

**PLAIN JANE
TAGALONG**

AND THE MAGIC DIARY

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by
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“Your imagination is everything.
It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”
~Albert Einstein

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Be My Valentine

Jane Smith was still new at applying makeup. Her mother, Linda, was a devout Catholic woman with traditional values who had only recently allowed her only daughter to experiment with mascara. But no lipstick, blush, or eyeliner until high school! Thirteen years old was far too young for that, even if some of the other girls' mothers were allowing it.

So, Jane stood in front of the bathroom mirror, concentrating hard as she lifted her shaky right hand up to her face. She was determined to master the art of mascara application during her last year at Lanigan Elementary School: grade eight. This was enough of a challenge. She had no interest in trying eyeliner or anything else until she could do this with ease.

She blinked repeatedly from the fear of stabbing herself in the eyeball with the tiny black brush again. Once she had completed the top lashes of her right eye successfully, she felt some confidence about doing the left side—a confidence that was short-lived when the brush dropped a small goop of mascara on her lid just below the lash line, right above her eyeball. It tickled and caused her eyes to blink uncontrollably. She felt like she might sneeze. Before she could wipe it away with a Kleenex tissue, black tears tinged her left eye and began flowing down her left cheek.

“Darn it!” she cursed. It was already 7:45 AM, and she had to be at Trisha’s house by 8:00 AM to pick her up for school.

Jane wet the tissue with cold water from the tap in front of her and dabbed her teary eye until it stopped stinging. She then lightly brushed the tissue on the bar of soap in the tray beside the sink, using it to wipe away all traces of black tears from her cheek. She focused, once again, on the task at hand. The mascara on her right eye had already dried perfectly. She could do it! She could make her left eye perfect, too!

Determined, she dipped the mascara brush back into its container then took a deep breath and focused on her left eye. Jane lifted her hand up slowly, trying her best to control the shaking as she slowly brushed the top lashes with a

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fresh coat of mascara. Success! It had only taken seven minutes total this time. Soon, she would get this task down to one minute at most.

Jane looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She liked the way the mascara made her brown eyes look bigger and brighter. She was pleased with how her short, permed, light brown mushroom haircut looked this morning, too. She wore a purple turtleneck sweater with matching purple earrings and her favourite acid wash blue jeans. This was a nice outfit, she thought to herself as she turned from side to side, noticing the new feminine curves that were starting to reveal themselves over the last couple of months. She *finally* had the beginnings of some boobs; albeit, they had arrived a few months later than most of her close friends who were born at least six months before her. Maybe Todd Brooks would pay closer attention to her at the Valentine's Day party at school this afternoon. And maybe he would even ask her to dance at the Valentine's Day dance tomorrow, on Friday evening. Time would tell.

"Jane!" her mother called from the kitchen. "It's time for school!"

"Coming!" Jane answered back, spraying her permed hair with one last coat of Final Net to keep it in place. She made her way through the kitchen to the porch, to put her outside clothes on for school.

Jane's two older fraternal twin brothers, Michael and Marcus, were seated at either end of the kitchen table, silently reading the cereal boxes in front of them—Cheerios and Shredded Wheat—as they ate their breakfasts. The twins, three years older than Jane, were already in grade eleven in high school. Both were tall and lanky musicians with hazel eyes, but this was where their similarities ended.

Michael was a wannabe rock star with wavy, shoulder-length, light brown hair. He wore ripped blue jeans, a black t-shirt commemorating his favourite lead singer and bassist, Geddy Lee, a black leather jacket that remained unzipped and open at the front, and white Reebok running shoes. Marcus, on the other hand, sported a short, spiked blonde hair cut with long, back-combed bangs that completely covered one of his eyes. He wore a white, long-sleeved, dress shirt with the collar turned up and black suspenders that held up his baggy black cotton pants. A long black dress coat, black and

white checkered scarf, and black Hightop Reebok running shoes finished his preppy-alternative style.

It was Thursday, February 14, 1985, in Lanigan, Saskatchewan. Although the morning temperature was starting out at -10°C , it was forecast to warm up to $+5^{\circ}\text{C}$ by noon. The coldest part of winter was virtually over. Certainly, there would be a few more snowstorms over the next six weeks. But the -35°C days of standing outside in the snow, waiting for the school bus—while bundled from head to toe in winter boots, ski pants, a thick winter jacket with the hood pulled up over a thick toque, and a scarf wrapped around her neck and head to shield her from the prairie wind—were now a thing of the past. This was not a particularly attractive image for a young girl who was determined to look pretty for all the suddenly gorgeous boys around her. Because as soon as her toque came off at school, her hair would inevitably turn into one staticky mess for the rest of the day—no matter how much Final Net hairspray she had applied to it.

On this day, Jane put on her winter boots, jacket, and gloves. No ski pants. No toque. No scarf. She opted, instead, for a pair of pink earmuffs to cover her ears while ensuring her hairstyle stayed in place.

A loud car horn sounded outside then, breaking Jane's brothers from their emotionless trances. They quickly slurped the last of the milk in their cereal bowls and then bolted toward the door. "Later!" they each called out as they brushed past Jane out the door to their friend's brown 1980 Ford Ltd. Country Squire station wagon in the driveway. The screech of the car's tires signalled them backing out of the driveway and speeding away, much to their mother's chagrin. Their antics often made her sigh and shake her head.

"Here," Jane's mother said, turning her attention to her daughter, handing her a paper bag lunch to place in her backpack. "Your Valentine's Day cards are in the front pocket." Linda still had her nursing uniform on, and she looked tired from the last of her three twelve-hour night shifts in a row. "Have fun," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee and sitting down at the kitchen table to enjoy it ... at long last.

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“Thanks,” Jane smiled, stuffing the bag lunch into her backpack and closing the zipper. Then she was out the door to greet Trisha who stood waiting for her at the end of her driveway directly across the street.

Trisha Stevenson and Jane Smith had lived across the street from each other in that small town ever since they were both infants. They had never known life without each other and were bonded like sisters because of it. If it were not for their close living arrangement, they may not have been such close friends. Trisha was a natural beauty who had always been a popular extrovert and seemed to know everyone in town, while Jane was more of a shy and awkward bookworm.

The girls lived on the last street on the southeast side of Lanigan: Howard Crescent. Both the K-8 public elementary and 9-12 public high schools were located on the west side—a chilly 20-minute walk one way—so they had to start their trek to school at 8:00 AM in order to get there in time for their first class at 8:30 AM. Trisha started each school day walk in the same manner: with an overview of the latest gossip she had learned from her telephone marathon sessions, trips about town, or parents’ visitors the night before.

“So, like, it’s true. The Archibalds *are* moving to Saskatoon soon,” Trisha started. “My mom and I ran into Allan and Elaine at the hockey rink last night. And, like, Allan got a position at the Royal Bank in the city, so he’s leaving this weekend to start his job on Tuesday, after the long weekend, and find them a new house. Elaine is, like, staying behind with the boys to get everything packed and ready for the move.”

Most girls their age would have referred to these adults as “Mr. Archibald” and “Mrs. Archibald,” but Trisha had been on a first-name basis with everyone since the day she learned how to talk, and her parents never corrected her for it. Or perhaps they had tried unsuccessfully. Unlike Jane, Trisha was surprisingly confident around everyone, no matter what their age or status, and she had no problem asking people about their lives to keep up with the town’s news. She clearly revelled in the power she gleaned by learning and freely sharing all this intel with others.

The Archibalds had three sons: Allan Jr., their eldest son, was in grade eleven with Michael and Marcus; Graeme was in grade ten; and Ewan was

one year younger than Jane and Trisha, in grade seven. The family lived just down the street from the girls; so, oftentimes, they had run through the sprinklers, gone swimming, and ridden bikes together with Ewan during the summer months, or they had all gone skating at the hockey rink, or sledding together at The Big Hill in the field behind their street during the winter months. But that was as close as Jane had ever gotten to knowing anyone else in that family, and she was a bit jealous of her friend's familiarity and comfort with all of them. Jane would *never* have considered just walking up to either of the older two boys to say hello and have a chat like Trisha would, never mind talking with their *parents* at a hockey game.

Another thing caught Jane's eye on this particular morning and made her feel even more jealous than usual: Trisha's glimmery pink lips. She was wearing lip gloss to complement her perfectly mascaraed eyelashes. Meanwhile, the wind was already drying out Jane's lips and causing them to chap more and more with every step they took in that cold, dry, windy climate. It was so unfair. Trisha was already a beautiful brunette with long curly hair, stunning green eyes accented by naturally long eyelashes, always perfectly coordinated outfits, and matching painted fingernails. As if she needed lip gloss to make her even prettier.

Trisha continued with more gossip. "And, like, last night at supper time, like, my dad said there are more whispers of a strike at the potash mine."

"Yeah. I heard about that, too," Jane replied.

"From *whom*?" Trisha inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Mom and dad mentioned it over supper last night. Like, I think they're pretty worried about it."

"That's for sure."

The Lanigan Division Potash Mine was a major industry, employing at least fifty percent of the men in Lanigan and surrounding areas. A strike there would be sure to divide the town, so even the kids were concerned about it. Trisha's father managed a group of mine operators while Jane's father worked as a steam engineer. Although they were in different departments, they would be on opposite sides of that strike which would inevitably pit

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their wives and children against each other, never mind all the men at the mine. Everyone knew it, and the tension throughout Lanigan was palpable because of it.

It had taken only two minutes to reach the end of Howard Crescent where the girls would pick up their first of two friends along the trek to school. When they walked up the driveway and rang the side doorbell, their friend's mother answered almost immediately.

"Hi Mrs. Dyck," Jane greeted her with the term of respect commonly used at that time.

"Hi Sharon," Trisha said without any hesitation, as though she was an adult herself. "Is Lisa ready?"

"Come on in girls. She's almost ready."

The girls entered the Dyck family's porch and waited as Lisa scurried about the kitchen, stuffing her bag lunch into her backpack and searching hastily for the last of her schoolbooks. "Sorry!" she called out as she disappeared down the hallway for a moment and then returned with her math book in hand and a relieved look on her face.

Where Trisha was a short and petite girly girl, and Jane was a tall and slender plain-looking girl, Lisa was more of a stocky, athletic jock. She never wore make-up except for at dances or special events. She played softball in the springtime, soccer in the summer, field hockey in the fall, and did curling in the winter. And she dressed the part each day for school: side-striped navy-blue track pants with a matching hoodie and a grey long-sleeve shirt underneath. Jane and Trisha had known Lisa since she moved to their street when they were all three years old. They could not have been any more different from one another, but they had fought and played together like sisters for the past 10 years straight. And they walked to school together every day.

Sharon took Lisa's math book from her with a laugh. "Go get your boots on," she said as she rearranged her daughter's backpack for her, taking the bag lunch out to place the math book in first, so as not to squish her sandwiches on the bottom.

“Thanks mom.” Lisa quickly put on her winter boots, coat, toque, and gloves. Her mother then placed her backpack on her back for her, and the three girls were out the door once again.

“Have a great day, girls! Enjoy the party!”

“Thanks!”

“Bye!”

“See you later!”

It may not have been as cold outside this morning as it had been all winter long, but the climate was still quite dry and windy. Jane couldn't help but lick her lips repeatedly to try to moisturize them. Of course, that only made things worse, as a red rash was starting to form just above her lips where the hot air from her nose would immediately dry her saliva. Noticing this, Lisa took a tube of ChapStick out of her coat pocket, applied it to her own lips, and then offered it to her friend.

“Thanks!” Jane graciously accepted the offer. “I forgot mine at home.” She applied a heavy coat of ChapStick all over her lips and then returned the tube to Lisa.

“So, how about Shelley and Jason?” Trisha inquired, straight back into gossip mode. “Did they, like, break up or something? Shelley didn't look very happy with him at the hockey rink last night.”

“No, they're still going out,” Lisa informed. “She was just mad that, like, he didn't call her yesterday. He used to, like, call her every night. But he said he was too tired after hockey practice. They worked it out last night, though.”

Shelley King and Jason Thompson were the most popular couple of all the kids in grade eight. She was the quintessential gorgeous blond with blue eyes that all the boys fawned over. And he, with his pitch-black wavy hair and shiny big brown eyes, was her male equivalent from the viewpoint of every girl within a 30-mile radius of Lanigan. He was even popular in Humboldt due to playing hockey against their team. Shelley and Jason had been dating for a whole six months—which was a long time for thirteen-

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year-olds. Everyone envied this golden couple. Even girls as pretty as Trisha and Lisa were obsessed with their love story.

Shelley and Jason both lived on the other side of town, only a few blocks away from the school, so shy Jane never got to know them as well as she knew all the kids on her own street. She wasn't a part of their inner circle. Any gossip she learned about them happened during these walks to school, or during her evening visits with Trisha at home. Lisa, on the other hand, had gotten close to Shelley due to their shared interest in sports. So, she had the inside track on everything Shelley was doing, and every boy she had dated since grade seven.

"Do you think they'll last? Like, I totally saw him talking with a few other girls at the rink last night." Trisha had a sly grin on her face. "There was a whole group of girls from, like, Drake standing around him before Shelley got there. Even some girls from *high school* were flirting with him."

"Duh! He's, like, totally hot." Lisa shrugged her shoulders. "They can both have whoever they want. I guess it depends on who they want."

That was the reality for these popular teenagers. Whatever they wanted, whoever they wanted, they got it. Must be nice, Jane quietly thought to herself. She rarely ever engaged in the conversations during these walks to school. She just listened as she tagged along with the others. And she would secretly fantasize about what it must be like to be a Shelley King type of girl—what your daily life must be like when everyone knows you and loves you, and they're all talking about your fabulous life during their walks to school.

"And do *you* still like Mike Shewchuk?" Trisha inquired, causing Lisa to blush. "Did you, like, pass him the note in class yesterday?"

"No!" Lisa scolded. Her face was beat red, half smiling, half annoyed.

"You should totally stick it inside his Valentine's Day card and give it to him at the party today."

"Trisha!" She shook her head, clearly uncomfortable with such an open discussion about her latest crush.

Trisha then turned her attention to Jane. “And *this* girl is in love with Todd Brooks,” she teased.

Jane could feel her face heating up and turning as red as Lisa’s. They all knew each other well, but it was still embarrassing to discuss crushes so openly with anyone—especially with the town’s biggest gossiper, Trisha. So, Jane would typically just leave it at that and stay quiet. She reserved her private conversations for their one-on-one phone calls or visits in the evenings, thinking that was much safer.

The girls made good time going all the way up Baun Street and cutting through a small patch of trees, over onto Claire Avenue for the second half of their trip. They all always inhaled deeply at the inviting aroma coming from the Lanigan bakery as they crossed Main Street. The deliciously comforting smell of freshly baked buns, bread, cakes, and pastries filled the air as adults entered and exited the bakery door from their angle parked cars in front of it.

The girls’ next stop was Crystal Mcleod’s house on the corner of the next street ahead. Crystal had been watching out her living room window for her friends to approach. As soon as she saw them, she disappeared from the window, and quickly appeared outside the front door carrying her schoolbooks and lunch bag in her arms. “Guess what! Guess what!” she excitedly announced as she ran toward them.

“What?”

“Guess who called me last night?!” She squealed with happiness.

“Who?!” all three girls blurted out simultaneously.

“Mike Shewchuk!”

Crystal may have been excited and hoping her friends would share in her joy with her, but she was greeted with an awkward silence instead. Lisa looked like she might cry. Jane stayed quiet and looked around at everyone else’s expressions, and Trisha searched her mind for an ice breaker of some kind. Finally, she replied, “That’s awesome, Crystal!”

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But Crystal had noticed the strange first reaction from everyone. “Like, *what?*” she asked, stopping walking for a moment, and looking at everyone inquisitively.

“Nothing,” said both Lisa and Trisha.

“*Nothing?* You’re sure?”

“We’re *sure*.” Trisha smiled and tried to turn the mood around quickly, restarting their walk toward the school. “So, like, what did he say?”

“Well,” Crystal smiled and giddily twirled around while she hugged her books and lunch bag close to her chest. “He totally asked me to the dance tomorrow night!”

“Did you say yes?”

“I said yes!”

Of course a boy like Mike Shewchuk would ask a girl like Crystal Mcleod to the dance, Jane privately surmised. Beautiful people all stick together. Crystal was practically Trisha’s twin, the two girls looked so much alike. They were both beautiful brunettes with perfectly coordinated wardrobes, flawless hair, and perfectly mascaraed eyelashes. They classified themselves as best friends to everyone in town. The two were inseparable at school, which meant Jane quickly played second fiddle once Crystal and Trisha were together. But that was just the way it was, Jane had decided. She was used to it by now and knew her place in the social pecking order. At school, she mainly hung out with the intellectual bookworms or other shy kids like herself. In the evenings, and on walks to and from school, she would get caught up on all the popular kid gossip from Trisha. It was their proximity—living right across the street from each other practically since birth—that kept Jane in the loop with everything.

The closer they got to school, the more kids they saw walking along the streets, and the more cars drove past them filled with carpooling parents and their little kids who were still too small to walk to school on their own. Jane was the first to notice Shelley King and Jason Thompson turn onto Clare Avenue about a block ahead of them. They were holding hands, both of them

smiling and happily chatting. It made her heart sink because she'd never experienced a love like that before, and she wanted it so badly. She wanted it most with Todd Brooks; but, half the time, he didn't seem to notice her at all.

"See, they're okay," Lisa pointed as soon as she saw Shelley and Jason up ahead.

Trisha rolled her eyes and grinned. "Like, it sure looks better this morning than it did last night."

"Do you mind?" Lisa gestured with her thumb her intention to join the two of them ahead.

"Go," Trisha said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Okay. Like, catch you guys later!" And, with that, Lisa darted toward the couple, calling out Shelley's name. It had been painful for her to hear all about how her biggest crush had just asked out another one of her friends to the dance, and she needed an excuse to get away. This was the perfect escape.

Crystal was intuitive. "Is she okay?"

"She likes Mike." Trisha blurted out now that Lisa was out of earshot.

"Oh. ... Oops."

"Like, you didn't know. It's okay."

Before long, it was 8:21 AM, and the girls were hanging their backpacks and winter coats onto their designated hooks on the wall outside their classroom, changing out of their winter boots and into their indoor shoes for class. Their next stop after that was always the bathroom to check their hair and makeup before the bell rang. Jane was absolutely appalled as soon as she looked in the mirror to see all her mascara smeared on her lids and down the front of her face.

"Fudge!" Jane exclaimed.

"Don't you mean *fuck*." Trisha laughed but lowered the volume of her voice when she spoke the swear word so not to be heard by any possible witnesses in the bathroom stalls behind them.

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“FUDGE!” Jane repeated more passionately than the first time.

Trisha looked over at Crystal who was giggling, too. “Like, she won’t even swear. It’s so funny.”

“Why is *your* mascara, like, still perfect?” Jane asked her beautiful friends. “What the fudge?!” She grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser in front of her, wet it with some tap water and a dab of hand soap from the pump on the wall, and she began rubbing the last of her makeup from her face. What a total waste of seven minutes that had been earlier in the morning.

“Like, tell your mom you need *waterproof* mascara!” Trisha said, as she and Crystal did one last check of their hair and applied a second coat of lip gloss to their lips before hurrying out of the bathroom and into the hallway.

“Hurry up, or you’ll be late!” they both called as the door closed behind them, leaving Jane alone momentarily with her now makeup-less face and red chapped lips. At least her perm was still in place thanks to the hearty coat of Final Net.

Jane soon joined her classmates who were lined up in single file outside their classroom five minutes before the bell rang, as was customary every Thursday morning. Their incessant teenage chatter and giggling was suddenly interrupted by a loud whistle followed by, “Okay, quiet down!” from their teacher, Mr. Day. “Let’s get moving.” They followed him down the hallway and out the side door of the school into the crisp winter air.

Jane quietly watched her biggest crush, Todd Brooks, who was five students ahead of her in the line-up. Always the class clown, he joyously hammed it up with his three headbanger friends during their short two-minute walk over to the high school, on the snow-shovelled sidewalk. He teased the girls in front of them with common superstitions to make them all cringe.

“Damn, man!” he exclaimed with an exaggerated look of terror as he stepped directly on each crack on the sidewalk as they strolled along.

“Oh God! *Don’t!*” the girls pleaded, half giggling, half serious.

“Step on a crack and you’ll break your momma’s back,” he taunted them laughingly. Their discomfort caused sheer joy in his guy friends which, of course, egged him on to continue with even more silly torments. “How much worse can it get? I already knocked over the full-length mirror in my bedroom this morning, and it smashed into pieces.”

“No!”

“Then I opened up my umbrella in the kitchen.”

“Stay away from me!”

“Then when I left my house this morning, a black cat crossed my path.”

“You’re doomed now, dude,” his friends joked as the girls around them shuddered in mock fear.

“Maybe I should walk under that ladder, too,” Todd pointed ahead to a maintenance man who was up high on a ladder, at the side of the high school ahead of them, collecting soccer balls from the roof. “Then again...” he paused for a moment, looking down at the ground in front of him where he saw one shiny penny. He picked it up, grinned, and showed it to all the girls before putting it into his pocket. “I guess this cancels it all. Now I’ll have good luck for the rest of the day.”

Every Thursday, all the grade eighters would take the short two-minute walk across the parking lot from their elementary school to spend time at the high school. The girls attended a home economics class where they honed their cooking and household skills while the boys attended a shop class to learn about specialized tools, machinery, carpentry, and mechanics. But these mornings were about more than just preparing the kids for the adult world ahead of them: first, it was to acclimatize them to the high school they would all be attending next fall; and second, it was to introduce them to the other grade eighters from nearby villages such as Guernsey, Drake, and Jansen. Those kids attended their own elementary schools at home, but they were all bussed into Lanigan for high school.

As soon as the village kids saw the Lanigan crowd crossing the parking lot, they got off their buses and joined them inside the high school doors. The

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volume of their lively discourse rose once again at the excitement of seeing each other, causing Mr. Day to interrupt with another sharp whistle, followed by another “Quiet down!” Unfortunately, it didn’t help much.

Jane both loved and dreaded these Thursday mornings. On the one hand, going to the high school made her feel very grown-up. On the other hand, she was increasingly shy and timid at the sight of all the older teenagers standing in front of their lockers in the hallway. She could hardly make eye contact with any of them, let alone talk to them. So, she would steal a glance here and there, but then she would quickly stare back down at the floor or chat with one of her quiet bookworm friends to restore her sense of comfort. Heck, Jane could barely even bring herself to make eye contact with Todd, never mind any of the high school students.

Todd was a wannabe rock star much like Jane’s older brother Michael, actually much like so many of the teenage boys in Lanigan. Everyone was a rock star with big hair in the 80s. Todd played the drums, was obsessed with bands like Black Sabbath, and was starting to grow out his dark brown hair to resemble Ozzy Osbourne’s wavy, long, back-combed style. He was the tallest boy in their class which made him look older, but his behaviour gave him away as the elementary school kid he was.

And then there was extroverted Trisha. “Allan! Graham!” she called out as the two Archibald brothers rushed past them into the school, just as the bell rang for classes to start. “Are you excited about Saskatoon?” They both looked back at her briefly, acknowledging her comment with a quick smile and a thumbs up before disappearing around the next corner, clearly in a rush to get to their respective classes.

The 16 grade eight boys now filed into their shop classroom on one side of the hallway, and the 13 girls all made their way into the home economics room directly across from it. Mrs. Zemplach stood at the counter of one of the four kitchens along the sides of the classroom while the girls all took their seats at the tables in the centre of the room.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, girls,” she greeted them all once everyone was settled in.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Mrs. Zemplach,” they responded in unison with forced smiles.

“Today, we’re going to be making sugar cookies and muffins for your afternoon celebration. How does that sound? Let’s get our aprons on, shall we?”

* * * * * * * * *

A wide countertop extended along the back wall of Jane’s grade eight classroom in the elementary school. Underneath that countertop were rows of cubby holes where all the students stored their lunch kits and textbooks for each class. All along the top were platters filled with heart-shaped sugar cookies and chocolate muffins with red icing that the girls had made during their home economics class that morning. Red and white Valentine-themed paper plates and cups, plastic cutlery, napkins, and several two-litre bottles of Coca Cola, Seven Up, and Orange Crush were set neatly beside them. The delicious smell of this homestyle baking filled the classroom, making it harder than usual for anyone to concentrate on their math assignment.

Todd Brooks sat three seats ahead and one row to the left of Jane, in perfect view for her to stare at him on a consistent basis each day. He had clearly already finished his work because his notebook was closed and tucked underneath his math textbook, and he’d pushed them both up to the top part of his desk, making room for an imaginary drum set in front of him. Completely immersed in his own rock star dreamland, Todd’s eyes were closed as his head bobbed forward in tempo with the silent air drumming of both his hands and feet. Jane wondered which song he was playing inside his mind and wished she could join in his fantasy along with him.

That was certainly more interesting than this boring math assignment: converting numbers between percentages, fractions, and decimals. Jane circled her pencil in the air just above the next question on the page in front of her. There were several more to complete with only three minutes left in class until lunchtime, so she knew she would have homework that evening. Math was definitely not her strong suit. She preferred English and the arts. Jane loved reading, writing, and drawing and would do this for the pure joy of it in her spare time. In fact, she was already quite clear about her future career—to obtain an English degree at the University of Saskatchewan,

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perhaps become an English teacher or work with a literary publisher, and one day become a famous romance novelist. The *romance* part of that author fantasy was new, ever since she'd become a boy-crazy adolescent.

Trisha, Lisa, Shelley, and Crystal were all seated one row away from Jane on her right—the popular girl row of the classroom, she had privately dubbed it. Throughout this math class, she'd seen them secretly passing a note back and forth underneath their desks. Trisha's sudden gasp and blushing face had caught Jane's attention, and she wondered what this latest message was about as her friend quickly refolded and tucked the note into her front pocket so as not to have it confiscated by Mr. Day. Jane was never included in these types of social activities, but she knew she would hear all about it from Trisha either on the phone later that evening, or maybe during their walk to school the next day. It must be a good one. The other girls were all smiling and giggling amongst themselves at Trisha's embarrassed reaction.

The loud school bell rang then, jolting everyone back to life. What a relief! Jane closed her math books and tucked her pencil back into her pencil case. The classroom grew loud with noise and chatter as all the students began rising from their desks, getting ready to grab their lunches and Valentine's Day cards from their backpacks in the hallway.

"Okay," Mr. Day announced from the front of the class. "Anyone who's finished, put your notebook on my desk for marking. Everyone else, get it done this evening. I want to see it on my desk first thing in the morning."

"Should we put the treats out on everyone's desks now?" Jenny Morin called from the far side of the room.

"When should we hand out the Valentine's Day cards?" Erin Lynch added.

Mr. Day raised his hands and smiled. "Hang on, girls. Eat your lunches. Once everyone is done and gone outside for the break, you can get the room organized for the party. Thank you again for volunteering, Jenny and Erin."

"You're welcome." They both beamed with pride.

Jenny and Erin were the straight-A, eyeglass-wearing, mascara-free bookworms of the grade eight class, albeit nowhere near as shy as their friend

Jane was. In fact, they were quite social as the teachers' studious organizers of dances and class events, and editors of the elementary school's monthly newsletter. Both girls seemed destined to become community leaders of some kind when they grew up.

The two girls had arranged for every student to place their Valentine's Day cards into a small bin at the back of the room so that *they* could pass them out on each desk before the party to avoid any awkward personal exchanges between the girls and boys. Almost as quickly as everyone had left the room to grab their cards and lunches, they all filed back in and tossed their cards into the bin before sitting down to eat at their desks.

Jane watched with envy as Jason Thompson and Mike Shewchuk each placed a small bouquet of carnations and heart-shaped box of chocolates on Shelley's and Crystal's desks after placing their regular cards for everyone else into the bin. A few other girls in the class placed extra candies like Love Hearts onto their classmate Mark Carroll's desk. When Mark returned to his desk with his lunch bag and saw the candies, his expression was a cross between shock and ecstasy. His face turned beat red causing collective laughter around him.

"Way to go, Mark!" the guys razzed him.

"You're the man!"

Jane silently admired Mark as she walked toward the back of the room to place her own Valentine's Day cards into the bin. In one short year, he had transformed from being a virtually unnoticeable, short, geeky-looking boy who pretty much kept to himself to a suddenly tall, cute guy with a peach-fuzz mustache and feathered back brown hair. He dressed well now, too, with his trendy wardrobe of fitted jeans, wool crewneck sweaters, cardigans, and t-shirts. Not only did Jane admire his new look from afar; she envied him. She secretly wished that she could go through such an amazing transformation herself and have boys leaving extra Valentine's Day gifts on her desk. Alas, not this year.

Plain Jane Tagalong and the Magic Diary

“I can help after lunch.” Jane offered to Jenny and Erin, as she placed her cards into the bin they were both carefully guarding at the back of the room. “Do you need help?”

“Sure. Thanks, Jane.”

* * * * * * * * *

Jane peered outside the classroom window as she pulled the pre-named Valentine’s Day cards from the small bin in her arm and set each one onto the appropriate students’ desks. She could see Lisa, Shelley, Jason, and a handful of other jocks playing street hockey together in their own makeshift hockey rink in the middle of the school’s soccer field. The outside temperature had now warmed up to +5° C, so their jackets were either open or fully off as they worked up a sweat running back and forth with their hockey sticks. Meanwhile, Trisha, Crystal, Mike, and a few other beautiful people loitered near the playground full of children, a little closer to the school, sharing anecdotes and laughter with one another. Crystal and Mike were holding hands—a sure sign they were officially a couple—and Trisha seemed to be a little extra flirty with Mark Carroll all of a sudden. Or maybe she was just probing him for gossip about which girls had given him all those Love Hearts and whether or not he liked any of them. Whatever the case may be, Jane knew she would hear all about it the next time she talked privately with Trisha.

“When you’re done with those, can you give everyone a few each of these?” Jenny asked, placing a bag of Hershey’s Chocolate Kisses into the bin in Jane’s arm.

“Sure.”

Erin was on a stool at the front of the classroom, pinning the last of her red felt heart hanging garlands above the chalkboard just as the school bell rang to end the lunch hour. She had already covered almost every wall and window in the room with Valentine’s Day decorations and seemed to be enjoying every minute of it.

“Yikes!” Jane exclaimed as she noticed the time on the clock and rushed around the classroom to finish dropping six Hershey’s Chocolate Kisses onto

each desk. By the time she was done, most of the students were already piling back into the classroom and grabbing their English books from their respective cubby holes at the back of the room.

Trisha stopped beside Jane briefly, leaning in a bit closer to whisper in her ear as she motioned toward Mark Carroll with a fascinated gaze. “Like, what happened to *him*? He’s totally hot now. Like, totally bodacious!”

“Like, I know. It’s kinda crazy.” Jane agreed.

“Okay, everyone! Get back to your desks! Quiet down!” Mrs. Chalmers announced as she entered the classroom and closed the door behind her. Unlike in high school, where the students all transferred from class to class for different subjects, the elementary school teachers were the ones who moved around to different classrooms throughout the day while the students stayed put in their homerooms. Mr. Day had left his homeroom to teach another group across the hall while Mrs. Chalmers took over for English.

It took a minute or two for everyone to officially settle in. “Okay,” the teacher continued once everyone was seated with their English textbooks opened on their desks. “You don’t need those today. Just one sheet in your notebooks will do. You’re each going to write a short essay—an opinion piece with an opening, body, and conclusion—during the first half of the class. Then we’re going to share a few of them out loud during the second half.”

Many groans could be heard from all corners of the classroom as the students closed their textbooks, opened their notebooks, and pulled a pen and bottle of Liquid Paper out from their pencil cases. Clearly, Jane was one of the few kids in her class who loved writing assignments. Give her *this* kind of class work any day of the week, and she was happy.

“Now, hang on,” Mrs. Chalmers assured those who resisted the thought of this task. “I think you’ll like this one. You’re each going to write about whether or not you think Valentine’s Day should be celebrated.” She took a piece of chalk and wrote on the chalkboard behind her: Should Valentine’s Day Be Celebrated? “This is the title of your paper. Please write it at the top of your page. Remember to capitalize each word in a title unless it is an article, conjunction, or preposition.”

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“Is ‘be’ an article, conjunction, or preposition?” someone asked.

Mrs. Chalmers smiled. “Can anyone answer that?”

“It’s a verb,” Jane timidly answered. It was the one area in her life where she was confident enough to speak aloud, albeit quietly.

“That’s right. So, we capitalize it. Thank you, Jane.”

Mrs. Chalmers took a seat at Mr. Day’s desk and began marking some of her homeroom assignments as the students began writing. Like most everyone else in the class, Jane snacked on the Hershey’s Chocolate Kisses on her desk as she wrote and snuck a peek or two at the stack of Valentine’s Day cards on her desk. Time seemed to fly by from her standpoint. Just as she’d completed her own conclusion, Mrs. Chalmers announced, “Okay, time’s up. Who would like to share first?” A few students giggled, and a few others cringed at the idea of public speaking. No one offered to read out loud for the class, so Mrs. Chalmers scanned the classroom with a curious grin as she walked between the rows of desks. “Going once ... going twice ... SOLD to our local rock star, Mr. Brooks,” she finally announced, stopping directly in front of Todd.

“Okay.” Todd willingly stood up and faced his cheering classmates—an opportunity for this class clown to enjoy being the centre of attention. He held his notebook in front of him and cleared his throat. “Should Valentine’s Day Be Celebrated?” he began by reciting the title of the opinion piece. “Every year on February fourteenth, people give cards, gifts, chocolates, candies, and flowers as a sign of love to their friends, boyfriends, girlfriends...” he paused, “and secret crushes.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down for effect, coaxing laughter out of his classmates. “But why? What is the point of Valentine’s Day? When and where did this tradition start, and who started it?”

“According to legend, a priest named Valentinus was going around Rome, preaching about Christianity and performing marriage rituals in the name of Jesus Christ. The Roman Emperor at the time didn’t like this one bit, so he arrested Valentinus and had him beheaded on February fourteenth. He even celebrated his decapitation with a public feast! His fellow Christians

made Valentinus a martyr after his death, and they renamed him Saint Valentine, the Patron Saint of Love. Somehow, over the centuries, people's memories of this Roman celebration of a beheading faded away and they chose to remember February fourteenth as a celebration of love, instead. Sweethearts used to share hand-written love letters with each other in the spirit of St. Valentine. But with the industrial age came fancy, mass-produced cards to replace those simple letters..." Todd picked up a handful of the cards on his desk to show his classmates. "Companies like Hershey's saw the perfect opportunity to sell *sweet* treats as gifts for your *sweetheart*..." He picked up the leftover wrappers of his Hershey's Chocolate Kisses and showed them to everyone.

"Now, here we are today, spending stupid amounts of money to celebrate a man who was decapitated in Rome sometime during the third century A.D. In my opinion, that's just stupid. Valentine's Day isn't a celebration of love at all. In fact, it is a money grab. It's an excuse for retail stores to force guys to buy more paper, candy, and flowers, and it causes them a lot of stress in the process. It's not worth it when a simple love letter on any day of the year will do." With that, Todd proudly took a bow. "Thank you," he said and sat down in his seat to the applause of his guy friends and the snickers of many others.

"Okay. Thank you, Todd," Mrs. Chalmers clapped and nodded in thanks to him for sharing his opinion piece so openly. "Let's hear from one of the ladies now. What do you think about Valentine's Day? Should it be celebrated?"

Jane sank down in her chair, hoping to disappear from the teacher's sight, while Shelley and a few of the more sociable girls all tentatively raised their hands with smiles. Luckily, Jane's ploy seemed to work as Mrs. Chalmers passed by her and turned to face the willing participants in the next row.

"Okay, Shelley. Let's hear from you."

The class now collectively turned their gazes from Todd over to Shelley. She cleared her throat, blushed, and made eye contact with Jason across the room. He acknowledged his girlfriend with a confident wink and smile which made Jane's heart sink with jealousy.

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“Some people believe that Valentine’s Day is nothing more than a commercial holiday designed to make people spend more money on gifts,” Shelley began, eyeing Todd with a sly grin, causing all her classmates to chuckle and Todd to lean back in his chair, his arms crossed in front of him, a defiant smirk on his face. “But we could say the same thing about Christmas and Easter, couldn’t we? And we could even say the same thing about other celebrations like our own birthdays.

“On all of these occasions, we take the time to buy or *make*,” she pointed to the freshly baked cookies and muffins at the back of the room, “gifts for others to show them we care about them, and that is important. We all need to know that people care about us. The act of giving not only makes the person who receives the gift feel great. It also makes the person who gave it feel great, and that creates more happiness and love in the world. That is what Saint Valentine represents to me: giving to others, showing love for others, and making the world a better place. That is why I think we should celebrate Valentine’s Day. It is a special day with one special purpose. It reminds all of us to show others how much we care.”

Todd and his friends rolled their eyes as Shelley took her seat. Her female friends clapped in favour of her take on the topic. Jane clapped, too, although she felt more envious than supportive when it came to this particular class assignment. She’d never known true Valentine’s Day love. Up until she began noticing the boys around her, and feeling the heartbreak of unrequited crushes, Jane had been quite content with sharing cards and candies among friendly classmates. But watching all the pretty girls now coupling up with all the cute boys made her heart ache, and she longed to experience romantic acceptance in this way.

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Everything felt awkward about Jane’s thirteen-year-old existence, including this Valentine’s Day party after English class. She used to love sitting with Jenny and Erin at these types of classroom social gatherings, conversing together over their latest book club read—which, this month, was *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.* by Judy Blume. But not today. This book discussed mature subjects that not all children were ready to talk about, so it

could only be checked out from the town library with express permission from a parent or guardian. While her two friends sheepishly read the author's take on menstruation aloud, Jane, who could not relate as she hadn't yet reached that level of physical maturity, found herself preoccupied with watching the goings-on among her peers.

Todd was boisterously clowning around with a group of boys and girls on one side of the classroom, as usual. Lisa, Shelley, Jason, and the jocks socialized together more quietly at a group of desks they'd pulled together by the window. Most curiously, Trisha was sitting quite close to the suddenly gorgeous Mark, engaging as though they were on some double date with the newly coupled Mike and Crystal. This would surely make for an interesting telephone gossip session later that evening.

"Well, like, *that's* sure interesting," Jane whispered just loud enough, causing Jenny and Erin to also notice the newly developed situation at hand.

"Hmmm." They both said, raising their eyebrows and smiling.

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As Trisha and Crystal were scheduled to attend ballet class after school, they rushed ahead of Jane on their way toward Lanigan's town hall, and Jane walked home on her own. She pulled her Walkman out from her backpack and placed the headphones on her ears before pressing play to listen to the personalized mixtape she had made for herself at home the night before. She absolutely loved Madonna's new hit "Crazy for You" and swayed her head back and forth to the sound of it, quietly singing it to herself as she fantasized about slow dancing with Todd at tomorrow night's school dance. Jane often fantasized about how she wanted her life to be, and the fantasy became even more involved as the next song "Hot Child in the City" by Nick Gilder began to play. Suddenly, her mind had replaced the girl in that MTV music video with herself—expertly, sexily applying her new waterproof mascara in front of the school bathroom mirror at the Valentine's Day school dance before re-entering the hallway where all her classmates turned to gaze at her in awe.

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“Like, what happened to *her*? She’s totally hot now. Like, totally bodacious!” she heard a few of them say as she sauntered past them in a fitted white t-shirt, black leather pants, and matching black pumps. Her lips shimmered with pink lip gloss. Her hair was perfectly backcombed and full-bodied like Sheena Easton’s, complemented by stunning, oversized white hoop earrings. Mark Carroll, and even Jason Thompson and Mike Shewchuk, stared at her with wanting eyes, much to the displeasure of their girlfriends. But Jane was no cheater. She walked straight past them, through the adoring crowd to the centre of the dance floor where Todd awaited her.

“Jane,” he said, caressing one of her soft, rosy cheeks with his hand, staring into her eyes with a loving glow in his eyes. “Jane.”

“JANE!” Her fantasy was suddenly interrupted by reality. She pulled the earphones from her ears and looked around herself in shock to see where the voice was coming from. She had already reached main street beside the bakery where her mother was parked in front after picking up bread for supper that evening. Her mother chuckled at her daughter’s dazed state. “Do you want a ride?” she asked.

“Sure,” Jane replied, pulling her backpack off her back, stuffing her Walkman and earphones inside of it before getting into the back seat of their green 1982 Ford Sierra. She secured her seatbelt and set her belongings on the floor in front of herself.

“Do you want a ride, too, Ewan?” her mother called out to Ewan Archibald who, unbeknownst to Jane, had not been too far behind her on the way home from school.

“Sure,” he said, joining Jane in the back seat.

Jane noticed a pile of mail on the front seat of the car beside her mother. She reached through the small opening between the two front seats for one envelope in particular. It was a letter from her penpal, Li Mei.

The two kids sat in awkward silence for a short time as they began the drive home. Finally, Jane found the courage to speak. “So, like, you’re moving to Saskatoon, eh?”

“Yeah,” Ewan answered with a blank stare outside his window.

“That’s exciting,” Jane said with an awkward smile. It was exciting to her, anyway. A new start! In the city! What a great opportunity to get out of this small town and get some excitement in one’s life.

“I guess so.”

The rest of the ride home was quiet. Within eight minutes, they had reached Howard Crescent and pulled up in front of the Archibald’s home where Allan and Graeme had just parked in the driveway in their powder blue Gran Torino station wagon.

“Thanks for the ride!” Ewan said, bolting from the car toward his brothers.

“No problem,” Jane’s mom replied, waving good-bye to him and his brothers. “Say hi to your mom and dad.”

“Okay!” he called back. Allan and Graeme waved back at Jane and her mom before play wrestling their little brother into their front door and disappearing into the house.

Jane stayed quiet in the back seat, not waving to anyone, not even attempting to make eye contact with the older boys. It was much too intimidating a prospect for such a shy girl.

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Jane had never had any interest in ballet, but she’d tried tap dancing lessons for two years before dropping out. She’d tried piano lessons for three years before that; but, unlike her brother Marcus, who practiced every night on his keyboard for at least two hours, she simply could not get herself to stay interested in the activity. Her parents had even offered her bass guitar lessons like her brother Michael, but none of these things stuck. Not even the more advanced ice-skating or swimming lessons. Jane’s only true obsessions were reading and writing: poetry, short stories, teen romance, correspondence between herself and Li, and her own private diary entries. This was the one constant in her life. Every single

evening. I suppose you could say she was more of an introvert—quite the opposite of her friend Trisha.

Each day after school was like the movie *Groundhog Day*—the same scene over and over again. Whenever Jane entered the side door of their home, she would glimpse Michael in the rumpus room downstairs, practicing his best Geddy Lee moves on his bass guitar, the sound of Rush music blaring in the background. That was, until their mother scolded him, “Michael, turn it down!” He would grudgingly oblige. Jane would then pass through the kitchen, down the hallway by Marcus’s upstairs bedroom, on her way to her own, where she would see him immersed in his keyboard, playing along to the latest Dépêche Mode or Thompson Twins synth-pop singles. What a relief to finally reach her private bedroom door, walk inside, and close it behind her to muffle the sound of all these distractions.

Jane kept her room tidy with her mother’s help. It consisted of one single bed with a bookcase headboard in the corner next to the door. The bookcase was filled with collections of paperbacks and cassette tapes piled high. The mattress was covered with comforting stuffed animals all neatly arranged in front of her fluffy pillows that were slightly tucked underneath her soft pink comforter. A full-length mirror and tall dresser stood beside it, covered in bracelets, earrings, and a Sanyo radio/double cassette tape player—which was perfect for recording personalized mixtapes. On the other side of her room, next to her somewhat dishevelled clothes closet and just under the white blind covered windowsill, was a small oak desk and chair set with the new electric typewriter on top that her parents had bought her last Christmas. A single sheet of paper was still inside of it from last night’s attempted writing session. It contained the three short sentences she’d typed before writer’s block took hold:

Chapter One

I still remember the first time I looked into John Hall’s eyes. He was 17 years old, and I was 14 years old. It was my fourth week of high school.

Jane stared at the page for a moment, debating whether to sit down and try again. But that urge was fleeting. Instead, she set her backpack down on the

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