

Nobody Was

7th grade in the Life of Me. Penelope

Here



ALISON POLLET

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*Thank You
for Everything*

Part one

ELSTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

6TH GRADE FINAL REPORT CARD SPRING, 1981

NAME: Penelope B. Schwartzbaum

FINAL GRADES:

ENGLISH: A
SOCIAL STUDIES: B+
MATH: B-
SCIENCE: B-
ART: A-
MUSIC: B+
GYM: Pass

REMARKS: Perfectly intelligent but has tendency to drift off during class periods. Will do fine in middle school as long as inattention does not worsen. Is timely, polite, and rarely impudent. Has irritating habit of altering penmanship style on monthly basis. (Perhaps an identity issue — guidance counselor would do well to take note.)

Chapter One

"Hey, weirdo, wake up! We're almost there."

"Yoooooooooooooooo . . ."

"Earth to Penelope!"

Penelope Schwartzbaum felt like her brain was rattling inside her head. She'd fallen asleep on the jostling school bus, her head against the window, using a spiral notebook as a pillow. She untangled the spiral from her hair, rubbed her eyes, and slowly twisted her neck to the left. A giant red face glowered at her.

As twelve-year-olds go, Penelope's best friend, Stacy Commack, was on the small side. But she was one of those people who, by sheer force of personality, appeared much larger than she actually was. Stacy had spent the summer at her father's beach house in California, and underneath her dirty-blond curls her dimpled, sunburned face resembled a peeling red potato.

Stacy was an impatient sort, and today she was particularly twitchy. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" she shouted at Penelope, flakes of sunburned skin flying off her nose. "It's the first day of middle school, we don't have any classes together, we're not

even in the same homeroom. Half the kids in our grade are going to be new. Everything's different!"

"Sorry," yawned Penelope, who had a tendency to apologize when it wasn't necessary. *I haven't really been sleeping*, she thought defensively, *I've just been resting — with my eyes closed*. She didn't bother to explain that to Stacy, who was simultaneously memorizing her class schedule and reorganizing her pencil case. Penelope made sure her eyes stayed open the rest of the ride.

The bus took a sharp left off the expressway onto a leafy, tree-lined street. Soon its giant wheels were crunching the circular gravel driveway of Elston Preparatory School. It lurched to a stop, and kids tumbled toward the door, a colorful chain of satin jackets and backpacks, like plastic toy monkeys falling out of their barrel, still interlinked. Stacy flung herself into the line, dragging Penelope with her. The first period of the first day of school was minutes away. "Hurry up!" she yowled. "We can't be late."

Penelope just wished she could go back to sleep.

But minutes later, she was propped in a wooden desk chair beneath a hot fluorescent light, listening to her homeroom teacher, Dr. Alvin, deliver a "Welcome, seventh graders, to the middle and upper school campus" speech. A pointy-faced woman wearing a Milk Duds–brown sweater rolled up to her elbows, Dr. Alvin leaned over her desk and peered into the rainbow sea of brand-new, not-yet-washed polo shirts. She coughed:

“Aah-heh-aah-hem,” and waited until the room was silent of rustling papers and uncapping pen tops.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m going to tell you this now, before the school year really starts. I’m going to tell you this now, so that when things get tough you can’t say you weren’t warned: This year we’re going to try and break you.” Dr. Alvin’s lips smacked on the word “you,” and Penelope, a skinny girl with freckles across her nose and brown hair that hung flat against her cheeks, felt as if she were already breaking, snapping in half like one of the Number 2 pencils in the front pouch of her backpack.

“We might try and break you, but you don’t have to let us. You can work hard. You can persevere. Do so and you’ll be rewarded. If you succeed at Elston Prep, you’ll go anywhere you want.” The class erupted in a deep collective sigh, the kind actors in soda commercials make after a super-refreshing sip: *Ahhhhhhh*. They knew what Dr. Alvin meant by “anywhere you want.” *College. Any college you want.* Getting into a good college was the whole point of Elston Prep.

In the margins of her notebook Penelope scribbled: *Getting into a good college is the whole point of life.*

She crossed out the words until they were obliterated by an inky smudge the size of a thumb.

“We’re all aware what ‘prep’ in ‘Elston Prep’ stands for, right? Preparatory. Meaning we’re preparing you. And not only for higher education, but for a fulfilling

life of the mind. Homework will be extreme. We're talking five, six hours a night. You're going to need to be disciplined. What you learn in seventh grade will be a foundation for what you learn in eighth and then in high school. What you learn now will help you later. But what you don't learn now will hurt you later."

To signal that this part of the speech was over, Dr. Alvin sank into a swively chair behind her desk. The class stared nervously as she flipped open her roll book, as if perhaps their seventh-grade fates were already written inside. But the teacher simply moved onto what she called the nuts and bolts of homeroom: roll call, locker assignments, tardiness, and absences.

A breeze snuck in through a cracked-open window, and Penelope placed her hand on her notebook to stop the pages from fluttering. She looked at the notes she'd taken during Dr. Alvin's lecture:

Pay attention.

We're going to try and break you.

Homework: 6 hours a night.

Don't get behind.

Catching up is very difficult.

Penelope used a thick purple pen. In her neat, loopy writing, the words didn't look as scary as they'd sounded coming out of Dr. Alvin's mouth. They looked bubbly and nice, and for a second she forgot to be petrified.



In seventh grade there was nothing more important than having a best friend, and Penelope had never been more aware of this than today. If it hadn't been for Stacy, she wouldn't have made it through the first day. In fact, if it hadn't been for Stacy, she wouldn't have made it to Algebra class.

Elston Preparatory School was special for a New York City school: A forty-five-minute drive from Manhattan, it boasted three separate campuses — one for nursery, one for elementary, and another for middle and high school students. The middle and high school campus, though only a block away from the elementary one, was twice the size. With its lush green fields and looming buildings, its libraries, laboratories, and gymnasiums, it was a giant new world for seventh graders like Penelope and Stacy.

"Guess who's in my homeroom," announced Stacy as she and Penelope trotted across campus, their brand-new white Tretorns — saved just for today — falling easily into step. They had half the day and lunch behind them; afternoon classes were about to begin. "Anabella Blumberg. Isn't that weird?"

"Mmmmm hmmmmm," agreed Penelope.

"She looks really good. Hey, what do you have now? You have Algebra, right? With Mr. Bobkin? I had that second period. I'm just warning you, he's scary."

As easily as Penelope and Stacy had fallen into

step, they fell out, as Penelope — who was having trouble navigating the maze of cobblestone pathways that connected Elston's buildings — took an unintentional turn to the right. "Hey, you're going the wrong way!" Stacy shouted, grabbing her friend's elbow. "No offense, Penelope, but you have to pay attention."

But Penelope *was* paying attention — just to all the wrong things. How could she concentrate on navigating the campus when being here was like visiting the Museum of Natural History? Except the exhibits had come to life!

A tall girl in a shredded Elston High School sweatshirt, wrists full of silver bangles, clanged past.

A boy in a Harvard sweatshirt yelled, "Friedman, catch!" then hurled a Nerf football into the air.

An eighth-grade girl bent down to tie the rainbow heart shoelaces on her red-and-white Nikes.

And here were girls from their grade: Lillian Lang and Annie Reed carried bulging Le Sportsac bags over their shoulders — the bags were so heavy, their wiry bodies sloped toward each other like bent paper clips. Pia Smith and Annabella Blumberg passed, laughing and pointing as they walked, at what Penelope wasn't sure. Vicki Feld and Tillie Warner studied a notebook as they shuffled past.

The seventh grade was like Noah's Ark, divided into sets of two, and now that they were on a new campus — surrounded by new buildings and new class-

mates — the pairs clung to each other even tighter. So if there were things about Stacy that bothered Penelope, she did her best to ignore them. Because if she thought about those things, she might get mad, and then she'd have to think about *not* being best friends with Stacy. And when you've been best friends as long as Penelope and Stacy had — since they were six! six years! half their lives! — *not being best friends* was something you didn't think about. Thinking about that was even more disorienting than getting lost on campus. It was like listening to your voice on a tape recorder, or getting eyedrops in your eyes, or waking up one morning to find out that the world is tilted.

When they arrived at Penelope's Algebra class in Gritzfield Hall, she had no idea how they'd gotten there. It had been too easy to not look where she was going, and to let Stacy lead.

Chapter Two

Sometimes ignoring could be a lot of work.

Penelope and Stacy emerged from Williams Bar-Be-Cue onto the corner of Eighty-sixth and Broadway, where Stacy stopped dead in her tracks, scrunched up her nose, and hissed, "Peee-ewwwww!" She tossed a grease-spotted paper bag of fried chicken at Penelope, who caught it just in time.

Blocks later, on Eighty-first Street, Stacy was still pinching her nose with exaggerated force. "I guess I'm just getting more sensitive to bad smells," she said when she finally felt safe to unclamp her nostrils. "My stepmother says that's what happens when women mature — odors bother them." Penelope had never heard that. She *had* noticed that lately Stacy had been scrunching her nose up all over the neighborhood. Places she'd gone her whole life, too: Williams, Broadway Nut Shop, Burger Joint.

Most kids who went to Elston Elementary lived on New York City's Upper East Side, so living across the park on the Upper West Side was a point of pride for Penelope and Stacy. "West is best!" they'd happily shouted when Elston Elementary's lone West Side school bus parted ways on the expressway with the fleet of East Side ones. "East is least!"

But that had been sixth grade. *Now* here was Stacy complaining that Broadway, the street she and her mother lived on, was a giant stink bomb. "Oh, please!" Stacy's mother scoffed when Stacy brought up the subject of moving across town. Shirley Commack was a reporter for the *New York Times* who cursed a lot and liked to talk about the good old days when she was a hippie at war protests. She wouldn't be caught dead on the pristine Upper East Side, and dreaded the thought that the West Side could get fancy like that. "You think Broadway stinks?" she argued. "Park Avenue is what stinks. Of boredom!"

Stacy and Shirley Commack lived in a building that looked more like a fortress than an apartment building, with its black gated courtyard, tiers, and towers. When Stacy and Penelope had been little, they'd pretended it was a castle: They were princesses; the doormen were palace guards; the elevator operators, knights; and Bernice, the Commacks' housekeeper, a fiery dragon entrusted to protect them.

After delivering the chicken to Stacy's mother, who often had cravings for takeout when staying up all night on deadline, Penelope and Stacy retreated to Stacy's bedroom. Her father had paid to have it redone, and Stacy had been allowed to pick the theme, which was rainbows.

There were rainbow sheets, a matching quilt and curtains, and satin pillows in the shape of rainbows;