

how to be a
goldfish



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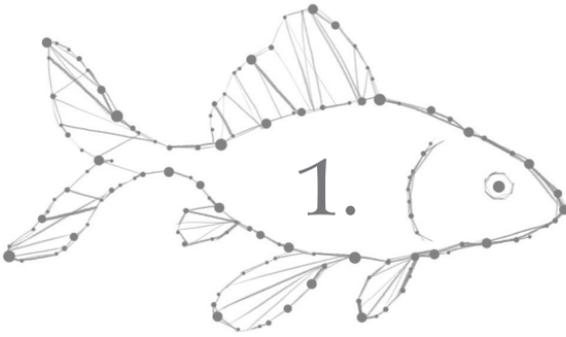
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Lizzie

I bet there aren't many kids who can say social studies changed their life, but it changed mine. It really did. If it weren't for social studies, Harry's farm would be history, and I would have never figured out who David was. He'd be just some city kid who passed through Scotch Gully one day in May.

It was last period and I was busting for school to be over so I could get outside. The grass was thick and green; the gullies, those hillside ditches that gave our town its name, were still fat with spring runoff; the sky was blue and cloudless; and at Harry's, the ewes were due to lamb any day. Harry was the closest thing I had to a grandfather, and great as he was, to him I was still a kid. So when he said I could name the first lamb born, I knew he expected a cute little-kid name like Curly, Fluffy or Snowflake, but I had my own ideas.

For a ewe lamb, I'd narrowed it down to *Baa*-*bra* or Tina *Baa*-*llerina*. Harry wouldn't get it, but I thought it was hilarious. I grinned, just thinking about the look on his face when I told him.

That grin disappeared when I walked into social studies and saw the maps pulled down and covering both sides of the chalkboard. Those maps rolled down like that meant we were about to have a pop quiz. By the time I took my seat, kids were buzzing like a nest of angry yellow jackets.

"Settle down," Miss Gambacort said. "It is not a quiz."

"Then what is it?" Gordon McInnis asked.

"A special project."

Gordon groaned so loudly he sounded like a cow in a branding chute. "Ah, c'mon, Miss G," he said. "Please don't make us sit in the library. It's way too nice to be stuck inside."

"You won't need the school's encyclopedias for this project, Gordon."

Miss G walked to the world map. She pulled the chrome handle down, then let it go. The map rolled up into its case smooth as corn silk, and that's saying something since that map had been around so long that some of the countries had new names.

Underneath that map in blue chalk, it said, EVERY FAMILY HAS A HERO.

I guess that's true. Grandfather Ross — my

mom's dad — died fighting in World War II, and my grandma lost three uncles in World War I.

“I want you to discover firsthand that history isn't just dates and places in a textbook or encyclopedia. History happens to people. Each one of you,” Miss G said, “will interview a family member. Your assignment is to find out what their life was like and uncover the challenges they faced.”

I put up my hand.

“Yes, Lizzie?”

“Can we write about someone who's not alive anymore?”

“No. It has to be someone you can actually interview.”

Reluctantly I pointed at the chalkboard. “But that says ‘Every family has a hero.’” Miss G tipped her head to the side like she didn't understand. She was new to Scotch Gully so maybe she didn't know about me yet. I picked my next words carefully. “I've only got two people in my family — my mom and grandma. They're great and all, but they're not very interesting. Or heroic.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. I knew better than to draw attention to my family. I looked around the class expecting the worst. To my surprise, most people's heads were nodding, as though they were thinking the exact same thing about their families. I guess that

made sense. How were any of us supposed to find a hero in our tiny town, where most folks were farmers and have been for generations?

“I think you’ll be surprised, Lizzie. Class, it’s 1981. We have televisions and microwave ovens. Some of you may even have a VCR. But your parents were born in the 1940s, when those things didn’t exist. Some houses didn’t even have indoor plumbing. Ask your grandparents what it was like to use an outhouse when it was minus twenty degrees.”

I didn’t see how using an outdoor privy in the winter made someone a hero, but I didn’t want to invite trouble by drawing even more attention to my family, so I kept my mouth shut this time.

“You look doubtful, Lizzie,” Miss G said. “What do you think makes someone a hero?”

“I dunno,” I answered. “Fighting in a war, I guess.”

“Good. Any other ideas, class?”

“Pulling someone from a burning building,” Gordon said.

Kids started calling out more answers: saving folks from earthquakes, tornados, tidal waves, and all manner of natural disasters, none of which had ever happened here in Scotch Gully. Like I said, this isn’t a place for heroes.

“Those are all fine ideas,” said Miss G. “Can we agree to call them action heroes?”

“Yeah! Like Han Solo,” Gordon called, and the class started buzzing again. A whole year after *The Empire Strikes Back* came out, and the boys in my class were still nuts for Stars Wars. It’s all they talked about on the school bus. That and hockey.

“Settle down, class.” Once things got quiet, Miss G explained, “Not all heroes leap into the fray. There are quiet heroes too. People who take a stand to protect the weak or to right a wrong.”

“Like on the news last night,” Carolyn Cousins said. I like Carolyn. Her dad and grandad were the county vets, and she liked animals as much as me.

“Explain, Carolyn.”

“Well, it said on the news there was going to be another rally in Toronto this afternoon, because of those three hundred men who got arrested in February for being gay, and because of how badly the police treated them. My dad said Margaret Atwood gave a speech at the last big rally. So people like that, who try to help, would be quiet heroes, right?”

“Exactly, Carolyn,” Miss G said, then she pointed right at me. At least I thought so, but it wasn’t me she was looking at. It was Bethany, in the desk behind me. Bethany Budge is what my grandma calls a piece of work. She’s had it in for me for as long as I remember. I try to avoid her, but that’s not easy. Scotch Gully is a small town, and our school is even smaller.

“Yes, Bethany?” Miss G asked.

“My grandmother says all the gays are going to Hell.”

BAM. Just like that, in the space of a finger snap, the whole classroom went silent. All eyes were on Miss G, waiting to see what she’d do. She took a deep breath and held it in like she was counting to ten, which is exactly what my grandma tells me to do when I’m upset.

Finally, she spoke. “You’ve all heard of Nellie McClung, Rosa Parks and Gandhi?”

Everyone nodded.

“Well, they were also protestors, and now we call them heroes. But I think we’ve strayed, class. Let’s get back to your projects.”

I wished I could see Bethany’s face right then, but I didn’t dare turn around. Instead, I kept my eyes fixed on Miss G as she picked up a piece of chalk and wrote INTERVIEW on the board in big letters.

“A good interview will reveal something about your subject that you never knew before, and that is what I want you to write about. One student will be chosen to represent our class and share their report on Parents’ Day.”

Parents’ Day is a huge deal. By the time everyone’s brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins show up, it feels like all of Scotch

Gully is squeezed into the school gym. I couldn't imagine anything worse than standing up on that stage in front of the whole town, talking about my family and reminding folks of the very thing I wanted them to forget.

Nope. I could never do that. It would be like trying to put out the last coals of a campfire with a can of gasoline. But I had nothing to worry about on that score. My project would be dull as dirt — my mom was only a small-town lawyer, and my grandma was just a part-time librarian.

Miss G moved across the front boards to the map of North America and pulled the handle down. When the map rolled up into its case, new instructions were revealed, written in green chalk this time.

SHARE YOUR HISTORY: CREATE A FAMILY TREE.

- Trace your family back to when they came to this country (or as far back as you can).
- Show their names and explain how they are related to you.
- The Scotch Gully Mercantile has stocked poster board especially for our class.

That was thoughtful. It meant nobody's mom or dad would have to drive all the way to the Woodward's in Arbroath County.

Then I noticed the very last line.

- All family tree posters will be hung in the gym for the Parents' Day assembly.

Oh no!

“Psst. Psst, Lizzie Ross.”

Bethany Budge. I fixed my eyes on the chalkboard, hoping she'd take the hint and leave me alone. Hard to believe now, but back in kindergarten I desperately wanted to be Bethany's friend. At church on Sunday, the Budges take up two whole pews. Bethany has five older brothers who always seem to be bossing her around, teasing her or ignoring her. But they stick up for her too. When she wears her hair Princess Leia-style, with her braids wrapped around her ears like two cinnamon buns, or on the school bus when she talks like Yoda, no one, not even Gordon McInnis, dares make fun of her. Those Budges might fight amongst themselves, but they take care of their own.

I wanted a big family like that so badly it hurt. Between polio and two world wars, there are only three people left in my family. I mean, I love my mom and grandma, I do, but it's always just the three of us at home, and sometimes the quiet feels thick and too heavy. Back in kindergarten, when I asked Bethany to be my recess buddy, she made a face and said, “My gran says I'm not allowed to play with you.” Then she shoved me. It wasn't hard, but I was so startled, I fell down and landed on my backside.

“Hey, Lizzie Ross,” Bethany said now in a voice

low enough not to attract the teacher's attention. "I'm talking to you."

I wished with all my heart that Bethany would just hush up, but I'd never been able to wish Bethany Budge away. It's like Grandma always said, "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

"I can't wait to see your family tree," Bethany whispered. "Do you even know who your father is?"

I tried to swallow, but my spit had dried up. When I didn't answer, she leaned so far across her desk that I could feel her breath on my neck. It smelled like warm egg salad with too many onions.

"My gran says you're a bastard," Bethany whispered. "She says your mom's hippie ways are a bad influence on the whole town."

I should have turned around and faced her then. I should have defended my mom and told Bethany to shut her mouth. But I didn't. Some dogs drop their tails and slink their bellies low when you catch them out. Other dogs are fighters, stand their ground, and growl like they've got angels behind them. Bethany was like that. A fighter. Calling her out would only have made things worse.

My hands clenched and unclenched. I tried counting to ten, but I only got to three before Bethany spit-whispered again.

"My gran says in the old days, bastards like you got adopted out to real families."