



# half a chance

CYNTHIA LORD



Scholastic Press / New York

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Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN 978-0-545-03533-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

14 15 16 17 18

Printed in the U.S.A. 23  
First edition, March 2014

The text type was set in Janson Text.  
Book design by Nina Goffi

# 1

## Out of Place

“Lucy, we’re going to love this place!” Dad called to me from the porch of the faded, red-shingled cottage with white trim. “We can hang a swing right here and watch the sunset over the lake. And these country roads will be great for biking.”

While my little dog, Ansel, explored some ferns, I took a deep smell of the pine trees lining the dirt driveway.

“I’ll buy you a new bike when I get back, Lucy. Would you like that?” Dad asked.

“Maybe we can get *two* bikes,” I yelled to him. “So we can ride together.”

“Great idea!”

Dad always promises me things before he leaves and then forgets by the time he’s home again. But I couldn’t help having that little bit of “I hope so” that this place would be different. That’s the thing with new beginnings — sometimes, they’re more than just starting over again.

Sometimes they change things.

“There are more boxes in the van,” Mom said, carrying a laundry basket full of kitchen stuff past me and across the flagstones leading up to the front porch steps.

“I’ll get them in a minute,” I promised. “Ansel needs to stretch.” But really, I wanted to take my first New Hampshire photo before I went inside and everything got busy. Whenever we move, I take a picture as soon as we arrive. It always makes me feel a little braver, knowing that on some future day I can look back at that photo, taken when it was new and scary, and think, *I made it*. Like creating a memory in reverse.

On the drive from Massachusetts to New Hampshire, I’d been thinking about what my first photo would be. When Dad said he’d found us “a lovely red cottage on a lake,” it sounded fancy.

Dad always says that red is a great color in a photograph, so I thought for sure I'd take a picture of our new house. But this washed-out red seemed to disappear into the woods behind it. The gambrel roof and two long windows above the porch made it look like an old barn with white-rimmed, tired eyes watching the lake.

This house didn't look like it was supposed to be quirky, though. It looked like whoever built it didn't really know how.

So I turned to see what the house was looking at: the bright blue lake, puckered by darker waves, and the four mountains — three graceful curves and one sharp peak — rising above the pine trees across the water.

When we lived in Vermont three years ago, there were mountains, too, but this would be my first time living on a lake. "Let's go down to the beach," I said, but Ansel pulled backward on his leash. "It's okay. You don't have to go swimming. We'll just look at the water."

Ansel's only fifteen pounds, but those fifteen can feel like a hundred when I'm tugging him to come and he's pulling back: *No way*.

I had to carry him. Between the lawn and the lake were thousands of smooth, soft-colored rocks: white,

gray, rust, yellow, and tan. They crunched under my feet, sounding like marbles rubbing together or Scrabble pieces as you mix them up. *Flip-flops are the wrong shoes for this*, I thought as my foot slid to the side.

Ansel's nose twitched at the unfamiliar lake smell: weedy and a tiny bit fishy. Out in the middle, the water was sparkling-pretty, like someone had spilled a whole bottle of glitter out there. But up close, an icky border of bright yellow pollen floated along the lake's edge. Beyond the pollen, a school of tiny minnows swam along, shifting directions quickly. *This way! No, that way! Who's in charge here?*

When I set Ansel on the sand, he immediately leaned down to sniff a little brown moth that was stuck in the pollen, fluttering. The moth might already be too wet, too exhausted to live. But I found a leaf to scoop him out of the water and placed him gently on a rock so he could dry his wings.

Even half a chance beats none.

Holding my camera to my eye, I saw I had ruined my shot. Now the colors were too close: drab brown moth on drab brown rock. And there was no story. It was just a moth stuck to a rock.

Dad would've thought of the photo first. He would've shot the moth struggling in the pollen and found a way to make people care — even though it

was just a plain, ordinary, dying bug. Dad's an amazing photographer, and he says it's just as important to show the hard things in the world as it is to show the beautiful ones. Even in the midst of horrible things, there are little bits of wonder, and all of it's true.

Ansel barked. Switching off my camera, I glanced where his nose pointed. On the beach next door was a row of kayaks, and an older lady was standing on the dock. Sitting next to her were a boy and a girl, both about my age, with their feet in the water and towels draped around their shoulders. Smaller kids were swimming nearby, just their heads showing above the waves. "Grandma Lilah, watch me!" a small voice yelled. "I'm a water bug!"

Ansel barked again. "Hush," I told him. "Don't bark at our neighbors. They live here."

The gray-shingled cottage next door looked how I had imagined a cottage on the lake would look: a fairy-tale house with bright-white painted lattice crisscrossing the tops of the bow windows and dormers jutting out from the roof. Baskets of red petunias hung on the long front porch.

Beside it, our cottage looked like a run-down summer camp on move-in day, with random boxes and suitcases and stuff in the yard.

Watching the neighbors having fun together at their pretty house made me feel lonely, not just alone. At twelve years old, I'd already moved three times in my life. I should've been able to march over there and say: "Hi, I'm Lucy. We just moved in," and not be scared. Practice only made it familiar, though. Never easy.

Ansel barked again, and the boy on the dock looked over at us.

*Uh-oh!* I lifted my hand and swished it by my ear, so it could go either way: waving if he was friendly or brushing away a mosquito if he wasn't.

The boy waved back, got to his feet, and started walking down his dock toward the beach.

*Is he coming over here?* I took a deep breath. Dad had driven us past my new school, and it was so small that any new girl would stick out immediately in September. It would really help if I made some friends over the summer.

I gave the boy my warmest smile. "I'm Lucy, and this is Ansel. We just moved in."

"I'm Nate." As he reached out his hand to Ansel, I gripped the leash. Ansel doesn't love everybody.

"We're sooo glad to meet you!" I said, in my sweetest, most singsongy voice, so Ansel would hear the "happy" in my voice and feel okay about the hand



coming toward him. He took a glancing sniff of Nate's fingers. His ears, which usually stuck up, stayed back, but the tip of his tail wagged.

Nate smiled, the freckles rising across his nose. There was a slight gap between his front teeth, which made his face interesting and a little funny and quirky — a *good* quirky. I couldn't believe how comfortable Nate seemed only wearing shorts and a towel. I'd be cringing if I had to meet someone in my bathing suit.

"We noticed the FOR SALE sign was gone," Nate said. "We were wondering who would be moving in."

"It's us," I said, and immediately wished I'd said something smarter. Of course it was us! "Though my dad leaves tomorrow on a trip to Arizona for his work, so it'll be mostly me and my mom this summer."

Ansel barked again, and I noticed the girl from the dock was coming up the beach, too. She wore glasses, and her long hair hung in wet pigtails.

"Lucy, this is Megan," Nate said. "Her cottage is the yellow one down at the point."

"Hi." I gave her a bright smile.

Megan tipped her head a little sideways, looking at me over her glasses. "How long are you here for?" she asked.

“We’re going to live here,” I said simply.

“Cool,” Nate said, grinning. “My grandma owns our cottage. We live in New Jersey, and my family usually only comes for two weeks, but this year we’ll probably be here all summer!”

“I always come for the whole summer,” Megan said. “I know just about everyone on the lake — at least on our side. Our real house is in Connecticut.”

Neither of them went to school here. I froze my mouth in a smile so my disappointment wouldn’t show.

“Come on, Nate,” Megan said. “We’re supposed to be helping Grandma Lilah watch the little kids while they’re swimming.”

“Do you want to come over, Lucy?” Nate asked.

“We just got here,” I said. “I need to help unpack.”

“Okay. See you later,” Megan said.

Watching them walk away, I wondered if maybe I should’ve gone. Even if Nate and Megan didn’t go to school here, a summer friend would make things better *now*. And most times, kids decide if they’re going to like you really fast. Saying no might’ve blown my chances.

One thing I’d learned about moving was that once you were there, it was better to just look ahead. Because even if you went back to visit the places and people you left behind, it was never the same —

except in photos. Those always keep everything exactly the way it was: a sharp-steeped white church against thunderclouds near our old house in Vermont, rainbow-colored graffiti on the overpass near our apartment in Boston, yellow window light slanting out across the wet cobblestones near our rented rooms on Nantucket.

I pointed my camera straight down and took a photo of my feet in my flip-flops on the shore with my toes almost touching the rim of yellow pollen.

*New Hampshire: Day One.*