



Excerpts from *Perch, Mrs. Sockets, and Crows Nest*

Mom set down the bag of mulch and sat back on her heels. "Andy," she said, "Our lives are like novels. The first book didn't end the way we thought it would, but it was still a really good book."

She brushed her hands on her jeans. "Now we begin the second book," she said. ...

"The best part of reading a good book...is seeing the story unfold, page by page, chapter by chapter, even with all its surprises." She leaned over, kissed my forehead, and smiled. "We can still suggest edits to God along the way."

I nudged her back and swallowed hard. Our next book sounded sad and hopeful at the same time. [p. 8-9]

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"Mrs. Sockets?" I called.

"Shhhhhh," I heard her scold out the screen window of the kitchen. "I'd almost caught it."

"Caught what?" I whispered. She opened the door and waved me in. She pointed over to the big picture window in her dining room. There was a sitting bench with pillows and a book open. But I couldn't see anything else. "What?" I asked again.

"Oh, can't you see it? It's brilliant today," she whispered.

She crouched over and tiptoed quietly as though she were sneaking up on a rabbit or a bird. I didn't see anything. She reached out carefully with her hands cupped together and scooped up the sunshine streaming in the window.

"It's just perfect this time of day. That late afternoon sun makes a halo around everything. I just love to catch some for myself."

Then she whispered like it was a secret: "Sunbeams are messages from heaven, you know."
[p. 32-33]

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"Grandma?" I asked. "Why don't you just pick the good apples from the tree instead of cutting up these rotten ones?"

Everyone stared at me like it was the dumbest question ever asked.

"These are baking apples, Andy," she said. "There's lots of good apple in that bucket and when it's all baked up, you don't know what the apple looked like when it started out."

I looked at my bucket of tiny, hard apples full of bruises and worm holes. Two large paper bags overflowed with the skins and rotten apple pieces. After an hour of all of us cutting, there was barely half a pan full of good apple pieces for baking.

I still didn't get it. It seemed like a whole lot of work for just a few apples.

John got up to get another bag for the compost. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "It's not about the apples, sport."

I looked at Mom. She was holding her side as she laughed. Grandma and all the aunts and sisters and cousins were telling old stories, poking fun at new ideas, and leaning and elbowing and laughing, all while paring their rotten apples and saving the sliver of any good they found. [p. 44-45]

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Mr. Hanson led Bessie into her stall.

"All you need to do is pump her tail and she'll give you a nice cup of warm milk. Here, I'll set the cup down for you." He put a cup under Bessie's udder.

Now, I was quite sure that you didn't pump a cow's tail to get milk. But Mr. Hanson is a very nice man and he seemed serious. I looked at Bessie and looked at Mr. Hanson.

"Go ahead," he said.

I reached for ol' Bessie's tail, and she swatted me like a fly. [p. 80-81]

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"How do you know which one is your dad's star?" Anthony asked me. In Minnesota, we always looked directly over my house. Mom had pointed out a new bright star about a week after my dad died and she told me, "It's a sign he's arrived safely in heaven."

In Grandma's backyard, millions of bright stars twinkled in the black. Anthony, Katie, and I gazed from our beach towels on the pool deck. The sky went on and on forever in every direction. Frogs and crickets and a lonely coyote filled the still night air with their noise, and yet it was eerily quiet.

"It doesn't matter which one it is," Katie said. "Once the stars are up there, everyone can share them. They twinkle to keep us all connected. When my dad was in Iraq last year, he told me that every time I looked at a star—any star—it would be shining his love down to me. And then when the stars came out in his half of the world, he would see my love twinkle right back to him. It was still really hard to be apart from him, but the world seemed a little smaller knowing he was only a star away."

I thought about all the people who were apart from someone they love—on earth and in heaven. All those stars above us twinkled little hellos and bright reminders of love.

The world was full of messages that night. Even the wind had stopped to listen. [p. 104-105]

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I swallowed hard.

"You okay, champ?" John asked in his quiet voice.

I looked at him.

Maybe it was the stillness of the air, waiting for something to happen. Maybe it was the sleeping fish or the gently rocking boat. Maybe it was John's kind, blue eyes or the way his voice sounded concerned when he asked. I don't know what it was, but suddenly, all those tears I had been choking on, swallowing down, holding back, came like Monday's rain. All at once and heavy.

"I can't r-r-remember my d-dad." I sniffed, trying to hold back the tears.

I looked down and felt like a baby crying like that in front of John. Mom would've rushed right over and put her arms around me. She would've started telling me stories, helping me to remember. Back home, I would've looked at my poster and seen his smile. I would have made myself rummage through the hollows of my heart to remember things we did together.

John just set down his rod and put his hands on his hips, looking out across the lake like he was expecting someone else to come and save me.

Finally, he said, "Tell me what you do remember." [p. 109-110]