

Excerpt from *THE QUIRKS: Welcome to Normal*
By Erin Soderberg

Published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, June 4, 2013
Text copyright Erin Soderberg Downing

Chapter 1

The Fifth House On The Left

Not so very long ago, there was a house in Normal, Michigan, where nothing was as it seemed. If you happened to stroll by on a warm September afternoon, you might have thought the house was perfectly plain and comfortably normal. Just a white clapboard house surrounded by other white clapboard houses, sixteen to a block. But if you were the rare sort of person who *notices* things, you may have spotted the differences.

The thorny roses that climbed up the crumbling steps of this particular house were always wilted. That itself was troubling enough for a pleasant neighborhood. But some days, the flowers were a different color than they were the day before. These roses had a tendency to change color with the weather and with one young girl's mood.

A white picket fence that ought to have matched all the others in the neighborhood instead had a pinkish tint. For several weeks, it smelled faintly of ham and pickle sandwiches.

And if you looked very, very closely, you might have seen a tiny fairy grandmother darting between the drooping branches of the willow tree.

Luckily, no one ever took the time to look that closely. And *that* was a very good thing.

Because when the front gate closed behind the people who lived in that house, most everything ordinary was left on the other side of the ham-scented fence. Inside, the Quirk family was anything but normal—it was just that no one in Normal had noticed.

At least, not yet.

Chapter 2

Penelope Quirk's Strange-Mazing Imagination

“Hold still, Molly. I need to focus.” Penelope Quirk jabbed one long finger at her twin sister, threatening to tickle her if she didn't stop squirming. “I'm going to try to make you blond.” Penelope giggled.

“Okay.” Molly Quirk shrugged, laughing a nearly identical laugh. “I like blond hair. Then people won't get us mixed up!” Molly wiggled her toes and closed her eyes, relaxing in the privacy of her family's backyard deck.

Penelope—who was often called Pen—automatically matched her sister's movements. Both Quirk girls stretched out, belly up, on the wooden deck. Molly snuck a peek at her sister and whispered, “But after this you should rest, Pen. Remember, school starts tomorrow.” Molly lay back, letting her dark-brown spiral curls rest comfortably on a half-flat helium balloon.

The “Welcome to Normal” balloon was one of several dozen identical balloons that had been delivered by neighbors when the Quirk family moved into their house a few days earlier. No one had brought over muffins or carrot cake or even lasagna. Instead, the Quirks had a collection of twenty-six floppy silver balls that no one was willing to pop and throw out.

In the few days since they'd arrived in their new town, Molly and Penelope had noticed that most everyone in Normal enjoyed doing everything the same as their neighbors. They all planted the same flowers, lined up in tidy rows, in front of their houses. The men in town had the same haircut, parted neatly on the left. And at least half the families drove either a tan or blue minivan. The Quirks' new town was pleasant and perfect.

Molly shivered on the back deck, despite the warm afternoon sun. She squinted at her sister and said, “Okay, I'm kind of chickening out. What if this actually works? Mom will freak.”

“It's not going to work,” Penelope muttered, rolling over and pursing her lips. She was trying hard to concentrate, but something deep down inside her was making it difficult to focus. Perhaps it was because Pen *liked* that she and Molly looked exactly the same. “Controlling my magic never works. But just hush, so I can at least try.”

The Quirk girls had been in the backyard for almost two hours, frittering away their last summer afternoon before the first day of fourth grade. As she had done every year on the day before school began, Pen was preparing. She was trying to boss around her imagination.

Like other almost-fourth graders, Penelope Quirk had a vivid and wild imagination, full of fantasy and fun and silliness. But unlike other almost-fourth graders, Penelope Quirk's imagination had a tendency to roar to life—literally.

Most people have a filter—a little switch in their heads that keeps them from saying and doing the strange or rude or just-plain-wrong things that pop into their minds all day long. But Penelope's switch didn't work as it should. Penelope could keep her mouth from sassing, but her mind was a different matter.

When Pen was nervous or distracted (or sometimes when she had to go to the bathroom in that way that made her cross her legs and turn yellow), Penelope lost control of her thoughts and *poof!* The tucked-away corners of her imagination became real, just like that.

For the last few years, Penelope even had an honest-to-goodness monster living under her bed. Molly had named their monster Niblet, because of his super-teensy toes. Niblet was the only thing Penelope's imagination had *poofed!* into existence that hadn't disappeared within a few minutes. No one could figure out why the big guy had stuck around, but he was a welcome part of the family now.

"Okay, here goes." Penelope squeezed her eyes closed and bunched up her lips, making her concentration face. She let an image of a blond Molly drift through her mind and momentarily cracked up. Pen hummed, trying to focus every last bit of attention on Molly's curls going golden.

Suddenly, a plane roared overhead. Penelope watched as it left a wispy white trail of steam in its wake. Hard as it was for her not to follow the airplane's path through the sky as it soared off to wherever, Penelope closed her eyes again before the contrail melted away. "Anything yet?" she squeaked, peeking at her sister, who was still stretched out beside her.

Molly lifted her head and shook her twisty curls in the thick, humid air. Still brown. "Nope. Keep trying."

"This is useless," Pen moaned. She sat up and picked absentmindedly at a glob of mustard that had been stuck to her shorts since lunchtime. "Why can't I make stuff appear or change when I want it to? Everything just *happens* when I *don't* want it to," Pen grumped. Molly couldn't help but laugh a little at her twin sister's sour face.

But Molly stopped laughing when angry steam started to billow out of Penelope's ears. The steam smelled like cabbage soup, which smelled like stinky feet. It smelled so bad that Molly sat up straight, tucked her nose inside the top of her shirt, and squeezed. Molly put a comforting hand over her sister's and gave it a little hand hug. "We'll figure out how to control your Quirk one of these days. I promise," she said from inside her shirt.

"Will I figure it out before we have to move again?" Penelope asked, lifting an eyebrow. (Brow-lifting was a trick both girls had been working on for several years, and, unlike her magic, it was something Penelope had mastered.) Molly didn't say anything, so Pen answered her own question. "Probably not. Normal seems perfect, so I'm sure we won't get to stay. We're not going to fit in here any better than we have anywhere else."

Penelope knew that she had really messed things up for the Quirks in quite a few towns—from Springfield to Hackensack to Pawtucket to Sandstone. The Quirks had lived in twelve states and twenty-six towns in the nine (and three-quarters) years Molly and Penelope had been alive. In that time, far too many people had witnessed the Quirks' special brand of magic.

As the girls stared up at the clouds, a herd of thundering cloud elephants suddenly came to life in the sky above them and stampeded across the smooth, baby blue background. Gloomy storm clouds formed under each elephant stomp and made the sky messy and black.

“Clouds, clouds, regular clouds...,” Penelope said, squeezing her eyes closed tight. Her body tensed with the effort of trying to control her thoughts.

Molly began to whistle a Beatles song. As she did, she wished—not for the first time—that there were something more she could do. But there wasn’t. She was as plain as Penelope was colorful, and that’s just the way it was. Molly was magic-less, like a big bowl of boring vanilla ice cream in a family full of wacky flavors.

Penelope’s face relaxed as she sang along with her sister. Then, as quickly as they’d come, the elephants melted back into puffy-fluffy clouds and drifted calmly across the sky again.

Next door, the girls could see their unfriendly neighbor, Mrs. DeVille, closing and opening her windows angrily as she watched the storm come, then just as quickly go. Pen and Molly looked at each other and grinned. Things were looking clear in Normal. For now.

Chapter 3

Grandpa Quill and His Rewinding Eggs

When Molly skipped into the kitchen the next morning, on her first day of fourth grade, the table was a mess. It looked like someone's pockets had thrown up on the speckled green surface. It was covered in papers and wrappers and crumpled dollar bills from the tip jar at the restaurant where Molly's mom, Bree, worked as a waitress.

Molly and Penelope had both flung their sweatshirts over the back of a kitchen chair the night before. Their little brother, Finn, had dumped a pile of his clothes—shorts, jeans, and one superhero costume—in the corner of the kitchen. And several days earlier, Grandpa Quill had tracked muddy footprints from the back door to the front, with a detour past the fridge on his way through. None of the Quirks were good at picking up after themselves.

With a family of mostly magical people, the Quirk house really should have been tidier. But since none of the Quirks had normal magic powers, and Molly had none at all, not a single one of them could just snap their fingers to whip up a clean kitchen.

Nothing was that simple. And no one's magic was that useful.

Molly squeezed a giant mug into the only empty space on the table and poured herself some cereal. She scattered a pinch of sugar over the flakes. Then, she dug a giant wooden mixing spoon into her mug. As usual, all the cereal spoons were dirty. And the bowls. That's just the way it was. Eventually, someone would put on some music and wash all the dishes in one afternoon. But until then, the dirty dishes were piled in the sink and on the counters and at the bottom of the broom closet (a closet that didn't contain brooms at all but did house a large collection of broken bagpipe bits).

Molly had only taken a few bites of cereal when her little brother, Finn, slipped one of his dirty LEGO pieces up and over the edge of Molly's mug. It was a silver ramp piece, one of his favorites. Finn thought he was very sneaky, but Molly usually caught him making mischief. Usually, she was the *only* one who did.

She leaned over to whisper, "If that ramp isn't out of my bowl in four seconds, I'll tell mom you're not wearing pants at the breakfast table." Finn preferred to wander around the house in only underwear. Their mom had made a rule that pants must be worn at the table, but Finn believed underpants *were* proper pants.

Finn's mouth twisted into a toothless grin, and he dangled his little fingers over her cereal. "My LEGO is a tiny life boat," he whispered back. His tongue poked a wad of oatmeal through the hole where his lower front teeth used to be. "Captain LEGO has arrived to rescue all of the flakes that are drowning in milk. Can't you hear them screaming, Molly?"

Molly fixed her brother with a serious stare. "I mean it, Finn. Three, two..."

Finn reached out and snatched the LEGO from her cereal. His fingers left a dirty streak in Molly's fresh, white milk. Molly shook her head, trying hard to ignore her brother. She watched

as Finn dumped the LEGO in his own bowl of oatmeal. Then he scooped it back out with his spoon and sucked it clean. Finn was always icky, sticky, and gross.

“Happy first day of school, Miss Molly.” Their grandfather, Quilliam Quirk, saluted Molly from where he stood at the stove frying eggs. “How do you feel about cowboys, kid?”

“I guess I’ve never really thought about cowboys, Grandpa.” Molly made a grossed-out face as she scooped a huge spoonful of dirty cereal into her mouth. She hoped Finn didn’t have fleas. Like everything with Finn, fleas were a real possibility.

Grandpa jiggled the pan. “Well, you better start thinking, kid. If things don’t work out here in Michigan, Texas is our next stop.” Penelope ran into the kitchen just in time to hear that. Her eyes opened wide and she skidded to a stop. Molly gave her sister a reassuring smile, even though she didn’t feel all that great herself.

The Quirks had lived in Normal, Michigan, for less than one week. One sliver of a week, and they were already planning for what they would do when they had to leave. Molly and Penelope never went to any one school long enough to get invited to parties, they never joined any sports teams, they never even had time to make real friends.

“Why Texas, Gramps?” Molly asked. Penelope leaned against the door frame at the edge of the kitchen, looking worried.

“Why not Texas?” Grandpa Quill said, grinning as he buttered two pieces of toast. “Can you stop calling me ‘old man,’ kid?”

“‘Gramps’ isn’t the same thing as ‘old man,’” Molly giggled. “Besides, I’m not so fond of you calling me ‘kid,’ and you *are* our grandpa.”

“And old,” Finn added quietly.

Grandpa tilted the frying pan. Two overcooked fried eggs slipped off the edge of the pan and onto his plate. “‘Gramps’ just sounds old,” he said. As Molly watched, the two eggs quivered over the toast on Grandpa’s plate, then slid back up and into the pan again. It was like her grandpa had hit a rewind button. In a way, he had.

Quilliam Quirk’s magic allowed him to have a do-over whenever he wanted it. He could flip time backward, like the button on a DVR remote, and everyone would relive the minutes or hours again. Grandpa had long ago learned to control his Quirk—most of the time, anyway—so his magic was usually pretty handy.

That morning, Grandpa had rewound twenty seconds, just enough to get his eggs back in the pan so he could take them out before they were overcooked. Grandpa preferred his eggs over-medium—he always said that whites should be chewy but yolks ought to ooze.

“I want to be a new man here in Michigan. Call me Quilliam. Quill, if you’re feeling casual.” Grandpa slid his eggs onto the plate for a second time and put on a charming smile under his drooping mustache.

Finn snorted through a mouthful of oatmeal. Molly jabbed him in the side with her elbow. “It feels weird to call my own grandpa by his first name,” Molly said. “It would be like calling mom Bree.” She tried that out. “Breeeee. Ick, no. It’s not right.”

“Well, if you’re going to be weird about it, call me Mr. Quirk instead.” Grandpa squirted ketchup onto his eggs and carried his plate to the table. Penelope trailed behind him and snatched a piece of toast off the edge of his plate.

“It’s not normal to call your grandpa by his first name and it’s even sillier to call him Mister. That’s a fact,” Molly nodded. She was sure she was right about this. “We want to fit in here in Normal, so I’m calling you Grandpa. Or I can call you Gramps...your choice.”

“You’ve got a point, kid. Gramps it is,” Gramps grinned, then pushed his plate across the table and sat down on an empty seat. He eagerly pulled the spoon out of Finn’s empty oatmeal bowl and started to scoop up egg yolk. He muttered, “It’s not normal...” Then chuckled under his breath. “Hey, where’s my other slice of toast? I was sure—” He harrumphed when he saw Penelope standing by the stove, happily stuffing the last bit of his toast into her mouth.

“Molly, have you seen your brother?” Bree Quirk breezed into the kitchen, wearing an apron with dancing chickens on it. She worked as a waitress at Crazy Ed’s, a diner-style restaurant on Old County Road Six. It was a nifty place with a broken gumball machine and a rusting motorcycle with a FOR SALE sign propped up out front.

Molly glanced at the chair right next to her, where Finn was now licking oatmeal remains directly out of his bowl. He looked like a dog. “He’s finishing breakfast, in his own special way,” she muttered.

“Finnegan Quirk,” Bree scolded, using Finn’s full name. She looked directly at the bowl of oatmeal without seeing her son. “I just hope you’re wearing pants at the breakfast table?”

Finn stuck his tongue out at Molly, ignoring their mom’s question, and rubbed his face in the oatmeal. The slimy oats smudged across his cheeks. Molly tried really hard to pretend her brother wasn’t there. She hated that she was the only person who could see him. It made his annoying habits that much harder to ignore.

Chapter 4

Invisible Finn

Like the rest of his family, Finnegan Quirk was born totally normal. But that quickly changed, and his Quirk appeared. Or, in the case of Finn, something disappeared. When he was six months old, he began to fade. At first, it seemed like his skin was just getting lighter. But then one day, he went to pick up one of his toys, and Grandpa Quill could actually see the toy through Finn's hand.

Over the course of his first year, Finn kept fading. He grew more and more see-through, until one day he just disappeared. Penelope had seen him crawling through the kitchen to grab a Cheerio off the floor, and in the blink of an eye he was gone. She assumed he'd somehow zipped out of the room, until she accidentally kicked him.

The strange thing was, Molly couldn't understand what everyone was fussing about. She could still see Finn. Bright as ever, solid as ever, ugly as ever. But she was the *only* one who had seen him—or the clothes that were or weren't on his back—since.

Which meant that no one else could see Finn plucking flowers from Mrs. DeVille's perfect pansy bed while the family walked Molly and Penelope to the bus stop later that morning. Molly shot Finn a look, silently begging him to behave. People would notice if flowers just started popping out of the ground. Especially Mrs. DeVille. (Penelope and Molly had already learned that their neighbor on the left was cranky and allergic to kids. Also, she smelled like hamster cage shavings, but that was beside the point.) Molly was not moving to Texas because of something as silly and childish as ruined flowers.

But she knew this morning was harder for Finn than most other days. If things were different, Finn would have been starting kindergarten. Because of the way he looked (invisible, of course), he wasn't allowed to go to public school. Like Penelope, Finn had been working on controlling his Quirk, but he hadn't yet gotten the hang of it. He was still as see-through as ever. Molly was the only person on earth who could see his sproingy blond hair and his chocolate-colored eyes and his dirt-crusting little legs.

"You girls should let your grandpa join you on the bus ride to school," Bree Quirk instructed. "I need to get ready for work, but he can come along and help out if anything happens." Penelope and Molly's mom worried about the first day of school almost as much as her girls did. She'd seen so many first days go badly for them.

Molly knew it would make them look even stranger if their grandpa rode the bus with them. That wasn't normal.

And yet, Penelope agreed immediately. "Okay, Mom!"

"No, Mom," Molly insisted, shooting her sister a look—the kind of look that told her twin to zip it. "Gramps is not riding the bus with us. No offense." Grandpa Quill shrugged.

"You *will* let your grandfather ride with you," Bree said, staring at each of the girls in turn. Her frizzy brown hair curled around her face, puffing up in some places and sticking

against her scalp in others. That morning's combination of wild hair, a chicken apron, and staring, watery blue eyes made her mother look a little crazy, Molly thought. She hoped her mom would run a comb through her curls before her shift, since she looked so pretty when she took a few minutes for herself. Their mom was so scatter-brained that she often forgot about combs and matching socks and other things that regular moms ought to remember.

"Mom, you know your magic doesn't work with me," Molly sighed, reaching up to tuck one of her mother's curls behind her ear. "You can stop wasting your energy on us."

Bree Quirk's magic was useful for a mother. If she put her mind to it, she could make people do what she told them to do, and could get them to believe whatever she wanted them to believe. Bree could make just about anyone see things her way. Anyone, that is, except Molly.

Just as Molly was the only person who could see her invisible younger brother, she was also the only one who couldn't be mind-charmed by her mom. Molly was immune to her whole family's magic. Immunity was Molly's Quirk, and she knew better than anyone just how lame that was.

"Are you girls sure you're ready for this?" Bree asked. She sounded sort of funny—like her voice was skipping. She was probably going to cry. That happened sometimes. Especially when she'd been doing her mind-control stuff. That day, though, Bree's tears were probably just regular-mom tears. She got all weird about first days.

"Yes, mom," Penelope and Molly answered together.

"They'll be fine," Grandpa agreed. "The girls are in fourth grade now. They should be regular pros at this whole first-day-of-school business. Quit your blubbering, Bree." Molly squeezed her eyes closed when she realized Grandpa Quill's crazy-long white mustache had bits of yellow egg yolk dripping from the tips. "And if it goes terribly, we'll rodeo right on down to Texas. No big deal."

But it was a big deal. Each one of the Quirks knew it. When they'd left Ohio after that summer's cat incident, they had all decided—as a family—that they were going to try to live life like a regular family. That's why they'd moved to a town called Normal. Because none of the Quirks wanted to move every few months. It was time to live a normal life. It was time to find a home.

Molly knew the family wanted to support her and Pen on their first day of school, but she wished they could all just butt out sometimes. There had been more than a handful of times that she was pretty sure she was the only Quirk really trying to fit in.

"I know you girls are going to do great," Bree said, her voice wiggling and wobbling. "This is the place," she whispered. "We're going to make Normal our home, and that's all there is to it." She smiled weakly. Molly could tell she was just barely holding herself together. Her hair stuck out at odd angles, like tangled bits of a bird's nest.

"What if we don't?" Penelope whispered, her eyes huge.

"We have to," their mother said. "It's time for us to settle down. We need to figure out how to fit in somewhere, someday. Our new, normal life starts today!" Bree said this as

confidently as she could, pounding her fist into her palm to make her point, but no one looked convinced.

The thing is, the Quirks only knew how to live the life they'd always had—a life of moving around. They'd always hit the road when something went wrong. They had never fit in anywhere, and they'd never stayed anywhere long enough to truly try.

“Go get 'em, girls!” Grandpa cried as the bus arrived. Penelope was up the bus steps within seconds. But Molly hesitated. The bus would take her closer and closer to school. Closer and closer to the chance for failure.

As Molly looked up at the driver, her stomach rumbled with nerves. Could they do it? Was her sister capable of blending in? Molly also wondered, selfishly, the same thing she wondered at every new school: Would *she* make friends this year? Would she finally find a way to fit in, to be part of her class?

There was only one way to find out: the Quirks absolutely had to make it work in Normal. How hard could it be?