

## Girls Like That End Up Fine

1972

It's Sidewalk Days downtown this Saturday, and Krista wants everyone to go and, what?—shop outside in boiling August heat, I guess, buying unsold junk cluttering card tables. I don't want to go but say I will. Krista's a little afraid of me, and maybe it's a big deal she asks.

"There's safety in numbers." Krista's voice is as serious as people in church, so I laugh.

"Holly P. Eicher!" she exclaims. She scolds like someone's mom, which is also funny. But hearing my first and last name turns me tense, reminding me I never should've told Krista my middle name's Patricia because Krista doesn't forget anything. "Holly P. Eicher!" she repeats. "Donna's still missing, and you know we should be careful."

Our friend—really, *their* friend—Donna disappeared outside Drug Fair in January. I met her for the first time on the day she disappeared. Krista says Donna was her best friend, though I bet if Donna were here, she wouldn't say the same. My mom's convinced Donna ran away. "That's what girls do," she says, because she did: she grew up here in Iowa City, then ran away to Chicago the morning after prom. Now my mom's back, running away from Chicago, and I'm dragged with her. We live with my grandfather, whose house is across the street from Krista's. It's like my mom doesn't want to know there's a difference between running away after prom and running away when you're eleven and three-quarters, which is how old Donna was when she disappeared. I didn't know Donna hardly at all, so why think about her? She was never really *my* friend. I liked her red hair.

I agree to go to Sidewalk Days because Krista bugs me until I say yes. That's how come people do what Krista wants, because she won't shut up. Krista's that kind of girl who doesn't have best friends.

Suzanne and Tracy are supposed to come with us, but on Saturday morning Tracy's stomach hurts and Suzanne won't go without her sister. What a lie. No one gets sick in summer. Tracy's scared. She and Suzanne were around that afternoon Donna went miss-

ing, but they ditched us before we started walking to the ice rink. Then Donna got mad at me and Krista and ran off, and no one's seen her since.

So much for safety in numbers with only me and Krista at the bus stop. She claims that if her mother was back from "traveling," she'd drive us downtown instead of us taking the bus, and I nod like I believe it, when everyone knows Krista's mother ran away for real, to Minneapolis, which sounds better than Iowa City. It's something to know, that mothers run away, and seeing this fact of life turns me wise and very mature. Krista doesn't want to know, I guess, because she's describing a postcard that supposedly came in the mail yesterday from her mother, with a picture on the front of Paul Bunyan and a blue ox named Babe. I don't believe one word of anything Krista's blabbering but don't let on until finally I say, "I don't get why the ox is blue," and she says, "Holly, I'm talking about my mother, not oxes," and I say, "It's oxen, not oxes," and she says, "That's what I said," and I say, "Did not."

She huffs a sigh and stares hard across the street and says, "I don't know why Babe's blue. It's all stupid, isn't it?"

Winning makes me feel terrible, like the day's ruined. Luckily the bus turns the corner toward us, and Krista windmills both arms because she worries bus drivers will drive by without seeing her, though that's never once happened. I always stand perfectly still, staring at the ground, and they see me fine.

We take sideways seats up front, sitting opposite each other. It's fun sending secret messages with our eyes. The bus here is safe, not like the El in Chicago. All summer, Iowa City kids ride to music lessons or the Rec Center or the library or downtown or anywhere to escape the house. Today I'm noticing the crowd's mostly university students, back for school, I guess. We're the only kids today, like we're doing something wrong.

I eye-message Krista to notice the scruffy, barefoot guy with the awful beard holding the bright red backpack thick with peace sign patches. I wonder if coming to the university changed him, like maybe once upon a time he was a farm boy in overalls. On the drive from Chicago, on Christmas Eve day, my mother told me that Iowa City was different than Iowa the state because of the liberal university. "Some people are afraid of Iowa City," she said. That seemed exciting, but I got here, and what a joke. I'm not one bit scared of Iowa City or these dirty students back in town after a summer away.

The guy's watching me watch him, so I flash a peace sign. He does the same right back, and Krista's mouth pops open. I know I look old for my age because my mother tells me not to wear halter tops. But she was asleep when I left today and didn't see.

"Going downtown?" he asks.

"We don't talk to strangers," Krista says.

"To Sidewalk Days," I say.

“What’s that?” he asks.

Well, I’m not interested in rerunning the exact conversation I had with my boring grandfather, so I shrug and hold up one finger, like, *wait a sec*, a trick that stops talking. Then I dig one-handed in my purse like I need something critically important before speaking another word.

Krista’s the one who can’t stand leaving something unexplained, so she jumps in: “Everything’s on sale outside on tables, with bargains and free lemonade and it’s all really exciting. Sidewalk Days is famous!”

“Mindless capitalist bullshit,” the guy says.

Dopey Krista nods, and maybe I don’t get exactly what the guy means, but for sure nodding’s wrong. I make my face bored-to-death and speak my grandfather’s word like it’s my own: “Socialist.”

“Cocktease,” he hisses, loud enough so only I hear. He yanks the cord. It dings and the bus stops, and I’m perfectly still until he’s all the way gone.

Krista shifts to sit by me. Maybe she heard, which is embarrassing. “He was mean,” she says. “My dad hates when the students come back.”

“But your dad’s a professor, right? Like my grandfather?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Lots of teachers actually don’t like their students. At school, I know last year’s teacher hated me.”

I bet. “Lots of people don’t like lots of things,” I hear my bored face say.

“We shouldn’t talk to strangers,” Krista says. “Aren’t you ever afraid?”

“We’ll never see him again,” I say. “He’s no one. We’re fine.”

I think of Donna talking to a stranger, Donna being so bored and so angry that she has to run away like my mother did, needing everyone to see how she feels. “Forget him,” I say. “I already have.”

Soon enough Krista pulls the cord, though the bus automatically stops at this corner because it’s downtown, the end of the line. “Thank you,” she says to the driver as she exits out the front. I follow, saying nothing. Maybe because that’s what we do in Chicago, or maybe because I don’t feel like talking. Or maybe to be a little bit mean. On the sidewalk, Krista says, “You didn’t thank the bus driver.”

“So?”

“It’s rude,” she says. “You’re so rude, Holly P. Eicher.”

“Oh, brother.” She’ll be on this all day. So I step back, lean into the bus’s open door, and shout, “THANK YOU!” No response.

Krista says, “Don’t you feel better?”

I feel worse, feel like the world’s criticizing me and bossing me around. This day’s terrible. My life’s terrible. School starts in ten days. “Come on,” I say, needing to sound in charge.

“Let’s go to Things.” It’s really “Things & Things & Things” but the cool girls at school say Things.

It’s the best store downtown, not a boring brick square, but more like a ski lodge built with dark wood. The doors are heavy, so walking in’s like entering a secret. College girls browse expensive gauzy skirts and V-neck blouses with swooping arms—clothes with fringe or beads, dangling tassels or feathers. Clerks let anyone—even us—sample fancy makeup and perfume from London and Paris, not like Mott’s Drugstore where ladies in smocks glare the second the door opens or Younkers, where makeup’s locked inside glass cases. Things also sells vases and dishes in wild shapes that regular dishes and vases never are, like triangles, and tweedy, velvety fabrics for women who sew their own clothes from Vogue patterns. There’s a wall of toys for little kids and babies, but not Barbies and Monopoly—chunky wooden trucks, and stuffed animals that aren’t boring teddy bears, but hippos and rhinos and a gigantic giraffe whose head grazes the ceiling. I spin racks of bracelets and earrings for hours, and there’s a girl with hair down to her butt who pierces ears for free—but anyone shopping there got their ears pierced ages ago. My deepest secret is that I pretend I’m this exact kind of cool girl, and maybe dopes like Krista believe me, but I know I’m a fake.

For my birthday in June, I asked for anything, *anything* from Things, inside one of their special purple shopping bags with Things & Things & Things printed in black block letters. Instead, I got a bathing suit from Sears, and not even a bikini. All I buy at Things is candy imported from England—Black Jacks and Fruit Pastilles, which cost more than three Hershey bars at Drug Fair. The flavor’s like soap. If I were rich, I’d take home the whole store.

Krista’s yakking about something, and we’re walking down the block, which is hard because the sidewalk’s crammed with card tables and racks, with people grabbing whatever’s on sale—Hawkeye T-shirts and bins of used paperbacks at Iowa Book & Supply, racks of summer skirts at Seiferts, sand candles at Gilda’s, buckets of plastic flowers at Every Bloomin’ Thing. Downtown is a big, hot confusion of slop hauled out to the sidewalk because, I guess, people happily buy crap off an outdoor table that they could care less about inside an air-conditioned store? How depressing.

I’m imagining Sidewalk Days in Chicago, imagining people stealing stuff off tables and running, Chicago people pulling a dusty plastic rose from a packed bucket marked “6 @ 25¢” and busting a gut laughing.

But Krista’s thrilled about every bargain, even these plastic flowers. She hands over a quarter for two yellow roses, one red, something purple, and two orange gladiolus stalks. The woman who takes the quarter adds four plastic daisies with smushed petals for free. Krista’s ecstatic, practically jumping up and down as we edge away, sliding through spaces in the crowd. She punches my shoulder lightly. “Only a quarter!”

“Plastic flowers?” I ask.

She says, “One’s for you, so we have matching yellow roses. That’s my thanks for coming downtown. Because we’re friends, right?”

*Friends.* I shut up.

Way more people here than I expected, and I bet I run into girls from school, my friends I’ve been avoiding all summer. Krista’s a year younger than me, and last year she was at Twain Elementary. When I moved here, I went to middle school—where we’ll both be in ten days. Maybe that’s why I came with her today, because Southeast will be hard for her, with her so-called best friend missing and her mom. People probably blame her. I guess I feel a little sorry for her. But also, that’s exactly why I’m always angry around her and why I ignore bus drivers and hate her plastic flowers. She doesn’t know real life. We were both standing there that day in January when she or maybe I got in a fight with Donna over something stupid and Donna ran off without us, and Krista and I went ice skating anyway. Maybe she or both of us or I even said, “Better she’s not here.”

We’re almost at Things, but Krista stops to paw through a table of 50 percent-off sweaters outside Alden.

“It’s ninety-five degrees,” I say, pointing to the electronic Iowa State Bank sign on the corner.

But she’s already pressing the bag of plastic flowers between her knees, pushing her head and its big, sloppy ponytail through the neck of a wildly striped sweater. My mother says horizontal stripes turn women into fat blobs, but I tell Krista the sweater’s cute, trying not to think about sweaty bodies trying it on all last winter, when it was inside the store. I hate that her mom’s not around warning about stripes, suggesting instead to try the green sweater.

Krista says, “Look at all the colors it matches.” She touches each stripe in turn. “Only four bucks.”

I glance at the tag and the Xs slashing out different prices, then point to the sign on the rack: “Fifty percent off the lowest price. So, you’re going to wear a Sidewalk Days sweater that costs two dollars.” She stares like I’m speaking Martian. I try joking: “That’s forty-eight plastic flowers.” I shouldn’t be so furious that she wants this cheap, ugly sweater, but I am.

“I love it.” She’s yanking off the sweater, getting herself stuck with her squirming and tugging—“Holly, I’m so hot!”—and I’m helping her—“Dang it, hold still”—and then there’s a woman right up beside us who says, “You girls are pretty. What are you, sixteen?”

Krista’s still trapped inside the sweater, but of course she can’t not answer, so she starts to say, “We’re actually—” and I cut in: “Sixteen and a half.”

Krista’s head pops free, and we peel the crunchy wool off her sweaty arms. How could this woman have seen enough of Krista, wrapped in a sweater, to think she’s pretty? So maybe the woman means me, and I’m the pretty girl who looks sixteen.

“I’m Kat,” the woman says.

“With a K?” Krista asks. “That’s my most favorite name.”

The woman nods. She’s wearing a black spaghetti strap midriff top with embroidered tulips on the yoke, faded cutoffs, and sandals with straps crisscrossed up her legs, which are gloriously tan. Best of all, she’s carrying a Things bag! She smiles, and her teeth dazzle, like she’s got more teeth—more everything—than other people and knows it. She’s exactly who I am in my mind.

Krista says, “You like my sweater, right?”

Just like her. Of all the questions to ask a glamorous stranger. It’s why I worry and why I’m mad at her all the time.

I say, “All the stripes.”

Kat passes me her shopping bag, and with both hands, she presses the sweater against Krista’s body. Krista looks down at her chest and says, “It’s happy colors. And only two dollars. You get one too, Holly.”

I say, “Krista, no. We absolutely cannot wear matching striped sweaters to school, not ever.”

Kat laughs, not haw-haw, but delicately, like jingle bells. “Wish there was another in my size,” she says, “but you found the only one, lucky girl. Snap it up.” She drapes the sweater over Krista’s arm.

A striped sleeve dangles out of a folded stack of sweaters on a table behind Kat. But I keep quiet. Obviously Kat doesn’t want this sweater.

“I’m visiting—” she says, and Krista jumps in to explain about Sidewalk Days, and we let her. Kat’s dark eyes pin me the way she pinned that sweater onto Krista. Sunglasses balance on top of her head, and I’m the one facing the sun, shading my eyes with one hand, working not to squint. It’s almost like this is what Kat wants, me with sun blaring against my eyes, her coolly watching. I interrupt: “Come on, Krista. Buy the sweater, and let’s go to Things.” I shove over Kat’s shopping bag, dying to know what she bought, though it’s not my business. Nothing heavy. Blouse?

“Are there good bargains at Things?” Krista asks. “What’d you buy?”

“No two-dollar sweaters,” Kat says. “I got this great makeup from London. Looks like a box of crayons, but for your face.”

“Mary Quant crayons?” I ask. Of course, I know those. And how expensive they are. The girls who are my friends at school rip out pictures from magazines showing Mary Quant models and their brilliant, peacock eyes. We all write “colour” with a “u” now.

“You use them?” Kat asks.

“Oh sure,” I say.

“Thought so,” she says. “Your look’s sophisticated for sixteen.”

“Because Holly moved here from Chicago,” Krista says.

Kat steps back, then steps forward again, cocking her head, looking at me and Krista the way she looked at the striped sweater. “Has anyone told you girls you could be models?” she asks.

I shrug, suspicious because obviously I’m really short, which I say, but Krista brags, “I’m five seven. My dad’s tall. He played basketball in high school and was in the state tournament and people thought he—”

Kat lifts one finger to quiet Krista. Weird catching someone else using my trick, like I’m replaceable. Kat says, “My travel partner, Max Van der Waal, the big-time fashion photographer—you’ve heard of him—could shoot some test photos of you girls. I work in New York City for *Seventeen* magazine, and we’re doing a feature on the Midwest and we’re scouting fresh faces. You girls know *Seventeen*, right?”

My friends at school love *Seventeen* and clip pictures they tape inside their lockers. When I’m alone, I skim the magazine in the school library to see what they’re talking about. Do I want my face in *Seventeen*, want girls turning the page to say, “I hate her hair,” the way my school friends do? I can’t imagine my faker face inside a locker, like someone’s dumb enough to think I’m some big deal.

Krista’s not smart about when to lie. “I only read books,” she says. “My mom loved magazines, but she’s gone.”

Kat’s eyebrows crunch into a V, and she says, “Ohhhh,” like a half question, and because I know what she’s thinking, I explain, “Not *dead* gone—run off. Missing. Like our friend Donna, who disappeared. We were the last to see her.” I don’t know why I say all that. Maybe because I don’t know if I believe a photographer named Max exists. Or if Kat really spells her name with a K. It’s embarrassing that Krista has all these problems, but it’s more embarrassing that I think Kat cares.

“I’m sorry,” Kat says and Krista mumbles, “Uh-huh.”

There’s a pause where Krista could say more, but she doesn’t. So I’m rude instead: “Are you really from *Seventeen*?”

“Totally legit,” Kat says. “But good question. I’ll give you paperwork to look over before we get going on the pictures. I’m thinking we could get you two friends the cover. Max is a genius at—”

“Donna’s my real best friend,” Krista says loudly and fast. “Not Holly. In case you wondered. Donna will be back for school, which is in ten days. She can’t miss our first day together at Southeast. I’ve known her since second grade, and we couldn’t wait to be thirteen together.” Krista keeps going, spilling everything to this stranger, when really we barely mention Donna, except secretly, like saying, “Safety in numbers.”

Kat’s face is confused, like regular girls right now should talk only about being excited about *Seventeen* and New York. Like we’re not supposed to have all these problems or

any. Maybe girls like us are too hard for her to figure out. Her face is definitely locked in a “figuring out” scowl. She feels sorry for Krista exactly the way I do, and everyone knows that’s different than being someone’s friend. I really think I don’t want friends. Let Krista have Donna. It’s not my fault she ran off that day.

Krista says, “Maybe can we put Donna in *Seventeen* instead of us? We traded school pictures every year, and also there’s one from my birthday party last October where she looks like a movie star. Donna would love being in *Seventeen*, probably more than me. She wants to be a movie star. She already picked out her name, Sheena Quinn. I just love it. Or. Maybe. Maybe if people saw her picture in *Seventeen* and...they would...? It’s probably stupid.”

Something’s wrong, and it’s that Krista stopped talking on her own. Usually someone finally interrupts. Oceans of people surround us, checking price tags, shouting, “It’s a dollar,” but mostly there’s weird, empty silence in my ears. I can’t look at her. I stare at the sidewalk, at a used-up, blackened piece of old gum cemented into the pavement.

Kat says, “I can’t...because, I mean...we need—OK. Bring Donna’s picture.”

Inside my head, words fill in: *Because we need live girls*. Kat and *Seventeen* could care less about dead girls like Donna because dead girls can’t sell clothes and makeup and acne cream and nail polish and Bonne Bell to live girls. Donna’s *dead*, snarls the mean voice in my head, even if my mom won’t say so.

“You know what?” Kat says abruptly. “I’m paying for that sweater. Must be hard without a mom. And no best friend.” There’s her phony smile. No one in real life is born with teeth that white.

Krista gives our first, last, and middle names as we stand in a line of people waiting to pay. She tells Kat she has no pets, she’s an only child, her dad’s a professor at the university: the usual stuff she tells. Then she does what I hate, which is interrupts herself to say something no one’s thinking, something no one wants said: “What do you think happened to Donna? People aren’t telling us the true truth. Right, Holly?” She blinks quickly, then squinches up her eyes. I hate when people cry because I just stand there watching.

“Um,” Kat says. “You could wear your new sweater in the pictures with Max.”

“I miss her so bad.”

“Donna’s fine,” Kat says. “I know she’ll be back.”

Krista’s eyes open wide, and she snuffles. “How do you know? What if Donna was kidnapped? What if my mom was kidnapped? I’m afraid to be downtown by myself. With Holly there’s safety in numbers, right?”

“Maybe you think too much,” Kat says.

“That’s what Holly tells me,” Krista says.



Kat says, "After this, we'll track down Max. He's wandering around downtown, and I know he's going to love you both." She passes me the Things bag to hold as she fumbles in her purse for money. We're one person away from the two pretty college girls adding up price tags on a scratch pad. They're fresh faces, like the girls in *Seventeen*. I could never be them because of too many things: me being the last person to see Donna alive; a mother who runs away once, twice, probably again because I saw that envelope of cash under her mattress. I feel ruined. After Health class last spring, my school friends counted nine months back from their birthdays to see when their parents did it. So funny, they thought, but not to me: nine months back from my birthday, my mom was buying her prom dress, maybe at this same store. "Busted," my mom said when I told her, and, "Don't blame yourself," which I didn't know I was supposed to.

Krista's still going: "Though Holly was with me the day Donna disappeared, so I don't know. Maybe I don't know anything. What happens to girls like Donna, when girls just disappear?"

"I don't know," Kat says in a sharp voice. "You're asking all these questions like I should know anything about any of this. I don't know your friend. Stop asking me what happened. There's all kinds of terrible people in the world, and I guess your friend had the bad luck to run into one of them."

"Bad luck?" Krista says. "Something so awful is bad luck?"

Krista's voice, her questions feel endless. I shout, "Say what everyone knows. Donna's *dead*." Surprising how easy it is, suddenly, to say the word. "Your best friend's *dead*. Dead, dead, dead."

Immediately Kat shouts back, "You don't know that. She's fine. Girls don't disappear and die. Girls like that end up fine every day. You'll see." She shoves over three crumpled dollar bills because of tax, but there's not enough change in the drawer, and one girl goes inside for a roll of quarters, and Kat says, "Dimes work," but there's only two dimes, so Kat says, "Keep the damn change." The college girl carefully folds Krista's ugly sweater into a shopping bag which she hands to Kat who pushes it toward Krista who wraps her arms tight around it like it's a squishy pillow.

"Holly P. Eicher," Krista says, each syllable shaky. "Kat's right. You don't know that. You don't know everything."

I think about my friends at school ripping down old pictures of girls every month after they finish the new *Seventeen*. Always another girl. I'll leave here someday, like my mom. "I'm sorry," I tell Krista, and I am. I'm no one's friend and never will be. I remember Donna's footsteps hitting the pavement as she ran. She was fast. Krista told me that day that Donna was the fastest girl in the fifth grade. We just went ice skating like we were supposed to because we didn't know. No one blamed us.

“Look,” Kat says. There’s a pause like she’s deciding what comes next. She speaks slowly. “I’ve got to check in with the magazine. This phone call could take a few minutes, so let’s all meet at Things & Things.”

“We’re setting up photos with Max?” Krista says. “You’re calling long distance to *Seventeen* in New York?”

“Yes, photos,” Kat says. “Yes, long distance to *Seventeen*.”

“You’ll tell them about us?”

She nods fast. “Everything.”

“Including our good luck meeting you today?”

Kat smiles, but she pulls down her sunglasses, like closing a door. “Absolutely,” she says. “Meeting me today is the best luck.” She hurries away, pushing through the crowd.

“I’m sorry,” I say, still not sure who I’m talking to.

Krista grabs my arm, pulling me toward Things & Things, and I realize I’ve got Kat’s shopping bag, which I show Krista. “She’ll be right back,” Krista says. Her gaze is so fiery intense that neither of us can look away. If she cries, I will too. So I say, “We’ll give it back then.”

Krista insists we wait in Things & Things for what feels like two hours, until the girls at the perfume counter get so sick of us we’re not allowed to spray even one more bottle. Finally, Krista gives up, and we go wait for the bus. Krista says, “Guess we get to keep whatever she bought,” but all that’s inside the bag is a copy of the *Daily Iowan* newspaper, a bus schedule, and a pack of Band-Aids. No Mary Quant crayons. I stuff everything into the trash, even the shopping bag, and Krista adds her striped sweater and the plastic flowers, including our matching yellow roses, though, honestly, they have nothing to do with Kat and I kind of wish she’d keep them. She and I sit scrunched close on the concrete bench, waiting for the bus, no talking, not even thinking. When a scruffy, long-haired student who looks a little like the guy we saw earlier lifts a hand in a half wave and plops onto the bench, we immediately stand up like we’re linked together and walk to the curb, balancing on its edge, waiting right exactly where the bus will pull up to take us home.