

Best Kept Secret

ALSO BY ANN M. MARTIN:

Belle Teal

A Corner of the Universe

A Dog's Life

Everything for a Dog

Here Today

On Christmas Eve

P.S. Longer Letter Later
written with Paula Danziger

Snail Mail No More
written with Paula Danziger

Ten Good and Bad Things About My Life (So Far)

Ten Kids, No Pets

Ten Rules for Living with My Sister

The Baby-sitters Club series

The Doll People series
written with Laura Godwin

The Main Street series



Family Tree

Best Kept Secret

The Third Generation

ANN M. MARTIN



Scholastic Press / New York

FOR Jane, Doug, and Henry,
with love and laughter

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school and college is part of the remote and unattainable future.

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Chapter 1

Thursday, July 14th, 1977

The first thing Francie Goldberg's eyes focused on as she struggled awake that morning was a copy of *Hop on Pop*. It was sitting on the little desk that her father had refinished and painted for her the previous summer. He had worked on the desk for many evenings — many evenings that Francie had spent sitting cross-legged on the floor of his studio upstairs, watching as he magically coaxed fairies and twining vines out of the white paint.

“Every first grader needs a desk,” he had said to her as he'd poised his brush above a knob on one of the drawers.

“Why?” Francie had asked.

“Because you're going to have homework. You'll need a place for your workbooks and pencils.”

Homework. The very word had made Francie feel proud. She was going to learn to read in first grade, and she would have homework like her friend Amy Fox, who lived next door

and was a year older and came home from school every day with important-looking papers sticking out of a green folder.

But now a whole year had gone by — all of first grade — and while Francie had indeed been sent home with homework, she'd spent a year struggling through exercises and trying to keep up with the students in the Red Wagon Group, which every kid in her class knew was the lowest of the three reading groups, no matter what it was called. Francie couldn't even keep up with the slow readers. She could barely read at all. Letters flipped themselves around and upside down. A *p* looked just like a *d* or a *b*, and words seemed to shift on her. Really, what was the difference between *read* and *dear* or *pets* and *pest* or, for that matter, between *kitchen* and *chicken*?

This was why three times a week, all summer long, she had to endure a visit from Mrs. Travers, with her work sheets and flash cards and suggestions to her parents that they buy Francie *Hop on Pop* and *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*.

From across her bedroom, Francie stuck out her tongue at *Hop on Pop*. She hated that book. She'd gone to all the trouble of memorizing it so that she could tell Mrs. Travers she could read after all, and then Mrs. Travers had opened to a page in the middle and told Francie to read it and Francie hadn't known where to begin without beginning at the beginning.

At least Mrs. Travers wouldn't be coming today. Thursday was not a Mrs. Travers day.

Francie sat up in bed and peered through her open window. She listened to the sound of traffic on Nassau Street — Princeton, New Jersey's, main street — which was a block away. The air drifting into her room was already hot. It smelled like grass and sunshine and the lavender plants that lined the walkway to the front door of her house. She looked at her yard below, with the flower gardens that her mother tended, and then across the street to the Newcomers' large Victorian house, with its many bedrooms and five Newcomer children. Francie's house was equally large, but the only people living in it were her and her parents, Dana and Matthew.

Francie padded into the hallway. She was about to make her way downstairs when she noticed that the door to the room next to hers was closed. This was one of the guest rooms, and the door had been open when Francie had gone to bed the night before. She quickened her pace and ran to the kitchen.

"Hi, Dana!" she said to her mother. (Francie's parents, unlike the parents of most of her friends, preferred to be called by their first names.)

"Morning, pumpkin."

Francie slid into her place at the table. "Why is the guest room door closed?" she asked.

Dana, who was busy at the coffeemaker, turned around and smiled. “Guess who’s here,” she said.

Francie thought for a moment. “Grandpa Arnold and Nonnie?” she asked, even though her father’s parents lived only an hour away and rarely stayed overnight with the Goldbergs.

Dana shook her head.

“Adele?” said Francie, excitement blooming. “Is Adele here?”

“Yes, I am,” said her great-aunt from the doorway.

Francie jumped up from her chair and ran to Adele. “You *are* here!” She paused. “But *why*? I didn’t know you were coming.”

Adele laughed and then stifled a yawn. “I didn’t know I was coming either. But when I was driving back home last night after a little vacation, I heard on the news that there was a blackout in New York. Most of the city is without power, so I decided to come here instead of going to my apartment.”

“A blackout,” Francie repeated. “Ooh. Scary.” The few times the power had gone out in Princeton, the Goldbergs had pretended they were pioneers and had eaten meals by candlelight and told one another stories, since they couldn’t watch TV. That had been fun. But Francie wasn’t sure she’d want to be in a city the size of New York without electricity.

“It *is* scary,” agreed Adele. “Think of all the things in a city that don’t work without power. Elevators — not that there’s an elevator in my building, but still. Streetlights, traffic lights. And I don’t even want to think about the subways. So I’m going to stay here until the power’s back.”

“I hope that’s not for a long time,” said Francie. “A long, long time.” Adele, who was Dana’s aunt, was Francie’s favorite person in the whole world except for her parents and Amy Fox. “Is Bobbie Palombo’s closed?”

“I suppose so,” replied Adele. “I think everything is closed.” Adele worked for a woman named Bobbie Palombo, designing costumes for Broadway shows. Because of this, she went to the theatre all the time and had already taken Francie to see *Hello, Dolly!* and *Gypsy*. Francie thought that, maybe, when she grew up, she might design costumes, too. *Maybe*. She wasn’t sure. It was hard to think that far ahead.

Adele took a seat at the table and Dana handed her a cup of coffee. Adele yawned again. “Where’s Matthew?” she asked.

“Upstairs. He’s just waking up,” replied Francie’s mother. “He worked until after two last night. He’s going to have to get a move on, though. He’s helping with a new exhibit at the art museum. He’s supposed to be over there in an hour.”

“And you?” Adele asked. “What are you doing today?”

“Putting the finishing touches on *Grizzly Bob*. It’s due in two weeks.”

Francie put her chin in her hand and stared out the kitchen window at the backyard. Her parents were hard to keep up with. They were the busiest people she knew, especially when you considered that neither of them had a regular job like her friends’ parents had. Amy’s father took the train into New York City five mornings a week and worked at an investment firm (whatever that was). Mr. Newcomer left his house every day at eight o’clock to work at a Princeton company called ETS, which had something to do with tests, while Mrs. Newcomer worked three afternoons a week in a store on Nassau Street. Those were regular jobs.

Francie’s parents were artists. Her father did have an office at Princeton University, because during the school year, he taught art courses there. Otherwise he worked in his third-floor studio at home, creating paintings that people all over the world wanted to buy. He worked whenever he felt like it, even if it was late at night or on a weekend. The room next to his studio was Dana’s studio. Dana illustrated children’s picture books. Sometimes she illustrated *and* wrote them. The books were very popular and it seemed to Francie that her mother was always running off to sign books for long lines of people who came to stores just to see her, or

flying to conferences to talk about her work. Once she won an award for one of her books, and Francie and Matthew flew with her to San Francisco for a big ceremony.

Francie couldn't have felt more different from her parents. She excelled at nothing. She couldn't even read the books her mother had written, let alone all the fat books lining the walls of their den. She had no interest in painting or in drawing. There was a piano in their living room, but Francie never sat at it. What she liked to do, mostly, was make up stories in her head. But sometimes she found it hard to entertain herself on long summer days.

"Well," Adele said to Francie now, "if your mom is working on *Grizzly Bob* and your dad is due on campus, then I guess it's just you and me today. What do you want to do?"

"Can we ride around in your car?" Francie asked. Adele drove an old blue Renault with a convertible top. She kept plaid bandanas in the glove compartment, and Francie always tied one under her chin when the top was down.

"Absolutely," Adele replied.

"Can we get pizza from Conte's for lunch?"

"Absolutely."

(Adele almost never said no.)

Half an hour later, Matthew left for the art museum on the university campus and Dana disappeared upstairs to her

studio. Francie and Adele tied on their bandanas and took a drive through Princeton. They rode along beside Carnegie Lake, where Francie and Amy went ice-skating in the winter. They made a big circle back through town, passed by the library and the YWCA, kept on going, and finally stopped at the playground in Marquand Park, before picking up pizza slices at Conte's. As they drove down Vandeventer Avenue, Francie waved proudly to Amy and three of the Newcomer kids, who were playing freeze tag in Amy's yard.

"Could we have a pizza picnic?" Francie asked as Adele parked the convertible in the Goldbergs' driveway.

"Absolutely."

Francie and Adele ate their pizza, sitting on a bedspread in the shade of an elm tree in the backyard.

"Now what?" Francie asked when her last slice was gone.

"Getting bored?"

"I'm just not sure what we should do next."

"How about walking to the campus and visiting your father?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Francie, jumping to her feet.

She took Adele's hand and they walked down Vandeventer in the direction of Nassau Street. They crossed Nassau and entered the world of Princeton University. It was only yards from the shops and businesses on Nassau, but it felt like a

different world — looming brick and stone buildings from other centuries, tree-lined walkways between dormitories and classrooms. The university had its own chapel and its own art museum and its own stadium. The oldest Newcomer kid claimed that one day she was going to go to Princeton University. Francie was in awe of this ambition, considering that she herself couldn't even read.

Francie and Adele stepped inside the museum and the first person they saw was a graduate student named Stella, who was Matthew's assistant that summer. She was walking into one of the galleries with a wrapped painting under her arm.

"Hi, Francie!" called Stella. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Matthew. This is my aunt Adele."

Adele and Stella shook hands, and Stella said that Matthew had gone to his office for a while, so off went Francie and Adele through the campus again. They found Matthew sitting behind his big cluttered desk, his feet on a pile of books.

Francie giggled. "I think he's sleeping," she whispered to Adele.

Matthew opened one eye and smiled. "No, I'm not. I'm planning a painting in my head." This was what Francie's father always said when he was caught with his eyes closed.

"We just stopped by to say hello," said Adele.

"Are you coming home soon?" asked Francie.

“In time for dinner. I’m due back at the museum in a few minutes. What have you been up to?”

Francie told her father about their adventures. Then she and Adele walked Matthew back to the museum, Francie jumping in and out of the stone gutters that lined the pathways through campus.

At the Goldbergs’ house, Adele phoned Bobbie Palombo and then reported to Dana, who was still working, that the power was coming back on in New York, neighborhood by neighborhood. “I’d better be on my way,” she said.

“No!” wailed Francie. “Please stay until tomorrow.”

Adele gave her a hug. “Can’t. I have to get back to work. I’ve already been away for several days. But this was a nice, unexpected end to my vacation.”

Half an hour later, Francie watched Adele pull the Renault onto Vandeventer and into the traffic on Nassau. Once Adele was gone, Francie ran next door to Amy’s and rang her bell. No answer. Francie wasn’t allowed to cross Vandeventer without an adult yet, so she couldn’t go to the Newcomers’ house. Instead, she continued past Amy’s to the Horans’. Mrs. Horan told her the twins had gone to the community swimming pool with Amy, which figured, because the twins were Amy’s age and always asked Amy to do things with them before they thought of asking Francie. Francie rang the Friedmans’ door,

but found only Jeanie Friedman's grandfather there. Mr. Friedman was very nice, and, the year before, had given Francie a silver charm for her bracelet on the eighth night of Hanukkah. But Francie was looking for someone her own age.

She scuffed her feet as she returned slowly to her house. She wished Amy were at home. She wished she had a very best friend who was almost seven like her and going into second grade at school. She wished she could read. She wished she had a dog.

She was climbing the steps to her front porch, eyes downcast, her thoughts on a dog, when she was startled to hear her mother say, "Hi, pumpkin."

There was Dana, sitting in a rocker, a glass of iced tea beside her.

"Hi!" cried Francie.

"I'm done with *Grizzly Bob* for the day," said her mother. "Would you like to go to the pool in a little while?"

"Absolutely."

Francie flew up the stairs to her room and changed into her bathing suit. Later, as she rode along Witherspoon Street with Dana, the loneliness of the last hour vanished and a summer evening with her parents stretched ahead. She suddenly realized that she might not understand her mother, but that her mother would always be there for her, steady and sure.