

*Summary: This is about a 12-year-old boy, kind of a loner, who is in denial about his loneliness, who spends a summer with his mother and older, teenaged sister on a communal farm in Maine. The story is about his growth as he figures out who he is and what he wants. The mother is simultaneously forced to face some difficult truths about herself.*

## **Chapter 1: You Have Only Yourself to Blame**

My mom has gone crazy. Things can go along one way for your whole life. Then one day, everything changes. One day, she's all, "put the iPod down and show some respect when your father is talking to you," and the next day she thinks my dad "should be pushed off a cliff." She has, "no idea what the hell she's supposed to do now," and hopes that I "don't grow up to be anything like him," even though I probably will because based on the way I'm acting lately I'm just as "emotionally disconnected" as he is.

No – I'm not, "super in touch with my feelings" or anything. Eleanor, my sister, is always telling me, "You're super out of touch with your feelings, James," and "Why don't you ever cry or get mad, James? It's like you're not even human." I guess I'm as human as she is. No, I don't talk on the phone with my friends about my "innermost thoughts" every minute of the day. I haven't been crying in my room every night so everyone will hear me.

I get that my mother is a wreck. "A train wreck," my aunt Judith called her last Sunday when my mother announced, while we were all having brunch to celebrate my cousin Trent's high school graduation, that she was taking me and Eleanor to live on "a communal" farm in

EPISODE 19: NOVEL EXCERPT - MIDDLE GRADE: *UPRISING* BY BETSY MELODIA

Maine for the summer. “It’s organic, of course,” she said. “We’re going to help with the animals and the farm stand and we’ll get plenty of healthy, farm-sourced food. And we get to stay in a little cottage on the property, rent-free. They make goat cheese.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard,” said Aunt Judith. “When have you ever been on a farm, Nancy? You’ve never even had a garden! You’ve never even had a potted plant! Did you say they have goats? Do you know what a goat smells like?”

Eleanor said, “There’s no way I’m going. Not a chance.”

“Your nails will get dirty, Nancy,” said Aunt Judith. “They’ll break right off. Have you thought about the fact that you don’t like dirt? What do you think farms are made of?”

Mom looked at me instead of at Aunt Judith. “Guess what?” she said. “They have chickens so we can eat real eggs every day. And goat’s milk – it’s very low in fat.”

Aunt Judith snorted.

“I mean, why not?” my mother said. “Why not just throw it all out and start over? What better place to do that than on a farm. Right James?”

“Yeah, right,” said Eleanor.

My mother looked up at the ceiling fan over the kitchen table. Maybe she was pretending that the ceiling fan was really a big, puffy white cloud in a blue sky, which may be “an image or a place that puts her mind at ease,” according to the book on the back of the toilet called, *Tuning Out the Noise of Everyday Life*.

“I’ll bet it’s really peaceful,” said Mom.

“Really,” said Eleanor.

Yesterday, I didn’t even know that you could get milk out of a goat.

## EPISODE 19: NOVEL EXCERPT - MIDDLE GRADE: *UPRISING* BY BETSY MELODIA

“You’re crazy Nancy,” Aunt Judith said. She was pointing her finger at my mother from across the table. “You read about something in a magazine and you think it’s the answer to all your problems. That’s not real life. You have no idea what you’re doing. I told you not to make big decisions right now. Remember the knitting store? 500 pounds of yarn and nowhere to put it? That’s real life Nancy. That really happened.”

“Nancy, think for a minute,” said Uncle David. “Does this make sense? For you and for the kids? What will you do for money? How will you pay for things, like food, and all those books and magazines you read?”

That’s a question my dad would have asked. “Where are all these goddamned magazines coming from?” he would always say when he went through the mail after work. My mother subscribes to a lot of magazines that “reflect her varied interests,” and help her “learn more about potential entrepreneurial endeavors,” like interior design, horseback riding, gourmet cooking, and king Charles cavalier spaniels, which is the kind of dog that we have. Our King Charles spaniel is named King Charles, which my dad always said was, “the stupidest possible name you could have chosen for the dog.”

My mother looked at Uncle David. “David, I really, truly think that this farm thing will be just what we need. I think it may be the answer.”

Eleanor said, “The answer to what?”

Even though everyone was against her I didn’t feel sorry for Mom. She has “only herself to blame.” That’s what my father says. He says, “What else are we supposed to think Nancy? If you never finish what you start?” That’s what he tells me whenever I bring home a “mediocre” report card that doesn’t “reflect my true potential,” or whenever he and my mom get a call from

EPISODE 19: NOVEL EXCERPT - MIDDLE GRADE: *UPRISING* BY BETSY MELODIA

the school telling them it's time for another meeting to talk about my "inability to make authentic connections with my peers."

My dad says you can't change who you are just because you want to. You can't change all the things you've done, that you keep doing, over and over, just like that. It takes real commitment. My dad says he's good at two things – work and golf - and he's put in the time and the "sweat equity" to prove it. He plays three hours of golf after work every day, Monday through Friday, rain or shine. "If you ever want to be in control of your life," he says, "you need to play golf. Golf is all about control."

Even though "that's rich – coming from someone who lost control over a thirty-three-year-old golf coach with fat ankles," I think he's right. When you "cry and carry on like a hormonal teenager," than no one will even care what you're upset about.

Eleanor told me, not that I asked, that Mom was just as upset about the fat ankles as the affair, because, Eleanor said, "Mom thought all Dad cared about was how good she looks. So it's like, everything she thought was a lie."

I think Aunt Judith is right about the farm. It's just going to be another yarn store. And then everyone will say, "You have only yourself to blame."

## **Chapter 2: No Turning Back**

What I want to know is, how did my mother get somebody to believe that she could work on a farm? Even if it does turn out to be more like “a summer camp for people who want to pretend they’re farmers,” which is how my dad described it when he found out where we were going.

My mother found a bunch of South Korean students to rent our house for the summer. Our house has only three bedrooms, and there are seven South Koreans, but my mother says that they’re used to “a more communal way of living than we are.” When my father found out he said, “There goes my investment.”

The day we left for the farm my mother had to track Eleanor down at her friend Grace’s house. She was worried because the drive from Raleigh to Stonington was about 24 hours and she had “only budgeted for one night on the road.” When Eleanor got home, Mom said, “You’re as bad as King Charles.” Ever since we started packing up our stuff, King Charles has been spending all of his time next door at the neighbor’s house, lying on the back deck with their dog, Sandy.

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