

Science Fiction

A Taste of Summer

By Ellen Klages



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Mattie Rodgers sat on the tiny sleeping porch of the summer cottage on Indian Lake, halfway reading a Nancy Drew book, and mostly watching her dad and two of her three older brothers try to fix the outboard motor on the dinghy. She was hoping they'd let her help, or at least get it back together soon, so her dad could take her exploring in the other parts of the lake.

She folded over the page of the book and got up out of the chair. Her legs made a slurping sound when she pulled up off the painted wood, because she was sticky hot. The boat lay upside down on the grass near the dock. Her dad was kneeling over the blades. AJ and Mike were doing something to the motor part with a screwdriver. They all had their shirts off and were shiny with sweat and streaks of black grease. She stopped a few feet away.

"Can I help, Daddy?"

He started a little, dropped the wrench, said one of the bad words, not quite in a whisper, then turned around and looked at her over his shoulder.

"No, sweetie. This is guy stuff."

"Are you fixing it?"

"Nope, not yet." His voice wasn't mad, but it sounded like it could change into mad pretty quick. He turned back to the propeller.

Mattie waited a minute, shifting her weight from one foot to the other on the grass. "Daddy? How long do you think it's going to be? Will you take me out for a ride when you're done?"

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Her father turned around. "Matts?" He looked surprised that she was still standing there. "Why don't you be a big girl and go play someplace else for a while? We'll be lucky to finish this before dark as it is." He sighed and rubbed his face, leaving a grease mark on his chin.

"There's nobody to play with."

"Where's Danny?"

"Fishing. He says I can't come along because girls scare fish."

"Well then, how about the twins?"

Mattie made a face. She was almost nine and Cindy and Shelley were eleven. They'd always played pirates before, exploring the lakeshore for treasure, but this summer all they wanted to do was read about the Beatles and roll their hair. "They don't want to do anything fun anymore. Can I go swimming?"

Her dad looked over at the weathered gray dock and shook his head. "Nobody's got time to watch you right now. Maybe when your mom gets back from Lake City."

Her mom had gone to get her hair done. Most Saturdays Mattie had to go along, but her birthday was in two days, and her mother had secret shopping to do. Mattie wasn't sure there was anything in Lake City she really wanted, and she hoped it wasn't going to be clothes. She was wearing her favorites—a pair of her brother Mike's hand-me-down cut-offs and a faded green Celtics tank top that came down past her knees and said HAVLICEK in letters that were just barely visible. Her red high-top sneakers were busting out at the toes and her brown hair was ragged over her ears where

she'd tried to cut off the annoying parts with her mother's nail scissors earlier that morning.

Mattie's shoulders sagged. "She'll just say we need to start dinner," she said under her breath.

"Look, Matts," her father said after a moment, "The boys and I want to get this back together before it starts to rain. Why don't you go get a popsicle at Miller's." He wiped his hand on his khaki shorts, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a five-dollar bill, three pennies, a dime, and a nickel. He poured all the change into Mattie's hand. "My treat." He reached up and patted her hair, looking at the gathering clouds. "But you'd better scoot on out of here. We'll have rain by supper, and if you come home soaking wet your mom'll have my hide."

Mattie considered her options and decided that a walk with a popsicle at the other end was probably the best of them. "Okay, Daddy." She kissed the cleanest part of his cheek and carefully put the coins in the front pocket of her cut-offs.

Their cottage was on a dirt road bordered by thick woods and blackberry bushes, about half a mile from the highway. As she walked, she scuffed her sneakers in the dirt and tried to decide what she wanted most when she got to Miller's. She sometimes had a nickel, or even a dime, but today she had eighteen whole cents, and that could buy just about anything. Maybe a popsicle. Or maybe penny candy. B-B-Bats or Nik-L-Nip wax bottles full of sweet syrup, or an Indian necklace made of pale candy beads strung on elastic just long enough to reach her mouth from around her neck. Maybe one of each. She felt pretty good. Not as good as if she was having a

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real adventure exploring on the lake, but better than just sitting on the porch watching the boys.

By the time she got to the old farmhouse and the field that was about halfway to the highway, the wind was whipping up dust around her feet. The leaves of the maple trees on the side of the road were turned over upside-down, showing their pale undersides. It was definitely going to rain, and she didn't think it was going to wait until dinnertime. She thought for a minute about going back, but decided that maybe being wet on a sort-of adventure was better than being dry and bored for sure.

The dirt road ended at State Route 42, two lanes of blacktop, an intersection everyone called "the Tee"—a tiny shopping district with a gas station, a grocery store, a bar, a real estate office, and an ice cream parlor.

That summer, Mattie's mother said she was a big girl and could walk down to the Tee by herself, but she wasn't allowed to cross the highway, because there was no stop light and the cars went too fast. Mattie didn't really mind; the only buildings on the other side were the bar and Bingham's Ice Creamery, and even today she didn't have enough money for that. The smallest cone cost a whole quarter.

Mattie walked up to the front door of Miller's Superette. It was on the safe side of the highway, but today its CLOSED sign hung in the big window, even though it was the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

She stood in front of the automatic IN door and jumped up and down on the rubber mat twice, but the glass door stayed closed. She kicked a bottle cap down the sidewalk in

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frustration, then looked around. Nobody was at the Tee. The real estate office had its blinds shut, and there was only one dusty black Rambler in the parking lot of Pete's Tavern.

The sky had gotten to be a weird color—yellow-green and dark at the horizon, so dark that there was no line between the land and the sky. Three in the afternoon, and it looked like it was almost bedtime. The clouds were so low they seemed to touch the top of the Texaco station, and the whole sky looked like a bruise. The neon beer signs across the highway in the window of the bar were hot red and yellow and green, shining through the darkness like alien jewels.

She stepped to the side of the highway. She could see for more than a mile in each direction—flat east, flat west—and there was no traffic at all. Far to the west, she could just barely see a solitary pair of headlights, tiny, like twin stars in a distant galaxy, glowing side by side.

Her mother said that God was watching her, all the time, and if she did anything bad, He'd know. But Mattie figured that God was probably pretty busy making the storm. It looked like it might be a big one. Big enough that he wouldn't really be paying much attention to one small almost-nine-year-old, even if she was the only person around.

She looked both ways again, just to be sure, then stepped out onto the highway. A shudder went through her whole body when her sneaker touched the blacktop, and she waited for a second, but nothing bad happened. She walked slowly over to the yellow stripe down the middle. She told herself that she wasn't really *crossing* the highway, because crossing

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meant the other side and she was just in the middle, but she knew it was the same kind of bad.

When they had driven over to Lake City to the restaurant with real tablecloths for her mother's birthday, she'd turned around on the back seat and watched the yellow stripe behind them until her father made her sit down. One thin stripe, unrolling like a ribbon. But standing on it, here on the ground, she could see that it wasn't. It was a lot of small stripes, the yellow paint faded in patches, all strung out one after the other, with big gaps in between them.

They were so far apart she couldn't even jump from the end of one to another. She turned around and walked back on her stripe, tightrope style, her arms out at her sides for balance. It was very dangerous. The yellow was solid ground, a narrow cliff, and the blacktop was a deep, deep canyon on either side. If her foot slipped, she'd tumble down and down. But it didn't, and when she got to the end of the cliff, she turned around and walked back again.

Then a thought came into her head. A thought so wonderful and so very, very bad and dangerous that she was afraid that her brain could even think it. She looked around. No one was watching, and the car didn't seem any closer. She couldn't hear its motor, not even a little. She thought the thought again, and this time it thought itself so hard that it made her mouth smile.

So she leaned down and put her head on the end of the yellow stripe, right in the middle of the highway, and did a somersault over to the next one. She laughed out loud, and tightroped to the end of that stripe, then did another roll,

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coming up onto her feet. When she straightened up she could hear, just faintly, the hum of the approaching motor. The headlights had grown to the size of marbles. She felt the first fat wet drop of rain splatter on her arm just as a bolt of jagged lightning lit up half the sky.

The rain began to roar down around her. She looked back at the awning of the closed Superette, and then over at Bingham's. The lights were off but the OPEN sign still hung in the window. She hesitated, then crossed the yellow line and ran as fast as she could to the other side of the highway.

She pushed on the battered tin MEADOW DAIRY sign that separated the top and bottom halves of Bingham's screen door. Its colors had faded to the ghosts of red and blue, and it was rusty at the corners. The door hinges squeaked as it opened and she stepped onto the bare wooden floor.

Bingham's smelled like sweetness. Vanilla and sugar cones and butterscotch, mingled with the soft, hot oldness of the wood. Her dad sometimes walked her down after dinner when he came up from Grand Rapids on weekends. He always got coffee fudge. This summer her favorites went back and forth between the butter pecan and the peppermint stick.

But with the lights off and the dark sky outside, it felt to Mattie like no one had been in here in a hundred years. A little bit magic, like it had been forgotten for a very long time.

She walked up to the counter, her sneakers leaving wet tracks on the dusty planks. She stood on tiptoe but saw nothing in the gloom except stacks of glass sundae bowls and clown-covered boxes of pointed cones under the hand-painted

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board with the names of all the ice creams. "Hello?" she called.

No one answered for a moment, and then from the back room a boy's voice said, "Sorry, we're closed."

Mattie watched the car pass Bingham's window. "It's raining really hard outside," she said after its taillights had disappeared into the downpour.

Silence. And then the voice said, "Okay, hang on. Hang on."

There was the muted clatter of dishes and the sound of water running, just for a minute. She had expected to see Mr. Bingham, the ice cream man, but instead out came a tall skinny boy in a pair of black shorts and a white Daddy shirt with the arms cut off ragged at the shoulders. He had a pair of glasses hanging on a cord around his neck.

The boy shook his head. "Kiddo, what in the world are you doing out in this weather?" he asked. He wiped his hands on a white towel, then tossed it on the back counter.

"I was going to Miller's for candy, but it's closed. Everything's closed but here."

The boy frowned. "I forgot to turn the sign around. Didn't think anybody'd be out because of the storm." He stopped and looked at the screen door like he was waiting for someone else to come in behind her. "You by yourself? Your parents know where you are?"

Mattie shrugged. "Sort of."

"I ought to let them know you're okay. Summer folks?"

Mattie nodded.

"They got a phone?"

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She thought for a moment. Her brain told her their phone number really quick, but that was the one at home. Home home. The cottage number had words and numbers. "Indian 769," she said finally.

The boy turned and picked up the black phone on the wall by the cash register. Mattie expected him to dial, but he just listened for a moment and hung up. "No dial tone. Line must be down." He looked out the window at the sheets of rain. "Nobody's going to be driving in that. I guess we'll just have to wait it out. You want an ice cream? On the house. Storm special." He flicked on the light behind the counter.

Mattie made a little surprise sound in the back of her throat and stared. She didn't mean to, and her mother would probably tell her that it wasn't polite, but she couldn't help it. The boy wasn't a boy at all. It was a lady, a grown-up lady dressed in man clothes, with curly hair almost as short as her Dad's, but gray at the sides.

"Do you work for Mr. Bingham?" Mattie asked when she trusted her voice again.

The lady laughed. "Off and on. I'm his sister. Nan Bingham. I come up on weekends to fool around with some new flavors."

Mattie had never seen a lady that looked like that. But she was Mr. Bingham's sister, and Mr. Bingham was really nice. He sometimes gave her a wink and put jimmies on her cone without her even asking. So maybe his sister was nice too. It was hard to tell just by looking. "I'm Mattie," she said. "Did you make the butter pecan? It's my favorite, this week."

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"Nope, that's an old standard. Good, though. I could give you some of that, or you could try my newest experiment."

Mattie wasn't sure she liked the word *experiment*. It sounded like chemicals and nothing that might taste good. "Are you a scientist or something?"

Nan nodded. "I'm a flavor chemist at Kellogg's down in Battle Creek."

"Wow." Mattie's eyes got big. "Did you invent Froot Loops?"

"Fraid not," Nan chuckled. "I worked on the cherry flavor, though."

That was pretty neat. Mattie had never wondered about who thought up cereal tastes. "What other flavors can you make?"

"Well, I just finished mixing up a batch of apple pie a la mode. Fred—my brother—will have it up on the board next week, but you can have a sneak preview, if you want."

"I like apple pie," Mattie said.

Nan smiled. "Me too." She pulled a glass sundae dish off the stack and scooped a small dollop of ice cream into it from a shiny metal cylinder she pulled up out of the big freezer compartment below the counter. She handed the dish and a spoon to Mattie.

"It just looks like vanilla," Mattie said. It did. It was a pale creamy white. She had expected it to be light brown, the color of applesauce. And it was smooth, no chunks of apple like there were pieces of real candy in the peppermint stick ice cream.

"Taste it."

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Mattie dipped the spoon into the edge of the mound of ice cream and sliced off a rounded crescent. The ice cream was cold and creamy, but as it melted on her tongue, Mattie tasted baking. She tasted soft, syrupy apples and cinnamon. She tasted crust, golden and flaky, and then a bit of cool, smooth vanilla ice cream.

"There's crust," she said in amazement. She ate another spoonful. "How did you *do* that?"

"Well, the chemist answer is that it's a balance of alpha-enol carbonyls with some soluble acetate esters and a squirt or two of ethyl maltol. But I guess you could say that I—" Nan stopped in mid-sentence as a lightning bolt lit up the room, followed almost instantly by a boom of thunder that rattled the front window and slammed the screen door all the way open with a bang. Nan and Mattie both jumped.

"That was a little too close for comfort," Nan said. "I think maybe we'd better go down to the storm cellar. The radio said earlier there might be a tornado watch. We'll be safer down there."

Mattie wasn't sure if that sounded safe or not. She wasn't sure about this chemistry stuff, or about going down into a basement with a kind of weird stranger, even though she seemed nice so far. But she *knew* that lightning and thunder and tornadoes were bad.

The room behind the shop was full of big refrigerators and boxes and counters, lit by a flickering fluorescent fixture over a big metal sink. At the back screen door, Nan held up her hand like a safety patrol person. "Wait here. It's really coming

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down, and I've got to open the cellar door. When I holler, run!"

Mattie leaned up against a stack of cardboard boxes. She listened as hard as she could, but the rain made so much noise that it was hard to tell whether she heard Nan's voice. She ran anyway. The screen door banged behind her, and then she was outside in more weather than she'd ever been in before. The trees were all bent over and the rain was bouncing off the parking lot higher than her ankles. It hit her body all over, so hard that it stung.

The storm cellar was a few feet to the left, two big wooden doors that opened out, just like in *The Wizard of Oz*. Mattie had always thought that riding the tornado off to Oz would be really fun, but today, as she fought against the wind to get into the cellar, she thought maybe staying in Kansas—or at least Michigan—wasn't such a bad idea after all.

She clattered down the wooden steps into the cellar, and when she was all the way down, Nan pulled the doors shut and shot the big iron bolt home with a bang. It was pitch dark and the rain sounded very far away. The cellar was cool and smelled like dirt and iron and old vegetables. Mattie knocked over something that rang like metal on the cement floor and was just about to be scared when Nan pulled a chain and a single light bulb lit up the cellar.

Stacked along one wall were more cardboard boxes, some marked GLASS and some marked PERISHABLE and one marked XMAS. Another wall was wooden shelves with glass dishes and jars of canned fruit and a jumble of kitchen utensils and fix-it tools. The last wall looked like a

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laboratory—a tall stool next to long, high table with test tubes and burners and flasks. A stainless steel cabinet sat at one end, and a battered old armchair at the other.

Mattie's basketball shirt was soaked through and clung to her body like Saran Wrap, all the way to her knees. Her sneakers made squishy noises when she walked. Nan's hair was plastered to her head and water ran down her face and her legs. Through her sodden white shirt Mattie could see the outline of a bra. That embarrassed her and she looked away quickly.

"Let me see if I can find you a clean towel," Nan said. "It won't help a whole lot, but at least you can dry your hair." She rummaged in a drawer in the lab table and tossed Mattie a pale green hand towel with a blue B embroidered on it. It didn't look like a science kind of towel at all.

Nan rubbed her own hair dry. "Have a seat," she said, pointing to the armchair.

"Is this where you make the flavors of ice cream and cereal and stuff?"

"Sometimes. That's what I do at my job, anyway. But down here I like to play around with flavors that Kellogg's would never use."

"You make yucky flavors?"

"Sometimes it works out that way," Nan laughed. "There are a lot of experiments that just don't end up how I hoped. But what I'm really trying to do is..." She paused for a minute. "I've never tried to explain this to anybody. I guess it's that what I do at work is all science. And what I do here is more of a hobby, like art, like I'm painting with flavors." She

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paused again and looked at Mattie. "Does that make any sense?"

"Not exactly. Do you mean you use food instead of paint to make pictures? Or like it's a painting you can really eat?"

Nan sighed. "No. It's..." She shook her head. "I can't explain it in words. You have to taste it. Do you want to? It's just flavor. It's not mixed in with ice cream or anything."

"I guess so." Mattie had never heard of anything like tasting pictures, or flavor without ice cream, and her stomach felt funny. It was kind of exciting, but scary too, like jumping off the high diving board at the pool. "But not a yucky one."

"Not yucky at all, I promise. Hold on." Nan went over to the steel cabinet. It opened with a soft hiss. She put on her glasses and looked at a list on the inside of the door for a minute, then picked up a small white cup. "I think you'll like this one," she said.

"What is it?"

"Taste it and see if you can guess." She handed the cup to Mattie.

It was a little paper cup, not a Dixie cup, but the pleated kind that tartar sauce came in at the drive-in. It felt cool in her hand. Inside was puffy stuff that was almost white, but not quite. It looked like a cloud. Mattie put the tip of her finger into it. She expected it to feel like whipped cream, or maybe marshmallow fluff. But it didn't. It didn't feel like anything. It just felt cool, and swirled around her finger like fog.

"Tip the cup, just a little, over your hand," Nan said.

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Mattie did, and watched the white stuff start to drift very slowly over the edge. It poured a lot thicker than it looked.

"Now pour it onto your tongue."

Mattie hesitated for a moment, then lifted the rolled edge of the paper cup to her lips. She tipped it and felt something cool, like whipped air, flow onto her tongue. Then there were flavors.

They changed and mixed and separated as the stuff flowed back on her tongue and down her throat. She tasted a fuzzy sweetness, then coconut and a salty tang, then a different, sharper sweet and a bit of burnt and smoke and way in the back of her mind she thought about her father mowing the grass.

The flavors lingered for a minute before fading, bit by bit, until all she could taste was mouth again. She licked her lips and peered into the paper cup. It was empty and just barely damp on the bottom.

Mattie tried to put a name to what she'd tasted, but her brain wouldn't give her a word. "Wow. What flavor *was* that?"

"What did it make you think of?" Nan was sitting up on the table, one foot propped on the stool.

"Lots of things, I guess. Drinking a coke, and going swimming and being too hot and putting on suntan lotion. And then I thought about barbecuing hamburgers and my dad mowing the lawn. You know, summer stuff."

Nan smiled and clapped her hands. Her eyes were shining like she was maybe going to cry, except that she looked too happy. "Turn the cup over," she said.

On the bottom, in pencil, it said SUMMER AFTERNOON.

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"But summer's not a flavor," Mattie said.

"You just tasted it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But when you think about flavors, you think chocolate, or strawberry, or maybe barbecue potato chips, right?"

"Yeah. And this was more like a movie that went from my tongue to my brain. It was..." Mattie stopped talking or breathing for a minute, then said, very slowly, "It was what you said. It was like pictures I could taste."

Nan smiled. "Well, that's what I do down here."

"Wow." Mattie looked at Nan with admiration. "How did you figure out how to do that?"

"First I went to school for a long time." Nan leaned back against a bare spot on the wall.

"Chemistry stuff?"

"Mostly. And physiology. How people's bodies work."

"Oh." Mattie rolled that idea around for a minute. "Like taste buds?"

"Yep. And a few other things. What do you know about taste buds?"

Mattie bit her lip. "We had them in school. They're the bumpy parts of your tongue, and they tell your brain what you're eating. Some of them can taste salty, and some can taste sour, and some can taste sweet, and the rest taste stuff like coffee. I don't like coffee."

"Because it tastes yucky to you, right?"

"Yeah." Mattie made a face.

"And yucky things don't make you feel good."

"Of course not."

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"See, there you go. But feeling good isn't a taste or a flavor. It's an emotion." Nan looked down at her lap for a minute. "That's what fascinates me about tastes and smells. Each taste bud has about fifty different receptors, and they're all connected with two different parts of your brain. One is the part that thinks and the other is the part that *feels*. So a taste can be just a taste, like the cherry flavor in Froot Loops, but it can also bring up emotions and memories. Like a summer afternoon."

"If you made summer-flavored ice cream, would it taste like the stuff in the little cup?" Mattie asked.

"I suppose. But I don't think Fred would have many customers asking for it."

"I would," Mattie said quickly. "Well, maybe not in the summer, 'cause it's happening then already. And we don't come here in the winter. But if I could get some to go, I'd put it in the freezer at home, and eat summer in the winter, when it's cold and I can't go outside, just to remember."

Nan smiled. "Well, if you want to come back some weekend next month, I'll make up a batch, just for you, to take home."

"I'd like that. It would be like a late birthday present."

"When's your birthday?"

"The day after tomorrow," Mattie said. "I'm going to be nine."

"Nine, huh? Are you going to have a party?"

Mattie shook her head. "Probably not. My dad has to leave tomorrow, on account of working, and he won't be up again until Friday, and by then it won't be my birthday anymore. My

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mom said that on my real birthday she'll drive me and all three of my brothers to the place with the fried clams, over in Lake City, but that's not exactly a party."

"What about your friends?"

"They're all at home in Grand Rapids. Nobody's my friend on the lake this summer. They're all boys or else they're old."

Nan looked at her for a minute and smiled a sad-looking smile. "I know the feeling. That's kind of how it is for me at work, being a chemist." She stood up and stretched. "I'd guess that I fall into your 'old' category, but I'd be pleased to have you as a friend. If you want."

"Okay," Mattie agreed.

"And if we're friends, then I ought to give you a birthday present, right?"

Mattie nodded. "Summer ice cream."

"No. You've already tried that. Besides, it *is* kind of a waste to eat it in July. For your birthday, I'd like to give you a really special flavor. One that I wouldn't share with just anybody."

"That would be very neat," Mattie said seriously. It was the first birthday present she thought she'd be excited about opening. "But if it's ice cream, then my brothers will probably find it in our freezer and eat it all."

"Don't worry. It's just flavor. I've got some little jars with screw-on lids that I use to take samples back and forth between here and my lab at work. You can put one in your pocket and it'll be your secret. Your brothers will never know."

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She rummaged around at the back of the table and came up with a small blue glass jar. She put her glasses on again, picked up a pen, and wrote something on a white label, then licked the back of the paper and stuck it onto the jar. Mattie couldn't see what it said.

Nan opened the cabinet again and scanned the list on the door. She reached way back to the back of the top shelf, so far that Mattie could only see her shoulders. Then she emerged again with another white paper cup in her hand. "This is the last of this batch," Nan said. She screwed off the jar lid, and slowly poured out the thick white cloud of flavor until the cup was empty, then screwed the lid back on.

"Happy birthday, Mattie." Nan handed her the jar.

It felt cool in Mattie's hand. The glass was dark blue and reminded her of Vicks. She turned it around and read the label, printed in neat capital letters: MAGIC.

"But ... but..." Mattie stared at the jar and then up at Nan.

"What's a scientist know about magic?" Nan shrugged.

"Look around, kiddo. The world is an amazing place. The stuff we can explain is what we call science. But all the rest—"

"What does it taste like?"

"I can't really tell you. It will taste like whatever is magic to you. The last time for me was like walking in the door of a kitchen where the most wonderful food I'd ever dreamed of was simmering on the stove, made with spices whose names I didn't know, all jumbled together so there might have been two or three or twenty. There was a little bit of something golden, just on the back of my tongue, mixed with a touch of

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danger that faded into a warm sweetness, like toffee made on another planet." Nan smiled. "It's different every time."

Mattie looked at the jar in her hand. "This is the best present I've ever gotten in my whole life." She gave Nan a hug and tucked the jar into her pocket.

"Enjoy it, kiddo. I hope—" Nan was interrupted by a loud banging on the cellar door.

"Nan? Nan? Storm's passed on through. You okay down there?" It was Mr. Bingham.

"Just fine, Fred." Nan yelled and went over to push aside the iron bolt. The door was flung open from the outside, and pale afternoon light flooded into the cellar. Outside, little wisps of steam were coming off the pavement, and the air felt soft and clean, as if the earth had just done laundry.

Mattie's mother grabbed her in a tight hug as soon as she was up the stairs. She smelled like hairspray and beauty shop chemicals. "Oh, baby, I was so worried. I waited in Lake City til the storm was over, and when I got home, your dad said he'd told you to go down to Miller's."

"Bob Miller closed up early. But Mattie did the right thing," Nan said. "Saw my OPEN sign and got herself in out of the rain. We went down to the cellar when it really started to let fly."

Mattie wriggled loose from the hug and watched her mother look hard at her new friend, trying to decide if it was okay to like Nan or not. She finally put out her hand. "Well, thank you. I'm Eileen Rodgers. I don't think we've met."

Nan shook hands. "Nan Bingham."

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"Nan's my sister. Works down at the Kellogg plant. She's a food chemist." Fred said proudly.

"Oh. Isn't that interesting," Mattie's mother said. There was a moment of awkward silence, then she turned back to Mattie. "Well, let's get you home and out of those wet clothes. The station wagon's parked over at Miller's."

Mattie waved goodbye to Nan and they walked across the parking lot. When they came to the edge of the highway, her mother reached down to take Mattie's hand.

"Mom," Mattie said, shaking her head, "You said I'm a big girl now." Her mother made a face that was half a smile and half a frown, but let her hand drop back to her side. As they crossed the yellow line, Mattie curled her fingers tighter around the jar of magic in her pocket and smiled at the clouds moving off to the east.

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