

Excerpt from *Blue to the Sky*

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Chapter 1

Presenting Pizza

*Pizza, pizza,
I wish I could eat ya*

In ten minutes, the lunch bell will ring and I can escape. My stomach throbs. A timpani drumbeat of ache. Could be something I ate this morning, something that nestled up beside a cashew or a pistachio en route to the grocery store. Or that maybe contains traces of any of my other allergens: milk, eggs, sesame, flax, peanuts.

Maybe I need to go to the bathroom, which since kindergarten I've avoided because of those black toilet seat mouths and the roar of their flushers. Usually, I stay away from public washrooms, holding it for home. Since I dropped out of kindergarten, home has been my school, so it was never an issue. Until this year. Today, I have to just forget about what's bothering my stomach, and that's easy because all I can think about is pizza.

*Your saucy aroma hangs in the air.
But I can't eat you; it's not fair.*

In the front row, where the teacher made them sit at the beginning of the year, Ameeet and Manuel make screechy noises with their chairs. Teeth-gnashing, mouth-drooling, starving tigers waiting in their cages for the bell to ring so they can eat their pizzas.

"Ella, we have just enough time." Mrs. Navid's voice snaps fingers as she walks toward me. "You're up now."

No, no, no, no! I'm distracted by the spicy smell; my stomach rumbles. Throbby yet growly too. Can Mrs. Navid hear that? Can the class? All of those eyes collect on me. Jasmine and Abigail and Madison and Sophia — those girls, past friends back in the early days of kindergarten before I left.

I hold on to Sophia's eyes for a moment. She lasted the longest, all the way until her ninth birthday.

Now those girls stare at Allergic-to-Everything Girl. That's what they call me. I want to roll their eyes off me. My best friend and rescuer from eternal loneliness pokes my back. "You can do it," Zenia whispers.

Mrs. Navid stops at my desk, her fingertips turning white as they press on top of it. "Ella, your presentation. Is it ready?"

Presenting ... pizza! I hear Mozart's *Triumph from The Magic Flute* in my head as I picture a row of waiters in tuxedos with silver serving platters lining up to deliver every kind of pizza imaginable. Mushroom and green pepper, pepperoni and cheese, barbecued chicken, meatball and bacon, black olives and feta, pierogi and french fry, dessert pizza — chocolate maybe with ice cream — I'm sure that's a thing.

Best of all, I'm going to be able to eat them soon. One week from today, at ten o'clock in the morning, the allergist will test me on milk and eggs. And I'm going to pass the tests this time; I can sense it. Dr. Best almost promised me that I would grow out of these allergies. I don't care about the eggs — there are no eggs in pizza unless it's cauliflower crust, and who wants to eat some fakey-flaky cauliflower crust, anyway?

"Your project on food ingredients. You said you would be ready today."

"Today?" I repeat. *Today, today, delay, delay.*

"Yes. We could get it over with this morning."

My knees jiggle. I try to pin them down with my hands. My presentation has been ready since last Saturday when I attended the library's first workshop for poetry month. Our city's poet laureate, the amazing Marion Degree, taught the workshop, and I wrote my speech with her inspiration. Rewrote it a few times too, although she never had the time to make me share. Luckily. I just can't talk in front of so many strangers. Since then, I've read it and rewritten it and listened to Tessa, the South African computer voice, read it out loud while I time it.

"You said you left your speech notes at home yesterday. Do you have them with you today?"

The words of my talk are stored on memory bytes inside my head. I actually don't need notes. But if I answer Mrs. Navid carefully, I won't have to lie. "No. I do not have any notes with me here today." Even with my hands squeezing my knees hard, they won't stop jiggling. My legs can't hold me with jiggly knees. I can see me stumbling to the front on my noodle legs. Before I make it, I will collapse to the floor. Fingers will point at me. Everyone will laugh. Braden, Charlie, and Cooper will make ugly mouth snorts.

Mrs. Navid sighs hot-air balloon disappointment. Her eyebrows meet and discuss me angrily.

She doesn't take me seriously anyway. It's my curly hair. It parties too much for anyone to take me seriously. I pat some of the curls close to my face so they settle down, but that doesn't help.

"You did tell me you wanted to work on this."

Did I tell her, or did I just nod when she and Mom discussed public speaking at meet-the-teacher night?

"I'll need to mark you Incomplete." Mrs. Navid writes something in her red notebook.

That's exactly how I feel! That's the mark Mrs. Navid should give me. Two years ago, my Omi gave me a T-shirt with a blank

chalkboard on the front. I will take my chalk and print *Incomplete* on the front as soon as I get home. *Incomplete. Can't compete. Total defeat.*

"I'll be emailing your mother. She can help you."

"No!" My mother won't help. She will lecture me, take me to the doctor, try to fix me.

Mrs. Navid looks up. "Are you ready to present, then?" She says it pillow soft. *Mrs. Navid just wants to encourage you to reach your potential*, I hear Mom's voice tell me in my head.

No, no, no! My teeth clamp shut. I can't.

"Mrs. Navid, Mrs. Navid!" Zenia waves her hand. I feel the breeze against the back of my neck.

Mrs. Navid can't ignore Zenia or she'll just get louder. "Yes, Zenia?"

"Can I come up with Ella?" Zenia asks.

"What do you mean?"

"We practiced our speeches together. We know each other's by heart. If I stand near her, I can be like her teleprompter."

"Very well. Ella?"

"But the bell's going to ring."

"Oh, I think students in sixth grade should have enough audience manners to listen to the end of a three-minute speech. Am I right, class?"

"Yes, Mrs. Navid." The drone from the worker bees. But I see Manuel sink down in his chair, rolling his eyes, and Ameet shakes his head.

I push my hands against the desktop to lift myself from the chair. The desk feels solid and smooth and gives me hope.

Zenia steps up beside me and tugs at my elbow.

We walk up together.

Behind me, Sophia giggles.

One step at a time, I'm walking on top of shifting clouds, a moving sidewalk that stops and starts. Finally, we get to the front. "Do I have to face the class?" I ask Mrs. Navid.

She nods.

I turn slowly. But Zenia moves to the side and stays facing me. She smiles.

"Make eye contact," Zenia whispers.

Mrs. Navid said we should sweep the room with our eyes, then look directly at someone sitting in front of us. I nod at Zenia, imagining broom eyes gathering all the dust on the floor in a heap. Anything to stop my knees from knocking. But the cloud floor rises up around me just the same. My legs sink into it. I can't fall down. I look at all of the eyes. Crinkly corners, giggles sparking from all those girls who were at that birthday party three years ago. One slippery peanut candy and a trip to the ER ended it.

They all want me to talk quickly, get my presentation over with so they can go to lunch. I shouldn't ruin another meal for them.

But I can't do anything quickly right now. The timpani beats louder in my stomach.

I take a slow, deep breath and start. "Food without faces." My voice wobbles, and I stop.

Zenia is mouthing the next words, but my eyes blur.

"Food withouuuut ..." I start again, croaking, "fa-ces."

Up at the front, Ameet grins at Manuel. I see his shoulders shake. Manuel rocks with sneaky, silent laughter.

That's it. I lose my voice completely. Rice Chex cereal backs up in my throat. If I try once more, I'm sure my stomach will empty itself out through my mouth, possibly even my nose.

Please don't let me upchuck

That would be the worst luck

My neck stretches, my chin reaches forward. I cup my hand
around my mouth.

The bell rings.

Luckily, grade six forgets its manners and takes off.