



# OPINIONS — AND — OPOSSUMS

*Ann Braden*

*Author of FLIGHT OF THE PUFFIN*

FREE  
SAMPLER

OPINIONS  
— AND —  
OPOSSUMS



**ALSO BY ANN BRADEN**

*The Benefits of Being an Octopus*

*Flight of the Puffin*

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*For Dan,  
the best partner ever.*

*How lucky I am that we get to sit next to each other on this ride  
of life, thinking big thoughts, asking big questions,  
and imagining the big, exciting lives of shopping carts.*



*In memory of my grandmother Jane Gracy Bedichek.*

## Chapter 1



LOTS OF KIDS HAVE TO GET BRACES, BUT NOT EVERYONE needs them because their adult canine teeth won't descend from the roof of their mouth. Weird, right? Just be glad you weren't there a few weeks ago when they excavated mine like I was a human archaeological site. And it doesn't help that the neighbor who brings me to all my orthodontist appointments is always sitting in the waiting room reading an archaeology magazine when I come out.

Today as my orthodontist tightened my braces, he joked that I was probably extra sweet since my sharpest teeth were buried so deep. I just nodded. It's not like I could say anything with all that equipment in my mouth anyway.

I didn't have anything to say as we drove home either. My mom was so relieved when Gracy, the neighbor lady, agreed to bring me to these appointments since my mom can't take time off from work. But it's awkward. Gracy tried starting conversations at the beginning. *"How's school?" "Fine."* *"What's your favorite subject?" "Lunch."* We didn't get much further since I

was pretty sure there's not much someone around seventy has in common with a twelve-year-old kid. Now we mostly drive in silence.

Until this afternoon, when Gracy screams: "Opossum!"

She slams on the brakes, and immediately the guy behind us starts honking. But instead of driving forward, Gracy turns off the engine and actually gets out. In the middle of the road!

"What are you doing?!" I call after her.

She says something, but I can't hear because of the honking. She pops the trunk and starts rummaging around. What could she possibly be doing? Maybe my mom shouldn't have been so eager to hand me to the first warm body with a car she found. I sink down into the seat so no one can see me.

But then Gracy opens my passenger door. She's wearing thick blue rubber gloves and points to something lying in the road.

"An opossum," she says. "We've got to save it."

What reality is this? I peer over the dashboard at the opossum lying in front of us. "Isn't it dead?"

"Probably just frightened into a state of shock." Gracy hands me a pair of gloves. "Agnes, if you help, we can move it to the edge of the road so it stays safe. There might be babies in the pouch."

"They have a pouch?" I say.

"Yes, they're our continent's only marsupials. Let's check."

I glance back at the line of cars forming behind us and the guy still honking his brains out. Everyone will see me if I get out of this car. I can't.



But what if there are babies in the opossum's pouch and it's *my* fault they don't make it?

I pull on the gloves and join her beside the motionless opossum.

My breath catches in my throat as she gently opens the opossum's pouch to reveal what look like a dozen tiny, squirming babies. And I wanted to keep sitting in the car!

I squat down, and together Gracy and I carefully pick up the mama opossum's stiff body and start moving her toward the side of the road.

The guy behind us sticks his head out the window and yells, "Gross!"

That's probably what I'd have said a minute ago, too, but even though this opossum smells like a dumpster full of rotten trash, all I can picture are those babies. Do they deserve to be called gross?

We set the mama's body down away from the road, under some bushes at the edge of the woods.

"Do you think she really might still be alive?"

Gracy nods. "Opossums have evolved to 'play dead' when threatened since most animals won't eat one that's already dead. But this instinct isn't great if your predator is a line of traffic ready to run you over. Can you wait here while I move our car out of the way?"

I nod and study the mama opossum. Her teeth are bared, and they look super sharp.

Once Gracy's car is parked on the shoulder, the angry guy takes off, still yelling as he goes.

But Gracy doesn't seem bothered. She simply takes the gloves back from me. "I always keep supplies in my trunk for situations like this."

Really? Who is this woman? Maybe I should be talking to her after all.

I watch her as she calmly puts everything back in the trunk. "Why doesn't the opossum know to not cross such a busy street?"

Gracy gestures at an apple core on the edge of the road. "Part of the reason they've been a successful species for nearly sixty million years is because they follow the smell of food."

"Even if it means crossing a road with cars?"

Gracy shrugs. "Cars have only been around for a hundred years, and evolution is a slow process. The opossum certainly isn't the only animal that does what it's done for years, even if it doesn't make sense."

I picture what could have happened if Gracy hadn't stopped. How ridiculously unfair. All the opossum wanted to do was eat the apple someone must have thrown out their window.

I kick the apple core as far as I can into the woods. If anyone should be angry, it's the opossum. Is it her fault she did what millions of years of ancestors have done? And look what almost happened.

Gracy and I stay, watching the opossum from the car, until finally, she stirs, stands up, and walks into the woods, taking her babies with her.

## Chapter 2



WHEN MY MOM GETS HOME FROM HER JOB AT THE BANK, I'm at the kitchen table looking at opossums on my phone. I never gave them a second thought before, but now I can't get them out of my head.

"Did you know that an adult opossum can eat five thousand ticks a year?" I say.

"That's a lot of ticks," my mom says as she drops her purse on the counter and starts going through the mail. "How was the orthodontist?"

"Fine." At least the appointment was. I don't have a word to describe what happened afterward.

My mom tugs off her stockings as she always does the minute she comes in the door. My mom hates stockings, but Mr. Adams, her boss, likes his female employees to wear skirts and stockings. It's not a written rule or anything, but my mom says that doesn't matter. So guess what she wears every day? Tight, itchy, sliding-down stockings.

"There it is!" my mom says, pulling an envelope from the

mail pile. “I didn’t want to miss it because we’ve got to fill this out and drop it off at church this weekend.”

“What is it?”

“Now that you’re twelve, we can sign you up for confirmation classes.”

“What?! Do I have to?” I didn’t have the best experience at Sunday school a few years ago when I made the mistake of asking what original sin was. I learned that (1) I should *totally* have known the answer already, and (2) everything bad was Eve’s fault from when she bit into that apple in the Garden of Eden. And to think I’d been excited that we were finally talking about a Bible story with a girl. Good times. I didn’t ask another question in that class.

Plus, it bothers me that everyone at church is positive there’s a heaven, and while I want there to be one, I’m not sure. I can’t count the number of times someone’s told me my dad is in a better place. Maybe that made them feel good, but I’d sure prefer if he was here. I wish I could even remember him, but I was too young when he died.

“Sorry,” my mom says as she starts to fill out the form. “It’s nonnegotiable. Not with your grandmother counting on you to be confirmed as a full member of the church . . .”

My grandmother—also named Agnes after St. Agnes—is super religious. But Florida is a long way from Connecticut. I start to say that, but my mom is still talking.

“And certainly not with Mr. Adams being president of the church board and talking for years about their membership targets.” She finishes the form and tucks it in an envelope.

“Maybe we can’t give much to the annual fund, but we can give him one more church member for his charts.”

Rick Adams, president of the church board of trustees and president of the First Whitefield Savings and Loan bank where my mom works, has way too much control over our lives.

“Do we really have to care about his charts?” I ask.

My mom starts doing the dishes. “We do if I want to get promoted, and considering how much your braces are costing . . .”

“Yeah, I know,” I say. “The promotion isn’t optional.”

I head to my room wondering why my mom insists on dragging me to church every Sunday (wearing stockings for the sixth day of the week!) when I’m not even sure *she* likes going. Not to mention, what was she thinking naming me after her super-religious mother?

Perhaps that opossum isn’t the only one stuck in the middle of the road.



In my room, I look for my writing notebook before I realize it’s my best friend Mo’s turn with it. We do a lot of co-writing. Making up stories together is our thing. Specifically, stories about shopping carts. Basically, whenever we see an abandoned shopping cart, we write a story from the shopping cart’s perspective. We’ve been writing them since fifth grade, and now we have three notebooks full of stories. *Shopping Cart Stories*, *More Shopping Cart Stories*, and *The Continuation of Shopping Cart Stories*.

But now I have a new inspiration—what about writing from

an opossum's point of view? What would that mother have said today if she could talk? *"Who are you calling gross? Are you carrying a whole bunch of babies around in your pouch? Have some respect!"*

I find another notebook, lie down on my stomach on my bed, and start writing.

## **THE OPINION OF AN OPOSSUM**

Let me tell you how much I hate cars. We opossums have lots of jokes about them . . .

**"Why did the opossum cross the road?"**

**"She didn't. She was smooshed before reaching the other side!"**

And yeah, I'm sure it doesn't seem so smart to play dead in the middle of the street. Well, it's not my fault. I've been playing dead in the face of danger for sixty million years. Do you know how long cars have been around? About a hundred years. Do you know how much bigger sixty million is than a measly hundred? A lot. And do you know how hard it is to break a habit? Let's take for example a habit that human beings are quite used to—**DRIVING CARS.**

Now, most of the people who drive cars know that it's bad for the environment. But do they stop? No. Because they need to get to the grocery store.

So don't you be judging the opossum that walks to the edge of the road to eat that apple core.

## Chapter 3



THE NEXT DAY AT SCHOOL, I TAKE A SEAT AT OUR TABLE in the corner of the cafeteria as Mo lays out the food his mom packed for him. Leftover baked ziti, carrot sticks, sour cream and onion potato chips, and a thinly sliced apple. Mo's right that apples taste better like that, but my mom says she doesn't have the time to cut my apples that thin, plus she says it all goes to the same place anyway.

"So, what's this confirmation class thing you texted me about?" Mo says, starting in on the chips.

"Basically, we've got eight weeks to study and prove we're religious enough to officially become church members."

"Or else, what? If you can't prove it, do they send you off on your own iceberg?"

I smile. *"To float off into the frozen fog of the Arctic . . ."*

*"Like a peaceful icy cowboy,"* Mo finishes. That's one of our favorite lines. It's from a story about the shopping cart we found chained to a bin of ice outside a gas station.

"This is why I feel so lucky to have zero/negative zero



faith,” Mo says. He always says that his mom’s nonobservant Jewishness and his dad’s lapsed Catholicism canceled each other out in a massive matter-antimatter collision. I’ve asked him which is the matter and which is the antimatter, but he just says, “The antimatter is the other one.” And he calls it zero/negative zero because he can.

I picture the girls who I know will be in confirmation class, too—like our classmate Miranda. She’s the daughter of my mom’s boss, Rick Adams, so that’s a done deal. Even though we’re not friends, she always invites me to her birthday parties because it’s the “Christian thing to do.” Not like I enjoy having to go. Most of her friends spend the party fake smiling at me and then making fun of me as soon as they think I can’t hear. It’s easier at school, where they pretend I don’t exist, but of course my mom wouldn’t let me say no to that invitation. Just like how she won’t let me get out of this class.

“Well, I hope the class isn’t too terrible,” Mo says. “You know people can be jerks.”

“They sure can be. Can you believe that guy who yelled out of his car window?” I blurt out. “Who does that?”

“You’re still thinking about that opossum hater?” Mo shakes his head. “Don’t let yourself care about opopinions.”

*Opopinions* is Mo’s trademark word for Other People’s Opinions. He should also trademark his ability to not actually care about them.

“What if they’re opopinions about an opossum who can’t stand up for herself because she’s paralyzed in fear in the middle of the road?” I say.

“Opopinions about an opossum . . .” Mo repeats, and he must like the sound of it because he keeps saying it over and over.

“I’m being serious,” I cut in.

“I’m sorry,” he says as we both get up to head back to class. “I just don’t think you need to get so worked up about it.”

Not much bothers Mo. He’s nearly a foot taller than he was last year but still wears the same sweatpants even though they end right below his knees. Actually, there is *one* thing that bothers him. Our school is kind of sports obsessed, and the basketball coach wants him to play. The coach even called his parents, and now they’re bugging him to attend basketball camp this summer.

We dump our trash, and when we pass the bulletin board, Mo puts his arm out to stop me, just like my mom in the car when she slams on the brakes.

There’s a new flyer announcing the town newspaper’s annual student writing contest.

Mo grips my arm. “We’re finally old enough. We’ve got to enter! Should we start working on a new shopping cart story after school?”

I shake my head and start walking toward our lockers. “Haven’t we sort of exhausted the topic? How about we write something new from . . . an opossum’s perspective?”

“But the judges will love our shopping cart stories!” Mo insists.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to care about opopinions,”

I say. “Even from judges. And I think opossums might have a lot to say.”

“But we always write shopping cart stories, and the next one is bound to be contest worthy.”

I think of Gracy. Just because things have been done one way before doesn’t mean it’s the right way.

“What if a shopping cart runs into an opossum?”

“Mo,” I interrupt.

“What?”

I swallow. “I don’t want to do it.”

Mo’s mouth drops open. “No way. We are not going to NOT do it. You just need some inspiration. Let’s go to the old park again for today’s shopping cart hunting. We’ve found some great ones there.”

I don’t want to go shopping cart hunting. I want to go home and work on *The Opinion of an Opossum*. But I can’t say no to Mo. Not when he cares about something this much.

“Fine.” I sigh. “I’ll go.”

## Chapter 4



WE GET OFF MY BUS THREE STOPS LATER THAN NORMAL but on a street that's nearly identical to mine, where the houses are just as small and smushed together.

Mo starts walking down the sidewalk sideways. Actually, *leaping* down the sidewalk sideways.

"What are you doing?"

"We're hunting. I'm channeling my inner caveman."

I try to mimic one of his sideways leaps.

"There's no harder prey than a metal shopping cart," he tells me.

I do another small sideways leap. "You really think this is how cavemen hunted? I'm thinking it's more like how they walked when the ground was actually lava."

Just then, someone comes out of their door and goes to their mailbox. I start walking normally, but Mo doesn't stop. The guy stares. Mo doesn't ever seem to care, and I follow him down a dead-end street into the park.

There's an old playground here that no kids ever seem to

come to, probably because their parents prefer the newly renovated park on the other side of town where you don't have to fend off splinters.

"Which way?" Mo asks. "To the ball field or to the history of Whitefield area? Or over the dangerous bouncy bridge?"

"History of Whitefield," I say.

Mo nods and takes off his shoes and socks before sideways leaping away. "Try it, Agnes! The feel of the grass is wonderful!" he exclaims.

"I like keeping my shoes on," I say.

Mo leaps past the World War II memorial, the Korean War monument, and the monument to the town's founders. He suddenly stops behind the clump of trees that's next to the square monument. At least that's what I've always called it in my head. It's a big square plaque in front of a stone wall in the shape of a square.

"FATE!" he yells. "It's FATE!!!"

What's he talking about? I hustle to catch up with him.

And there behind the trees, inside the square stone wall, is a shopping cart.

Mo dances around it. "It's like the shopping cart gods looked down and saw you were getting bored and decided to give you your very own story!"

"Huh?" I say. "Why is this my story?"

"Well, it's your territory."

My . . . I look at the square plaque that he's pointing at, and for the first time ever, I actually read it.

HISTORIC TOWN SHEEP PEN

There used to be sheep here? My eyes snap to his. “What do sheep have to do with me?”

“Because remember how all those St. Agnes cards your grandmother sends you *always* have sheep on them? So you must be connected somehow . . .” He looks at me, and his face changes. Like he can tell I am in no way about to go along with this.

“I am named after my grandmother,” I say. “Not some stupid sheep. And maybe it’s just random that the cards have sheep on them.”

“Come on,” he says. “I didn’t mean that in a bad way. Sheep are nice and fuzzy. And can you imagine if they were still here messing up this perfect suburbia? I mean, they poop all over the ground.”

“Yeah, but sheep just follow other sheep around,” I say. “Who wants to be considered a brainless follower?”

Mo looks down, and his shoulders drop. “I’m sorry.” He peeks up at me. “If you want, you can call me MoMo for the rest of the day.”

“Never mind,” I tell him. I look past him at the tiny square of grass inside the walls. Why didn’t they make the walled-in area bigger? Would the sheep have complained? Would they have said *anything*?

But Mo is still full of ideas. “Our story could be about a shopping cart that wakes up here, with no memory of leaving the grocery store parking lot, but its secret dream was always to escape, and so now it—”

I cut him off. “Mo, I’m not writing about any shopping cart.”  
I look him right in the eye. “I just want to focus on my opossum  
opinions. And opossums and sheep are completely different.”

“But, Agnes . . .”

I shake my head. I am not a sheep.

## Chapter 5



AS SOON AS I GET HOME, I DIG OUT THE MOST RECENT cards my grandmother sent me. Okay, so they all have sheep on them, but I'm sure that's just a coincidence. I flip one of the cards over. I've never read the small print on the back before.

And right away, I read that the name Agnes comes from the Latin word for lamb. And that it means "chaste" or "pure." Awesome. Evidently, St. Agnes is the patron saint of girls and chastity. Because every girl wants to identify with a pure white lamb, right?

I also learn that St. Agnes was born in the year AD 291 into a Christian family. She was beautiful (thank goodness, no one likes ugly lambs), and the governor's son wanted to marry her, but she refused because she was devoted to God.

So they dragged her through the street and beheaded her.

When she was about twelve or thirteen years old.

What does it mean when a religion tells you a girl's most saintly act was to die?



I swallow.

I blink.

Then I put the cards back where I found them.

Sometimes there's a reason you don't want to read the fine print.



After dinner, my mom and I are doing the dishes and listening to a political podcast while I'm trying to forget my newly discovered connections to sheep. It helps that my mom could never admit to the rest of her family that she listens to this show. My extended family is all there's-one-way-to-think-and-you-definitely-don't-question-it, so this is our secret. Really, it's quite unsheeplike.

I'm almost done with the dishes when my phone starts buzzing.

"It's Mo," I say. Mo and I have discovered that while our parents are super strict about screen time in the evenings, they'll happily let us talk on the phone.

My mom nods to my phone. "Go ahead. I can finish up the rest."

"Hey," I say as I head to my room.

"Hey," he says. "Any chance you've changed your mind about the sheep shopping cart story?"

"No!" I flop down on my bed.

"But you said that—"

"I'm not a sheep, Mo. Sheep go along with stuff they don't believe in. Stupid, chaste sheep."

“Whoa. You don’t have to yell,” Mo says. “And did you just say ‘chaste’? I don’t even know what that means.”

I get up from my bed so I can pace. “Forget it. It doesn’t even matter.”

Mo is quiet for a long time.

“I’m sorry I yelled,” I finally say.

“That’s okay. Just at least listen to this beginning.” Mo starts reading:

*Steve the shopping cart stared out over the park and thought his big thoughts: How did I get here? Was I really born to carry stuff? He knew there had to be more to life than holding basketball-size cantaloupes. And even though he was alone for the very first time, and even though he didn’t like being by himself, he made a decision. He was never going back to the grocery store.*

“That’s pretty good, Mo, but I’m not in the mood right now.”

After I hang up, I pick up the confirmation class brochure on my desk. On the back is a quote from the Bible verse about the Lord being my shepherd.

I drop the brochure back on my desk.

What is it with me and sheep right now anyway?

## **THE OPINION OF AN OPOSSUM**

Playing dead isn't really playing. What do you do when you encounter danger? Sometimes I growl and run, but when it's really intense, I faint. And I hear I'm not very pleasant then. I kinda drool and stink, and green mucus oozes from my butt. Fun times, right? I should get the Most Convincing Decaying Animal award.

But hey, it usually works! It doesn't matter how gross and embarrassing it is. Because no coyote wants to eat anything as smelly as me after I've gone down. So, an hour or so later (ASSUMING A CAR HASN'T RUN OVER ME), I pick myself up again and walk away, my dignity fully intact.

Like a real-life miracle.

## Chapter 6



"I KNOW THIS ISN'T WHAT YOU'D CHOOSE TO DO ON YOUR Wednesday nights, but you and me, we're a team," my mom says as she drives me to confirmation class.

"Thank you," she says as she pulls in front of the church.

I nod because I get it. I get that we need that promotion, and I get that Rick Adams is the kind of boss where this stuff matters, and I get that we're a team, and maybe I'm not old enough to earn real money yet, so I can do this to help instead.

But it doesn't feel good just going along with stuff I'm not okay with. And I can't help thinking about sheep.



When I get to the "pastor's parlor," the lights are all off, but then I see Miranda sitting primly in her chair like the perfect student that she is. Even though she's in the dark.

"Do you think we should turn on the lights?" I venture.

She looks at me, slightly horrified. "There's a sign that says to keep the lights off when the room isn't in use."

I pause. “Isn’t it in use now?”

“But Pastor Paul isn’t here yet.”

I look at her. Then I eye the nearest lamp.

“I’m sure Pastor Paul will be here any minute,” she says.

Fine. I take a seat.

Pastor Paul shows up just a few minutes later. “Ah, let there be light!” he says, flicking on the switch.

Tya, Miranda’s bestie, arrives right after that, carrying her lacrosse stick and wearing a shirt that says **BLACK, BOLD, AND BEAUTIFUL**. She gives Miranda a friendly poke with her lacrosse stick, saying something about lunch that makes her giggle. Tya sits at the popular table with Miranda, but she doesn’t do the fake-smiling thing like Miranda’s other friends. Last year when I was in her English group, she was so funny telling us about her cat named Robot and how she swears he’s an alien from another planet that it made the whole group thing bearable.

The last and only other person to show up is Jaclyn. I’m surprised to see her here, as she spends most of her time at school in in-school suspension or rolling her eyes when our science teacher checks to see if she has her homework.

“So, just girls this year.” Pastor Paul smiles as he settles into an armchair at the end of the table. “That’s . . . different, but don’t worry. I’m sure we can make it work.”

I’m not sure what he means, but I bite my tongue. The only way I’m going to get through this class without screwing things up for my mom is if I keep my mouth shut.

“This class will set you on the path to being a servant of God and a dedicated member of our church,” he says. “These eight

weeks are an opportunity to ensure that each of you follows the example of the church's founding fathers to strengthen your faith and your bonds to this church, to leave the world a better place . . ."

Miranda is already taking notes like her life depends on it. I can't imagine it's easy living with her demanding father. Rick Adams has raised her by himself since her mom died of cancer when Miranda was little. Which is rough. I would know, right? Still, at least her family doesn't have to worry about money, and they do have a lot of help. Miranda's aunt lives next door and cooks them dinner every night, and they've always had a housekeeper, too.

"Now," Pastor Paul says, "before I pass out the special workbooks we'll use for this class, I want you to take a moment to look at each other. Make eye contact."

Miranda and Tya make eye contact, and I turn to Jaclyn, but she's keeping her eyes down on the table.

"The choice you'll be making to join the church as full members is a momentous one, and these are the people you're on this journey with," Pastor Paul says.

He gestures to a picture of a white-bearded God. "God is a constant source of strength, and you can be a source of strength for each other, too. Lean on each other when you have confusion or doubt." Pastor Paul closes his eyes, his hands clasped together. "I pray that each of you will embark on your own pathway to God."

Miranda and Tya have now closed their eyes, so I close mine, too. I try to picture what a pathway to God would look

like. A staircase? A long accessible ramp? Glittering? Marble? I have no idea.

As Pastor Paul passes out the workbooks, he starts drawing on Bible stories to talk about the kind of church members we should be. Be willing to sacrifice like Abraham. Pray as often as Daniel. Obey the Lord better than Saul. Which makes no sense to me, because wasn't Saul the one who got in trouble for NOT killing every living thing in a city when God wanted complete revenge? But I don't ask, and no one else does either. Tya is flipping through the workbook. Jaclyn is tying knots in her hoodie drawstring. Miranda is nodding like she'd be fine slaughtering people if God asked her to.

My face must give my doubts away, though, because Pastor Paul pauses and smiles at me. "I know the Old Testament can be a bit intense, Agnes, but don't worry. We'll get to the New Testament soon enough."

I nod and try to slump lower in my chair.

Just like at school, Miranda is ready with the correct answer for every question Pastor Paul asks. But somehow, I can still see her sitting in the dark, feeling like she isn't allowed to turn on the lights.

When Pastor Paul leads us in prayer—"Our Father who art in heaven . . ."—I mumble the words, but like always, I get twisted in knots about the beginning. Because it'd be nice to believe my actual dad is in heaven . . .

Miranda raises her hand again, but this time Pastor Paul hasn't asked a question.

"Yes, Miranda?"

“Sorry, Pastor Paul, but I was just thinking about what you said earlier. About how this is our opportunity to strengthen our bonds to the church, and how important it is for us to be able to rely on each other. And I was thinking that maybe we should first make sure we’re all committed to the church.”

Pastor Paul smiles like this most exemplary pupil is going to make his pastor heart burst. “How do you imagine doing that?”

“Maybe a pledge form or something?” Miranda says. “How about one that says we believe in God and are here to serve Him.” She looks at me. “We could each sign it to show how dedicated we are.”

My stomach drops away from me. Miranda says more things about how she can write it up and bring copies next week. Pastor Paul is practically leaping around with the excitement of it all.

What am I going to do? Do I actually believe in the God that punished Saul because he didn’t kill absolutely everyone? Who got mad at Eve for taking a bite of an apple? Why was that such a big deal? Why did that story have to make God so focused on revenge?

None of this makes any sense to me, and I’m pretty sure this class, and these classmates, won’t exactly help.



## Chapter 7



MY MOM STICKS HER HEAD IN MY ROOM. “HAVE YOU done all your homework already?”

I nod, and she comes in and kisses the top of my head. She’s already in her giant fleece bathrobe, and she smells like the clementines she’s been eating as her “healthy dessert.”

“Turn off your light soon, okay?” she says. “I’m heading to bed.”

“I will.”

“And your phone’s downstairs already, right?”

I nod again.

“Hey, Mom?”

She stops in the doorway and turns back toward me. “Yeah?”

“What are you supposed to do when . . .” I pause. “When you’re supposed to tell the truth, but telling the truth will cause problems?”

My mom’s face freezes, and then she’s right back next to me, sitting on my bed. “Is everything okay? You know you can

always be honest with me, right? If you're doing something that you shouldn't be doing, I would rather—"

I cut her off. "It's not that kind of thing, Mom. It's confirmation class. Miranda is planning to bring in a form for us each to sign that says we believe in God, and I don't think I do."

Mom lets out a long breath. "I'm sorry." Then, after a long moment, she says, "You'll have to sign it anyway."

"I figured."

"This is why we have white lies, right?" she tells me. "Like when Linda at work asks me if I like her new haircut, I always say yes. It doesn't matter if I don't."

I swallow. "Because we don't want to hurt feelings."

"Exactly," she says. She wraps her cozy, fleecy arm around me. "I know dealing with stuff like this can be tricky, Agnes. Just remember I have faith in you. I wouldn't want to be on anyone's team but yours."

"Me too, Mama." I burrow into her robe.

But as cozy as it is next to her, I can't help thinking that talking to Linda, who I think always looks great with any hairstyle, is different than signing a document that says you believe in God.

And how there must be *some* way to move forward in which I don't have to play dead.

## **THE OPINION OF AN OPOSSUM**

**Now, for the record, I hate playing dead. I mean who really wants to just drop to the ground and hope for the best?**

**But sometimes your only options are do what you want OR SURVIVE. And I'm only here because my ancestors chose the second option.**

**But I would swear on all the stiff lifeless bodies of my ancestors that if I could change things so that survival did NOT require us to fully submit to those who just happen to be more powerful, I would.**

## Chapter 8



"I HAVE A QUESTION," I SAY. MO AND I ARE AT HIS HOUSE because: better snacks. We have the house to ourselves since Mo's mom has taken his sister, Sadie, to her new dance class, so we've taken the liberty of opening a new box of all-butter coffee cake, cutting it down the middle, and loading two plates with our enormous portions.

Mo takes his first bite. He pauses, eyes closed, to savor all that butter. Then he opens his eyes. "Okay. Shoot."

"Do you believe in God?" I ask.

His eyes fly open. "Way to beat around the bush." He laughs.

"Do you?"

He takes another bite. "You know. Zero/negative zero faith."

"So you don't believe in anything?"

"I don't think so," he says. "But I don't really like thinking there's nothing out there either. Maybe we're all swimming in primordial chocolate soup, and the meaning of life is to stop and lick the flowers more."

"I'm serious, Mo."

“Well, I am too. I have no idea. Who really does? Who can say with certainty they know what’s going on with all that stuff?”

“Lots of people.”

“Well, good for them.”

I take a bite of coffee cake. It’s a pretty great feeling when a mouthful can taste this good and you still have most of a slice so big it barely fits on your plate. “And I’m supposed to.”

“Supposed to what?” he says.

“Supposed to sign a paper at confirmation class that says I believe in God.”

Mo nearly chokes on his cake. “What? Are you supposed to sign a paper that says that you’ve figured out what’s inside a black hole while you’re at it?”

I shake my head. “I think that’d be easier.”

“Ha!” Mo smiles and looks off out the window. I’d bet anything Mo’s remembering the story about the shopping cart who had dreams of being an astrophysicist and loved to stare up at the stars from the middle of the parking lot every night.

*“But a shopping cart is just one point in an enormous universe,”* I recite.

*“One point that can see all the other points and can finally feel at peace,”* he finishes.

“That was a good one,” I say.

“I miss writing them with you,” Mo says. “You’re the one who was always good with the metaphors. It’s not the same on my own.”

“It’s not forever,” I tell him. “I need to work on my opossum stuff first. It’s what’s speaking to me now.”

“Which you’re not letting me read, by the way.”

“It’s too soon. But I told you it’s about opossums. Isn’t that enough?”

“Well, is it about more than just opossums?”

Is it? I stare at my plate. “Kind of.”

Mo sighs. “Fine.” He pokes me with his fork. “So, are you going to sign that paper at church?”

“I don’t know. I want to believe in God, but I just can’t get there. At least I’m not there yet.”

“Well, then that’s easy. Just don’t sign the paper.”

“But I can’t *not* sign the paper. Miranda will flip out. Pastor Paul will flip out. Then I’ll probably get kicked out of confirmation class and Miranda’s dad will find out. He’ll be ‘disappointed,’ and that means my mom won’t get that promotion, and we won’t be able to pay off our credit card debt, and then—”

“I get it! So just sign the paper, Agnes.”

I wave my fork at him. “But it’s church! I’d be officially lying in church.”

“But you don’t believe in God.”

I shake my head, pull the empty coffee cake box toward me, and start stabbing the top of it. “You make it sound so easy.”

“You asked for help,” Mo is saying. “And I’m helping. Logic is your friend—even if you’re not a friend to logic.”

I keep stabbing the plastic. “Some things are not always logical.”

## Chapter 9



BY THE TIME MO'S MOM AND HIS SISTER, SADIE, PULL INTO the driveway, Mo has finished his half of the coffee cake and the rest of my half, too.

I, on the other hand, have managed to completely destroy the lid of the box.

"Good job taking care of the evidence," Mo whispers as he wipes up all the remnants and puts them in the trash. "Even if she goes through the garbage, she'll never recognize it."

There's the jangle of the key in the lock, and then Mo's mom sweeps into the house like she always does: talking a mile a minute with her arms full of groceries and Sadie's school stuff. Sadie trails behind her doing twirls and then bunny hops away into the living room.

"Agnes! How are you? How was your day?" Mo's mom asks. "Are you hungry? I just got new snacks at the grocery store."

"It was good, and I'm full, thanks," I say.

Mo clears his throat. "Don't forget about your only son! My day was fine, and actually, yes, I could use a snack."

Honestly, Mo could win awards with his metabolism. He must get it from his dad, who takes about eight peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with him to work every day.

Mo's mom squeezes him into a hug from behind. "No snacks right before dinner, but I'm glad your day was good."

Mo starts looking through the grocery bags. "What's for dinner?"

"Just pasta and sauce tonight, and you're going to be watching Sadie," she says. "Your dad and I have trivia night and need to leave by six o'clock." She smiles. "Our team is doing great!"

I try to remember the last time my mom went out with friends. Or even talked to someone on the phone. Between work and her night classes, I think it's been years.

Mo starts to say something, but then Sadie flies into the room. "I AM A DINOSAUR FAIRY!" she screams. She leaps into the air and comes down hard. She leaps again and lands with another big thump. "I AM TERRIFYING. I WILL EAT YOU ALL." She spins until she falls over.

"Dinosaur Fairy, can you get your lunch stuff from your backpack and put it in the sink?" Mo's mom asks. She's already gotten two bags of groceries put away.

"DINOSAUR FAIRIES ARE VERY BUSY!" Sadie yells.

"Your lunch stuff, please," Mo's mom says.

Sadie leaps again, but instead of getting her lunch stuff, she hops right over her backpack.

Mo's mom shakes her head and giggles under her breath. "She did this for the entire dance class. Everyone else was



practicing first and second position, and she was leaping around and thumping.”

“Are you going to stop bringing her to class?” Mo asks.

She shakes her head. “She’s six. She’s allowed to be silly. Will you unpack the rest of these groceries?”

“I can help, too,” I say, and start to unload a bag.

“Thank you, Agnes,” she says. “You know, Mo was telling me you started confirmation classes. It’s wonderful you’re doing that.”

“Yeah, it’s real wonderful, right, Agnes?” Mo jokes.

“I’m serious, Mo,” his mom says. “Sometimes I regret not raising you as Jewish. If we had, you’d be learning Hebrew and getting ready for your bar mitzvah right now. You’d be preparing to be an adult.”

“I’ve got six years until I’m an adult, Mom,” Mo says.

She nods. “And if you wait to start thinking about your future till then, it’ll be too late.”

Mo glances at her. “That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?”

His mom shakes her head. “I know you want to resist this, but your dad is right. A good college is how you get a good job, and a good résumé is how you get into a good college, and colleges will be looking for *serious* students who are dedicated and members of teams and—”

“And high school is too late to start a new sport,” Mo finishes for her. “I know.”

When she goes back out to the car for more grocery bags, Mo sighs. “She’s fixated on the path-to-college stuff.”

I pull a box of pasta out of the bag. “It’s all right. You don’t really care about opinions, right?”

Mo smirks. “Too bad parents always want us to care about theirs.”

I let out a deep breath. “Yeah. And what are we supposed to do about it?”

Just then, Mo’s mom reappears, with more grocery bags and a flyer. “Mo, I almost forgot. I got more information about that basketball camp. It sounds perfect!”

Mo drops an empty grocery bag over his head. “Then how about *you* go to it.”

Mo and I crack up when his mom gets that deer in headlights look.

## Chapter 10



AT HOME, I FLOP DOWN ONTO MY BED. THINGS WOULD be so much easier if I could convince myself to believe in God. But every time I think about how angry He was in those early Bible stories, I feel bad. Because why would that kind of God love me? And where are the girls in the Bible stories who get to feel God's love—without having to die? Or without biting apples that condemn the whole human race for eternity? I thought believing in God was supposed to feel good, not like you're digging yourself even deeper into a hole.

Just then, my phone buzzes in my hand. It's a video of Sadie from Mo. She now plans to try out for our school's annual spring talent show with her own dance routine, and there she is in their kitchen swinging her arms around like she's a robotic windmill in a tornado.

I laugh in spite of myself. That girl—I just love her confidence! So many kids seem more sure of themselves than I'll ever be. Last year at the talent show, Miranda played the piano, and a bunch of her friends did a full dance routine to a Beyoncé

song. The whole auditorium exploded when they finished. What would that feel like, to be up there on that stage?

I start scrolling through my phone, watching different music videos, imagining what it'd be like to pull off one of those dance routines. I end up clicking on the trailer for a Beyoncé documentary. There isn't any music in the trailer, though. Just a voice that sounds old and wise and kind. An interviewer asks the question: "And what advice would you have to give this generation?"

And the old, wise, kind voice says: "Tell the truth. To yourself first."

I click stop on the video. I feel like time has stopped. Like the voice is speaking right to me.

Because I've never considered that someone could be lying to themselves.

And I've never felt so swept away by a voice before. I do a Google search to find out the voice on the Beyoncé trailer is Maya Angelou. It says the quote is from one of her last interviews before she died in 2014.

Maya Angelou. I swear I've seen her name before. And suddenly, I realize where.

I burst out of my room and into my mom's room and pull open her closet.

And there she is on a poster pinned to the inside of my mom's closet door. At the bottom of the poster are the words "Still, like dust, I'll rise."

I feel like I can hear Maya Angelou saying those words in her beautiful voice.

## Chapter 11



"MOM," I SAY AS SOON AS I'VE GOTTEN TO THE KITCHEN. "You have a poster of Maya Angelou."

She looks up from the bills she's been paying at the kitchen table. "Why do you look so shocked?"

"I guess because I didn't really know who she was before. She's . . ." How do I describe it? And why do I feel like my heart wants to leap out of my chest? Was it her voice? No, not just her voice . . . it was her voice saying what she said.

"She's an amazing writer." My mom completes the sentence for me. "I must have gotten that poster in college. I was an English major, and I remember reading her autobiography for one of my classes, and it was wonderful. Really inspiring."

"What'd she talk about in her autobiography?" I ask. "I know one of the things she said was that the most important thing was to tell the truth. To yourself first."

"Did she?" my mom says, looking up at the clock. "We should start getting dinner ready. We're having stir-fry tonight."

She heads to the fridge. "Snap peas were too expensive, but

I got green peppers and onions and carrots.” She emerges with them all in hand. “Oh, and a can of pineapple. I was thinking we could try that sweet-and-sour sauce again. Can you be in charge of the pineapple and the carrots? I’ll do the onions and peppers.”

“Sure,” I say, retrieving the can of pineapple from the cupboard. I try again. “What do you remember from her autobiography?”

But my mom’s looking at her phone and doesn’t seem interested in this conversation. I guess just because she used to be excited about Maya Angelou doesn’t mean she is anymore.

“Oh dear,” she says. “I missed a call from Gracy. I hope everything’s okay.”

She starts to listen to the voice message and glances at me, confused. “I think she’s inviting you over to show you something? Something about an opossum—no idea what that could be—”

“Yes! Can I go?” I’m up and almost out the door when I remember our stir-fry plans. I glance at the can of pineapple on the counter. “I mean . . .”

“Go ahead.” My mom smiles. “Grandma Agnes isn’t close by, and those kinds of relationships are important. I’ll make the stir-fry on my own.”

“Are you sure?”

My mom turns on the radio to the news and nods. “I’m sure. She seems like such a sweet old lady.”

## Chapter 12



WHEN I GET TO GRACY'S DOOR, THERE'S AN OFFICIAL-looking note stuck to it with a message about the trees in her front yard.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing to it when she comes to the door.

"Oh, nothing to worry about," she says, glancing at it. "Some of our neighbors are concerned about whether my new birch trees are allowed by the new neighborhood association rules. I don't know what they have against beautiful trees . . . Anyway, come in! I have something to show you!"

She leads me inside to the dining room. The table is piled with old magazines, books, and travel guides. The other end of the table is cleared except for . . .

"Is that a skull?!"

Gracy grins. "It sure is. And not just any skull. That, my friend, is an opossum skull."

"But where did you . . ."

"I have a few different skulls stored in the basement that I've

collected over the years—and I just remembered one was an opossum. I found it way back when I was getting my anthropology PhD.” She motions me over. “Come on, it’s not going to bite. Take a closer look.”

I step forward. “It’s so long and pointy.”

“Isn’t it, though? It looks like the ancient animal it is.”

“Sixty million years old, right?” I say.

“Good memory.” Gracy’s eyes twinkle. “Contemporaries with the saber-toothed cat.”

The line between the opossum’s forehead and its nose is such a smooth curve. Like the kind of long, gentle sledding hill Mo is always searching for. “Can I touch it?”

“Sure can. All the germs were boiled away long ago.”

I run my finger along that slope to its mouth. “Those sharp teeth must have helped it last so long, too.”

“Well, the teeth help them eat anything. But the most important thing is their ability to take care of their babies.”

I look up at her. “Isn’t survival more about your ability to defend yourself against enemies?”

Gracy snorts. “A world history textbook might make you think that, but no species survives if it can’t raise healthy babies. And opossum mothers can raise nearly forty babies a year.”

“Forty? How’s that even possible? But I guess there were a lot in that pouch.”

Gracy walks to a bookshelf that’s threatening to collapse under the weight of all its books. She pulls one out and starts



reading aloud. “Thirteen spots in the pouch for nursing, and up to three litters of babies a year.” She hands me the book.

“That’s a lot of babies.” I peer at the picture of the opossum and the close-up of one of its paws. “It looks just like a human hand.”

“Yes, they have opposable thumbs, too, which come in handy.” Gracy smiles. “Agnes, what do you think was the biggest reason humans developed into a dominant species?”

“Uh . . .” I think of Mo sideways leaping down the sidewalk like his version of a caveman. “Using tools to hunt?”

“The human version of sharp teeth, eh?” Gracy clears the books off two chairs, and we sit down. “Tools and weapons helped, but the real game changer was our big brains. Our ability to work together, make plans, debate options, and divide up tasks made us an unstoppable force.”

“Like how cavemen hunted in groups?”

She pauses. “That’s what comes to your mind first, isn’t it? How about the women? What do you think they were doing?”

“Uh . . .” I don’t want to admit I kind of assumed they were waiting back at the cave.

Gracy shakes her head. “It’s not your fault you only picture the men. That’s the story you’ve been told because for a long time the only anthropologists were men, and they weren’t as interested in talking about women’s roles. But let’s change that image in your head right now.” She leans toward me. “Because you know who found ways to birth those big-brained humans? Women who asked other women for help when they were

in labor. You know what formed the cornerstone for human relationships and ultimately for societies? The bond between a woman and her child. Who developed language? Women reassuring their babies with their voices. Who likely invented the first calendar? Women tracking the cycles of the moon.” Gracy pauses. “Guess who provided most of the food.”

My head is swirling. “That one was men, right?” I venture. “With their hunting?”

Gracy raises her eyebrows. “It was the women who made baskets from grass and gathered plants and berries. It was the women who wove string nets and caught small game and fish. That was far more reliable than going up against a big wild animal.”

It’s like Gracy has turned on an enormous light bulb inside my head. And the more stuff she tells me, the more my mind is blown.

“How do you know all of this?” I blurt. And why does it feel so huge?

Gracy goes back over to her bookshelf and pulls out another book. “Thankfully, the field of anthropology has been busy making up for lost time.” She hands me a fat book published by the Smithsonian, then starts piling magazines on top, *National Geographic* and *Scientific American* and *American Anthropologist*.

“Always remember,” she says, “we can never understand the truth about something if we don’t wonder what we’re missing. Metal spears will easily turn up at an archaeological site, but intricately woven grass baskets won’t necessarily survive.”

“I’ve never thought of that, but of course it makes sense,” I say.

“You see, Agnes, underestimating women has been a habit for generations.” Gracy shakes her head. “People always say that it’s hard to change someone’s mind, but it’s even harder to change someone’s habits.” She taps the opossum skull. “Just ask our friend here.”

I touch the edge of the opossum’s jawbone at the base of one of its sharpest teeth. “Maybe opossums will evolve so that they stop playing dead when they’re in a road,” I say quietly.

Gracy puts a hand on mine. “It just takes enough of them finding a way,” she says. “And then they’ve reshaped the future.”

## **THE OPINION OF AN OPOSSUM**

Maybe sometimes we have to play dead, but you know what's kept us opossums going since the time of the dinosaurs? How us mamas can carry our babies around with us. All seasons of the year. Over all sorts of obstacles.

And how great are we at sniffing out food? Yep. We're unstoppable when it comes to finding what's edible, no matter where it might be.

Single mothers for the win.

You think opossums have a story about some female opossum screwing things up because she took a bite of a shiny apple in a garden?

Not a chance.

## Chapter 13



"SO, WHAT WAS IT GRACY WANTED TO SHOW YOU?" MY mom asks over dinner.

"An opossum skull."

She pauses with her fork raised in the air. "Well, that's sure unexpected. Was it interesting?"

"It actually was," I tell her. "Did you know opossums have played dead for millions of years just so their predators will leave them alone?"

"Is that so?" my mom murmurs between bites.

"But now their predators are cars, so they're just getting run over."

She looks at me. "That's rough."

"They should change, right?" I say. "They should stop playing dead. At least when they're in traffic."

"They probably should."

"They probably will. It's just, change takes time . . ."

"I don't know." My mom takes a bite. "Does an opossum even know it's possible to change?"

I stop chewing. “I hope so.”

My mom doesn’t look up from her food, but something has woken up inside me, and I press on. “Gracy’s really interesting. She knows a lot about ancient women and all the important things they did—they actually gathered most of the food and figured out how to use stones to grind grains and how to fish with nets and stuff. It’s kind of amazing, right?”

“Really? That’s nice,” my mom says through a yawn. “I’m sorry, Agnes. I had to get up early to study for my accounting class.”

And that’s the end of our conversation. My mom doesn’t have enough time in a day to do all her work or get proper sleep or have friends. So it’s not like she has time to think about what women were achieving thousands of years ago. Or to suddenly want to question all sorts of things you’ve always assumed were true.

But that doesn’t mean I have to be the same.

## **THE OPINION OF AN OPOSSUM**

**What do you do if your mama, who has carried you and fed you for your whole life, thinks you should both keep playing dead? What if she doesn't think there's another option?**

**What if she's wrong?**

**The mama opossum walks and walks, carrying her young. But if those babies keep clinging on forever, if they stay with her every step of the way . . . will they ever have the chance to evolve?**

**Instead, when they're old enough, they need to drop off, hit the ground, and start making decisions for themselves.**

**But that moment when you let go of her fur and start falling to the ground? It's terrifying.**

## *Acknowledgments*

I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER (AND WILL BE FOREVER grateful for!) the moment the idea for this book sparked into place. I was out to dinner with some wonderful librarians in Virginia in 2019 when Lara Ivey turned to me and said, possibly joking but possibly not: “For your next book . . . how about an opossum?”

The fact that the many layers of an opossum fit so perfectly into the story that was already taking shape in my head speaks to the innate brilliance of Lara and to the innate brilliance of the universe itself.

There was another moment, decades earlier, that I’ll also always be grateful for. I had been an active member of the youth group at my church and loved it. We ate, did service projects, and laughed, and our associate pastor, Rev. David Spollett, made hymn singing extra fun by dancing to the beat. And then at some point we had elections, and the newly elected youth president made a new rule: We should all sign a form saying that we believed in God. The problem was that as much as I



loved church, I just wasn't there yet. I wanted to believe, but every time I saw an image of God as an old (and maybe angry) man with a long white beard, it stopped me short.

I really loved Reverend Spollett, and I talked to him about it. He encouraged me to push back against this whole idea of signing a pledge. Since I didn't have the confidence to do that, I dropped out of youth group. But I was still a member of the church, and Reverend Spollett invited me to be a youth member on our church's search committee for a new pastor. Suddenly, I was reading potential candidates' statements of faith and being exposed to some of the many wide-ranging ways people can define God for themselves: As the thread that connects us. As hope. As love. And with that, a whole world of faith opened up for me. So thank you, Rev. David Spollett, for the unconditional love you gave to me and my questions, and for the wide-open air of possibility with which you surrounded us.

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When you have written a story as personal as this one, the core of your gratitude belongs with the people who have shaped you as a person the most.

To my mom, who raised me by herself and was always ready—in her own quiet way—to support me being who I was, instead of who others wanted me to be. What wasn't quiet: the two of us belting out “Joy to the World” in the car on every Christmas Day as we replaced all the *Hes* with *Shes*. (Plus, there's nothing like finding out that your mom, who you saw as quite the rule follower, refused to memorize the Apostles' Creed for her confirmation class because she didn't think she should have to memorize what she believed.)

To my best friend, Amy, who once split an all-butter coffee cake down the middle with me and was by my side from first grade on as we spent our days playing double solitaire (Nerts!) and laughing over bizarre jokes no one else was ever going to understand.

To my daughter, Alice, who at seven years old helped me write some of Sadie's lines and who still has that confidence—and who I hope will never lose it.

To Ethan, for giving me the privilege to live with the deep, questioning, and powerful mind of a twelve-year-old. I am so lucky to be your mom.

And above all, for my husband, Dan. When you begin a relationship by personifying abandoned shopping carts together, you know you've found the best teammate there could be. And when you catch him replacing all of the *he* pronouns with *she* when reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* aloud (and is even more outraged than you are about how out of balance the original was), you know you've found the best co-parent as well. Thank you for cheering me—and this story—on every step of the way.

*Then they rode off into the sunset, two shopping carts who, together, could be fully themselves—and who knew how beautifully free and wonderful that felt . . .*