

**SO B. IT**  
**BY WEEKS**

*(The readers take their places at the podium—from SL →SR: , , ,  
(Narrator).)*

**(HEIDI)**

One thing I knew for a fact from the time I knew anything at all was that I didn't have a father. What I had was Mama and Bernadette, and as far as I was concerned, that was plenty.

Bernadette started off being the next-door neighbor, but that didn't last for very long.

**(HEIDI)**

My mother loved me in her own special way, but she couldn't take care of me herself because of her bum brain. Bernie once explained it to me by comparing Mama to a broken machine.

**(BERNIE)**

All the basic parts are there, Heidi, and from the outside she looks like she should work just fine, but inside there are lots of mysterious little pieces busted or bent or missing altogether, and without them her machine doesn't run quite right.

**(NARRATOR)**

And it never would.

Bernadette understood about Mama. She knew how to talk to her and how to teach her things. The trick with Mama was to do things over and over the exact same way every single time until she got it.

**(HEIDI)**

That's how Bernadette taught Mama how to use the electric can opener. Every day for weeks she brought over the cat food cans and opened them in front of Mama.

**(BERNIE)**

Watch me, Precious. Lift up. Put the can under. Press down. Listen to the hum. Done.

**(HEIDI)**

Pretty soon Mama was saying the words along with her. Well, not all of them, but she'd nod her head and say...

**(BERNIE)**

done

**(HEIDI)**

...when that part came. After a while Bernadette let Mama try it herself

**(NARRATOR)**

At first she couldn't remember what to do, she got the order all mixed up, but Bernie kept working with her and talking softly to her, and finally one day Mama opened a can all by herself.

**(NARRATOR)**

Done.

**(HEIDI)**

I don't know who was happier about it, Bernadette or Mama.

After that, Mama opened cans all the time. Soup and cat food and tuna fish. Any kind of can.

**(HEIDI)**

In fact, we had to keep them hidden up high, or over at Bernadette's because if Mama saw a can she opened it...

**(NARRATOR)**

...whether you happened to need what was inside it right then or not.

**(HEIDI)**

Bernie taught me everything I knew and she was a very good teacher. When she explained things, they shot into my brain like arrows. She could describe an Arctic blizzard or cross-pollination, and suddenly I'd be leaning into the bite of a freezing wind or riding on a bumblebee's back right into the middle of a snap dragon.

Nobody ran in Bernadette's world—

**(NARRATOR)**

They skittered or high-tailed it.

**(NARRATOR)**

They didn't whine, they puled and moaned.

**(HEIDI)**

She knew a million words, and when she couldn't find one to fit, she'd make one up. Like when Mama got frustrated and started scrunching up her face and working her jaw, Bernadette would say—

**(BERNIE)**

Your mama's cooking up a royal rimple, Heidi.

**(HEIDI)**

A royal rimple sounds like some kind of fancy pudding to me, but Mama cooked them up on a pretty regular basis and, believe me, hers didn't come with whipped cream and a cherry on top. I loved my mother, and I know she loved me too, but if we hadn't had Bernadette, we'd have been in big trouble.

**(NARRATOR)**

Heidi didn't tell Bernie the morning she went down to the bus station get her ticket.

**(HEIDI)**

She thought I'd gone to the library. It was the first time I'd ever lied to her. I didn't like the way it made me feel, dirty or something, so I was anxious to set it straight as soon as I got home. When I told her what I'd done and showed her the ticket, she was livid.

**(BERNIE)**

I've poured my whole self into you, Heidi, like warm milk into a bucket. Why are you doing this now? Why can't you just let things be?

**(HEIDI)**

Because things aren't the way they're supposed to be.

**(BERNIE)**

How are they supposed to be?

**(HEIDI)**

A person is supposed to know where she came from, Bernie.

**(BERNIE)**

We've been over this already. It doesn't matter where you came from, it only matters that you're here.

**(HEIDI)**

Maybe that's what matters to you, but I'm not like you, Bernie. I don't want to be like you and I don't want to be like Mama either.

**(BERNIE)**

Are you trying to hurt me? Is that what this is all about?

**(HEIDI)**

It has nothing to do with you, Bernie. It's about me, don't you get it? You think I'll forget about soof and Hilltop and all the rest of it, you want me to forget, but I won't. If I do, I'll end up like Mama—full of missing pieces.

**(BERNIE)**

The pieces you're missing are not important ones, Heidi.

**(HEIDI)**

Don't tell me what's important! You don't know. You don't know anything. You want me to be like you, but if you really loved me you'd want me to be normal.

**(NARRATOR)**

Bernie turned her face away as if she'd been slapped.

**(BERNIE)**

I feel as though I don't even know you anymore.

**(NARRATOR)**

She burst into tears.

**(HEIDI)**

I cried then too. Partly because I felt bad about hurting her feelings, but mostly because I realized that what she'd just said was true. She didn't really know me anymore. I wasn't sure I knew myself. I wanted to go to Liberty, I needed to go, but I was also afraid and I couldn't admit my fear to Bernie, she would've pounced on it like a cat on a yarn ball, unwinding my resolve until it had no shape.

**(BERNIE)**

It's not safe, Heidi. You're too young to go by yourself.

**(HEIDI)**

I didn't tell her that it also wasn't legal. Why should I fuel her fire when I knew she'd find out soon enough anyway? *(to Bernie)* I have to go alone, you can't come with me and neither can Mama. There isn't any choice.

**(BERNIE)**

Yes there is: don't go. Wait until you're older. Listen to me, I'm not saying forget about it, I'm saying give it time. We can keep calling Hilltop. We can keep showing your mama the photographs. Maybe she'll remember something.

**(HEIDI)**

You're just saying that to try to keep me here. You know Mama can't remember things, Bernie. I don't care what you say, I'm going.

**(BERNIE)**

You may not go to Liberty and that is final, Heidi

**(HEIDI)**

You're not my mother. You can't tell me what to do. You're not even family. You're nobody. Nobody!

Bernie snatched the ticket. She was so angry she didn't even look like herself anymore.

**(BERNIE)**

Is this what you want, Heidi? Is this all that matters to you anymore?

**(HEIDI)**

Yes.

**(BERNIE)**

Fine. Then go. Just go.

**(NARRATOR)**

She threw the ticket on the floor, stomped across the kitchen and through the doorway into her apartment, slamming the door behind her.

**(HEIDI)**

It's the only time I remember ever h(Narrator)ng seen that door closed.

At dinnertime, Bernie finally came over and heated up a can of stew. She spooned it onto plates for Mama and me, but she took her own plate back to her place. This time she left the door ajar.

**(HEIDI)**

I put Mama to bed alone for the first time in my life. Luckily she didn't give me a hard time. I even got her to shower and wash her hair, which was usually Bernie's department. Later, I took my bath and when I was lying in bed, Bernie came in and sat down on the very edge of the bed,

**(BERNIE)**

You mustn't lie to me ever again, Heidi.

**(HEIDI)**

I had to Bernie, otherwise you would have tried to stop me from getting the ticket.

**(BERNIE)**

We both know I can't stop you, don't we Heidi-Ho?

**(HEIDI)**

I was going to New York by myself. I felt a strange hollow sensation in the pit of my stomach and my mouth tasted funny, metallic like the water from the drinking fountain at the library. I swallowed hard and looked up at the clear, blue sky. It was comforting to know that a piece of that very same sky would be hanging over Liberty when I finally got there.

