DOG, YOU LISTEN TO ME. I HAVE A PLAN TO GET YOU A DOG.”

Ace looked pretty crazy all of a sudden. Crazier than usual. His caterpillar eyebrows were all tufted up, and his eyes were kind of twitching with excitement.

“Grandpa, look. If you just bring home a dog, they’re not going to let me keep it.”

Ace waved his hands at me like I was the one talking crazy.

“WHAT KIND OF A SHMENDRICK DO YOU THINK I AM? I DIDN’T SAY, ‘BRING HOME A DOG.’ I SAID”—and now he talked even louder and pronounced each word extra-clearly, like I was the one with the hearing aid—“A PLAN TO GET YOU A DOG. A PLAN TO MAKE IT SO YOUR PARENTS LET YOU GET A DOG.”

“Okay,” I said, becoming curious. “How?”

Ace smiled with satisfaction, like he had just told one of his famously bad jokes. "ARE YOU IN?"

"I guess."

"OH NO. YOU CAN'T GUESS. IF YOU'RE IN, YOU'RE IN. YOU GOTTA DO WHAT I SAY TO DO, WHEN I SAY TO DO IT. EVEN IF YOU DON'T WANT TO, YOU GOTTA STICK WITH THE PLAN AS LONG AS IT TAKES. NO MATTER WHAT. SO DON'T SAY YOU'RE IN IF YOU'RE NOT IN. IT'S ALL OR NOTHING, KID."

"Okay, okay."

"OKAY, WHAT?"

"Okay, I'm in."

Ace clapped his hands together once, loudly. Then he held out his right hand to me like a businessman. I shook it and was surprised at how strong his grip was underneath his loose, spotted old-person skin.

"So . . . what do I do?" I asked eagerly.

"BUPKIS," said Ace.

I frowned. "Nothing?" I asked. Was this some sort of joke?

"ZORG ZIKH NISHT."

"Zug . . . what?"

"DON'T WORRY," he explained.

"I'm not worried," I said. "It's just—"

"SO, ALL RIGHT, ALREADY. ALL IN GOOD TIME, KID. TO THOSE WHO WAIT SHALL COME ALL THE RICHES OF THE WORLD."

And with that he walked out, leaving me more confused

than when he came in. To be fair, it felt like something momentous had just taken place. But the next morning, nothing. And the next, and the next. So I sort of forgot about it.

Until now. Until the jug appeared.

“SHE WANTS TO KNOW HOW LONG THIS MIGHT TAKE?” said Ace. “AS LONG AS IT NEEDS TO, KID. AND NOT ONE MINUTE LONGER.”

I looked at Ace. I looked at the jug.

I had a feeling this was going to take a long time.