

*from Andrew and Hillary*

by C. P. Boyko

HILLARY WAS WEEDING the flowerbed, and questioning the weediness of weeds, some of which were just as beautiful as any flower, when an urgent message reached her from the Candy Ninja.

Her brother Ben handed her a piece of paper. “Andrew told me to give you this.”

She looked at the paper, which Andrew had not even taken the trouble to fold, for the message was in code.

Gregarious, Matinee Principal.  
Theater Cane Ninny island real toad movie.  
Youth hem island needeled.

She slipped the paper into the front pocket of her dress, put her sister Prudence in charge of the younger siblings, and went inside the house. She could decipher most of the message by sight, and in any case could guess its gist, but half the fun of having a secret code was going through the process of decoding it, and then destroying both the translation and the original. She entered the bedroom she shared with her sisters, withdrew from its hiding place beneath her and Judith’s mattress a pocket dictionary, identical to one that Andrew owned, and silently locked herself in the bathroom. On a fresh piece of paper she wrote down the word that alphabetically preceded each of those in the message.

Greetings, Math Princess.  
The Candy Ninja is ready to move.  
Your helter-skelter is needed.

The code, while simple, was not infallible. As usual, Andrew had skipped a word when encoding: presumably it was her help that was needed. She was also amazed that he could misspell a word (“needled”) even in the act of copying it out of the dictionary. Nevertheless, the Candy Ninja had other assets that made him an excellent secret agent. She thought almost affectionately (agents could little afford such luxuries as affection) of his speed, his ingenuity, and his strength. His capacity to endure the cold and rain was as legendary as his capacity to withstand torture. And there was, of course, his ninjutsu.

She began to compose a reply, then realized that he would have to return home to decode it. She tore all the papers to tiny shreds and flushed them, and returned the dictionary to its hiding place. She found Andrew in the back alley throwing stones at a plastic bottle, an activity from which she was able to distract him only with difficulty. He had a tendency to drift into trances, which irritated his teachers and most of his family, but which Hillary respected, for she knew that he was dreaming about candy.

“Do you have any money?” he asked her, according to formula.

“No,” she replied, according to formula, “but I wish I did.”

Having thus established her identity and her abiding commitment to the cause, he went on, “The people in Number 147 just moved out.”

Sometimes guests at his family’s motel left behind a dollar or two, in seeming absentmindedness (neither Andrew nor Hillary was yet familiar with the concept of tipping).

“How will we get the key?” —“Grandpa is at the desk. If he’s not sleeping, you’ll talk to him while I sneak around back.” —“He’ll hear you.” — Andrew reminded her that he was a ninja. —“I don’t know. I’m supposed to weed the flowerbed.” —“Okay. I’ll help.” —“I don’t know.” She remembered the time he had helped her roll coins for her parents. He had stuck the rollers on his fingers like claws and run around the room growling, he had built towers of coins and brought them crashing down, he had devised embezzlements that involved buying coin-sized washers from the hardware store, but he had not actually rolled any coins. “It can be hard to tell the weeds from the flowers if you’ve never done it before.”

“Pay your brothers and sisters to do it.” —“Pay them! With what?” —“With some of the candy we’ll buy with the money we find.” —“What if we don’t find any money?” —He shrugged. “Then you’ll be in debt.”

The word froze her soul. From the way her parents used it in their arguments, she had come to think of debt as synonymous with muddle, illness, and disgrace. Suddenly she saw how easy it was to fall into dishonor, criminality, even death, and how thin was the crust of civilization beneath her feet.

But she feared that she had already raised enough objections to make Andrew doubt her allegiance. She made an offer to her sisters and brothers, who accepted as happily and gratefully as if the payment were already in hand—for they were not accustomed in that family to being compensated for their chores. Hillary reflected, with fright and excitement, that she and Andrew simply *must* find money in Number 147; if they did not, her siblings would never trust her again. They might never trust anyone again.

Andrew and Hillary walked their bikes the seven blocks to the motel by back alleys, where life was messier and richer. They saw mysterious animal tracks preserved in concrete, a car bumper like a disembodied smile, a herd of ants carrying a leaf, and a paint can half full of gelatinous paint.

“Wrong color,” said Andrew. —“Wrong color for what?” —He grinned. “Camouflage.”

When they reached Andrew’s room, Number 15, he closed the curtains, handed her two black markers, and took off his clothes. “Start with my feet,” he said.

She understood immediately. Andrew often undressed before performing physical feats like climbing trees or jumping ditches; he claimed nakedness gave him greater agility, and Hillary could well believe it. As a ninja, however, he had to be dressed in black in order to blend with the shadows. Here was an elegant solution. She began blackening his toes.

“That tickles.” —“This is gonna take forever.” —He took one of the markers and colored the other foot with rapid back-and-forth strokes, as if he were shading a foot in a coloring book. —“I’m not doing your doink,” she said. —He took his penis in hand and colored it with rather more care.

They both paused to admire his handiwork.

Andrew quickly lost interest in the task, and the markers ran out of ink before Hillary had finished his legs. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the result, and moved around the room liberally and in demonstrative silence.

“Now we’re ready.”

His grandfather was asleep in the office and the keys to Number 147 lay on the counter, but Andrew managed to invest his acquisition of them with a great deal of ninjutsu. On their way back to his room, however, he and Hillary were spotted by Andrew’s brother Roger, who was smoking in the doorway of Number 12.

“Hey, Andrew, why the hell aren’t you wearing a shirt?” He did a double take. “Why the hell aren’t you wearing any *pants*?”

“I was just going to put some on,” said Andrew graciously.

They ducked inside Number 15 and Andrew got dressed. Then, moving with conspicuous stealth, they let themselves into Number 147.

The room smelled moist and tangy, like the underside of a rock, and was in a state of magnificent disarray. There were bedclothes in the bathroom, towels on the bed, lamps lying on their sides; the telephone was out of its cradle and the television was turned to the wall; newspapers and the residue of meals were strewn across the floor.

“Boy,” said Andrew, “it’s worse than my room.”

They found much treasure, which they divided equitably, including a cardboard box with a flip-top lid, part of a watch strap, a marble, a battery, and several elastic bands—but no money. Hillary dropped into a chair and succumbed to gloom, while Andrew rummaged through the fridge in search of sweets.

“Hey, have you ever had this?” He held up a jar of instant coffee. —“I don’t know.” —He said that it must be good, because his parents and most of his brothers and sisters drank it all the time. —“What’s it taste like?” —“You know,” he shrugged. “Like coffee.”

She found and washed a cup, into which he poured coffee crystals and hot water from the bathroom tap, stirring the concoction with a corner of the shower curtain.

“You first,” he said.

“Ugh. It smells like burnt toast.”

“Ugh. It *tastes* like burnt toast.”

But they drank it all, while standing around in efficient and preoccupied poses like adults.

“Do you feel any different?” he asked. —“No,” she lied.

They couldn’t stop giggling. They ran outside, as if expecting to see snow or a parade passing through town. The sky was purple and the horizon piled with kingdoms of cloud. The trees in blossom smelled as sweetly perfumed as uncooked hotdogs. A soft breeze carried intimations of elsewhere. Andrew remembered the time he had thrown a frog on top of the school. Hillary imagined herself a girl in high school, carrying a purse and with her hair in a braid. The world was brimming with adventures. Every solid object concealed spaces where candy might be found.

“Come on!”

“Let’s go!”

They hopped on their bikes and pedaled away.

“Andrew,” a voice called after them, “have you delivered your paper route?”

“Shut up, Nance!” he screamed. “I *said* I’ll do it later!”

They raced up Hawk Hill, but Hillary was laughing too hard to catch her breath. They coasted down the other side all the way to Main Street, flying over potholes and past stop signs, car horns blaring a salute to their fearless independence. Andrew turned in to the bank parking lot and slammed on his brakes, pivoting on one foot and spraying gravel. Hillary came to a more sedate stop, which she embellished by remaining upright for several seconds before having to put a foot down.

“Hey, would you look at this!”

The poster had been on the telephone pole for weeks, and they had both seen it many times; but now it seemed to glow with significance.

MISSING: Our beloved cat  
Answers to “Mr. Whiskers” or “Charles”

Last seen down by the lake  
Needs meds

There was a picture of the cat looking surprised, and the offer of an ex-orbitant reward.

“Do you know how many Tongue Lashers we could buy for that much money?” said Andrew.

The question was not rhetorical, and Hillary did some calculations, the results of which left her flushed and dazed. “Enough to fill your fort.”

Andrew’s fort (which was also, unknown to one another, the fort of several other kids) was an abandoned garden shed in a vacant lot. It was not large, but it could hold a lot of candy. Andrew went into a brief trance.

“I’ve seen that cat,” he said finally. “I *know* I have. Come on!”

They rode out to the lake at top speed, standing on the pedals and pulling hard on the handlebars for leverage. When they reached the picnic area, they jumped off their bikes without braking, and the bikes rolled several feet before they wobbled and collapsed in the grass.

Catherine and Caroline, two girls from their class, were there with their families, and Hillary waved. Andrew batted her hand out of the air.

“Don’t. They’re—dorks.” He had been about to say “girls.” “Plus they’ll want to join us and share the reward.”

Hillary saw that he was right.

They moved down to the beach and began searching for clues, while striving not to appear to be searching for clues. There were, if anything, too many clues; the area was teeming with them. A bottle cap, a broken sand shovel, a half-buried plastic bag—all these suggested to their imaginations conflicting scenes of abduction, escape, scuffle, chase, injury, fugue, and drowning.

Andrew asked Hillary whether, if she had to drown, she would take a breath or let out a breath first. —“Take a breath,” she said, after consideration. “Although I guess you’d probably let it out in the end.” —“Yeah. It’d probably be over faster if you let out your breath. But I’m the same as you,” he said. “I’d take a breath.”

“Here, kitty, kitty,” said Hillary softly. “Here, Mr. Whiskers.” —“That won’t work. The owners would have tried it already.”

An idea brought her up short. “Maybe he didn’t *want* to come. Maybe he ran away.” —Andrew concealed his surprise, but not his admiration. “My thoughts exactly.”

They moved along the shore, away from the swimming area and out of sight of the picnickers, to where the beach became rocky. No longer spurred by observers, they allowed their search to become relaxed, almost luxurious. They hopped from stone to stone, choosing their steps carefully to avoid booby-traps. They plucked foxtails and chewed them contemplatively.

“Theeth theedth thtick in your mouth.” —“Turn them around. They only stick one way—like fishhooks.”

Hillary discovered a pool filled with algae and tiny crayfish, but Andrew, who disliked bugs and muck, found something better. Among smooth rocks the size of apples and tennis balls, he found a doorknob.

He tried to pick it up, but it was stuck. He moved some stones and found that it was attached to a piece of wood.

“Maybe it’s a whole door,” said Hillary, and helped him clear away rocks.

It was a door. But it did not appear to have washed up or been dumped there. It was free of dirt and slime and was well preserved, neither warped nor rotten. And it was embedded firmly in the ground, flush with the earth around it. It looked, indeed, like a cellar door, still in regular use, that someone had taken the trouble to conceal.

“But who would put a cellar *here*?” —“Maybe it’s a bunker,” said Andrew, “or a hideout.”

They looked around to make sure they were not seen; then Andrew turned the knob and lifted the door open—revealing a long stone stairwell dimly lit by strange, flickering lamps.

“Well,” said Andrew, “now we know where Mr. Whiskers got to.”

Hillary hesitated—thinking of her siblings, the flowerbed, her homework, her teachers, the laundry that needed to be done for tomorrow, the three books she was reading, even her parents.

“Maybe it isn’t safe,” she said. “I mean, maybe we should bring along Duke and Burchett and those guys.” —“Naw. They won’t come. They’re mad at me.” —“Why?” —“Just ’cause I wanted to play Burchett or Birdshit.” He explained. “You say either ‘Burchett’ or ‘Birdshit’ really fast and they have to guess what you’re saying. It’s great. It’s almost as good as Quack or Whack.”

He and Hillary played a few rounds of Quack or Whack; Andrew won, 4-3.

Then, because she had hesitated, Hillary forced herself to go first down the stairs.

She took two steps. “Something’s weird.” The stairs seemed to be repulsing her feet, and at the same time tugging at her heels. She took another step with difficulty, feeling as if she were wading in water against a current. Then she realized what was unusual about the lamps along the walls: their flames pointed not upwards, but horizontally. Finally she understood.

“The stairs *look* like they go down, but they don’t—they go up!”

She backed out and got down on her hands and knees, this time taking the stairs head first, so that when she passed through the plane of the door and gravity shifted by ninety degrees, she found herself clambering up the stairs on all fours.

Andrew watched in amazement as she stood upright: she seemed to be sticking out from the stairs like a board that had been nailed to them. He followed her example, feeling dizzy for only a moment as his head passed through the door. Then he too found himself crawling up a staircase, and it was a simple matter to stand and continue upright. Neither could remember why they had experienced any difficulty; it seemed as if gravity had always operated in this direction. They laughed and looked over their shoulders with fond condescension, as though at their own childhoods, and were startled to see, through the door at the bottom of the stairs, only empty sky.

At the top of the stairs was another door, which Andrew opened slowly and poked his head through. They found themselves in a long stone corridor lined with identical doors, and whose walls disappeared in darkness overhead. The air was cool and smelled like the woods after rain; the walls



looked damp in the lamplight. There was no sound, but the silence was busy and varied, like the blackness behind one's eyelids.

"We should mark this door," Hillary said, "so we can find our way back out."

They searched their pockets but found nothing capable of leaving a mark, so Andrew reluctantly placed one of his elastic bands on the doorknob.

The corridor curved to the right in either direction, like an S, with no end visible. They went right. They passed 173 doors, by Hillary's count, before the passage began to curve to the left.

"Well, at least we're not going in circles."

"Unless it's a really big circle."

Finally, Andrew threw open a door at random—and they stood looking out on a grassy plateau that rolled gently downhill to the horizon, where a white haze betokened a distant sea. Clouds tumbled across the sky, casting undulating blankets of shadow over the plain; lush grasses and edible-looking flowers rippled and bristled in the wind. And everywhere were horses: horses single and in pairs, horses cantering, galloping, and grazing, horses flicking their tails and fluttering their manes in contentment and exhilaration.

"Wrong door," said Andrew, and tried another.

They saw a dark, narrow, winding alley between brick tenements that was clogged with food stalls, nests of rags and cardboard, and heaps of garbage. Dogs of all shapes and sizes roamed through the shadows; sniffed the air and one another; shat, hunched and quivering, or pissed, one leg cocked, in corners; and rooted in the trash like shoppers hunting for bargains.

"Dogs," said Andrew, and slammed the door.

The next door opened onto a vast atrium filled with warm, candy-colored light. Sunshine streamed like stage spotlights through high stained-glass windows, igniting clouds of lazy motes that glowed as brightly and briefly as sparks.

"Now this is more like it."

The floor was covered with languorously sprawling cats—cats dozing, yawning, stretching, preening, purring, and snoring.

“Excuse me,” Hillary addressed a nearby tabby. “We’re looking for a cat.” —The tabby gazed up at her with steady indifference. —“His name is Charles,” said Andrew. —“Charles Whiskers.” —“Although he might be using an alias.” —“An alias is a different name.”

The tabby yawned, waited a moment to be sure that another yawn was not coming, then said, “Can’t say as we have much use for names round here.”

Hillary was perplexed. “Then what do you call one another?”

The tabby smacked his lips reminiscently, as though memories had taste. “Don’t recollect as we call one another much of anything at all.”

Hillary began outlining the inadequacies of this system, but Andrew interrupted her to describe the cat they had seen on the poster.

“No,” said the tabby, “afraid I never was much of a one for faces. Mind you, I know just the cat you might should ask. He knows everycat hereabouts.”

“What’s his name?” said Hillary. “I mean, what’s he look like? I mean, where can we find him?”

The tabby licked himself thoughtfully. “No,” he said at last, “won’t claim as I’m much good with directions.”

They approached another cat, a Siamese who looked at them intelligently as they explained their problem, then said, “Might one inquire as to your *rank*?” —“Rank?” —“That’s what one *thought*: visitor-class. Well, permit one to be the first to inform you that cats of the visitor-class, when addressing cats of the superior-class—and one is a cat of the superior-class—are required to look at three points before making eye contact.”

“We’re not cats,” said Andrew.

The Siamese nodded. “Apology *accepted*. Just remember that the rule applies all the way up the line: you must look at four points for cats of the outstanding-class, five for cats of the distinguished-class, six for cats of the exalted-class, and of course seven points for King Charles himself—though one hardly supposes you’ll find yourself in the king’s company. It is rather

less unlikely in one's own case; and naturally a cat of the superior-class is required to look at only four points before meeting the gaze of the king."

"The king's name is Charles?" said Hillary. —"Well, *yes*, but a cat of the visitor-class would address him as Lord Admiral Whiskers The Most High." —Andrew said, "That cat over there told us you didn't use names." —"That cat over *there*," said the Siamese, "is no doubt a cat of the eminent-class. One need scarcely say more."

"How does one—how does a cat of the visitor-class get an audience with the king?" said Hillary.

The Siamese assured them that it was difficult, unheard of, fraught with peril; but when they pressed for details, pledging their commitment and intrepidity, he was unable to supply any definite facts or guidance. Gradually they realized that he knew nothing about the king besides his name and rank.

They asked other cats, but none of them knew or would reveal the king's whereabouts. Eventually Andrew and Hillary gave up and went in search of the king on their own.

They passed through cavernous galleries, parlors, courts, annexes, antechambers, hallways, and halls; everywhere cats lay basking in pools of sunlight.

"They don't seem to *do* much here," said Hillary. —"I know. Isn't it great?"

At last they found the king in yet another stuffy ballroom, enjoying no regal distinction other than a dusty palanquin which looked no more comfortable than the flagstone floor.

"Hello, Your Kingness," said Hillary, bowing, curtsying, and looking at seven or ten points around the room, "I mean, Lord Admiral Whiskers the Most High."

The cat from the poster blinked benevolently and looked at Andrew, who had gone into a trance and was staring at him hungrily. Hillary pinched Andrew's arm, and he wagged his head but did not take his eyes off the king.

"Who," said the king in a voice of ominous softness, "is this boorish cat

who fails to observe the court etiquette?”

“I’m not a cat,” said Andrew. “I’m the Candy Ninja. This is the Math Princess. And you’re Mr. Whiskers. We’ve come to rescue you.”

The cat king’s face puckered in what Hillary took to be wrath; the muscles in her legs tensed, preparing to flee the royal death sentence. But then King Charles laughed.

“I like this cat,” he said. “He flouts the etiquette, and he calls me ‘mister’—something that you bunch of lickspittles would never dare do, am I right?”

Without lifting their heads, the cats around him agreed obsequiously that they were all terribly obsequious.

“But what makes you think I’m in need of rescuing, kitten baby? I’m perfectly content where I am.” The king stretched and yawned.

“But your family misses you,” said Hillary. “They’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Don’t talk to me about *family*—those fat cats were my slave-drivers. They took me for endless footslogs—on a leash! They wouldn’t leave me alone: always pushing me outside or calling me back in. They weren’t happy unless I looked busy. They thought a cat should always be on the prowl, hunting for its supper—even when the cupboards were full of tuna! No, pussycat, I’m never going back to that gulag, thank you very much.”

Andrew muttered sympathetically.

“But your medication,” said Hillary. “Don’t you need to take your medication?”

“That poison!” The king waved a paw contemptuously. “There’s nothing wrong with me that a little nap won’t fix.”

Hillary looked glumly at Andrew, but could not catch his eye.

“Well, if we can’t persuade you,” said Andrew in a bright voice, “I guess we’ll just be leaving, then.”

“Aw, kitten, I was going to make you a minister. Your friend, too, maybe.”

Hillary would have liked to hear more about the positions they were declining, but Andrew was already asking for directions home.

“Your world,” said the king, “has few exits, but plenty of entrances. Try that door there, and if not that one, the next one. You’ll get there eventually. You can’t really miss it.”

“Goodbye, Your Highness . . .” Hillary bowed and genuflected, but Andrew was already walking out the door indicated.

They found themselves emerging from a blackthorn bush at the bottom of Main Street. Looking back, Hillary was amazed: the foliage appeared unbroken; no one would ever guess that there was a door there. Indeed, as soon as they had taken a few steps, she doubted whether she herself could say for certain where they had come out.

She sighed. The adventure, which had begun so promisingly, was over.

“I guess we better walk back and get our bikes,” she said.

“Not till we’ve collected our reward,” said Andrew.

He lifted his shirt and revealed a hissing, wriggling Mr. Whiskers.

“But how!”

He reminded her that he was a ninja.

Her joy and admiration were quickly superseded by scruples. “But you kidnapped him!”

“Technically he belongs to his owners, so technically we’re returning him. Ow! Stop scratching!” He held the cat at arm’s length as he hurried up the street. “Besides, he needs his medicine. You said so yourself.”

Hillary trailed behind, too overwhelmed by doubts to keep pace, yet moving too fast to think clearly. By the time they reached the owners’ front door, she had resolved to do the right thing, but was no closer to knowing what the right thing was. Andrew told her to ring the doorbell, and her amorphous thoughts dissolved into a jumble of amorphous feelings. She rang the doorbell.

The door opened.

“Hey lady, we found your cat.”

A woman whose many chins gave her the appearance of perpetually re-coiling in disgust stood glaring at them.

“That’s not our cat,” she said. “Our cat came home last week.”

With a violent convulsion, the cat king escaped from Andrew’s grasp

and ran away down the street. The woman offered to let them each pick an apple from the tree for their trouble, and closed the door.

Andrew and Hillary parted at the sidewalk with few words, Andrew slouching vaguely homeward and Hillary going to retrieve her bicycle.

The sun was low in the sky, there was a chill in the air, and the picnic area was vacant. The sight of her bicycle, lying twisted and forlorn in the grass, filled her with shame; she pushed it home, feeling unworthy to ride it. All the excitement of the afternoon had drained from her, leaving only despondence and dismay. She winced as she remembered each of her misdeeds: abandoning her siblings and her work, stealing the room key, drinking coffee, ignoring stop signs, jumping off her bicycle, snubbing her classmates, abducting a king. And, worst of all, she had nothing to show for it, nothing with which to pay her brothers and sisters for their labor. Not that any amount of candy could ever have justified her behavior. How had she allowed herself to do all those things? First she blamed herself, but that made her unhappy. Then she blamed Andrew, but that made her feel mean. Finally she blamed the coffee, and vowed never to use drugs again.

Her brothers and sisters sat through supper in a state of restless agitation, eager to show Hillary what they had accomplished in the garden and anxious to receive their reward. They were sure that their older sister's sullenness was feigned, concealing some delicious surprise. They all, even the littlest ones, helped clean up after the meal without bickering or bargaining, prompting their father to cynically express his astonishment.

Prudence, acting as guide, drew Hillary's attention to the yellow flowers like goblets, the pink flowers like dripping wax, the white flowers like folded napkins, the purple flowers like splashes of paint, each nestled in splendid isolation in its black bed of freshly turned soil.

Hillary just shook her head.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't you know anything?" She kicked one of the purple plants. "These are weeds," she said, and stomped back indoors.

Each of the children looked to their next-older sibling for some explanation; Prudence stared at the beheaded flower. — "Why is Hillie mad at you?"

asked Gillian. —“Be quiet, you *child*,” said Prudence. She kicked one of the purple weeds and went inside. —“Why did Pru tell you to be quiet?” asked Ben. —“Shut up, you *boy*,” said Gillian, and, kicking one of the yellow flowers, followed her sisters inside. Alan cried, and Judith sang a song about butterflies.

Andrew, on his way home, stopped at the house of Mrs. Willoughby, the most senile of the customers on his paper route.

“Is it that time again already? I always lose track. My goodness, when I think of how the time—”

“Thirteenth of the month,” Andrew confirmed, picking a number at random.

She rummaged in her purse for money. “Your brother Lawrence was just here with the paper. It’s wonderful how the whole family pitches in.”

Andrew felt neither gratitude nor surprise at this information. He had learned that if he could avoid the job long enough, either his mother or one of his nice siblings would deliver the newspapers for him. He could then count on his father or one of his nasty siblings to chastise him for his laziness, but he was used to that.

“Thanks, Mrs. Willoughby. See you next month.”

Mrs. Willoughby watched him saunter down the street till he disappeared first from view, then from her imagination, her heart warmed by the sight of a boy so young carrying so much responsibility so lightly. She never read the newspapers he brought, her eyesight not being what it used to be, but she cherished his visits.

Andrew bought twenty Tongue Lashers and five chocolate bars at the grocery store. Then an idea occurred to him. He would share his spoils with Hillary and her little brothers and sisters. He was touched by his own generosity, and daydreamed about their tearful gratitude. When he reached Hillary’s street, however, he was appalled to discover that he had already eaten all the candy. He could not even remember what it had tasted like, and the pangs of loss were compounded by remorse.