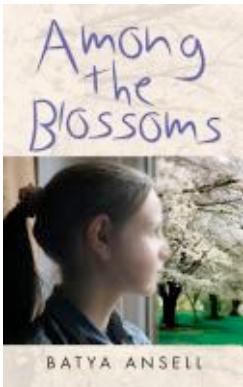


Among the Blossoms



BATYA ANSELL



The year is 1987. Rachel Martin is a bright thirteen-year-old student who feels that nothing will ever turn out right for her. Self-conscious about her looks, Rachel feels doomed to forever live in her beautiful sister's shadow. The one anchor in Rachel's life is her father, but even he won't be able to protect her from the events that lie ahead...until the arrival of a new teacher with a dark and mysterious past.

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Among the Blossoms

Batya Ansell

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First Edition

Chapter 1

There is nothing worse than having a horrible substitute for three weeks in a row. The only thing possibly worse is having to sit next to the darest boy in class who happens to be madly in love with you.

It was my dreadful misfortune to have both. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a snob, and everyone can tell you that I'm certainly no raving beauty. In fact, I'm the type of girl that no boy would look at twice, or even once for that matter.

My name is Rachel Martin. I just turned thirteen and I'm in the seventh grade at John F. Kennedy Middle School. I have straight brown hair which I wear down to my shoulders and bangs which I wear down just below my eyebrows. I wear my bangs long in order to cover up the hundreds of freckles on my forehead. I hate my freckles. I also hate my ears. I keep them covered at all times. My ears are gigantic and stick out a lot. The worst thing is when the wind blows and my hair flies up and then everyone can see my ears. I always feel like Dumbo about to take off.

I am resigned to the fact that I will probably go through life never knowing what it is like to wear my hair pulled back in a ponytail, or to ever display a pair of earrings from my enormous lobes.

Whenever I start to feel depressed about my looks, my mother always says: "Some of the ugliest ducklings turn out to be the most beautiful swans." Mothers have been known to lie to try to make you feel better. But I

know better. This is one ugly duckling who is going to mature into a full grown ugly duck.

So now you know. I'm nothing special. Unlike my sister, Heather. Heather is seventeen and gorgeous. You know the type: long, silky blond hair, a fantastic smile, tan all year round (no freckles), a great figure, and the most delicate ears you've ever seen. I hate her.

She's got over half the guys at Monroe High School falling all over her. It honestly makes me ill knowing that we come from the same mother and father.

Do you know what it means going through life being a Rachel and having a Heather for a sister? I'll tell you. It means having the dreariest boy in class madly in love with you. Which brings me to Arnold Green.

Arnold Green has been in love with me for two years. It started when we were in Mrs. Roth's fifth grade class. Even then, he would always manage to stand next to me in line. He would also try to talk to me during nutrition break. I say "try" because talking for Arnold was no simple feat. You see, Arnold wore these monstrous braces on his teeth. In fact, the inside of Arnold's mouth had about as much steel as the Golden Gate Bridge. Attached to these braces were these enormous rubber bands that looked like they were going to snap out at you every time that he opened his mouth. Having a conversation with Arnold could definitely be hazardous to your health.

So here we are two years later, and together again. Arnold's braces are now off, and I must admit his teeth do look straighter, but the rest of him is still the same. The same long, skinny body, the same kinky

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brown hair, and the same goofy wisecracks. And my luck, he once again managed to find a seat next to me. This time it's English 7 with this miserable substitute. I can't even remember this guy's name. (I gave up trying since we've had so many since school started three weeks ago.) This one has a moustache and bad breath. I can tell he's afraid of us and doesn't know what he's supposed to do. Although he is somewhat better than the last sub we had who used to do nothing except sit at his desk and balance his checkbook while most of the class went berserk. That's pretty much the way it's been since our regular teacher left after the first day of school due to "personal reasons" That's teacher talk meaning either he was fired for doing something bad, or he had a nervous breakdown after one day of trying to teach us and just couldn't take it anymore.

Anyway, you can always tell when a sub is afraid of the class. They usually bombard us with tons of busy work. That way they don't have to teach, and in turn, we kids will be so snowed under with work that we couldn't possibly cause any trouble. Mr. Bad Breath has been giving us a lot of "fun" stuff to do. You know, the usual Xeroxed stuff like mazes, word searches, crossword puzzles - all the same things most of the other subs had given us to do. Fun can get pretty boring if that's all you do during third period English class for three weeks.

I was starting to get real sick of these subs and wished we would finally get a permanent real teacher. Someone who would teach us instead of babysit. Someone who would tell Elan Hanson that if he threw one more eraser across the room, he would be thrown out of class. Someone who would please take control

of this situation and give us an interesting book to read.
(I admit it, I love to read. It's my secret passion.)

Just as I was about to give up in despair, in walks an office monitor and hands Mr. Bad Breath a note. The note informs us that as of next Monday we would have a permanently assigned English teacher for the rest of the school year. Some lady with a foreign sounding name would be taking over the class. The rest was big blur. I was so excited by the news that I just stopped listening to everything else. Finally, someone who would stick around and get us going somewhere.

Naturally, I pretended to be disappointed along with the rest of the class. I didn't want them to think that I was some nerd who liked to read and write.

My sudden feelings of joy were cut short when one of Elan's erasers hit me on the back of my neck. I turned around only to see Elan pretending to be working out the answer to a word puzzle. I know he was just pretending because Elan can barely read, let alone be able to put a word together by himself.

I glanced around the room to see if anyone else had seen him throw it. Everyone else was too busy doing what they usually do. Eric was staring blankly into space scratching the inside of his nose with his erasable pen. Andrea and Stephanie were giggling as they passed notes around the room. Michelle was hunched over copying Rebecca's math homework. Mark was looking at the latest Playboy centerfold which he stuck in a large dictionary he was pretending to read. Michael and Tony were standing on their chairs to get a better look at the dictionary. Eliot and Brad were having a contest to see who could make the loudest obscene noise. Donna was snapping her gum

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so loudly I could barely hear myself think. And Arnold, well Arnold was doing what he usually does when he's not looking at me. He was too engrossed to be having fun. Arnold was in the midst of reading A Tale of Two Cities, and seemed to be a million miles away.

And as for me, well at that moment, all I could think about was next Monday and the lady with the strange sounding name.

Chapter 2

The familiar aroma of my mother's burnt chicken filled the air as we sat down to dinner. I've always envied the families shown having dinner on prime time TV. They seemed so polite and full of good natured fun. The mother always had on the latest jogging outfit which fit her so snugly, and her hair was always done in the latest style.

The father usually wore a very preppy outfit to the table and began every conversation with a witty joke or big smile. The kids were cheerful and usually bantered back and forth in a relaxed manner. They always asked to be excused before getting up, and of course they always folded their dinner napkins neatly on the table. These families never would consider chewing with their mouths open showing every slimy ingredient while chomping on tough morsels of meat, or talking with their mouths filled with potato salad.

Needless to say, dinners at our house were not quite like the ones on television. I'd say dinners at our house were somewhat more disorganized than most. Take my mom. After almost twenty years of marriage, poor Mom still doesn't know how to cook. It's not that she hasn't tried; in fact, she's tried everything. Our kitchen is filled with stacks of cookbooks and clipped newspaper recipes strewn about. Still, the awful truth is that everything my mom makes tastes and looks the same - which is pretty ghastly. Mom means well, but by the time she's finished cooking, you can tell she's been through an ordeal. Her hair is a mess, her fingers have

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a fresh cut (no doubt from trying to dice a potato), and her apron is splattered with every ingredient used. I think that half of my mom's problem is that she tries too hard; the other half is that she was never meant to cook. The only problem is that no one else around here cooks either. Anyway, dinner went as usual. We all waited for Mom to announce it was time to come to the table, and we all did our best to choke down whatever she put on our plates and waited with great anticipation for Thursday evening. That's the night we all go out to dinner. If it wasn't for Pronto Pizza, I'm sure we all would have perished from malnutrition a long time ago.

I don't want to paint too ghastly a picture of my mom. She's really okay as far as moms go. It's just that I wish that once in a while she would remember she has another daughter. You see she's really hung up on Heather. Heather this and Heather that. You'd think the whole world revolved around her first born female child. Not that I really care. In fact, I'd hate to have my mother fawning all over me. It's just that it's so sickening to watch her fussing all the time over her beloved number one daughter. I never did believe those parents who always say that they love each of their children "all the same." It just isn't so. But who can say that I blame her. After all, if I had a choice between Beauty and the Beast, I'd choose Beauty too. Besides, my mom and Heather are so much alike. The same soft features, the blond hair - although my mom's is somewhat faded now. Looking at old pictures of my mother, it's easy to see she was once a real beauty too. Even now the resemblance between the two of them is very striking.

But aside from their looks, they seem to share something else - something very special, as if they

belong to a private club and everyone else is excluded. Not that I would care to belong to it. In fact, I can't think of anything more boring than sitting around and talking about clothes, hair, and all those "young men" as my mother calls all those dopey guys who come chasing after my sister. What really bugs me most is that if I happen to be walking by at the time, all conversation stops, as though I was eavesdropping on some top secret stuff. The insulting part of all this is that my mom thinks I might even be interested in any of this stuff! Nothing could be further from mind!

It's like when all the girls in school went crazy over Steven Stud last year. Oh, that wasn't his real name. His real name is Steven Myers, but everyone called him The Stud because of the way he looked. He had this real jaunty strut; his long hair was slicked back; he wore boots and tight jeans and to top it all off, he started wearing this black leather jacket with chain buckles hanging below his waist. (Ultimately, it was his leather jacket that caused his demise. It had something to do with our school dress code, and Mr. Becker, our school vice-principal, wound up taking it away from him. The only way he could get it back was for Mr. Myers to come to school and pick it up from the school office.) Anyway, it was a pretty disgusting sight to see so many girls making fools of themselves over this dumb, stuck up guy. With all those girls drooling all over him, he started to believe he was pretty hot stuff. But, as it turns out, after his jacket was confiscated, things went downhill pretty fast for Mr. Stud. His dad even made him cut his hair and that made his popularity nosedive even more. So much for Steven Stud.

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I remember telling my dad about Steven Stud. He just shook his head and laughed and said, "Looks like he'll just have to get by in life by just being Steven Myers for a while." That's just like my dad. He's a real easygoing and very gentle man. He's always been pretty special to me. Dad's not at all what other people would consider handsome; in fact, he's rather ordinary looking. He's short and a bit on the stocky side, and truth be told, his hair is pretty sparse - but my dad has the kindest eyes you've ever seen. They're just ordinary brown like mine, but they twinkle and shine whenever he looks at you.

That's the one thing I always notice first about someone - their eyes. Dad says if you look deep enough into someone's eyes, you can see their souls. I believe that. Anyway, my dad and I have always been pretty close, especially when I was a kid. Whenever Mom and Heather would go off shopping or whatever together, Dad and I would always do something too. Most of the time we would just hang out on the back porch and talk. My dad is a great talker. More than that, my dad is an even better listener. Lots of times, when I'd get upset over something, he would say, "How about if you and I go for a little walk?" That's exactly what we would do. We would just walk past our house for about a mile, down by the lake, until we would get to our favorite spot in the world - the orange grove. There we would always stop, sit down under one of trees and just talk. That orange grove is just about my favorite spot on earth. The smell of those blossoms is one of the most amazing smells you can imagine. Anyway, sometimes we would just sit there for hours, just talking and breathing in the clean, sweet fragrance. It's there that I feel most comfortable talking about

anything and everything with my dad. Mostly, we talk about things that I can't quite explain. Things like how I wish there was something special about me, or the times I feel crummy about not being pretty like Heather; things like the different stuff going on in school and how my life just wasn't going anywhere. Stuff like that.

Dad would let me ramble on, all the while listening to me while we walked along the grove, or just sat on the grass. Usually, my dad would nod his head and often tell me something similar that happened to him when he was younger. I don't know if he made it up, but in the end, we'd walk home laughing about something or another. At other times, we'd just sit very still and take in the delicate smell of the orange blossoms and watch the branches sway in the breeze. Before leaving, we'd always manage to pick a few blossoms to take home with us. Walking with my dad, and carrying the handful of white blossoms somehow made everything seem right for at least a while.

Anyway, Dad and I haven't been down to the orange grove in ages. He's been working pretty hard and putting in a lot of overtime hours at the machine shop where he works. Lately, he's even gone in on Saturdays too. Of course, I've been pretty busy as well. Busy wondering what in the world will ever become of me.

"Hey Rachel, you look like you're about a million miles away," yelled Heather as she gave my arm an abrupt nudge.

"I was just thinking," I answered, as I buried some soggy carrots under my portion of overcooked pot roast.

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"I know, you're always thinking," my sister chided me. Why don't you just quit thinking all of the time?"

"You mean you want me to be more like you?"

"Very cute," answered Heather, as she aimed a burnt biscuit in my direction. "Listen, do me a favor. I've got a date with this new guy in my history class in about an hour, so would you mind drying the dishes for me tonight?"

"Again? I did them for you last night, and the night before that!" I argued.

"I know, but I don't want to be late. I still have to take a bath and put on my makeup."

Come on Rachel, I'd do it for you," Heather pleaded.

"That's very sweet," I murmured, hoping that she couldn't see my face begin to blush. Fat chance of my ever having to take Heather up on her offer. What made me so angry was that Heather probably knew it too. The very idea of my ever getting invited out on a date was so remote that my sister knew she could afford to be generous with her offer.

"Oh, I don't think Rachel will mind. Right honey?" asked my mother.

Calling me "honey" was my mother's way of twisting my arm. I resented it.

"I'll do it," I mumbled as I got up to remove my plate.

"Great!" shouted Heather, as she bolted from the table leaving her plate full of uneaten food.

"Just a minute young lady." It was the first time Dad had spoken since we sat down to dinner. Heather grimaced as she turned around. "I don't think you thanked your sister for helping you out."

Heather glanced at Dad and then at me. "Thanks, Rachel," she said hastily, as she looked back at Dad.

"One more thing. Be sure to be home by ten o'clock, and if your homework isn't finished, you can't go out," he announced.

"I don't have any homework," snapped Heather. This time she looked directly at Mom for a few seconds, then turned around and ran off to her room.

"You didn't have to be so hard on her, Sam," whispered my mother as she started to clear the table.

Dad didn't respond. He just looked down at his cup of cold coffee. Small trickles of perspiration were forming on his forehead. He looked tired as he got up slowly from the kitchen table and pushed his chair in.

There was an awkward moment of silence which was mercifully broken by the sharp ring of the telephone. Heather answered the phone in her room before it could ring again. Everyone knew it was for her anyway.

"Rachel, do you mind taking care of the kitchen for me?" asked Mom as she glanced over at Dad. "I promised Heather I would iron her blouse for tonight." Mom quickly took off her stained apron and left the room before I could respond that I would clean up.

Dad looked over at me and smiled. "Well, Rachel, I sure know how to empty out a room. How about you? Am I going to scare you off, too?"

"No. I don't scare that easily," I replied, "and since I'm going to be in the kitchen for a while, would you like me to make you another cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, Rachel. I'm kind of tired. I think I'll turn in pretty soon." He started to walk off, but then slowly turned around and faced me. "By the way, how's school coming along?" he asked.

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I wanted to tell him about the new English teacher coming Monday, and how eager I was to finally be rid of the do nothing subs, and about a dozen other things that were on my mind. But I could tell that Dad was exhausted and just trying to be polite. Now was not the time.

"Everything is fine," I lied. I gathered up a soapy sponge and started scrubbing out a gigantic burn spot from the pot. "Real fine."

Chapter 3

"My name is Hannah Yousef, announced the woman in front of the class."You will please call me Mrs. Yousef."

Somehow my image of our English teacher didn't quite fit the person I now saw in front of us. After all, I had gotten used to seeing a lot of teachers coming on like just "one of the gang." You know the type, the ones trying to look and talk like one of us in order to "establish real communication" and make this a "mutual learning experience." Give me a break. Personally, I get a little tired of seeing teachers with hair the same style as ours. Ms. Kramer, who teaches Spanish, actually wears her hair in pigtails. Can you imagine a grown woman in pigtails? She's got to be at least thirty years old! Then there's Ms. Linkley who teaches ninth grade English honors. She's known to play favorites - which includes calling on only the cute boys in her class, and pretty much ignoring everyone else. She laughs at their stupid jokes, acts real flirty in class, and tries to hide the fact that she can't teach by pretending to be real "cool" - but I'm told that most of her class can see through her phoniness and call her "Looney Linkley" behind her back. I hear that the serious kids in her class who love to read and write are pretty much left out on their own. It's enough to make you want to avoid being in English honors. I suppose I should feel more like Heather who always says, "If you've got it, flaunt it." And Ms. Linkley sure does flaunt

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it. Just the same, I can't stand people who show off, or try to be something that they're not.

Anyway, getting back to Mrs. Yousef. She was as different from those "with it" teachers as you could imagine. She stood perfectly erect next to her desk as she spoke to the class. Her black, curly hair was cut short and pulled back high above her forehead. A pair of small gold earrings was the only jewelry that she wore. I'm not very good at telling a person's age, but she looked close to my Grandma Helen's age - about sixtyish, I'd say. I couldn't say for sure because her olive skin seemed so smooth and unlined. Only when she smiled did tiny wrinkles appear around her eyes. She had a beautiful wide smile with perfectly even teeth. Smiling made her look younger and somehow very vibrant. Aside from her smile, it was her eyes that fascinated me the most. They were as dark as coal, and so shimmery that they actually seemed to glow. I found her to be pretty - for an older lady that is - but in a very natural kind of way.

She was dressed very simply; she had on a dark blue knit dress with buttons going all the way down and a matching blue knit sweater. In her hands she held a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses which she alternated from hand to hand as she spoke. With her first few words, I immediately became aware of an unfamiliar foreign accent.

"I hope that this year will be a good one for all of us. It is my hope that you will learn and find the work stimulating and productive. Above all, I hope that you will develop a love and appreciation for reading and writing since that is what you will be doing a great amount of this year. Our reading will not just be for the purpose of appreciating a good story, although that is

important, but also we will be spending time analyzing themes, character development, conflict, and other elements of literature. In addition to reading, you will be doing some original writing of your own. You will have opportunities to explore various genres in writing - not just analytical essays, but also short stories, poetry, book reviews and so on."

She paused just long enough to take a deep breath and continued.

"We will begin by keeping a daily journal." She went on about how this journal would be like a diary. We would be writing in it every day for the first five minutes in class. She described it as a writer's "warm-up" exercise: just like an athlete needs to warm up before an event, a writer needs to warm up to get the creative juices flowing. Sometimes, she would provide the daily journal topic for us, and other times, we would be on our own. Our journals were private. In it, we could record our innermost thoughts and ideas whatever they might be. No one was to read anyone else's journal without their express permission. The penalty for invading someone else's privacy would be an Unsatisfactory in work habits on that semester's report card.

A quiet moan filled the room at the thought of this happening. As if to soften the blow, Mrs. Yousef smiled and said softly, "I am certain that this will not be necessary. Please understand that I am not doing this to be harsh, it is just that I value a person's privacy very highly, and I do not want any of you to feel inhibited in what you write for fear that someone else might read it. After all, this is meant as an exercise in discovering and expressing your innermost feelings - whatever they

might be - whether funny, tragic, irrelevant, or even irreverent."

She must have noticed some of the puzzled looks on our faces after she said those last words, for she abruptly walked over to the bookshelf and took out a stack of paperback dictionaries which she quickly distributed around the room. On the blackboard she wrote the two words: **irrelevant** and **irreverent**.

"Your first class assignment is to please look up the meaning of each of these two words and be prepared to give a sentence using each one correctly. Please begin now." Further murmurs of discontent began to circle around the room as students began to realize that Mrs. Yousef was not going to be the fun "word search" and "maze" type of teacher. It was already apparent that we would have to work in here.

Mrs. Yousef interrupted the groans by simply stating, "You have three minutes." From then on, all that could be heard was the steady flicking of dictionary pages.

I had finished early, and looked around the room to see if anyone was finished. Only Arnold. His dictionary was closed on a corner of his desk. Instead, he was holding another book which he was completely engrossed in... what else? A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. The rest of the class had their frowning faces busily at work.

Time was just about up, when Mrs. Yousef began to write a several phrases on the board:

1. What I most enjoy doing in my free time is:
2. My favorite school subject is:
3. My least favorite subject in school is:
4. What I like most about me is:

5. The person I most admire is:
6. The quality I admire most in others is:
7. The last good book I read is:

"Time is now up. Please close your dictionaries." With that pronouncement, she assigned one person from each row to collect the books and put them back on the shelf.

At the same time, she began to pass out large index cards to each of us. We were to write our name, class period, and the date on the top of the card, then we were to copy and fill in the phrases from the board.

"I hope I will gain a little knowledge about each of you through this brief information. Since class is almost over, I will now tell you what your homework assignment is for this evening."

At the mere mention of the word "homework," another series of groans set in - this time louder than before. Mrs. Yousef greeted them in her same quiet manner and simply stated that we were to write three sentences for each of the words we had previously looked up. The sentences were to be written neatly and legibly, with capitals and punctuation marks where they belonged, and the new word was to be underlined. As an example, she walked over to the side board and wrote:

1. It is irrelevant to me whether you like homework or not, what is relevant is that you do it.
2. To voice discontent in front of your teacher, could be viewed as being highly irreverent.

She then smiled and sat down. I could barely suppress a grin. This year just might prove to be interesting.

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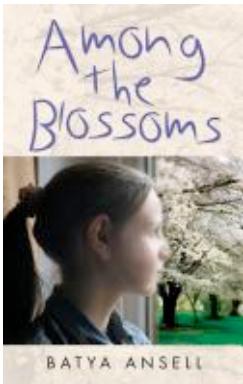
I painstakingly filled out my index card and stared at what I had written.

Rachel Martin English 7 Per. 3 Oct. 23, 1987

1. *What I enjoy doing most in my free time is: read*
 2. *My favorite school subject is: English*
 3. *My least favorite school subject is: Math*
 4. *What I like most like about me: Nothing*
 5. *The person I most admire: my dad*
 6. *The quality I admire most in others is: humor*
 7. *The last good book I read: To Kill a Mockingbird*
- :

Class was almost over. I glanced up and saw my teacher looking directly at me. I could feel my face begin to get hot as she acknowledged me with a smile. I looked away pretending not to have noticed her. After a while, I looked up again. This time she was reading from a large black binder on her desk. She had put on her glasses and appeared deeply engrossed in whatever it was, never once looking up from her notebook. I watched as she slowly began to roll up the sleeves of the sweater she was wearing.

It was at that moment that I first noticed something strange on her left forearm. I must have sat there for several minutes just staring. It wasn't until the bell rang that I finally looked away to gather up my things. I brought my card up to Mrs. Yousef's desk and nervously glanced at her arm again. This time I got a closer look. There was no mistaking now what I had seen. The question was Why? I left English class in bewilderment. *Why in the world would my teacher have a numbered tattoo on her arm?*



The year is 1987. Rachel Martin is a bright thirteen-year-old student who feels that nothing will ever turn out right for her. Self-conscious about her looks, Rachel feels doomed to forever live in her beautiful sister's shadow. The one anchor in Rachel's life is her father, but even he won't be able to protect her from the events that lie ahead...until the arrival of a new teacher with a dark and mysterious past.

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