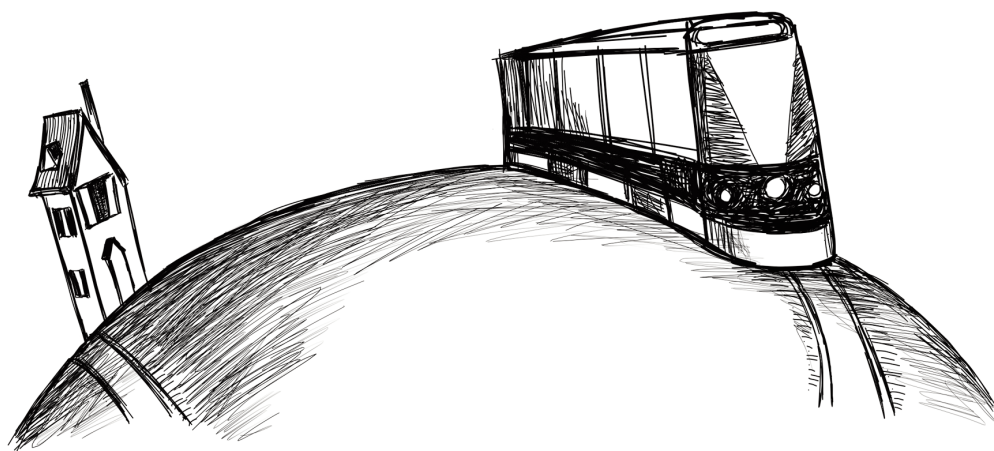


CHAPTER 1



THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE TRAM LINE



Sam was bouncing. All over the house, all over the yard—TODAY WAS THE DAY!

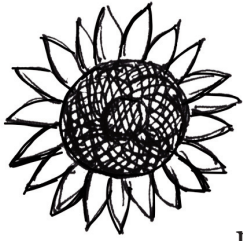
He was so excited—and yet so On Edge—that he'd already knocked over at least Ten Important Things inside the house, including a pitcher of sunflowers. His father had sent him outside, shouting, "SAMMY! NO CRASHING!"

Small chance of that.

Sam had hours to fill before he could go try out for the baseball team, and he couldn't just do nothing. So he climbed on top of the shed, bellowed "MY NAME'S SAM" at anyone in earshot, leaped over the lettuce patch, stood on his head and looked at the world upside down. Later on he figured out an anagram for NO CRASHING—CHIN GROANS.

Sam loved word puzzles. Before long he'd thought of at least two anagrams for TODAY'S THE DAY—

TIDY TOADS—YEAH,
IT'S TOAD HEYDAY—



and another for SAM BELLOWS LOUD—
OWL SLAMS DOUBLE—
and said to himself, *They all sound Great!* Then he ran around the garden, playing chase with his pet cat Clio.

“Clio,” Sam’s Uncle Donovan once said, “That’s an a-mews-ing name.” Sam laughed at the pun, and at Clio, who kept veering away from the unpredictable sprinkler Sam’s dad had hooked up to an outside faucet.

Mostly Clio just lurked in the bushes, and pounced on soccer balls, or catnip mice, or whatever hopped by—though Sam saw her catch a sparrow once—not something he liked remembering.

By ten o’clock Sam had gone in and out the back door at least a hundred times, looking for a tennis ball and a catcher’s mitt. He’d been told not to slam the door, ten times, for sure. But the screen door at the back of their house just sort of slammed on its own.

Didn’t it.

Whenever anyone went in or out.

Besides, his father said every week he was going to fix that door and find the key to the one at the front and he never did. He never had the time, he always said.

And anyway, TODAY WAS THE DAY—Sam was Ten Years Old and today he was determined to try out for the baseball team at Byrd City Park. Which is why he was outside now, in his blue-and-gold shirt, the colour of his favourite baseball team, practising catching—bouncing a tennis ball off the side of the house and catching it when it rebounded—Bam!—

Sam tried to be quiet, but you could hear the noise everywhere in the house and, throwing the ball again, he wondered if people could hear him maybe even a whole kilometre away (1093.61 yards—Sam was good at numbers. He knew how far it was between bases: 60 feet. Or 18.288 metres—he’d learned metric conversion too). Then he flinched as he lost his concentration and dropped the ball.

BAM! he threw it harder, impatient with himself, impatient to be off to the park. And BAM! threw it again, wanting to keep on practising, just in case it helped—practise even on his own, today of all days—

On his own because this morning no one had had time to play catch. “No time today, sport,” his father had said.

“Ask Cory,” his mother had said.
“He’ll play with you. Or Ann will.”



But no such luck. His brother and sister were busy—Cory off to play basketball, Annie to practise diving and swimming. “Sorry,” they both said. “Maybe tomorrow?”

Even Uncle Donovan wasn’t willing to play today—though he often wrestled with Sam, threatening to turn him into a pretzel. Or showed him magic tricks, chanted crazy rhymes, and told stories about explorers caught in the ice and giant birds that picked people up and carried them off to their secret lair. Sometimes he glared fiercely and added “even pterodactyls (that means ‘wing-fingers,’ Sammy).”

On a good day, Sam laughed with him, but today Uncle Donovan just said “No.” Croaked ‘no’ was more like it. He’d come down with a bad cold and had lost his voice. *He’s being really crabby*, Sam thought. Almost as annoying as the kids at school, the ones who kept teasing him, telling him he was too short to join the team. It wasn’t their team, even if they said it was.

His last name made everything worse. Swallow. Face it. He was Sam Swallow.

In Byrd City.

Yes, he knew that Byrd City was named for Admiral Byrd, the great explorer—he’d been told it over and over—“that’s why that big bronze statue stands in the centre of town.” “Neat,” Sam always answered. But who cares about a statue with an owl always perched on the top of its head? Not Sam. Not when he had to deal with catcalls on the playground.

The Weaver twins were especially annoying. They kept asking him to fly.

It’s not funny.

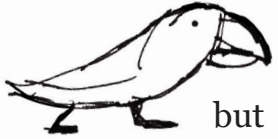
Sam ignored the Weaver twins whenever they teased him like that to get his attention. Most of the time. Occasionally he’d think of throwing one of his Uncle Donovan’s weird rhymes back at them.

Donovan Donovan Sullivan Blake

Call me a name and your belly will ache

But rhymes never solved anything. So usually Sam just laughed the teasing off and went back to whatever he was doing. Maybe a number puzzle. He just wished things were different, that’s all.

And he really didn’t like being called Sammy.
It’s a little kid’s name.



OK, he was short—he knew that—but he wasn't little, and his name was Sam, not Sammy, though that's the name his father called him by. Others too. Even Parker their parrot kept repeating SamMEE, SamMEE. Over and over.

But then Sam remembered how Cory and Annie argued with each other—who was smarter, who could hold their breath longer—"I can"—"Can not"—"Can too"—"No way"—"Way"—and figured *no-one's right all the time*.

When the kids at school told Sam he couldn't play baseball, for instance, that wasn't true at all. He could catch really well. He knew that. And run as fast as the rest of them, too. As for batting a ball, and pitching, and fielding—well, he was learning. Cory showed him his special three-fingered pitch. His dad was always showing him how to swing a bat. And his sister Annie, who was 12, said things like "Focus—let everything else fall away, like water off a widgeon's back." *Whatever that meant*.

He just had go to the Park and show everyone what he could do.

"Forget those other guys, Sam," Cory said. "Wear your name—be proud of who you are."

Easy for him to say, Sam thought. He's 14. He's already tall. He's always eating. And he's not here.

Nor is anyone else. They're all busy.

Maybe looking after Littlebird. Oliver. His little brother.

"Littlebird' was Annie's name for Oliver. She'd called him that right from the start, and everybody else just copied her.

Someone was usually looking after Littlebird—feeding him, reading him stories, rocking him to sleep, singing him that kookaburra lullaby they always sang—

Well, maybe right now they were doing something else. Didn't matter.

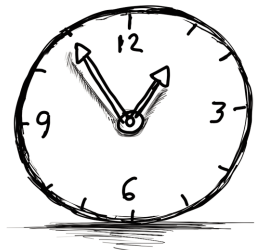
Uncle Donovan, though—Sam knew for sure what Uncle Donovan was doing. He was hovering over a crossword puzzle, being grumpy.

Bam!

I have to get on a team, Sam told himself, throwing the ball against the house again—Today! BAM! and

BAM!—

till five minutes to twelve, when his mother called quietly from the screen



door, “Sammy, come in for lunch. Please stop crashing the house, and please don’t slam the door—you’ll wake up Littlebird.”

“Okay,” Sam said, as he climbed the five steps from the yard to the deck. “And after lunch I’m going right to the park.”

He was laughing as he pushed open the screen door and stepped inside—until he heard it SLAM! behind him.

“Sammy,” his father was sharp-eyed and stern: “I’ve told you a thousand times: Stay In or Go Out, but Do Not Slam!”

“But,” Sam started to say—

But Uncle Donovan interrupted, rasping, “Sammy, Control Yourself—or you’ll—you’ll—you’ll turn into something I can’t think of—” His throat choked up and his threat turned into a thunderous fit of raucous coughing.

He makes more noise than I do, Sam thought. More noise than me and the door together.

Annie was already sitting down at the kitchen table, her hair still wet from swimming. Clio the cat—curled up on an overstuffed armchair, perilously close to another pitcher of sunflowers—was opening

one eye from time to time to stare at Parker the parrot—who kept squawking. “NO CRASHING, NO CRASHING!”

Clio ignored everyone else—until Cory stumbled back into the house, complaining loudly that he’d just bumped his head on the doorframe. Clio leaped from the chair and slipped toward the back door then, ready to dart underfoot when it next opened.

But Sam scarcely noticed. He was so excited he almost couldn’t eat. Today was the day when his life was going to change—

Then suddenly he looked at the clock—five minutes to one ALREADY?

“I’ll be late,” he blurted, “the tryouts will be starting—“

“Better hop to it then,” his father said.

“You could take the tram,” said his mother.

“Breathe deep,” said his sister.

“See ya,” said his brother.

Littlebird was nowhere to be seen.

The last thing Sam heard, as he and Clio rushed out the door, was his uncle’s scratchy voice flapping, “Don’t get yourself in such a twist—be free as a bird—but watch out for that cat or you’ll answer

to me.”

Sam didn't see the raven flying low overhead, or the long shadow that the raven cast on the ground in front of him, or the eagle circling high above. Or the cat under his feet.

Nor did he pay attention to anything that might be in his way, like the ball that he'd left on the deck when he'd last come in to the house, and that anyone could easily have slipped on or skidded on or tripped over.

Suddenly

flying?

The deck upside down—

Or falling?

The earth so close—

Slam.

And instantly

still.



Something curious and very un-ordinary had happened.

When the door slammed, it made no sound at all.

