MEG CABOT

From the Notebooks of a Middle School Princess
“It would be easy to be a princess if I were dressed in cloth of gold, but it is a great deal more of a triumph to be one all the time when no one knows it.”

—Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*
From the Notebooks of a Middle School Princess
Middle school has not been working out the way I hoped it would.

Of course, my expectations were somewhat high. I’d heard such great things. Everyone always goes, “In middle school you get to do this” and “In middle school you get to do that.”

No one ever told me, “In middle school Annabelle Jenkins is going to threaten to beat you up by the flagpole for absolutely no reason.”

But that’s exactly what happened just now when
Annabelle Jenkins shoved me in the hallway after second period.

My first thought was that it all had to be a mistake. What have I ever done to Annabelle Jenkins?

That’s why I said, “That’s okay!” to Annabelle as I squatted down and gathered up the pages that had spilled from my organizer. I checked and saw that my pink schedule was still taped to the inside cover. Phew!

I know it’s weird that it’s May and I still worry about losing my class schedule, but I can’t help it. You get a demerit if you lose your class schedule. I’ve gone the whole year without getting a demerit.

Plus I like knowing my schedule is there inside my organizer just in case I suddenly get amnesia or something.

“Don’t worry,” I assured Annabelle as I stood up. “I still have my schedule.”

That’s when Annabelle did something really weird. And I mean, really weird, especially for the most popular, prettiest girl in the sixth grade at Cranbrook Middle School.
She shoved me again!

She did it hard, too. Hard enough so that I lost my balance and fell flat on my butt in front of everyone.

It didn’t hurt (except for my pride).

But it was still totally shocking, considering that, up until that moment, I’d always thought that Annabelle and I were friends. Not *good* friends—we don’t sit together at lunch or anything. Annabelle is very selective about who she invites to sit at her table.

But we certainly aren’t enemies. We’ve been to each other’s houses, since my step-uncle works with Annabelle’s dad.
Whenever I go to Annabelle’s, she shows me all the awards she’s won for gymnastics, and when she comes to my house, I show her my wildlife drawings. She’s never been very impressed by them, but I always thought things were cool between us.

I guess not.

“I’m not worried about you losing your schedule,” Annabelle sneered. “You think you’re so great, don’t you, Princess Olivia?”

“Whoa,” I said, straightening up. “Annabelle, are you okay?”

The reason I asked this is because there was no reason that I could think of for Annabelle Jenkins to:

1. Knock my organizer from my arms.

2. Shove me.

3. Ask me if I think I’m so great.

4. Call me a princess.

I thought maybe she’d just found out her dog had got run over or something, and she was taking it out
on me. If she even had a dog, which I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t seen one the last time I’d been at her house. I like dogs, so I probably would have noticed.

But I guess I was wrong about us getting along, since the next thing that happened was that all of Annabelle’s equally pretty, popular friends—who’d gathered around and were watching Annabelle humiliate me—laughed even harder as Annabelle imitated what I’d asked her, using a high-pitched, whiny voice that I personally don’t think sounds anything like me.

“Whoa, Annabelle, are you okay?” Annabelle pointed at me, but glanced at all her friends. “Olivia is such a loser, she thinks I actually like her. She thinks we’re friends.”

The look on Annabelle’s face made it very clear that we were not now, nor had we ever, been friends. We’d probably never even gotten along.

Then Annabelle leaned her face very close to mine and said, “Listen here, Princess Olivia Grace Clarisse Mignonette Harrison—if that’s even your real name, which I doubt. I’m sick of you thinking
you’re so much better than me. Meet me at the flag-pole as soon as school lets out today. I’m going to give you the beat-down you deserve. And if you tell a teacher, I’ll make sure to say you started it, and you’ll be the one to get a demerit.”

Then she gave me one more shove—not as hard as the last one—and disappeared, with her friends laughing behind her, into the throng of scarily tall seventh and eighth graders, who seem to take up so much more space in the hallways than all of us lowly sixth graders put together.

Fortunately, by that time my friend Nishi had come up alongside me.

“What was that about?” Nishi asked.

“Annabelle says she’s going to give me the beat-down I deserve after school,” I said. I guess I was still in shock, or something. It felt like I was watching myself in a movie. “She called me a princess.”

“Why would she call you a princess?” Nishi wanted to know. “And why would she want to give you a beat-down? I thought you two got along.”

“So did I,” I said. “I guess I was wrong.”
“That’s weird. Does she think you’re a snob, or something?”

“Why would she think I’m a snob?” I looked down at my clothes, which are the same as Nishi’s, since we have to wear uniforms to our school, which include a skirt. I’m not wild about the skirts, which have pleats in them. Pleats are generally not flattering, according to my step-cousin Sara’s fashion magazines. “Do I look like a snob?”

“I don’t think so,” Nishi said as people streamed around us, trying to get to their next class before the bell rang. “Not any snobbier than usual.”

I gave Nishi a sarcastic look. “Gee. Thanks.”

“Well, sometimes people who like sports think people who like to draw wildlife illustrations are—”

“But I’ve never been snobby about my drawings! It’s just a hobby. It’s not like I’ve won any medals for them.”

“Hmm. Weird. Maybe you should tell a teacher.”

“Annabelle said if I did, she’d say I started it and make sure I got a demerit. I’ve gone the whole year without getting a demerit.”
“Why would they believe Annabelle and not you?” Nishi asked.

“Probably because Annabelle’s dad’s a lawyer,” I reminded her glumly. “Remember? She’s always saying her dad will sue the school district if things don’t go her way.”

“Oh, right,” Nishi said, shaking her head. “I forgot. Well, I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. We’ll figure it out at lunch. See you then.”

“See you,” I said, not feeling quite as hopeful.

Then we both dived into the hallway throng, since we didn’t want to be late. At Cranbrook Middle School, if you’re late to class, you lose a merit point. If you lose enough merit points, they won’t let you pass on to seventh grade.

Now I’m sitting here still trying to figure out what I could have done to make Annabelle hate me so much, much less want to give me a beat-down.

But I’m coming up with nothing.

Nothing except the fear that after school, I’m going to die.
The thing is, I’m so completely boring and average. It doesn’t seem like there’s any reason for Annabelle to hate me.

Me: Olivia Grace Clarisse Mignonette Harrison
(my real name, no matter what Annabelle thinks)

Height: Average (for my age, twelve)

Weight: Average (completely within normal body mass index for my height)
Hair: Average color (brown) and length (to the shoulders, though usually I wear it in braids because it’s easier to manage since it has a tendency to frizz, especially on humid days, which, here in New Jersey, happen a lot)

Skin: Average (well, brown, the result of an African-American mom and a Caucasian dad)

Eyes: Average—not sapphire blue, like my step-cousin Sara’s, or deep brown, like Nishi’s. My eyes are hazel. Just plain, average in-between hazel. They don’t even change color in the light, like girls’ eyes do in books, flashing emerald green when I’m angry or anything. They stay hazel all the time.

So. Boring.

There are only two things about me that aren’t average, but I don’t think
they’re the reasons why Annabelle wants to beat me up.

The first is my name: Olivia Grace Clarisse Mignonette Harrison (which for some reason Annabelle thinks is fake, but I swear it’s not).

I don’t know why my mom chose to give me so many middle names, especially such bizarre ones. Mignonette is a sauce you can order in restaurants to put on oysters.

I don’t even like oysters.

And there is a famous princess who my step-cousin Sara likes to follow on the gossip blogs named Princess Amelia “Mia” Mignonette Grimaldi Thermopolis Renaldo, whose grandmother is named Clarisse, so it’s like I have two royal middle names (Clarisse and Mignonette), which I will admit is also bit weird. Sometimes I wonder if my mom was obsessed with princesses or something.

But I can’t ask her because she died when I was a baby. I never got a chance to know her, which is too bad, since she sounds like someone I would have
liked. She was a charter jet pilot. That’s a person who flies private planes for other people.

She didn’t die flying, though. She died on vacation in Mexico after crashing her Jet Ski.

I have never been on a jet or a personal watercraft. My aunt says they’re more dangerous than flying a private plane.

That is the second non-average thing about me. Since my mom is dead, I have to live with my aunt and her husband and his two kids, my step-cousins Justin and Sara. I’ve never even met my birth dad, although he sends me letters and stuff. I write back, to a post office box in New York City, because Dad has to travel all the time for his job (for which he gets paid very well. I know, because Aunt Catherine is always super excited when his support check for me comes every month, even though she and Rick, her husband, have a very successful home design and construction business).

This is why I’ve never met him (my dad, I mean). An assistant forwards him my letters from the post office box. He lives wherever his suitcase happens
to be, which is usually somewhere like Costa Rica or Abu Dhabi (at least according to his postcards).

This is “an unstable atmosphere in which to bring up a child,” according to my aunt Catherine.

My aunt Catherine and my step-uncle Rick provide a stable enough atmosphere in which to bring up a child I guess, but sometimes I wish I could live with my dad. I know we’d have the best times on his archaeological digs, even though there aren’t any schools or clean drinking water there, only mosquitoes and, according to one movie I saw, Nazis.

Okay, Dad’s never specifically said he’s an archaeologist, and Aunt Catherine doesn’t like it when I ask questions about him, but I’m pretty sure that’s how he and my mom met. She had to have been the pilot on one of his expeditions.

That’s probably why my dad can only communicate with me by letter. Seeing me in person would be too painful a reminder of all that he lost (not that I’m beautiful like my mom was, because I’m so average looking, but my aunt Catherine says I have my
mother’s bone structure and could grow up to be attractive some day).

It’s all good, though. Dad explained that when I get lonely or frustrated, I should pour out my feelings in my diary (which he sent me—Although I never seem to have it with me when I need it, so I just write in whatever is handy, such as my French notebook, like now).

Dad says he knows someone who kept a diary for a long time, and it always helped her. I assume he’s referring to my mother, and he just can’t bear to say her name (which is Elizabeth) because her beauty haunts him.

Still, even though I never mention this in my letters to my dad, the thing I get most frustrated about is that I am basically half an orphan.

Not that anyone ever treats me this way, of course. No one ever forces me to sleep in a cupboard under the stairs like Harry Potter (we don’t even have a cupboard under the stairs) or sweep up
cinders like Cinderella (our fireplaces are all gas and Uncle Rick wired them so you can switch them on with a remote control, not that I’m allowed to).

I have my own room and everything. Aunt Catherine and her husband treat me almost just like I’m one of Uncle Rick’s kids, so I don’t have any right to complain.

Except that I do get sad sometimes that I’m not allowed to have a dog or cat (because Uncle Rick is allergic and Aunt Catherine doesn’t want pet hair getting on her designer furniture or carpets).

It also kind of bums me out that Aunt Catherine and Uncle Rick’s company, O’Toole Designs, has
been hired to build a fancy new mall in a country called Qalif, so we’re moving there this summer. Even though I want to be adventurous, like my dad, I really don’t want to move, because I’ll miss Nishi.

Also, it’s bad enough that I have to wear a skirt every day as part of my school uniform. Aunt Catherine says that in Qalif, girls have to wear skirts *all the time*, and women have to cover their heads. It’s the local custom.

I think I would prefer fighting Nazis.

It also seems a little bit unfair to me that Aunt Catherine and Uncle Rick say I can’t have my own computer like Sara and Justin (because there is not enough WiFi in the house to stretch to my room), or a cell phone (Aunt Catherine says I can have one when I’m in high school though, if I get good enough grades).

I guess I sort of do feel like I’m missing out a little, not texting or going online with my friends. Sara gets to, and she’s only four months older than I am!

I definitely don’t mind not having a TV in my
room, though, like Justin and Sara. I want to be a wildlife illustrator when I grow up, so I don’t have time to veg out in front of the TV, playing video games like Justin or watching reality shows like Sara. I have to practice my drawing. Wildlife illustrators are the ones who draw all the animals you see in books or on the Web or next to the exhibits when you go to the zoo.

People don’t realize this, but baby kangaroos (called joeys) are born only two centimeters long, completely blind and hairless. They have to crawl into their mother’s pouch, where they will stay six to eight months until they are ready to come out and hop around.

Someone has to draw this because their kangaroo mom isn’t going to let anyone inside the pouch to photograph it!

That’s what wildlife illustrators do.

Obviously I’m not a professional artist yet, but I took a free art test I found in the back of a magazine
when I was in the dentist’s office—the kind where they ask you to “Draw Tippy the Turtle” as best you can—and sent it in. I have to admit, I never expected to hear back.

So I was more shocked than anyone when the art school called our house one day out of the blue and said they’d received my drawing of Tippy the Turtle and thought I had “real talent.” They wanted to offer me a scholarship!

Of course they hung up as soon as Aunt Catherine told them I was twelve.

But still! From that day on, I knew I was going to be an artist. I mean, if I can get a scholarship at age twelve, I can definitely get one when I’m older.

Ms. Dakota, my art teacher at school, agrees. She says I just have to keep practicing, especially perspective (which is the art of drawing objects so that
they appear multi-dimensional). Ms. Dakota showed me how to create a vanishing point in the center of the page, then make sure all the lines in my drawing met there. It’s super hard.

So hard that I have to admit I spend a lot of time drawing kangaroos and cheetahs and our neighbor Mrs. Tucker’s cats instead of practicing my perspective.

It’s amazing how your whole life can change in one day. Like the day I won the art scholarship (even if I couldn’t accept it). That was a really good day, a day I went from being average to not-so-average, in a good way, because someone thought I was good at art.

Not like today, which is a horrible day.
I guess I should have known this day was going to be horrible the minute Mr. Courtney handed out those “Who Am I?” genetic family history worksheets in Bio.

What am I supposed to put under Father’s Eye Color—or Father’s Mother’s Eye Color? Obviously I can write to Dad to find out, but by the time I get the answers, the worksheet will be overdue, and it’s worth 25 percent of our grade! (Although Mr. Courtney says it’s okay to leave some things blank. The twins, Netta and Quetta, don’t know the biological information for their dad, either.)

But I really hate not knowing things.

Especially things like why Annabelle Jenkins would want to beat me up.

It makes no sense.

No sense at all.