

Henry Castlewaite
and
The Portrait of Doom

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Chapter 1: A New Beginning

Henry Castlewaite woke to the blare of a train whistle that came from the steam engine pulling his passenger car. He anxiously sat up in his seat trembling with fear, not because the whistle had startled him, but because he had a bad dream, the same dream he had many times before. He dreamed that tiny pinpoints of light glowed underneath each of his fingernails and somebody had seen them. He didn't know why he feared people seeing them. He just did.

He glanced at his fingers, saw they were normal, and breathed a sigh of relief. Ten years ago when he was a baby, he lay abandoned in a wicker basket on the side of a tall hill overlooking the small town of Terwilliger, Tennessee. It was midnight, and high above him a very unusual cosmic event had taken place. Two shooting stars streaked across the sky in different directions at exactly the same time and formed a giant 'X' in the night.

As the stars trailed off into the distance, they left behind two long tails of glittering sparkles, one red and the other blue. Oddly, the sparkles rained down upon Henry like gentle mist from a cloud above and came to rest underneath each of his fingernails, causing them to glow like he had dreamt.

Strange, Henry thought to himself, as he remembered it. The trouble was, his fingers still glowed that way, but only in the light of the full moon.

Relieved it was only a dream, he leaned back in his seat and glanced across the passenger compartment at the man staring suspiciously back at him. He was a representative of something called the Castle Family Trust, and Henry was its ward. The man was escorting Henry back home because Henry had an accident and lost all of his memory. The man had an unusual name, Monrad Pimplesquirt.

Pimplesquirt was very rotund, walked with a cane, and seemed deeply

troubled by something Henry had done. As the train sped down the tracks, he kept shaking his head and muttering, “*Henry – Henry – Henry*, I don’t know how you can live with yourself — *REALLY!*”

Henry had no trouble living with himself ... because he couldn’t remember what he had done. When he asked, Pimplesquirt glared at him and said, “*AS IF YOU DIDN’T KNOW!*”

Henry tried reminding him several times he had amnesia, but Pimplesquirt scoffed. He said it was no excuse for not remembering.

On this occasion, when their eyes met, Pimplesquirt raised a curious eyebrow. He knew he had Henry’s full attention, so he launched into another round of *Henry*s.

“*Henry-Henry-Henry...*,” he began in his usual, annoying manner.

Henry sank awkwardly into his seat.

“I don’t know how you can live with yourself — *REALLY!*”

Henry wondered what all the fuss was about. It wasn’t like he had *killed* anyone — *OR DID HE?* That’s the trouble with amnesia. You could never be too sure. On the bright side, it did seem like the best cure for a nagging conscience.

As Pimplesquirt droned on, the train slowed down to a snail’s creep. Henry glanced out of the window to see what was happening. They were approaching a train station, and the sign on the platform said, ‘Terwilliger, Tennessee.’ He was back home. Unfortunately, he no recollection of it.

“This is our stop,” Pimplesquirt grumbled, as he struggled to get to his feet. “Follow me, and try to keep up!” he snapped.

Pimplesquirt grabbed the traveling case that had been sitting on the floor next to him and hobbled over to the compartment door with his cane. He waited impatiently for Henry to don his top hat before begrudgingly opening the door. It was an odd garment for a boy, Henry knew, but it was his only possession, so he was quite fond of it.

Keeping up with Pimplesquirt was like waiting in line for a cheap carnival ride. It was slow and not worth the trouble. Pimplesquirt squeezed his wide frame out of the door, slinked sideways down the hall between passenger compartments (it was the only way he could fit), stumbled awkwardly down the metal steps onto the platform below, and doddered into the train station looking

like he wanted to be anywhere but Terwilliger. Several times Henry had to rush to his side and prop him up before he lost his balance and fell.

Once in the lobby, they lumbered past busy travelers, crying babies, and a very elderly couple, who, not surprisingly, moved faster than they did. They stopped at a booth where Pimplesquirt rented a car. He seemed quite upset when the clerk told him it didn't come with a driver. After the clerk handed him the keys, Pimplesquirt asked what they were for. Henry took them because Pimplesquirt said he didn't think he needed them.

Henry escorted Pimplesquirt to the parking lot where the car was waiting. Apparently, they had no luggage, other than the traveling case, because they didn't stop to collect any.

To Henry's dismay, Pimplesquirt had rented the smallest car on the lot. It was so small he didn't think Pimplesquirt could fit inside. After suggesting he rent a bigger one, Pimplesquirt scowled at him and proceeded to get inside. He crawled in head first until his hips got stuck between the doorframe and the steering wheel, then he asked Henry for help. Henry thought he had a better chance of pushing his fist through an ant hole than pushing Pimplesquirt into the driver's seat, but somehow he succeeded. He even successfully closed the driver-side door without having to throw his full weight against it.

Pimplesquirt looked like an elephant trapped in a fishbowl. His head was bent forward from his shoulders because the ceiling was too low, his left arm was pressed firmly against the driver-side window, and the steering wheel was lost somewhere between his chest and stomach. As Henry gazed at the ridiculous sight, Pimplesquirt rolled down his window and ordered him to get inside. Not surprisingly, he had trouble rolling the window back up.

Henry did as he was told and got into the front passenger seat. He patiently waited for Pimplesquirt to start the car, but Pimplesquirt didn't know how. He managed to turn on the windshield wipers, the radio, the fog lights, the air conditioner, and the seat heater, but he couldn't figure out how to start the engine. Henry had to show him. He then had to tell Pimplesquirt how to put the car into gear and work the gas pedal and brakes. Once they pulled out onto the street, Henry realized he had made a big mistake.

Pimplesquirt drove as if he didn't know anything about stop signs, red lights, or how to use a turn signal. When it came to using his horn, Pimplesquirt

blared his three times — at parked cars! If it wasn't for the careful driving of other Terwilligans, Henry was sure he would've had another accident.

Pimplesquirt drove north on Farm Road 88 dodging on-coming traffic as he went and openly wondering what the little white lines in the middle of the road meant. When they were ten miles north of town, he turned into a small family farm on the east side of the road. On the other side of the highway were two other farms. Next door was a fourth. Henry couldn't help but notice that all four farms happened to come together at the same point in the road.

“Be on your best behavior,” Pimplesquirt advised, as he drove up the driveway with his nose still pressed firmly against the front window. “With any luck, this is where you will be staying.”

Henry glanced out of his window at the house when a knot formed in his stomach. He instinctively knew he was starting life over again. The trouble was he wasn't sure how the last one turned out.

He got out of the car and began straightening his top hat in the window when the knot in his stomach suddenly wrenched. Staring back at him in his reflection was a complete stranger. It took Henry a moment before he realized what had happened. He had completely forgotten what he looked like!

“Henry?” Pimplesquirt yelled, after he got out of the car and began doddering towards the house with his cane. “Will you bring the traveling case with you when you come?”

“Yes sir,” Henry replied, before glancing at his reflection again.

The boy staring back at him had jet black hair, dark eyebrows, and a smooth complexion. He was neither fat nor skinny, and his eyes were either blue or hazel.

With his top hat on straight, Henry reached into the backseat of the car for the traveling case but stopped short of grabbing it. He noticed something odd about it. The latch was in the shape of a lion's head. The odd thing was the lion's eyes were moving.

Henry leaned forward to take a closer look when the lion suddenly bared its teeth and growled at him.

Startled, Henry leaped out of the car like a frightened kangaroo and landed flat on the driveway with a thud. Unfortunately, the noise caught Pimplesquirt's attention. He stopped, turned around, saw Henry lying on the

ground doing nothing, and yelled, “*Chop-chop!* We haven’t got all day. And don’t mind Lizzy. She won’t bite you unless you try opening the case!”

Henry figured Lizzy was the lion on the latch.

Frustrated Pimplesquirt didn’t warn him about Lizzy in the first place, he got up, brushed the dirt off his clothes, straightened his top hat in the window, again, and muttered something he hoped Pimplesquirt didn’t hear. He then reached into the backseat of the car, grabbed the traveling case by its handle, and carried it to the house like he was holding a wild animal by its tail, which was not altogether untrue.

According to the welcome mat, the farm belonged to a family named Albright. There were five of them in all, as Henry would soon learn. The head of the house was named Albert. He was short, stocky, and had little patience for silliness. His wife Martha — or Marty, as he called her — was tall, thin, and comported herself with an air of dignity that was perhaps missing from her husband. They had three children: Bert, Ernie, and Alicia. Bert and Ernie were twins and a year older than Henry, and Alicia was the youngest at age six.

They exchanged pleasantries at the front door before being invited inside.

The house looked like a museum. The wooden floors glistened with a luster Henry had never seen before, the windows were so clean the glass was practically invisible, and everything looked so neat and tidy it would make a hospital emergency room administrator jealous. The neatness impressed Pimplesquirt so much he remarked it would be a fine place for an orphan to stay. Henry, of course, didn’t remember he was an orphan.

“This way,” Mrs. Albright graciously told them.

She led them from the entryway into the den, where she stopped in front of a small chair next to the fireplace and said to Henry, “You may sit here, dear.”

Henry set the traveling case down on the floor next to the sofa and plopped himself into the chair. Secretly, he was glad to get rid of Lizzy. She had been breathing hot air on his arm all the way from the car and growled at him with each step he took. Apparently, everyone mistook the growling sounds for his stomach.

Mrs. Albright then led Pimplesquirt to the other side of the room where

she fluffed up some pillows on a normal-sized chair.

“And you may sit here, Mister ... *um*.”

“*Pimple-squirt!*” he reminded her. “*Monrad Pimplesquirt.*”

Mrs. Albright blushed. It was such an odd name. Not wanting to appear impolite or rude, she smiled and said, “how nice.”

“Yes,” Pimplesquirt huffed proudly. “It’s Dutch. I believe it comes from the word ‘Pimpersquood,’ meaning squirting pimple.”

Bert and Ernie chuckled, until their mother glared at them.

Fortunately, Pimplesquirt didn’t hear them. He was too busy glancing disdainfully at the chair Mrs. Albright had offered him. It seemed way too small for a big man, like him. Everyone else was glancing worriedly at him because he seemed way too big for normal-sized chair. Complicating matters, the chair sat too low to the ground and next to a tall secretary that blocked wide access.

Pimplesquirt politely made no mention of this. Instead, he graciously thanked Mrs. Albright for her hospitality, turned his large backside towards the chair, and waddled backwards with all the grace of a cement truck backing into a parking space.

Calamity then happened. When the back of Pimplesquirt’s legs bumped into the chair, his knees buckled, and he came crashing down onto the cushions like a loose piano falling ten floors to the sidewalk. When his knees bent, they cracked so loudly Henry thought gunshots had been fired and ducked. Because Pimplesquirt fell so swiftly, he had to let go of his cane to brace for the landing. Somehow his cane remained standing perfectly upright on the floor in front of him. It looked like a giant toothpick standing on one end.

The others stared at it incredulously. Thinking it was just perfectly balanced on the floor, Bert reached out and tried knocking it over with his finger. The cane, however, didn’t budge. It remained perfectly upright, as if glued in place.

Mr. Albright raised a curious eyebrow. “What an unusual walking stick you have there,” he said to Pimplesquirt.

“*This?!*” Pimplesquirt grumbled. “*Nasty balance.* They don’t make them like they use to.”

Ernie asked if he meant, like the ones that fall over when you let go of

them.

Mrs. Albright was too busy straightening the pictures out on the wall behind them to notice. When Pimplesquirt landed in the chair, he sent an impact tremor throughout the house, shaking the walls violently and knocking the pictures askew. Once she had them all straight, she graciously offered everyone tea and cake.

Famished, Henry was the first to say ‘please.’ When he got his, he eagerly gobbled it down, hoping to be offered more. Unfortunately, Mrs. Albright was more concerned with the crumbs that had landed on the floor than with the empty plates because she grabbed a broomstick and dust pan and began sweeping everything up that hit the floor.

“Good as usual, Marty,” Mr. Albright said, after swallowing his last piece.

“Delectable, indeed!” Pimplesquirt agreed. “I must have your recipe.”

Henry preferred second helpings, but it didn’t seem like he would get any.

Just then, Henry heard a loud roar followed by an ear-piercing scream. He turned just in time to see Lizzy lunge towards Bert from the traveling case. Somehow, Lizzy’s head had transformed into a real lion’s head, and she was now chomping in the air at Bert with her sharp teeth.

Bert fell backwards onto the sofa desperately trying to avoid Lizzy. There were more screams and shouts until Pimplesquirt leapt from his chair like an Olympic high jumper, grabbed his cane off the floor as he flew past it, and pummeled Lizzy on her head with it until she transformed herself back into the latch. Everything happened so quickly, Henry wasn’t quite sure what happened.

“WHAT WAS THAT?!” Mrs. Albright exclaimed, while rushing to the aid of her son.

“Nothing ... nothing at all!” Pimplesquirt replied matter-of-factly.

“BUT I SAW A LION!” Alicia yelled excitedly. “IT WAS TRYING TO BITE MY BROTHER!”

“It may have looked that way, but it was nothing of the sort,” Pimplesquirt reassured them. “Just an old magic trick. That’s all.”

“*MAGIC TRICK?!!*” Mr. Albright blared, after raising another eyebrow.

“Indeed. The traveling case belonged to a friend of mine. He was a magician. This must have been part of his act. I should have been more careful. I do apologize if it startled you so.”

Pimplesquirt pressed a dry handkerchief to his forehead before sitting down, again, cracking knees and all.

The Albrights were slow to return to their senses. Mrs. Albright’s heart was still pumping like a jackhammer trying to take down the Golden Gate bridge, Mr. Albright looked like he was trying to find a third eyebrow to raise, and Bert, Ernie, and Alicia sat as far away from Lizzy as possible, which meant scooting all the way over to one side of the sofa until they were practically sitting on top of each other.

Henry didn’t return to normal, either. When Pimplesquirt brushed past him with his cane, he felt something odd, like the feeling you get when you bring two magnets of the same polarity together. He had that same feeling in the car with Lizzy and when he donned his top hat. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was feeling, but he could swear it was *magic*.

“Now, where were we?” Pimplesquirt muttered to himself, ignoring all the shocked faces in the room. “Oh, yes — about Henry — shall we begin?”

Mr. and Mrs. Albright nodded at each other. Then, Mrs. Albright quickly ushered the children out of the room. She asked Bert and Ernie to take Henry upstairs and show him their rooms while she and Alicia baked cookies in the kitchen. Henry reluctantly complied, but made every effort to remain within earshot of the conversation below.

He heard only bits and pieces of it. As best he could tell, Pimplesquirt was offering the Albrights money to take care of him. Mr. Albright didn’t seem too pleased with the offer. He said it wasn’t enough to cover the cost of food or new clothes for a growing boy, like Henry.

Pimplesquirt countered by suggesting he could wear hand-me-downs from the twins and do chores around the farm to make up for other expenses. Henry didn’t hear what happened next, but when those issues were settled, Pimplesquirt had agreed the Trust would purchase the twin’s hand-me-downs at full price and allow Henry to work on the farm six days a week — *for free*.

Then the negotiations took a turn for the worse — if that were possible. Pimplesquirt asked Mr. Albright which room of the house Henry would stay in.

Mr. Albright promptly replied none. He insisted the Trust's offer wouldn't cover Henry's share of the utility bills and offered the treehouse or the barn in the back as living quarters, neither of which had any electricity or running water.

Pimplesquirt chuckled. He thought Mr. Albright's feeble counteroffer was just a negotiating position to get him to increase his offer a little, which he did, but only to play along. Mr. Albright responded by offering the attic, instead, which had only one light socket and no electrical outlets, but he offered it only on the condition Henry didn't use a lightbulb greater than 5 watts.

Pimplesquirt sat bolt upright, not because of how inhumane Mr. Albright's offer was, but because he didn't offer the attic in the first place! Pimplesquirt went so far as to offer even more for it, despite what size lightbulb Henry used. Once he learned it had a straw mattress for Henry to sleep in and a stone fireplace to keep him warm, the deal was sealed. Henry would stay in the attic.

Secretly, Henry was thankful Mr. Albright didn't have some dark cave on his property he could offer, instead.

The papers were quickly signed, followed by the smell of freshly baked cookies being set on the table. Mrs. Albright called the boys back downstairs and told them a deal had been struck and that Henry would be staying with them. Everyone seemed happy, except for Henry, who had lost his appetite.

For the next twenty minutes, Pimplesquirt chatted frivolously with the Albrights while eating cookies. He ate every one within reach and even got into a tussle with Alicia over one. When Henry said he didn't want his, Pimplesquirt was the first to grab it. Not coincidentally, after all the cookies were gone, Pimplesquirt announced it was time for him to leave.

"It was most delightful to meet you," he said graciously. "Unfortunately, I have a train to catch, so I must be off. Before I go, I would like to speak with Henry — *alone*, if possible?"

"By all means," Mrs. Albright replied. "You may use the sitting room."

"The front porch will be fine," Pimplesquirt suggested. "I'll leave from there."

Mrs. Albright nodded.

Pimplesquirt grabbed his cane and instructed Henry to bring the

traveling case. After they made their way to the front porch, Pimplesquirt patiently waited for Mrs. Albright to close the door before speaking to Henry.

“I have something to give you,” he quietly mumbled, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out an envelope. “This will help you remember a few things,” he said.

“What is it?” Henry asked curiously.

“It’s a letter you wrote to yourself.”

Henry blinked. “Why would I write a letter to myself?” he asked sensibly.

“I have no clue, boy,” Pimplesquirt replied brusquely. “The important thing is the letter has been vetted by the Trust, so it’s okay for you to read it. I suggest you do it soon.”

After Pimplesquirt handed Henry the envelope, he felt that odd sensation, again, the same one he felt with his hat and Pimplesquirt’s cane.

“Mr. and Mrs. Albright are your caretakers now,” Pimplesquirt continued. “Do as they say. Another representative of the Trust will be here shortly to check on you. If you have any questions, send them by post. There are self-addressed envelopes in your traveling case, if you need them.”

Henry’s ears pricked up. “Excuse me, sir? Did you say *my* traveling case?”

“Yes,” Pimplesquirt nodded.

“But I thought it was yours.”

“If that’s what you thought, you were mistaken. I wouldn’t have such a thing. As for Lizzy, she belongs in a cage. You’d best keep a sharp eye on her. She’s a vicious Ani-Lock. You must be up to the task of disciplining her. She needs a good deal of it, you know.”

“An Ani-Lock...?” Henry asked cluelessly.

“Yes — an *Animal Lock*. Certainly, you’ve heard of that! She guards the contents of your case from anyone who tries to open it. If you feed her the right thing, she will open the case. But don’t tell anyone what she eats. It’s like giving them the key.”

“But, sir? You said it was just a magic act.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Pimplequirt pompously snickered to himself, thinking he had been most clever. “After all, we wouldn’t want the Albrights to know

what we are, would we?”

Pimplesquirt giggled to himself, again.

Henry, on the other hand, didn't know what Pimplesquirt was talking about.

“*Umm*, excuse me, sir,” he asked, “but ... what are we?”

Pimplesquirt suddenly fell quiet. He looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Didn't the Trust tell you?” he asked hopefully.

“Tell me what?” Henry inquired.

Pimplesquirt now looked as if a train had run over his foot.

“Forgive me, Henry,” he said breathlessly. “I-I didn't know. The Trust should have told you.”

“Told me what, sir?”

“You're a wizard ... like me. I guess you forget because of your amnesia. As for *Lizzy* ... well, she's as real as you and I.”

Henry's mouth dropped.

Pimplesquirt, on the other hand, suddenly acted like everything was back to normal. He donned his hat and gloves and began doddering towards the car with his cane.

“But, sir?” Henry pleaded with him before he reached the driveway. “You're not leaving me here alone with ... with *Lizzy*, are you?”

“She'll calm down once she's had something to eat.”

“B-B-But, I don't know what she eats!”

“Nor do I. I suggest you read your missive.”

“*Missive*?”

“The envelope I gave you, dear boy! Certainly you haven't forgotten about it already?”

Henry glanced at the letter Pimplesquirt had given him. He didn't know it was a *missive*.

“If you have any questions, send them by post,” Pimplesquirt reminded him. “If it's urgent, use the red envelopes. The Trust will respond immediately. I'm late, so I must be off. Good luck, Henry,” Pimplesquirt bade him. “My guess is you'll need it.”

Henry watched helplessly as Pimplesquirt opened the car door, wedged

himself inside, and started the engine. He accidentally put it into the wrong gear and the car shot backwards nearly six feet, almost crushing Mrs. Albright's magnolia sprouts. Once he found the right gear, he sped off towards town, making a high-pitched squealing noise as he went and leaving a suspicious scent of burning metal in the air.

Henry recognized it immediately as an unreleased parking brake.



Chapter 2: Mysterious Missives

Henry sat alone on the front porch, listening to Lizzy grumble. He was worried the Albrights wouldn't let her back inside the house. He thought about leaving her outside, alone, and retrieving her later when nobody was looking, but decided it was too risky. The Albrights had small pets wandering the grounds.

Thinking he had no choice but to take her inside, he stood up, took one deep breath, grabbed his traveling case, and knocked on the front door. Nobody answered. He waited a few moments before knocking, again, but still no one answered. Noticing the door was slightly ajar, he pushed it open, stuck his head inside, and looked around.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" he asked nervously. "It's me, Henry. My meeting with Mr. Pimplesquirt is over. I'm coming back inside."

Hearing no one, he quietly stepped into the house, closed the door behind him, and timidly tiptoed over to the den where he had last seen everyone. It was empty, except for a large banner that now hung over the fireplace that said, "*Welcome Henry!*"

No sooner had he read it than the entire Albright family jumped out from behind tables, lamps, and chairs, and rushed towards him shouting, "*SURPRISE!*"

Lizzy didn't expect this. Nor did the Albrights expect to see Lizzy. When the two met, Henry's warm welcome suddenly turned ice cold.

Lizzy thought she was being jumped by a pack of hoodlums and leaped out from her latch roaring madly and baring her teeth at the Albrights. Mrs. Albright came to a screeching halt in front of her and thrust her arms out to block her children from getting any closer.

Mr. Albright slid to a stop, too, but his weight carried him a little further than the others. Having slid too close, Lizzy pounced. She lunged at him with her jaws snapping in the air, like before. Fortunately, she missed, giving Mr. Albright enough time to scramble backwards out of her reach.

The room fell completely silent, except for Lizzy's growling and the Mr. Albright's hysterical panting.

Henry cleared his throat. "I noticed the front door was open, so I came inside. I hope you don't mind."

Mr. Albright's eyes slowly swiveled from Lizzy to Henry. "*What's that?*" he asked, pointing an insinuating finger at the traveling case.

Henry felt Lizzy move. Apparently, she didn't like being pointed at, so she growled and hissed at Mr. Albright until he put his finger down.

"My traveling case," Henry answered innocently, ignoring the ferocious beast snarling at them.

"*That thing is yours?*" Bert asked incredulously.

Henry begrudgingly nodded.

Mrs. Albright quietly clutched her children in case of another attack. Mr. Albright, on the other hand, now looked like a marble had fallen out of his head.

"They're really quite strange, you know," he blurted out for no apparent reason.

Henry wasn't sure what he meant.

"Excuse me, sir, but ... who's strange?"

"The representatives of the Trust," he replied matter-of-factly.

Lizzy snarled even louder, now. Henry tried shushing her, but to no avail.

Alicia, who was quite smart for her age, poked her head out from behind her mother and asked, "If the traveling case is just a magic act, why is he talking to it?"

"I'm sure he's just trying to make it go away, dear," Mrs. Albright replied tensely. "Isn't that right, Henry?"

She nodded in a manner that suggested he should agree.

"*Oh, yes!*" Henry eagerly replied, after getting the hint. "That's exactly what I'm doing." He then shook the traveling case sharply with his hand,

hoping Lizzy would transform back into the latch, but it only antagonized her even more.

Mr. Albright's eyes dimmed. He could tell Henry didn't have control of her.

"Then, perhaps, you can you explain *this* to me?" he asked, ominously.

He removed a parchment from his shirt pocket, unfurled it, and showed it to him. It had a large, red button at the top with some words scrawled underneath. The words said, "If anything unusual happens — *ANYTHING AT ALL* — and you suspect Henry did it, *PRESS THE BUTTON.*"

Henry wasn't quite sure what he was looking at.

"Just so you know," Mr. Albright told him, "Pimplesquirt gave me this after we signed the papers."

As Henry eyed it, again, a puzzling thought popped into his mind. Apparently, he came with a panic button!

"Albert?" Mrs. Albright interrupted her husband. "It's not the boy's fault he has a magic act for a traveling case. He's an orphan. I'm sure he can't afford proper things."

"It's not a magic act, Marty," he replied, suspecting something foul.

"There's no such thing as magic, dear," she replied tartly. "Don't frighten the boy on his first day."

"But, mom?" Ernie interjected. "You remember what the Krepowskis said?"

Mrs. Albright suddenly clapped her hand around Ernie's mouth and smiled.

"They said you were a very nice boy — with some irregularities — but nothing to worry about," Mrs. Albright told Henry.

"Who are the Krepowskis?" Henry asked.

"They were the family who took care of you before you came here," Bert answered cautiously, afraid his mother might slap her hand across his mouth, too.

Then, for some reason, Bert began speaking very rapidly.

"THEY-COULDN'T-TAKE-CARE-OF-YOU-ANYMORE-BECAUSE-MRS.-KREPOWSKI-HAD-A-NERVOUS-BREAKDOWN!"

Mrs. Albright suddenly clapped her hand around Bert's mouth, too, but

she was too late. Bert had said everything he intended.

Mrs. Albright politely smiled at Henry and said, “You had nothing to do with it. She was having troubles in her life and needed some time to work them out, that’s all. We’re happy to have you. Isn’t that right, Albert.”

She glared at her husband, who, after seeing the look on her face, decided it was prudent to agree with her.

“*Err* — right!” he said defensively. “We are very happy you will be staying with us. But just in case this silly button works, I think I’ll put it here.”

Mr. Albright pulled a hammer out of his pocket and nailed the parchment to Mrs. Albright’s immaculately pristine, wooden wall so that anybody could reach it, including Alicia.

Henry watched uncomfortably as Mrs. Albright winced with each rap of the hammer.

“Dinner is at five,” Mr. Albright told him. “Bert will show you to your room. The balloons are for you. Welcome to your new home.”

Lizzy began growling, again. Apparently, she didn’t like balloons, either.

Bert twisted out of his mother’s grip and told Henry to follow him.

Henry politely thanked the Albrights for their hospitality, then followed Bert up the stairs.

Bert kept at least two steps in front of Henry and one eye on Lizzy. The rest of the family remained below, watching with rapt attention.

After Bert reached the second floor landing, he passed a Grandfather clock on his left that ticked loudly. It was the only thing in the house making noise at the time.

He crossed to the other side, opened a small closet door, and pointed up at the ceiling.

“Your room is up there,” he said.

Henry looked inside. The closet was completely empty, except for a narrow ladder that extended up through a narrow hole above.

“There’s a door at the top,” Bert told him. “You might have to jiggle the knob a bit to get it to open. Your room is in there.”

Bert hastily vacated the closet after Henry stepped inside. Apparently, he was still afraid of Lizzy.

“She won’t bite you unless you try opening the case,” Henry told him.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going near her,” Bert replied.

Henry glanced downstairs and noticed the Albrights were still staring up at him with rapt attention.

“I’ll just see what my room looks like,” he told them.

Henry climbed the ladder with one hand while carrying his traveling case with the other. After slipping through the hole in the ceiling, he found himself in a dark hallway that led to a small door with a brass doorknob. He jiggled it, like Bert said, and the door popped open. Behind it was a large room with a dormer window that faced the back of the house. The room looked and smelled like an attic.

It was completely empty, except for the straw mattress and stone fireplace Mr. Albright had mentioned and a wooden desk with a chair next to it. All around him were exposed joists, rafters, and beams, except for the floor, which was covered with narrow, wooden planks. If it wasn’t so cold, dark, and musty, it might even have been habitable, Henry thought.

He walked over to the desk, laid his traveling case down on top, then strolled over to the window. After peering out, he saw the entire farm behind the house. There was a barn, a pig sty, a chicken coop, and rows and rows of empty cornfields. With winter approaching, the Albrights had already harvested their corn. Off in the distance, he saw the Blue Ridge Mountains.

He plodded over to the fireplace where he spotted a wooden peg sticking out from a rafter and decided to hang his hat on it. It was the perfect place to keep it, he thought. Beneath it lay a pile of dried logs for burning. Because the attic was so cold, Henry decided to start a fire. He threw a log into the hearth then searched for a match to light it with, but didn’t find any. He would have to ask the Albrights for some, later.

He sat down in the chair and took in his new surroundings. Strangely, he felt at home here, though he didn’t know why. Perhaps the Krepowskis kept him in an attic, too, he thought.

He took his missive out and grimly stared at it, wondering if it would really remind him of things. He hoped it would because he couldn’t remember anything about himself.

He opened the envelope, removed the thick parchment inside, and

began reading. The first thing he noticed was it wasn't a letter at all. Just a list of items that belonged to him.

The first item on the list was *Top Hat*. When he read it, something odd happened. Dozens of memories about his top hat began pouring into his head. They came so fast, he felt like he was reliving parts of his life over again.

He remembered where he had found it — Terwilliger's refuse yard — and what he was doing when he found it — looking for aluminum cans to exchange for pocket money. According to his memories, he had been rummaging through a pile of debris when he felt that odd sensation, again, the same one he had felt several times already today. When he looked down, he saw a top hat laying near some old clothes. After picking it up and looking inside, he saw an entire room hidden in it. He now remembered it had a secret room. He also remembered his top hat was magical.

He quickly set his missive down, retrieved his hat from the wooden peg, and glanced inside. The room he remembered was still there. All he had to do was look at it the right way. It had a closet, a dresser, a chair, a small coffee table, and a footlocker, and no matter which way he tilted his hat, the room remained perfectly upright.

After placing his hat back on the wooden peg, he remembered something else. He *could* feel magic. In fact, that's what he had been feeling all day. His hat, traveling case, missive, and Pimplesquirt's cane were all magical!

He glanced at the next item on his list, which said '*Pocketknife.*' Suddenly, he remembered having one. It had three blades. The longest one, when opened, turned his knife into a broomstick — *a flying broomstick!* The middle one turned it into a very old book of magic, and the smallest one turned it into a wand. Henry now remembered he had a wand! He also remembered where he kept it — inside his footlocker next to his schoolbooks.

He set his missive down, again, and retrieved his hat. This time he climbed inside. He placed his hat on the floor with the brim facing up, stepped inside, then stretched his hat all the way up over his head. He then jumped down through a trapdoor that was beneath him and landed on the floor of his room next his footlocker.

His heart pounded with excitement as memories of his pocketknife kept pouring into his head. It had two spells on it. One was a *locking* spell that

prevented anyone, including him, from opening the blades. The Trust put it there to prevent him (and anyone else) from using it. What the Trust didn't know was that Henry had cracked the spell and could open his pocketknife at any time. The other was a *return* spell that caused his knife to return to his bedside each night precisely at midnight, no matter where he last laid it. In fact, it was the return spell that caused the Trust to put the locking spell on his knife in the first place. The Trust couldn't crack the return spell and, thereby, take his knife away from him, so they decided to put a locking spell on it, instead. That way he couldn't open it and use it.

After finding his pocketknife where he had left it, he grabbed it, wiggled back out of his hat, sat down on his straw mattress, and opened the smallest blade. He watched as his pocketknife transformed into a wand.

It was beautiful and finely made. It had a golden tip, a black mahogany shaft, and a white pearl handle. Halfway down the shaft was a family crest, which, for some reason, his missive didn't remind him of. It made him wonder if he had inherited it from his family or not. After deciding he may never know, he moved on to the next item on his list, which said, '*Spell Box.*'

After reading the words, memories of his spell box began pouring into his head. He kept it inside his traveling case, along with many other items, such as candles, blank parchments, envelopes, feather quill pens, and other things. His missive now reminded him of Lizzy and what she ate ... *BELT BUCKLES!* He even remembered he kept a jar of belt buckles inside his footlocker.

He set his missive down, again, crawled back inside his hat, and fetched a belt buckle from the jar. After climbing back out, he tossed it to Lizzy and watched her munch on it as if she were chewing a nail. The moment she swallowed it, the traveling case popped open, and Henry looked inside.

His spell box was exactly as he remembered it, a gold, wire-framed box with crystal panes on each side. The top and bottom panes were hinged so they could be opened, like tiny doors. Henry also remembered what a spell box was — *a mail box for wizards!* He then remembered how to send letters to the Trust. All he had to do was drop an envelope addressed to the Trust inside his spell box and close the lid. Once shut, the envelope would disappear in a cloud of puffy white smoke. The letter would then appear in the Trust's spell box, wherever that was.

The next item on his list wasn't an object at all. It simply said, 'Warning,' but the moment he read it, Henry remembered receiving a stern admonition from the Trust. Certain board members, whom he now remembered, had instructed him not tell anyone he was a wizard. If he expected someone knew, he was to contact the Trust immediately — by wizard's post — using a red envelope. He also remembered the board members were wizards, too. In fact, he had just seen them in California before boarding the train to Terwilliger with Pimplesquirt.

Henry quickly checked his stash of red envelopes in his traveling case and noticed he had plenty. The Trust must have made sure he was fully supplied so he wouldn't have any excuse for not writing.

The next item on his list was 'School.' Suddenly, memories of the school he attended poured into his head. He attended Maribella Elementary on the north side of Terwilliger, just past the fire station on Elm Street. He also remembered all of his classmates, teachers, and the administrators. He even remembered his best friend, Gwendolyn Applewaite. Suddenly, he didn't feel so alone anymore. He even looked forward to school tomorrow because he was eager to see his friends, again, especially Gwendolyn.

The last item on his list was not even a word. It was a tilde that was meant to signal the end of the list. However, upon seeing it, he remembered something else, something he didn't want the Trust to know. He used a tilde instead of words to hide it from them. Apparently, his trick worked because the Trust allowed him to read his missive.

The tilde reminded him he had written *a second* letter to himself, one the Trust had *not* vetted. He also remembered how to retrieve it. All he had to do was activate his spell box.

He set his missive down, carefully removed his spell box from his traveling case, held it firmly against the wooden beam next to his straw mattress, and waited for it to attach itself to the post. He then retrieved his name plate from his traveling case and inserted it into the open slot on the box. The moment it slid into place, he heard a *pop* and watched his spell box fill up with smoke. Once the smoke cleared, he saw his letter inside. It was just as he remembered it.

He pulled it out and read it. It was written on the same type of

parchment as his missive, meaning it was magical. To his surprise, it contained only a single word — *Cottage*. The rest of the parchment was completely empty. After reading it, dozens of memories about an old cottage began pouring into his head.

It lay somewhere in a dense forest far away, but Henry didn't remember where. Inside was a bedroom, a kitchen, a den, a sofa with matching chairs, and a window that overlooked a garden behind the house. Henry had no idea who owned the cottage or why he even wrote about it. He didn't even know why he needed to conceal it from the Trust. His memory seemed completely useless except that it had to be important. Why else would he have gone to the trouble of writing it and hiding it from the Trust?

As memories of the cottage kept pouring into his head, he heard another *pop* from his spell box and noticed it had filled up with smoke, again. Somebody else had written him a letter. After waiting for the smoke to clear, he retrieved it and began reading.

Dear Henry,

I just heard about your unfortunate accident and amnesia. Believe me when I tell you this ... YOU HAD NO ACCIDENT! It was a dastardly thing the Trust did to you, erasing your memory like that. My hope is I'm not one of your memories that had been erased. That's not likely, however, because I may have been the reason they did it in the first place. It was brave of you to stand up to Baltos like you did.

I write because I owe you and your friends a debt of gratitude. You saved my life, and I cannot repay you. As a show of my appreciation, I will answer the question you and your friends asked about.

The spell you inquired about is called the Hummu-Goulabba spell. Heed my advice and do not use it. It's no spell at all. IT'S A SPIXIE!!! As you're fully aware, there's no telling what a spixie may do.

Your friend always,

Mojo

No sooner had Henry read the parchment than the words disappeared from it. Worse, the return address on the envelope disappeared, too. Before another thought crossed his mind, Ernie knocked on his door, poked his head inside the attic, and told him it was five o'clock and dinner was on the table.

