

Chapter 2: The Explanation

"Looks like the package wasn't for your mom after all," Lizzy says after a few minutes.

I don't answer. My hands are shaking, and I set the wooden box down on the kitchen table. We back away about two feet and stare at it.

"So this is a birthday gift from your dad?" Lizzy asks.

I nod. My heart is beating so fast that I actually hear it pulsing in my ears.

We stare some more and the words float in front of me. *The Meaning of Life. For Jeremy Fink. 13th Birthday.* Mom has obviously known about this for at least five years. Why did she keep it from me? I don't have any secrets from anyone. Well, I guess I haven't told anyone about kissing Rachel Schwartz at her bat mitzvah last April, but that's mostly because it wasn't so much a kiss as it was our lips accidentally occupying the same space as we reached for the last Shirley Temple on the waiter's tray.

"So what do you think is inside?" Lizzy asks.

I finally speak. "No idea."

"Can the meaning of life be in a box?"

"Wouldn't have thought so," I say.

"And you never saw this box before?"

I shake my head.

"Your mom never mentioned it?"

I shake my head again and try to recall what I'm sup-

posed to do to avoid having a panic attack. I've only had one, the time Mom and I flew to Florida to visit my grandparents last year. No matter what they say about how safe flying is, I think only birds and superheroes should be in the clouds. Deep breath in, hold it for four counts, deep breath out. I had never considered the meaning of life before. Why hadn't I considered it? What is wrong with me? Has everyone else thought about this except for me? Maybe I was too busy trying to learn about time travel so I could keep Dad from taking the car out on that fateful day. My time travel research is important though, if not *vital*, to all of mankind. How was I supposed to put that aside to ponder the meaning of life?

"Are you all right?" Lizzy asks, looking up at me. "You look a little green."

I do feel a little light-headed from all the deep breathing. "I should probably sit down." We head to the living room and sink down into the tan corduroy couch. I lean back and close my eyes. When I was three, I named this couch Mongo. It was one of the first pieces of furniture that my parents found during the height of their old collecting days, before I was born. Dad told me that objects people left on the street were called *mongo*. I think he must have told me this while we were sitting on the couch because somehow I thought he was saying the *couch* was called Mongo. The couch was old when they found it, and older still now. As the years went by, Mom kept covering up the holes with other pieces of fabric. At this point, the couch is almost ALL other pieces of fabric, but she won't

get rid of it because I named it. She's sentimental that way. Apparently not sentimental enough to tell me about the box though!

"You're starting to look semi-normal again," Lizzy observes. "Not so green anymore. A little sweaty, maybe."

Nothing like the appearance of this box has ever happened to me. Or to anyone I know. Or to anyone I have read about. I need to sort this out, to make a plan. I open my eyes and say, "Let's recap."

"Okay," Lizzy says, sitting forward eagerly. Lizzy loves a good recap. We saw a detective do it on TV once, and ever since then we've occasionally recapped our day.

I stand up and begin to circle the coffee table. "Okay," I say. "We were about to go into the building when Nick came by. We convinced him to give us the big package with my mother's name on it. We promised to leave it for her, and then somehow, without realizing it, we opened it."

"That's one way to put it," Lizzy says encouragingly. "Go on."

"Inside the box we found a letter from a lawyer who was an old friend of my father's. He said he lost the keys to a wooden box that my dad left for him to give to me when I turned thirteen." I pause here to take a deep breath. "I will turn thirteen in a month with no way to open the box."

"Maybe your mom has a spare set," Lizzy suggests.

"I doubt it. Harold sounded awfully sorry about losing them, so he must have been pretty sure they were the only ones."

"Or what if your dad built the box himself? Then

maybe the keys are with his old tools. No, wait, your mom donated all that, right?"

I nod, remembering how hard it was for her to get rid of his stuff. "It doesn't matter, though. Dad was good at fixing things up, but I don't think he could make something as intricate as this, with all the keyholes. He definitely engraved the top himself, though. He loved that engraving tool."

"Yeah," Lizzy says wistfully, no doubt recalling the weekend where Dad went around engraving his initials on every wooden surface until my mother took the tool away (but not before Lizzy got a plaque with her name on it to hang on her bedroom door). "Too bad you didn't get his handyman genes."

"True, but if I had, we wouldn't have the hole between my room and your room from where I tried to hang those shelves." Over the years Lizzy and I have made good use of the hole to pass notes back and forth. It's lucky our bedrooms are back-to-back, or else the hole might have gone into the middle of the Muldouns' kitchen.

"We'll find a way to open the box," Lizzy says decisively. "I promise."

"No offense, but your promises tend to get broken, or at least bent, a lot of the time."

"Not this time," she says, jumping up from Mongo. "Come on, let's put the package back together. Your mom will be home any minute."

I follow her back into the kitchen and watch as she repacks each item in reverse order. I am impressed at how neat she is being, since Lizzy is the messiest person I know.

As she tosses in the last of the crumpled newspaper, I realize there is no way I can pretend to my mother that I don't know what's inside.

As Lizzy reaches for the long piece of packing tape, I say, "Don't bother trying to tape it back together. I might as well tell her I opened it. I'm not as good a liar as you."

Lizzy puts her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes. "I think I've been insulted."

"I just meant that if I were a spy trapped behind enemy lines, I would want *you* to explain why I was there. We each have our strengths, and making people believe you is one of yours."

"So what's *your* strength?" she asks.

Good question. What *is* my strength? Do I even *have* a strength? Maybe I have *too many* strengths, and that's why I can't think of just one.

"Oh, never mind," she says, heading toward the door. "I can see this is taxing your brain, and I have to get home to set the table for dinner."

We agree that I'll send a note through the hole in the wall once I've been punished and sent to my room, which, I'm positive, is what will happen. Our grandfather clock — mungo from 83rd Street and 2nd Avenue — chimes five times. This means I have twenty minutes before Mom comes home to do enough good things around the apartment that maybe she'll go easy on me for opening her package.

Grabbing the fish food off the shelf in the kitchen, I hurry into the hallway where the tank sits on top of a long marble table — mungo from 67th Street and Central Park West. The fish all swim to the surface to greet me, except

for Cat, the loner. All my fish are named after other animals because Mom won't let me have real pets due to the fact that she is still mourning her childhood rabbit. Cat is a striped tiger fish who keeps to himself. Dog is brown with white spots and not that bright. He spends most of his day banging his nose into the side of the tank. Hamster is a hyper, orange goldfish who swims back and forth all day like he's in an Olympic relay race. My newest fish, Ferret, is long and silver and sometimes hard to find because he blends in with the gray rocks on the bottom of the tank. I sprinkle in some food, and they quickly swim to the surface to gobble it down.

These fish and I are a lot alike. They swim around the same four walls, safe and secure in their familiar environment. That's how I am, too. Honestly, I don't see any reason to leave my neighborhood. Everything I could ever want or need is within a few blocks in any direction: Dad's store (I still think of it as his), movies, school, the doctor, grocery store, dentist, clothes, shoes, the park, the library, the post office, everything. I don't like change.

I grab the feather duster from under the sink and run around the apartment, swishing it over every possible dust-collecting surface. I swish the mirrors, Aunt Judi's many sculptures, the tabletops, bookshelves, and the spines of the books (almost all of which were discarded from the library or bought at flea markets). I dust the television screen and the beaded curtains that Mom made the summer she was pregnant with me and stuck in bed. I am tempted to dust myself even!

Running into my bedroom, I quickly throw my blanket

over the bed, not bothering to straighten the sheets first. The stuffed alligator that Dad won for me by knocking over old milk jars at the state fair is trapped underneath the blanket. Now it looks like I'm hiding something because of the lumps and bumps. I'm about to fix it when I hear the double knock on the wall that indicates a new note is waiting for me. I lift up the poster of the solar system that covers the hole and grab the end of the rolled-up notebook page. Our walls are about six inches apart, so when we first tried to stick notes through on small pieces of paper, they would fall into the hollow space between. One day, years from now, maybe someone will find them and wonder who we were. Now we only use notebook paper, folded the long way, so it reaches all the way through.

Inside the note are two jelly beans. Watermelon, my favorite. I pop them in my mouth and read the note:

Good luck! If you get punished, there are more where these came from.

Lizzy and I look out for each other that way.

I scribble a big *THANKS* on the bottom of the note, stick it back through the hole until I see it reach the edge of her wall, and knock twice. It soon disappears from the other end.

I am straightening the books and papers on my desk when I hear the front door open. I had planned on being in the kitchen next to the box when Mom got home, but now that it's time, I can't move. I sit on the edge of my bed and wait. I hear her key ring jingle as she hangs it on the

hook by the door. *Thud* goes her heavy briefcase onto the floor. Now she's walking into the kitchen to get a glass of iced tea. I know her patterns very well. Three more steps until she'll see the box. Two more steps. One. Now she'll be examining the package, wondering why it's open. Now she's reaching in past the newspaper and pulling out the letter and the wooden box. And now she'll call my name. Okay . . . now!

Now?

Why don't I hear anything? I expected, "Jeremy Fink! Get in here immediately!" Instead . . . silence. What does this mean? Another minute passes, and still nothing. Is she trying to make me squirm by dragging out the inevitable? Or what if she slipped and fell and is lying unconscious on the floor?

When I reach the kitchen I see that Mom isn't, thankfully, knocked out on the floor. Instead, she's standing by the table, staring down at Dad's box. I am familiar with that position, having been in it myself for quite a while. The letter is in her hand, hanging down at her side. Her face is pale. I can see some gray hair poking through the black, and for some reason it makes me sad. I have the urge to take her hand. Instead I just ask, "Um, Mom? Are you okay?"

She gives an unconvincing nod and sits down in the bottle cap-covered chair. "You should have this," she says, and hands me the letter. She runs her fingers over the words Dad engraved on the top of the box. "It was only a week after the accident when I mailed this box to Harold for safekeeping," she says, not taking her eyes off of it.

"Your thirteenth birthday seemed like a million years away back then."

She looks so sad that I wish she were angry at me instead. Not that she has a bad temper or anything, but she's big on boundaries. I know if the package had *my* name on it, she never would have opened it.

"Even though your dad insisted he would be here to give you the box himself, I knew that deep down he didn't believe it. The instructions to send it to Harold were in his will."

My throat feels like a snake is wound around it, but I manage to ask, "He believed that palm reader on the boardwalk, didn't he?"

She lets out a big sigh. "I don't know. I think some people have a greater sense of their mortality than others. He knew the number of years that were allotted to him."

Neither of us speaks for a minute. Then I whisper, "I'm sorry I opened the package." If I were a little bit younger, I would have blamed it on Lizzy.

Surprisingly, she smiles. "Your dad would have opened it, too. He was curious about everything. That's why he loved flea markets and collecting so much. He was fascinated by what objects people kept, and what they threw away. Remember those stories he used to make up about each thing he found?"

I sit down across from her and nod. I do remember, but the memories are very foggy. After Dad died, it was like all the furniture was talking to me (but in Dad's voice), and I had to make a conscious effort to remember that the hall table was just a table, not the very table on which the Dec-

laration of Independence was signed. Which of course it wasn't really.

She runs her hand over the scratches that burrow deep into the kitchen table. "Remember what he said about this broken table when we found it?"

I shake my head.

"When we found this at a tag sale, your dad said it belonged to an old woman who was very overweight. She was sitting at the table when she saw in the newspaper that her lottery numbers had come in. In her excitement she fainted and fell forward onto the table, breaking one of the legs underneath her weight." Mom gestures to the box and says, "He was so excited the day he got this box. He said it was the most unique one he'd ever seen, with all those keyholes. You were six at the time, and he starting filling it for you that very night. He didn't engrave it until a few months later."

My eyes begin to sting with the onset of tears, but I blink them away. "So you know what's in it?"

She shakes her head. "He was very secretive about it. He kept it at the comic store in the vault."

So that's why I never saw it around the apartment! "Do you have an extra set of keys?" I hold my breath until she answers.

She shakes her head. "There was only one set. It takes four different keys to open it, and I mailed them to Harold. I can't imagine what he did with them."

"Maybe Dad made an extra set and kept them at the store. I can ask Uncle Arthur if —"

She just shakes her head. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. I cleaned

out all your father's things from the store. There's no other set."

I pull hard on the top of the box, not really expecting anything to happen. It is sealed up tight. "How am I going to open it, then?" I ask.

"I honestly don't know." She stands up and takes the pitcher of iced tea out of the fridge. As she reaches for two glasses she says, "Lizzy's dad has some tools. We can ask him to saw through it if you haven't found a way to open it before your birthday comes."

I jump out of my chair, nearly knocking it over. Snatching the box from the table, I hug it to my chest.

"I'll take that as a no, then?" she says, sounding slightly amused.

"Yes, that's a no," I say firmly, tightening my grip. I can't let Dad's box get sawed in half after hearing how much he loved it. After five years, he has sent me a message with one instruction, to open this box on my thirteenth birthday. Somehow, no matter how impossible it might seem, I am going to do exactly that.

Chapter 3: The Keys

I send Lizzy a note telling her that Mom doesn't have the keys and that, miraculously, I'm not being punished. Hours later, as the grandfather clock strikes eleven, I finally get a response.

I have a plan. Come over at 10 am. Bring the letter and the box. Sorry it took so long to get back to you, what with the whole Friday Night Is Family Movie Night thing. Field of Dreams again. AGAIN!! Don't be late!

Lizzy

Lizzy's plans always make me nervous, but in this case I have nothing to lose. Between dinnertime and now, I exhausted my own methods for opening the box. To see if extreme temperatures might loosen the locks, I put the box in the freezer for an hour. No change. Then I put it in the microwave. But before I hit start, I took it out, because what if the meaning of life is actually some tiny alien baby that my father rescued from certain persecution? I didn't want to microwave the little guy to death.

My final attempt was to wedge a butter knife under the lid, but instead of sliding inside the box, it only hit another layer of wood and wouldn't budge.

I do not like surprises. I won't watch scary movies. I