



What if being a bully  
was the only way to survive?

# IMAGINING ELSEWHERE

SARA HOSEY

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Books

**Content Warning:** This book touches upon the topics of bullying and suicide that may be triggering to some readers.

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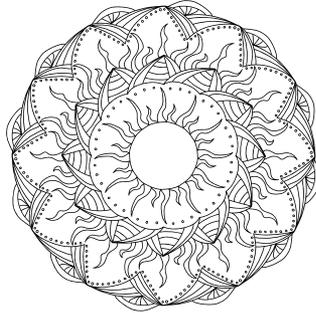
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*For Jess, John, and Julian*







# Chapter 1

Moments after she met Candi Clifton for the first time, Astrid Friedman-Smith experienced a sinking feeling of recognition. She knew karma when it came around to bite her in the ass.

It was on that very first day at her new school that Astrid found herself flying—literally flying—across the cafeteria and then falling face down on the polished linoleum while her classmates laughed and threw milk cartons and French fries at her.

She knew she deserved it, especially because her own poor choices had been one of the main reasons she was at this new school in the first place. It was the fall of 1988 when they moved from Queens to Elsewhere, New York, in part because Astrid had a not-so-

insignificant problem with bullying and harassing other students. A problem so big, in fact, that it had made the New York area tabloid newspapers, which ran third-and fourth-page headlines like, “High Performing High Schoolers Get an A+ in Cruelty” and “Out on Her Ass-Trid: Lead Bully Expelled From Prep School.”<sup>1</sup>

Astrid had lived in Elsewhere for a full two weeks before that first day in the cafeteria and she’d still believed the move had been punishment enough. This was partly because, before the move, when Astrid had looked up Elsewhere in the World Book Encyclopedia,<sup>2</sup> all she was able to discover was that it was a small, economically-depressed community where the high taxes were matched only by a startlingly high suicide rate.

*Some real small-town values right there*, Astrid had thought. She’d imagined that if she could simply survive her senior year at Elsewhere High, she’d be fine. She’d had no idea that surviving Elsewhere might actually be a challenge.

She’d heard of Candi before she’d met her—and even seen a picture of her. For some inexplicable reason, there was a lurid painting of a twelve-year-old Candi hanging up in the public library. From what Astrid had gathered, this Candi girl, despite only being in high school, ran the town of the Elsewhere.

This made no sense to Astrid, but then again, there were lots of things about her new town that she hadn’t been able to fully comprehend. How it was possible, for example, that the town simply “didn’t

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<sup>1</sup> But we’ll get to that.

<sup>2</sup> The hard copies of Wikipedia. Big books in an alphabetical set, they covered lots of topics, but were sort of limited. For example, there was no entry for anything really “contemporary” and there was no good sex stuff, much to the dismay of many middle schoolers.

have cable” and barely got network television stations?<sup>3</sup> Or why was it that everyone was so scrawny? And not thin in a fashionable New York way but unhealthy, sunken-eyed and sallow. And why, at least if the classes Astrid had attended that first day were any indication, did no one seem all that concerned with attendance, academics, or really anything close to scholarly rigor at Elsewhere High?

Astrid couldn’t ask these questions though, because, up until the day she met Candi, no one was willing to actually speak to her. All of her overtures of friendship had been met with either blank indifference, nervous giggling, or wide-eyed, outright fear.

That all changed the day she met Candi.

Astrid was sitting at one end of a long table, empty except for a cute, nerdy kid alone at the other end, immersed in a D&D rulebook.<sup>4</sup> Astrid was—strategically—sensorially-cocooned: The Cure blasting on her headphones, eyes glued to her blue binder, on which she was putting the finishing touches on an elaborate rendering of the words “THE SUGARCUBES,” and chewing on the turkey sandwich she’d just bought and then customized (removing the turkey and putting chips in its place).

She had almost forgotten herself, munching away, when a strange sensation overtook her—it was as though someone had thrown a big down comforter over the entire cafeteria. She looked up to see that everyone was talking differently, standing differently. They had an unconvincing nonchalance about them, as though a camera crew had entered the room and they were trying to “act natural.”

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<sup>3</sup> Once upon a time, if you had a good antenna on the top of your house, your television was able to “stream” (not what we called it) 7 or 8 stations. *And that was it.*

<sup>4</sup> Don’t ask Astrid how she knew what it was. She wouldn’t want to talk about it.

And then, there she was.

Candi.

She wore a white cinch-belt over a skin-tight pink dress, layered pink-and-white socks and white ked sneakers, and dozens of bracelets on each arm. Her voluminous blonde hair, which framed her face like a lion's mane, added several inches to her height. She walked like a runway model, drawing each knee up before shooting her pointed foot forward, like an archer drawing an arrow. Lift, shoot, lift, shoot.

Other students parted to let her pass. She was flanked with a girl on each side, who walked just a bit behind her, reminding Astrid of the v-shaped formation birds flew in.

Frozen mid-chew, Astrid wondered if they had planned the entrance. It felt like something out of a John Hughes movie.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the music still streaming into Astrid's ears helped, giving the trio's dramatic march a soundtrack.

As it became clear the girls were headed toward Astrid, Astrid's tablemate quickly put the rulebook in his pocket and scurried away.

Astrid longed to follow him but was pinned in place as Candi, with a flip of her magnificent hair, rested her gaze on Astrid's face.

Awkwardly, Astrid put down the pen she was gripping and, despite her churning stomach, forced a hopeful smile. Astrid, who had been popular, really popular, at her old school, thought maybe this would be her chance, her introduction into the upper echelons of Elsewhere society. She willed herself to play it cool. Or at least cool-ish.

Candi crossed her arms and regarded her coldly. Astrid stopped smiling.

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<sup>5</sup> John Hughes made a bunch of 80s movies that, for many of us, really capture the 80s teen experience. Be warned, though, like a lot of 80s pop culture, they're totally racist and sexist.

Her heart raced with fear and, she realized, a bit of excitement. This was the most socially stimulating encounter she'd had in weeks. And, she couldn't help but admit, Candi was startlingly beautiful. Beyond her basic good looks—she had the face of a Sears catalogue model and the figure of someone in an aerobics workout video<sup>6</sup>—she was somehow luminous, as if she were being followed around by her own special lighting crew. Astrid wanted to snort contemptuously and pretend to refocus on her drawing, but she found that she couldn't take her eyes off of Candi.

Candi's lips moved, but her words were inaudible to Astrid, who still had music blaring into her ears.

Astrid moved one headphone to the side and said, "Sorry, hi? What did you say?"

Candi widened and then narrowed her eyes.

Astrid gave a closed-lip smile and removed the headphones completely, pushing them down to rest around her neck and, after fumbling with the player, turning the music off.

"What's that?" Candi said impatiently, gesturing toward the table. "Is that a transistor radio?"

Astrid looked down and then back up at Candi. "Yeah, basically," she said. "It has a tape player. With headphones. It's a . . ." She didn't want to appear patronizing, but it seemed to Astrid that the other girl actually didn't know. *Upstate* was clearly behind the times in so many ways. It was possible they hadn't heard of the invention yet. "It's a Walkman?"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This was actually high praise.

<sup>7</sup> A Walkman is a tape player you could carry around—this was a brand new idea in the early 80s! Later, there was a "Discman," which played CDs, which were . . . oh forget it.

Candi hummed, a low and lovely noise that could have meant comprehension or agreement or even disapproval.

“I’m Astrid, by the way,” she said.

“Astrid,” Candi repeated archly.

No one else in the cafeteria was even pretending not to watch them. Instead, they stood, wide-eyed and spellbound.

“You’re . . . um, you’re Candi, right?” Astrid asked. She sat up a little straighter. It seemed to her that this might be an audition. Somehow, however, no one had given her the script.

Candi stared stonily.

“I’ll take it,” the other girl said at last.

“What?” Astrid asked.

“I want the radio,” Candi said. “And the headphones.”

Despite herself, Astrid felt her cheeks flush, her breathing coming too fast and shallow. She knew—she knew all too well from her past experiences—that she had to somehow assert herself, make it clear that she wouldn’t be pushed around. But, having been on the other side of this situation—having been the bully—she also felt she had too few options. She wasn’t going to try to fight the other girl, obviously. She was seriously outnumbered. But placidly handing over the brand new Walkman that she had used all of her money to buy would only make it clear that she was ripe for future exploitation and abuse. She concluded that she’d have to fall back on what she did best.

Channeling her inner-Heather,<sup>8</sup> Astrid said, “Um, what’s your damage? I don’t know how they do things in Elsewhere, but usually people in human society get to know each other, hang out and then,

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<sup>8</sup> Heather Chandler, that is, from the iconic 1989 cult classic, *Heathers*.

sure, maybe borrow each other's stuff once they're friends? Which, I have a feeling we are not gonna be. So, um, that's a no." She closed with a mock-sincere smile.

A gasp went up from the audience. Instead of angry, Candi looked more like an affronted teacher, her mouth agape in shock.

"It seems we have a misunderstanding," Candi said, adopting her own fake-smile. "*This* is how we do things in Elsewhere." She reached out a long arm and picked up the Walkman. But the headphones were still around Astrid's neck and she was pulled forward over the table before the headphones came free from the device, snapping back at her.

Suddenly a male voice called, "Get her, Candi! Take her down!"

Astrid glanced over her shoulder. Her classmates, some with their arms folded across their chests, others leaning on each other jauntily, were no longer silently observing. They were murmuring, giggling. Astrid was alarmed to realize she didn't understand what was happening. What did that guy mean by "get her"?

She regretted not scrambling away when the nerd at the other end of the table had. She was out of her depth with this girl, outnumbered in this crowd.

And yet Astrid couldn't—or wouldn't—completely abase herself here, couldn't just walk away and let the other girl publicly rip her off. So, staying the course, she began to step out from the picnic-bench style cafeteria table<sup>9</sup> saying, "Oh my God. Take a chill pill. I will loan it to you if you ask, but this is totally uncool."

"You're falling," Candi observed, her voice neutral.

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<sup>9</sup> Do these still exist or does everyone sit on ergonomic/hypoallergenic yoga balls at lunch now?

And she was right. As Astrid tried to slide out of her seat, her leg somehow became tangled in her backpack strap. Suddenly, her arms were pinwheeling and her legs were shooting out behind her.

Her half-eaten sandwich plopped to the ground beside Astrid as she landed painfully on her knees and hands, her palms pressing against the sticky floor.

It was silent for a beat and then, suddenly, shockingly, everyone started laughing. The entire cafeteria was screaming and hooting.

Astrid picked up her bag and scrambled to her feet, the blood rushing to her head, making her feel even dizzier. Her focus narrowed: She simply needed to escape this room.

Why did the doors seem so far away?

“You can’t stop falling!” Candi laughed.

Astrid felt what she imagined to be a hand pushing her from behind. This was when she flew, her arms outstretched Superman-style, before she found herself on the ground again, cheek to linoleum. Again, she pushed herself up with her palms, but now the floor seemed impossibly slippery, as if someone had spilled milk or juice. The general hilarity continued, more and more uproarious, as Astrid rose and again tried to move toward the impossibly distant cafeteria door. Unbelievably, she fell a third time, tripping over her own feet and pitching forward, knocking her head against a plastic bench.

Someone said, “She’s bleeding,” as though they were concerned, but nevertheless the laughter continued.

Astrid’s body would not cooperate. Nothing was working right. She could not get to her feet. She began to crawl on her hands and smarting knees, aware of how pathetic she must have appeared, but determined to escape.

She saw people’s shoes; her fellow students were at least parting to make a path for her. Something hit her with a soft thud and a small

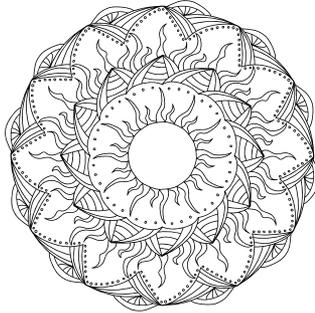
carton of chocolate milk came to rest beside her. As though flood-gates had been opened, others now screamed with laughter as they pelted her with half-eaten lunches.

She closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of industrial cleaner, grease, and sneakers, before opening them and rising a final time, her hands outstretched, like antennae that would guide her to safety. She willed her legs to propel her through the doorway.

Astrid heard Candi's voice, predicting, directing.

"You're passing out."

And then it all went dark.



# Chapter 2

Astrid had a cottony and foul taste in her mouth. Her right foot was cold and wet. Her clothes, too, were damp and sticky and smelled vaguely of dirt, sour milk, and sweat.

The air itself, however, smelled crisp, like freshly mown grass, which made sense because, as Astrid opened her eyes and looked around, she realized she was on the soccer field. It was early evening—not yet dark enough for the huge, looming field lights to be turned on—the sun just starting to set behind the large, almost-menacing school building.

She looked down to see that she was only wearing one of her Reeboks.

Slowly, she sat up. She blinked and ran her hands over her face before standing.

Her knees were wobbly and her stomach empty and upset.

*But I'm okay. I'm alive, and I'm in one piece,* she thought. *Where is my other sneaker?*

The shoe. This was a tactic that Astrid recognized. It was a show of power. In fact, Astrid recalled doing something similar once to Evie Rossillio, a girl at her old school. Although, Astrid had stolen not just a shoe but, Evie's entire ensemble during gym and Evie had to wear her dorky gym uniform, including shorts that she had clearly outgrown, for the rest of the afternoon. Astrid pushed the memory from her mind and refocused on her own persecution.

How long had she been out? Had anyone missed her? Did her mother even notice that she wasn't at home? Astrid could answer that last question easily: No.

Astrid shivered, but not from cold.

She bent to pick up her backpack, which was beside her, an unaccountable kindness. She unzipped it to see that while her books were all stacked neatly inside, the Walkman and headphones were not there. Candi had taken her prized possession after all.

Astrid kept her remaining shoe on and started to trot, limping away from the school, feeling every pebble through her thin sock. If she'd not been so upset, distracted, and generally distressed, she might have stopped to inspect some of those rocks, to see if there were any nice ones she might like to bring home. But she was in fact upset, distracted, and generally distressed, so she jogged mulishly off the field, past the school and then down Main Street. She didn't stop until she could see the driveway of her new home.

Heart pounding and still somewhat dazed, she stumbled up the front steps. Once inside, she moved quickly, trying to bellow a hearty,

“I’m home!” as she rushed to the staircase, hoping to avoid her mother and Cecile, her twelve-year-old sister.

They called back to her from the living room—a weak, “Come tell us about first day,” from her mother, but neither one pursued her.

In the bathroom, she looked at her haggard, ashen face in the mirror. She had a gash in the middle of her forehead. Her fingers rose automatically to touch it. It didn’t hurt. It wasn’t deep. But it was ugly, red, and angry-looking.

Unsummoned, another memory returned: shoving Evie Rossilio on the steps during a fire drill. Astrid remembered the surprising softness of Evie’s plump upper arm as Astrid had pushed her. She remembered calling out in a false-tone, “Sorry! Oh my God, are you okay?” when the other girl hit her forehead on the staircase railing. But Astrid and her friends hadn’t waited to see if Evie was, in fact, okay. They’d just galloped, laughing, down the rest of the stairs and out into the sunshine. Evie had gotten a gash, though. Astrid saw it the next day when she’d come into homeroom.

Astrid regarded herself another moment in the mirror. The cut looked like Halloween makeup. Her hair—which she had laboriously curled and teased up that morning, as though a cool hairstyle would have made her any friends—was flat and greasy against her thin, scowling face. Noting the dark circles around her eyes, she thought, sardonically, that she might just fit in in Elsewhere after all.

She stripped off her soiled clothes and got in the shower.

Under the hot water, she recalled her almost heartbreaking optimism as she’d marched to Elsewhere High that morning.

The thought of returning there ever again filled her body with a jangly, prickly dread.

After her shower, she lay in a towel on the bed, unable to turn her mind off and drift into unconsciousness.

It wasn't as though she could run away. She didn't have a car and she only had a learner's permit anyway. Plus, she had nowhere to run away to. Although she was hoping to convince her mother to let her take the bus to the city to stay with her aunt and uncle for a long weekend later in September, that would only be a brief escape. She couldn't stay with them permanently.

The fact was that she was undeniably trapped in this horrible place that was apparently stocked with a nasty, violent, inhumane mob led by a beautiful, cruel, teenage tyrant. Astrid had quickly slid under her blankets and shut off her light when she heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs; alas, she was not quick enough.

"Hey, sweetie," her mother said, standing in the doorway.

"I'm sleeping," Astrid said.

"I saw your light on a second ago."

Astrid hadn't had an actual conversation with her mother in days, and although she told herself she was simply curious to see how long they could go without speaking, she was actually hoarding this information greedily, to be weaponized at a later date: "Remember the time we didn't speak for four whole days? Oh, no, of course you don't, because you didn't even notice."

The mattress squeaked as her mother sat at the foot of her bed.

"Enough sulking," her mother said, gently squeezing one of Astrid's feet. "Tell me about your first day."

Astrid was almost alarmed; perhaps someone from the school had called home. But no, her mother seemed way too laid-back to know about her encounter with Candi.

With a heavy sigh, Astrid heaved herself up and switched the light back on.

"What happened here?" She ran a finger over the cut on Astrid's forehead.

“I fell in gym class,” Astrid lied.

Her mother’s brow furrowed. “And you hit your head?” she asked.

Astrid shrugged. That she couldn’t tell the truth somehow made her even angrier with her mother. That she couldn’t say, “I was attacked in the cafeteria and then I was knocked unconscious and left on the soccer field and no teacher bothered to intervene or call you,” somehow seemed to be her mother’s fault.

She looked at her pretty and sharp-featured mom, who didn’t wear make-up and didn’t always remember to tend to her curly hair, who was so skinny because she forgot to eat, who was always so busy thinking deep thoughts that she neglected to think the shallow ones, even though they were sometimes important too.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Astrid said, adding, “Except maybe that you somehow invented a time machine and took us back, like, fifty years ago to a place that is totally weird and awful. And then you get to get back in your time machine every day and go to the real world and me and Cecile are stuck here with all the freaks and weirdos.”

“Listen,” her mother said plaintively, running her hand up to Astrid’s calf and giving it a soothing stroke. “Let’s just give it a little time. Let’s give it the school year. You’ll be going away to college. Okay? Just a year.”

“Whatever,” Astrid said. She moved her leg away from her mother’s hand. Despite her resolve to be stoic and suffer through her punishment, she couldn’t help but want to punish her mother as well. “Maybe I could just go live with Dad in Germany or something,” she said.

“Astrid,” her mother said, warningly. Astrid’s mother knew that Astrid would never go to live with her dad, that the threat was just a shortcut to hurt her.

“You don’t get it, mom,” Astrid said. A tear rolled down her cheek and she batted at it.

Her mother tried to wipe the tear from her face, but Astrid pushed her hand away. “I know I don’t,” her mother said.

Her mother was working hard to pretend she wasn’t noticing Astrid’s mounting irritation.

“Sometimes it takes a while to feel settled somewhere,” she said. “You know, to make friends and find your niche. Maybe if you and Cecile got out more, went hiking, that sort of thing. Oh,” she said, remembering something. “I got you this.” Her mother had been carrying a small paperback book—which was unremarkable, as her mother was more likely to be carrying around a book than not—and now she placed it next to Astrid on the bed. “*Field Guide to the Greater Triantic New York Region*,” her mother said. “There are obviously amazing rocks around here.”

“I mean, Elsewhere is like 90 percent sandstone from what I’ve seen,” Astrid said, grudgingly.

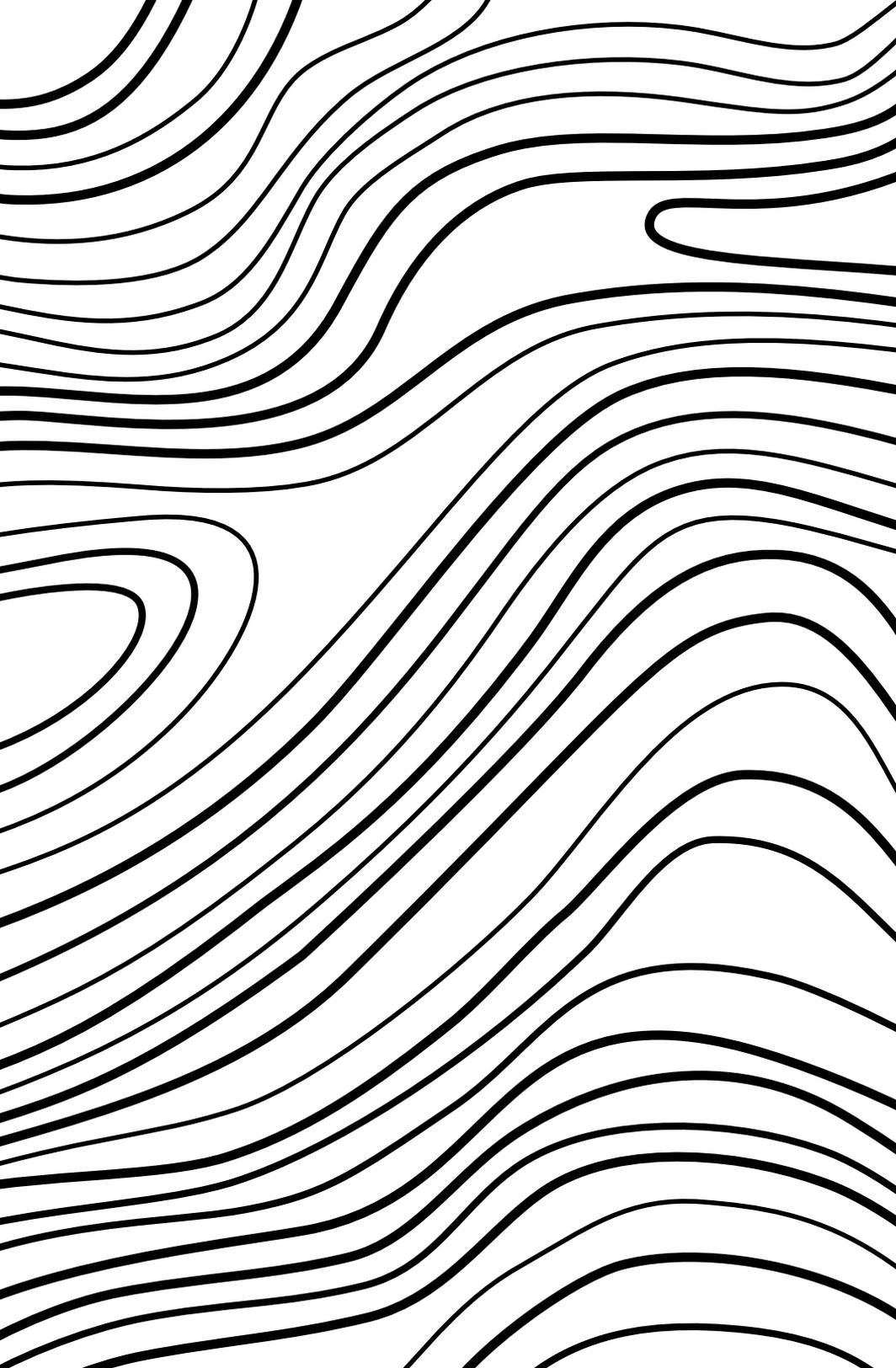
Her mother ignored her. “And when you’re not off doing solitary rock-hunting, maybe you could check out, I don’t know, the lake or something. And I was thinking we could go to the movies this weekend. Saturday? Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Astrid shrugged, non-committal. She did want to go to the movies, but she also didn’t think she’d ever be leaving the house again.

“Sounds rad,” Astrid said, sarcastically. “Going to the movies with my mom.”

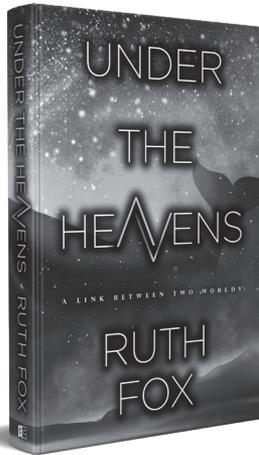
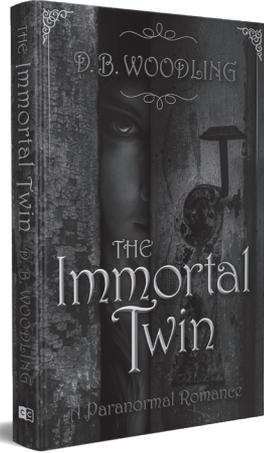
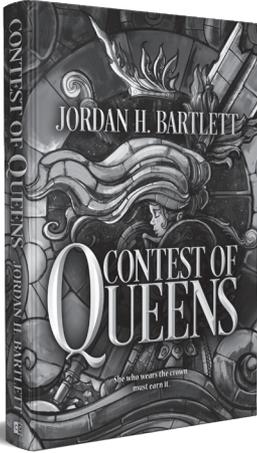
“There are worse things,” her mother said.

“Um, yeah. I’m aware.”



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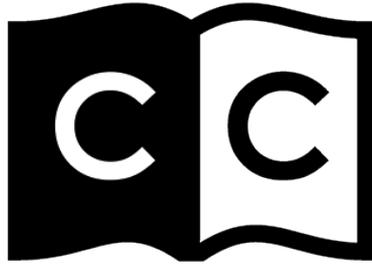
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# BEING A BETTER PERSON CAN BE A LOT HARDER THAN IT LOOKS.

**I**t's 1988, and former bully, Astrid, is forced to move from Queens to the small town of Elsewhere. Although this town is totally weird, Astrid sees the move as a way to reinvent herself. That is, until Candi—the teenage tyrant with supernatural powers who rules Elsewhere—decides she wants Astrid to be her new bestie.

Having to choose between the perks and safety of being the Queen B's best friend and the desire to be a better person could cost Astrid her life. As Astrid and her new friends begin to dig into the dark history of Elsewhere and the source of Candi's powers, they form a dangerous plan to resist Candi's compulsion and to escape Elsewhere, or else be doomed to live under Candi's rule forever.

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*“You’re in an Elsewhere state of mind!”*



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