



"Who Hears the Fish Cry?"

Norma Fox Mazer

STEALING-1

I'm shoplifting in Kersher's Music Store in the Northside Mall the day I meet Tyler Byrden for the first time. Northside Mall isn't really a mall, more a raggedly collection of stores scrunched together under one roof, and Kersher's isn't really a music store. It does sell some CDs and cassettes, but mostly coffee, donuts, ice cream, and candy. Maybe nothing is what it appears to be in Muntsville.

I'm pretending to be a browser while lifting an old Tina Tanniaka cassette and slipping it into a side pocket of my pants. Tina Tanniaka is a singer no one knows. She's totally berserk, and if I don't take the cassette, it will just languish here, which means no one will hear her. So in a way I'm doing a favor to music and to Tina Tanniaka, which is what I'm thinking when I look around and see this guy watching me.

Skinny blond guy. Nothing special thin face coining down to a pointed chin. Vanilla ice cream guy. And he's staring at me. So I give him a stare--a glare stare, like I think he's a Mr. Macho hitting on me. As if. I swing past him, all haughty and innocent, like I don't know anything about anything, and walk right on out the door. ... And he comes right on out after me.

MULTIPLE LIVES

"How many of you believe life and indeed all of human history is like a staircase that we keep climbing up?" Mr. Masichewski says the other day in AP history. And when nobody answers, he goes on, "I've just given you a common expression of a

philosophical idea which has influenced plenty of big thinkers. So! Who wants to defend that idea? Who wants to knock it apart? Come on, freshmen, show me that you deserve to be in this class."

Janet Eckland raises her hand and everyone sort of shuffles and slinks clown in their seats. Janet Eckland can talk. "I will defend that idea," she says, all perky. "I see my life like that. I mean, going upward. Rising. Higher and higher. It is like stairs!" She nods, agreeing with lierself. "You keep going and then you get to the place where you want to be."

"And that is ...?" Mr. M. says.

"Well, wherever," Janct says, "but better than where you started."

"Ah. Why so?"

Higher is better, Mr. M.," she says, and you can just hear the duuuh in her voice.

"Because....?"

"Because you're older. You're: independent. You do what you want. You get married and have sex and money."

Whistles. Clapping: Foot-stamping. Janet looks around and smiles,

"Whoa, people!" Mr. Masichewski, says, and he calls on someone else.

Not me. I don't speak much in class-haven't since way back in fourth grade. Sometimes I consider it, but then I figure, Why bother. If I did speak, though, on this particular subject, I would say that I know for a fact that if life is like a staircase, it's multiple. It's more than one set of stairs. You know how people always say we only have one life to live and we better make it count? That's a sneaky way of saying kids shouldn't do drugs or have sex, et cetera. But the point is, that only-one-life-to-live thing is not true.

I can testify to that. I've had Life One, I'm smack inside Life Two, and I gotta believe there's a Life Three coming up. I'm not Shirley MacLaine-ing here. Nothing so fancy. It's just this: Life One was my mom, my dad, and me. Marcy, Kevin, and Krystal. A regular American family. Until one day, either right before or right after my fourth birthday (Mom's not real clear on that detail), Kevin did the Big Walk-Out. You now. The

he-went-to-the-store-for-a-pack-of-cigarettes-and-didn't come-back-for-ten-years thing. Except ten years have been and gone, and he still hasn't come back with that pack of cigarettes.

My mom won't talk about it, but I think maybe Kevin got disgusted with her drinking. When I say this, though, she snorts, tosses her hair around, and says, "Who do you think taught me to love beer? You're off track, Krystal."

"Tell me the unsplit truth then, Mom, and put me back on track."

"The unsplit truth? Ma!" she calls to Grandma, who's wiping down the kitchen walls, a rag clutched in her knuckly hand. "Did you hear that, Ma?"

Grandma doesn't answer. She's not one for conversation. She has things to say and she says them, full decibel, when she's ready.

"So what's that mean--the unsplit truth?" Mom asks.

"The basic truth. The whole thing."

"Oh, uh-huh. Gotcha." Mom waves her cigarette in the air. "Well, maybe someday I'll tell you the whole thing. When I'm good and ready," she adds, giving me a Lady of Mystery look.

No mystery about Life Two. That began after Kevin left us, when Grandma moved in. She came with a suitcase and a bag of sugar cookies. She put the suitcase down in the hall and the cookies in the kitchen cupboard. Then she bent over, looked me in the eye, and said, "No cookies for you, my girl. Not now, Not until I know you're a good girl."

I was four years old. I knew I was a good girl. I dragged a chair over to the cupboard, climbed up on it, and reached for the cupboard door. I could almost taste that cookie in my mouth.

Grandma was quicker then and not so arthritic. She hauled me off the chair, plunked me down on the floor, and smacked me hard on the hand. "That hurts?" she said when I howled. "Good. I mean to bring you up right. I was too nice to your mama, and look at her. I'm not making that mistake again."

I know this is what she said, not because I was a four-year old genius who

remembered her every word but because I've heard those exact words so many times since then those words and plenty more, not nearly so nice.

SHOVE

"Take me to the toilet." That's the first thing Grandma says every day when I come home from school and the reason I rush out the moment the bell rings. Grandma's spine is fused, her hands are swollen, and she has trouble doing certain things. Can't tie her shoes, can't button a dress, needs help in the bathroom--a whole list of stuff.

After the toilet I help her shower. After that it's, "Take out the garbage. ..."
"Vacuum the living room...." "Put away the dishes...." Then it's time to go to the grocery store: Grandma recites what we need: loaf of bread, quart of milk, five pounds of potatoes ... whatever.

"You got that?" she asks.

"Yes."

She counts out money. "Bring me back the change. Don't think because I'm a helpless old woman you can take advantage of me. You hear me, Krystal?"

"Yes."

"You steal my money and you'll rot in hell."

I shove money and list into my pocket. I shove Grandma's voice into the box in my mind I've made for it and slam down the lid.

STEALING-2

I swing past: Vanilla Boy, all haughty and innocent, like I don't know anything about anything, and walk right on out the door of Kersher's Music Store.

And he comes right on out after me.

"Are you following me?" I say, cold and hard.

"Hi," he says, like I just gave him a big hello, for God's sake! "I saw you take that."

"You saw me take what? What the hell are you talking about?"

I spit this out like I'm really really mad, not scared, not seeing myself hauled off

to the police station in handcuffs, not already hearing Mom crying and Grandma screaming she always knew how I'd end up.

"Which one did you take?" Vanilla Boy says..

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It was a cassette," he says.

"What are you, the store owner? An undercover cop?"

"I'm not going to turn you in," he says. "Who did you take? I think I know."

"If you know, why ask?" I stare at the pale lemon hair, the pale blue eyes, the acne on his chin. I pull the cassette out of my pocket. "You want it? Is this what this is all about? Here, take it."

"Tina Tanniaka," he says, looking but not talking. "I thought so. She's great."

Now I really stare, because this I don't believe. Nobody in Muntsville knows Tina Tanniaka except me. He must have been cheating. He must have been watching right over my shoulder. I put the cassette back in my pocket and I start to walk away.

"You didn't tell me your name," he calls.

"Well, no *kidding*," I say with great and obvious sarcasm.

He does not get it. He says, all solemn and good manners, "Tyler Byrden here."

A major geek! But then, probably because I'm grateful that he didn't rat me out, I say, "Krystal Cahill. Here," I add.

He sticks out his hand, and after a moment I put out mine, and we shake.

"*Crazy raisins*," he says, which is a bizarre phrase from a Tina Tanniaka song

I give him the only answer possible. "*Blazing blueberries*." Which is from the same insane Tina Tanniaka song.

Then, even though I still don't believe that here is someone who actually knows Tina Tanniaka, I stand there a little longer, and we talk about her and her songs and we can't agree on anything. He says the greatest song she ever wrote is "Heart Like a Potato."

"No way! 'Move Over, Mountain Man,'" I say.

"No, no, no! Have you listened to 'Heart Like a Potato' recently?"

"Excuse me! Have you listened to 'Move Over, Mountain Man' lately?"

We get into it. We argue, he waves his arms around, and I try to shout him down. "You are fierce," he says, and his eyes are snapping. Pretty soon—I don't even notice how it happens--we're talking about a bunch of other stuff. And somewhere in there, I tell him how everything in the world appears weird, stupid, and awful to me but also hysterically funny.

"Even when no one *else is laughing*," he says.

"*Especially when no one else is laughing.*"

And then we do this back-and-forth thing, almost like a routine, like we planned it or something, for God's sake.

He says, "*Weird when*"

"—*they tell you they love you*," I say.

"--'*cause they want to feel better*," he finishes.

Then I say, "*Stupid when—*"

"—*they are so sure they know what you need—*"

"-and *what you are thinking.*"

And then together we say, "*Awful when* "

And we talk over each other. He says, "*when they sit at the table stuffing their faces so they don't have to talk to you.*"

And I'm saying at the same time, "*when they scream every thing like they never learned to talk like normal people.*"

"So *what's funny?*" he says.

"*All of the above.*"

He scratches a pimple, makes a little bloody place. I give him a tissue and he sticks a scrap of it on the spot and asks, "So which was the first Tina Tanniaka song you ever heard?"

"*Who Hears the Fish Cry?*"

"Same here," he says.

"The first one you ever heard?"

"Yup."

"You lie, you skinny mule!"

"I swear it's the truth. Boy Scout's honor." He raises three fingers.

"You were a Boy Scout?"

"A short career. They kicked me out."

"What for?"

"General weirdness."

Then it's really really corny, but we sing together, *"Who hears the fish when they cry? / Old Mr. Thoreau said it. / Baby, do you believe it? All those years ago! / I didn't know those folks back when were swift, / But when I saw that, it gave me such a crazy lift. / Fish cry, fish cry, fish crying in the water. / Why? Same reason you do, baby. Cruel, baby, cruel, / That's the world we're in. / Go on, lift up your chin, take a spin. / You may not win, but don't forget, / Old Mr. Thoreau, he said it all those years ago. / Who hears the fish when they cry cry cry cry cry CRY."*

And then we stand there some more and talk some more, and it's like we're twins who just got reunited, for God's sake.

BEING GOOD

In fourth grade my teacher, Mrs. Springer, had a pink face and hair that smelled like lemons. I wanted her for my own, and I went into practically full-time making up stories about her being my real mother, who'd had to give me away because she was poor but had been looking for me ever since, and once she knew the truth, we would be reunited forever and ever.

Oh, how I wanted Mrs. Springer to like me. Like me better than anyone. To love me. To love me more than anyone.

To earn that love, I talked.

I had noticed that all my teachers liked the kids who spoke up, the ones who raised their hands and knew the answers.

I began putting up my hand for every task and every question. I didn't wait for

Mrs. Springer to call on me. I spoke up. *I will. ... Let me.... The answer is, zuh, the answer is ... wait, wait, I'll get it. ...*

"Krystal," she cried one day after I'd jumped up three times to offer the wrong answers, "don't you ever shut up?" Her pink face got pinker. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said that."

"Said what?" I asked.

"Shut up. That is not a nice way to talk."

"I don't care," I said, and I didn't. She could say shut up to me a hundred times, a thousand times, even a million times. It would still be just a little love tap to me compared to what Grandma said. "Mrs. Springer," I called.

"Yes, Krystal?" she sighed.

"Look." | clamped both hands over my mouth. Maybe I would never talk again. If that was what Mrs. Springer wanted, that was what I would do.

After that day I tried to be nicer and quieter, like other girls, but I wasn't good at it. Not good at all. I couldn't just sit still and quiet, because how would Mrs. Springer notice me if I did that? So I went on waving my hand in the air, springing up, and yelling out answers.

"You're a big problem," Mrs. Springer said one day. "What am I going to do with you, Krystal?"

Adopt me. Let me live with you. Be my mother.

She looked at me so intently, I knew she was reading my mind. I knew she was thinking about it. It was thrilling.

That same day she told our class we had been chosen to put on a play for the whole school. I could hardly believe my luck. I would take a part, I would be wonderful, and Mrs. Springer would love me so much that my whole life would be different. When she passed around the sign-up sheet, I signed my name twice.

"Stupid," the girl sitting next to me said.

I just smiled. This way I knew I would get a part.

Mrs. Springer kept me after school. She sat at her desk, her hands folded, and

said, "Krystal, I'm taking your name off the sign-up sheet." She gave me that same intent look and said she was very sorry but I didn't know how to be part of a team. "I really can't have you in the play and use up all my energy trying to control you. Do you understand, Krystal?"

"Oh... yes!" I sang out. And I smiled, broad and big, the same way I smiled when Grandma told me that she knew from the moment she walked into the house all those years ago that I was bad news. And after that I did stop raising my hand and calling out answers, right or wrong.

In fifth grade I skipped school quite a few times. In sixth grade I skipped pretty regularly, and in seventh grade the truant officer came to our house. After he left, Grandma chased me around, whacking at me with her cane and crying out that everything she'd ever thought about me was true. "Sneak! Liar! You good-for-nothing. Trifling bit of dirt! Lousy kid! You'll never be any good."

BAG OF CHIPS

Every time I go into Quik Mart for chips or soda, I squint my eyes at the cashier, the pretty woman sitting on a high stool behind the counter, and I try to see her as if she's a stranger. The big dark hair cloud. The big flashy earrings. The big white smile. What do they add up to? Who is she? Then the line moves forward and I put my chips down on the counter and say, "Hi, Mom."

"Krys!" she says, like, Wow, what a surprise! She flashes me the smile everyone loves. "Hey, it's you! What're you doing here?"

STEALING-3

Tyler Byrden and I stand out there on the sidewalk under the overhang of the Northside Mall, and we're talking like long lost twins or something. We do not run out of things to talk about, and he does not act like he wants to get away, and I think, Is this real?

And then after a while I say, "Hang on, I'll be right back." And I go into Kersher's and put the Tina Tanniaka cassette back in the rack. I don't look out the window to see if Tyler's still there. If he's waiting for me. Or if he's gone now. I buy an ice cream cone. Vanilla, as a joke, which maybe I'll tell him' about someday-like Mom says. When I'm ready!

I walk outside, licking the ice cream, and he's not there.

Right. Big stupid surprise.

I lick the cold ice cream, and I'm laughing inside at how dumb I am. I put the cassette-back for him. Trying to impress him. So how much have I learned since Mrs. Springer and fourth grade?

I throw the cone clown on the sidewalk and mash it all around with my sneaker.

"Why are you doing that?" a voice says in my ear.

I turn. "Mr. Vanilla himself!"

He blinks a little. "What?"

"Never mind! Never mind! Where were you!"

I hear myself sounding like Grandma. Screaming, scared : and mean. I don't know what to do. I could smash my head against a wall. Or throw myself in front of a car. I walk away. I come back. I twirl around in a circle. I'm crazy. Crazy as my grandma.

"Stay clam and nobody will get hurt," he says. Which is another insane Tina Tanniaka line.

And that is so good, so perfect. *Stay clam and nobody will get hurt.* I want to say something. I want to say *crazy raisins* or, *blazing blueberries*. Something. Anything. But I can't. I can't speak. I just stand there and stare at him.

"I saw what you did," he says.

Isn't that what he said when I came out with the cassette? Which was-it now seems at least a week ago. A month ago. Another life ago.

"In the store," he says. "I was watching you. You put it back"

"Oh ... *that,*" I get out. And I shrug, like it's the merest nothing, a trifle, a tiny

gesture that I hardly knew I made.

"They didn't see you," he says.

I nod.

"They didn't see you take it, and they didn't see you put it back."

I nod again.

"Mondo weirdo," he says.

"Insane," I agree.

And we sit down on the sidewalk, our backs against a wall, and we go on talking like we never stopped.

CRAZY

"Jeez Louise," Mom said one day when Grandma had been louder and meaner than usual, "that woman has been traveling on the road to crazy for years, and it sounds like she's just about got there."

"That woman is your mother;" I said.

"Well, thank you for the information, Krystal."

"Was she always crazy like this?"

"Was she always-- Let me think about that. ... Well, maybe not as bad as she is now. But, yeah, she was probably always a terrible woman."

"You say she's terrible, but we live with her. How come we just live with her and don't do anything about it?"

Mom shrugged. "What do you want me to do? I can't kick her out in the street. She's here. We're stuck. Anyway, it's not so bad if you're careful."

"It's bad," I said, "and you know it. You got away from her once," I added.

"Uh-huh. Your dad came along, and that was it for me. Such a good-looking guy. No dummy, either," she said, and smiled her pretty smile, as if Kevin's coming along had been a really good thing all around.

Okay, I guess it wasn't a *total* bad thing. I mean, I'm here-- for whatever that's worth. But the fact is, Mom didn't know what she was doing when she went with

Kevin-she just did it. She didn't know what she was doing when she told Grandina to come live with us. Mom never had a plan. She was always a going-along person, and she's still a going-along person. She works, she does the bar scene, and she hands over her life and her money to whoever is there ready to take it.

What's she going to do when I leave? Because I am going to leave. That's one thing I know for sure. Everything else is just all questions and no answers. But on that one point, I'm positive. As soon as I graduate, I'm out of here. I'm gone. I'll go as fast and as far as Greyhound will take me. I've got a plan. It's simple. It's called the Whatever-You-Do-Don't-Do-What Mom-Did Plan.

THE DRY SMELL OF GLADNESS

There was this one day when Grandma was screaming at me, telling me I was no good and going to hell and all that sort of thing. No different from a hundred other times, but for some reason I just couldn't stand it that day.

"Yeah, Grandma," I said. "You're right, I'm going someplace. I'm going there right now." And I walked out of the house.

She screamed after me to come back, that I had work to do, that I was rotten and bad.

I walked away and I kept walking, thinking that maybe I was on my way to Greyhound and a real somewhere else a whole lot sooner than I'd planned.

I kept walking. Muntsville is not so big that you can get lost, but I managed to do it. I walked myself right out of Muntsville, and then I kept walking, and I walked until I dead-ended on a dirt road surrounded by weedy fields, with not a house, a horse, a person, or even a dog anywhere in sight.

I was tired and maybe crying a little. I do that sometimes when no one is around. I stopped and leaned against a tree and looked up at the sky, and I hated how blue it was. How perfect.

Then the weirdest thing happened. The sky looked back at me.

It looked back at me, and it was quiet and blue and just *there*, like it loved me or

something.

And then the same strange thing happened with the trees and the weeds and the dirt road. They were all looking at me, I swear they were, peaceful and calm, like they were telling me something and waiting for me to get it.

And I did. I got it.

I got that the trees and the sky and the road and even the weeds in the field—they didn't care if I was happy or unhappy, if I was sad or mad, good or bad. They just went on being what they were. Weeds. Trees. Sky. And that was enough. That was all they had to be.

And then I was like that too ... Not good or bad, not wanting anything. Just there. And I was all calm and full of something... like peace, or maybe it was what they call happiness.

It was like sun heat or water, like a river of cool water, sliding and gliding through me.

I sat down, and then I lay down and stretched out my arms and looked up at the sky. And for a few moments that was all I wanted, the dry and dusty scent of the road and the blue sky over me.

STEALING-4

After a while Tyler and I are sitting on the sidewalk, our backs against a wall, and we're talking like we'll never stop. Then Tyler, all of a sudden he sort of ducks his head, and he doesn't even look like Vanilla Boy anymore, and he says, "Krystal."

He says my name, like that. "Krystal."

And I say, "Tyler." And I like saying it. So I say it again. "Tyler." I touch his lips. I don't know why, I just want to, so I do.

And he says, "You want to kiss?"

"I don't care," I say. "It's okay, if you want to."

But when our faces get close together, I almost can't breathe. He smells like bread or something, maybe pinecones, just some thing very good.

Our lips touch, and it's different, it's so different, it's not like anything I ever knew or felt or thought... or knew I wanted.

It's ... it's the blue sky again, and the weeds and the trees and the road.

"Oh. Wow," I mumble against his lips, which I know you're not supposed to do when you kiss. But except for Jimmy Monroe, who threw me in the snow and pushed his dirty face against mine back in fourth grade, no boy has ever kissed me. So I don't have any practice doing it right.

I don't want to ever stop.

We don't.

We sit there, kissing and kissing and kissing.

"You kids!" someone says, walking past us, and we still don't stop.

We kiss and kiss and kiss.

And his face is all shiny and red when we finally break apart, and probably mine is too. And then he does something even more wonderful. He leans toward me again and he licks my lips and then he licks my eyelids.

"Okay," I gasp, and I stagger, to my feet, gripped by something both sweet and terrible, knowing I will never be the same again.