

people who send letters don't just email each other. It's a lot faster, and then my mom wouldn't have to work so much.

"The world's a big place," she said at the table last week, "but all I ever see of it is my mail route in Walsten. And we live in a house that always stays in one place."

"All houses stay in one place, Lea," my dad said. "That's what houses are for."

"Except if there's a tornado," I said. "Then they can move." Tornadoes can take three forms: a stovepipe, a winding snake or an inverted triangle. There are a lot of tornados in Florida. Unfortunately, we've never been to the United States. My grandparents live in France, so we usually go there.

Two pigeons are pecking around in the fallen leaves. They flap up into the air when I bend down to pick up a chestnut. If I'm not home for dinner, I'll just eat chestnuts. They're rich in vitamin C, and you need that if you don't want to get scurvy. Sailors used to get that after being stuck on a ship for months. I drop a few chestnuts into my pocket. I haven't been gone for months, but I'm already half an hour from home.

I peel a chestnut and think about the things I like the most:

1. Playing with Ahmed
2. Lying in bed with my mom and looking up strange place names in the atlas (like Qaqortoq, Wagga Wagga or Zzyyz)
3. Deep-sea diving

Then I think about the things I hate:

1. Disgusting vegetables hidden in my food
2. Benni
3. Waking up early

There's no escaping the things I hate. While of all the things I love most, there's one I haven't even done yet. My parents think I have nothing to complain about. That's true, I guess, I have a pretty easy life. My name is Raven, I'm ten years old and live in Belgium. My dad writes marketing texts and slogans and makes a lot of money doing it. But my mom is way more interesting. She's a postwoman who sometimes gets sent away on secret missions. Like now, for example. She's been gone for a few days. It's safer if we don't know where she is. Not everyone can be trusted. She doesn't call home because that's not allowed. It says so in her contract: "No contact with the homefront." Homefront, I like that word. It sounds like something important is happening here too.

She would want to know exactly what Benni did to me today, from A to Z. She would remember every little detail and ask all the right questions.

How many knots did Benni tie in your sleeves?

Which words did he spell wrong in your cheese sandwich?

Did he peel the tangerine before stuffing it in your water bottle?

Then she would shake her head and say, "Jeez Louise, what a story." She wouldn't say "Oh it'll be all right, son. Benni must be going through a hard time." But she wouldn't say "I'm going to bash his brains out with my rolling pin" either, though she'd probably think it. Then she'd chuckle and mutter, "Just kidding." We don't even have a rolling pin—we buy all our cookies at the bakery.

Every night, my mom lies down beside me in bed. "Shall we go on a trip?" she asks. We search the atlas for the silliest-sounding places we can find, and we're off, to Gogogogo in Madagascar or

Batman in Turkey. My mother knows a lot about the world, and what she doesn't know we look up in I Know Everything: Continents of the World.

But tonight we can't do that because I'm alone with my dad. Assuming I make it home, that is, because now I'm really lost. Not as lost as I will be soon, but I don't know that yet.

Maybe I should tell you how the day started first

The day I got lost was a Monday. On Mondays, I stay in bed as long as possible, just like I do every other day of the week. My bed is a warm cave, and I'm a caveman. Then I'm a cave bear. But soon I remember that cave bears have been extinct for a long time, so I get up. My dad's already called me three times.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he's tapping away on his keyboard. There's organ music blasting from the speaker, as if somebody's died. My mom always leaves early for work, so she's normally not at breakfast. I turn down the radio, sit down at the table, and scatter chocolate sprinkles on my toast like I always do. When my dad isn't looking, I pour them straight out of the box into my mouth.

What do you want for dinner tonight?" he asks.

"Chicken legs with apple sauce," I say, and my father looks at me as if I'm some kind of child prodigy.

"Beautiful," he says. He can think about sunglasses and waterbeds and stuff like that, but not about dinner. "Chicken and apples it is!" he mutters and sticks his nose back in his rhyme dictionary.

"What rhymes with kitty kibble?" he asks.

"Spitty dribble," I say. "Did mom call?"

He shakes his head no. Not even he knows where Mom is. He makes up some excuse about a time out, but time outs are for sports and my mom doesn't play sports.

I make myself a stack of cheese sandwiches and shove them in my lunchbox. There's just enough room left over for a tangerine. Then I snap it shut.

I pull on my jacket. The only reason I still go to school is that I want to learn French.

"See you in a bit," my dad says, as if I'm going for a walk around the block.

"School goes until four, you know," I say.

My dad laughs as if I'm making a joke. Then his face turns serious.

"Wait. Come here a second," he says. He pulls me onto his lap and rubs my back.

"Mom loves you so much," he says.

Duh. Of course, she loves me. I wriggle out of his arms. "I'm not a dog, Dad," I say. If I had hair on my back, it would be standing straight up.

"And I love you too. Don't ever doubt that. We never fight about you."

"I really have to go," I say and zip up my jacket. I'm not sure which is worse, words that don't mean anything or words about how much they love me.

"What else rhymes with kitty kibble?" he calls after me when I'm at the door. I throw my hands into the air: we don't even have a cat because I'm allergic to fur. Little do I know that pretty soon I'll have a pet. I assume it will be a Monday like any other. I grab the plastic bag containing eighteen tiny boxes of chocolate sprinkles and head out the door.

"Straight home after school, now," my dad shouts, the same as he does every morning.

My school is called The Four-Leaf Clover, and it's only a few blocks from our house. I'm ten now, which means I can walk to school by myself. Today is presentation day. Our teacher does the best he can to teach us stuff, but I'd rather learn from the other kids in my class. Jack, Ahmed and Lena are all up before me.

Their topics are the country fiddle, peanut brittle, and *Chicken Little*. Too bad my dad isn't here. Then it's my turn. My topic is chocolate sprinkles. Sprinkles are made of long spaghetti-like strands of chocolate. Who wouldn't want to learn about that? I even made a quiz: Which of the following is true about chocolate sprinkles? I give them three answers to choose from:

- a. Cacao trees are endangered because of global warming, so chocolate sprinkles will soon be an endangered species.
- b. A spoonful of chocolate sprinkles contains about ten grams of sugar, which is the exact amount of sugar in one apple.
- c. In Belgium and the Netherlands, people put chocolate sprinkles on their toast (and dump them straight into their mouths when nobody is watching).

They're all true. It was a trick question. Only four kids got it right. At the end of my presentation, I pass out the little boxes of chocolate sprinkles that I brought from home so they can all dump them into their mouths. The teacher joins in, but then he accidentally chokes on the rush of tiny sprinkles. "Fascinating, Raven," he sputters. "I'm sure there's plenty to say about sprinkles, but I don't need any more of them in my nose."

Fortunately, Mr. Tanguy isn't the type to take off points for presentation topics that end up in his nose. All in all, the day was off to a fairly normal start, except that most of the topics kind of rhymed with 'kitty kibble.'

And unfortunately I have to tell you about Benni

Mr. Tanguy steps out of the classroom for a minute to get a new sponge, and Benni walks up to my table.

"Raven, what kind of name is that?" he says. We can hear Mr. Tanguy sneezing and snorting in the hallway.

Benni is a head taller than the rest of the class. Maybe he'll grow up to be the Giant of Walsten one day. The tallest man in the world's name was Bob, and he grew to be eight feet and eleven inches tall. By the time he was four years old, he was already five foot three. But I doubt Benni will ever become a big friendly giant like Bob. His dad is an escalator salesman and his mom is our school principal.

It is true that a raven is more of a bird than a name, and I don't even look like one. But at least it's a clever bird, just as clever as a dolphin or a chimpanzee. Benni sounds more like a dog's name if you ask me. But since I value my life, I decide it's better to keep my mouth shut.

"Raven. Isn't that the big black bird that poops all over the street?" Benni snarls. Everyone knows where this is going, but nobody speaks up. Not even Juna, and she's the toughest one in the class. Every day, Benni picks somebody to bully. The whole class breathes

slowly in and out as he chooses his next victim, as if there's nothing else we can do. The room goes silent, all you can hear is the chirping of Charlie and Simba (our class parakeets).

"And don't they eat garbage?" he flicks a dirty tissue onto the floor. "Go on Raven, eat some trash!" Then he empties my pencil sharpener. "Go on, eat it!" I bend down and sweep up the pencil shavings with my hands.

When Mr. Tanguy comes back into the classroom, he nods with satisfaction.

"It's so nice and quiet in here. The parakeets could learn from your example," he says.

When nobody's watching, Benni keeps going. He ties the sleeves of my jacket into tight knots. He writes BIG LOOZER on the cheese in my sandwich. He squeezes the tangerine into my water bottle, peel and all. And that's not all he did, but I didn't find out the rest until later.

After lunch, me and Ahmed head over to the grass field next to the school and lie down on our backs.

"There," Ahmed says, pointing to a cloud. "A dragon letting out a huge fart."

I see it. If you look closely, the whole sky is full of big farting dragons. Take a deep breath and you can almost smell it.

Then we attempt to gargle Ahmed's chocolate milk while lying down on our backs. Gargling is completely harmless as long as you remember to keep your epiglottis closed. We try all the vowel sounds, but short A seems to work the best. Don't even try long A. After all the chocolate milk is gone, we just lie there until the bell rings. We both agree that Benni is a stupid jerk, but unfortunately, I'm not done with him yet. That afternoon, we go swimming. In the locker room, I discover that he's cut a huge hole in my swimming trunks. Right in the spot that covers the one body part I definitely don't want people to see. For a second, I consider telling the teacher. But I don't want to be sent to the guidance counsellor again. I put my clothes back on, stuff my swimming trunks into my gym bag and go tell Mr. Tanguy that I forgot to bring them.

"No problem," he says. "They've got a whole basket of extra swimsuits around here." His nose is still red from snorting.

My choices are a pair of tiny brown trunks with orange jellyfish on them or a pair of baggy black gym shorts with a broken elastic waistband. I go for the brown ones. Better toddler trunks than no trunks at all after diving into the water.

Showers are mandatory. The lifeguard is a strict, bald man who checks to make sure everyone's hair is completely wet before letting them in the pool.

"Look! It's Sir Splatter Poop!" Benni shouts as I walk out of the locker room. I've got birthmarks on my back, legs and belly. My mom calls them my deserted islands, but they're actually not deserted at all since every square inch of skin contains thousands of bacteria.

"No shouting, Benny," Mr. Tanguy says.

First, we have to swim laps, and then it's free swim. We make the biggest cannonballs we can without knocking the lifeguard out of his chair. Ahmed can make the largest splash, though I'm pretty good too. It all comes down to leaning back a little bit before you hit the water. One day, we hope to compete in the national cannonball championships. We also do the whale, the dolphin, the crocodile, and I dive all the way down and touch the bottom.

I almost forget about Benni. But back on the bus he cuts in front of Ahmed and plops down beside me.

He shoves his backpack between us and says: “You know what you are? You’re a mama’s boy!”

So I love my mom, doesn’t everyone? Dad’s are fine and all, but they didn’t give birth to you. I don’t respond because I’m tired and my teeth are all sticky from the Curly Wurly bar I always eat after the pool.

“You’re a big baby,” he sneers. “Coochie coochie coo.” He tries to tickle me under my chin.

I jerk back my head and say that my mom is in Africa for her job.

“I thought she was a mail lady?”

“Yeah, what’s your point?” I snap. “You think all she does is deliver the mail? Sometimes they send out her on special assignments.”

Benni’s eyes narrow into slits.

“She has a very important delivery to make in Botswana,” I say. Botswana has nothing to do with robots, by the way. The name comes from the Tswana, the African people who live there. Part of the Kalahari Desert is in Botswana. Actually, it’s only half desert because there’s grass and even trees in some places.

For one nanosecond, Benni hesitates. But one billionth of a second isn’t really enough time for information to sink into your brain. So he says: “You mean your mom just left. Africa, come on.”

I stare at the rain beating against the window. Luckily for my mom, the rainy season in Botswana hasn’t started yet. She hates umbrellas, and she left her raincoat hanging on the coat rack in the hall.

As soon as the bus stops in front of the school, Benni takes off.

“No running on the bus, Benni,” the teacher says.

I just sit there for a while. It’s only Monday, a little before four, but it feels like it’s been a whole week. When I get off the bus, I’m completely disoriented. It’s no wonder that pretty soon I’m totally lost.
