

Chapter 5

Unless you have been very, very lucky, you have undoubtedly experienced events in your life that have made you cry. So unless you have been very, very lucky, you know that a good, long session of weeping can often make you feel better, even if your circumstances have not changed one bit. So it was with the Baudelaire orphans. Having cried all night, they rose the next morning feeling as if a weight were off their shoulders. The three children knew, of course, that they were still in a terrible situation, but they thought they might do something to make it better.

The morning's note from Count Olaf ordered them to chop firewood in the backyard, and as Violet and Klaus swung the axe down over each log to break it into smaller pieces, they discussed possible plans of action, while Sunny chewed quietly on a small piece of wood.

"Clearly," Klaus said, fingering the ugly bruise on his face where Olaf had struck him, "we cannot stay here any longer. I would rather take my chances on the streets than live in this terrible place."

"But who knows what misfortunes would befall us on the streets?" Violet pointed out. "At least here we have a roof over our heads."

"I wish our parents' money could be used now, instead of when you come of age," Klaus said. "Then we could buy a castle and live in it, with armed guards patrolling the outside to keep out Count Olaf and his troupe."

"And I could have a large inventing studio," Violet said wistfully. She swung the axe down and split a log neatly in two. "Filled with gears and pulleys and wires and an elaborate computer system."

"And I could have a large library," Klaus said, "as comfortable as Justice Strauss's, but more enormous."

"Gibbo!" Sunny shrieked, which appeared to mean "And I could have lots of things to bite."

"But in the meantime," Violet said, "we have to do something about our predicament."

"Perhaps Justice Strauss could adopt us," Klaus said. "She said we were always welcome in her home."

"But she meant for a visit, or to use her library," Violet pointed out. "She didn't mean to live."

"Perhaps if we explained our situation to her, she would agree to adopt us," Klaus said hopefully, but when Violet looked at him she saw that he knew it was of no use. Adoption is an enormous decision, and not likely to happen impulsively. I'm sure you, in your life, have occasionally wished to be raised by different people than the ones who are raising you, but knew in your heart that the chances of this were very slim.

"I think we should go see Mr. Poe," Violet said. "He told us when he dropped us here that we could contact him at the bank if we had any questions."

"We don't really have a question," Klaus said. "We have a complaint." He was thinking of Mr. Poe walking toward them at Briny Beach, with his terrible message. Even though the fire was of course not Mr. Poe's fault, Klaus was reluctant to see Mr. Poe because he was afraid of getting more bad news.

"I can't think of anyone else to contact," Violet said. "Mr. Poe is in charge of our affairs, and I'm sure if he knew how horrid Count Olaf is, he would take us right out of here."

Klaus pictured Mr. Poe arriving in his car and putting the Baudelaire orphans inside, to go somewhere else, and felt a stirring of hope. Anywhere would be better than here.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get this firewood all chopped and we'll go to the bank."

Invigorated by their plan, the Baudelaire orphans swung their axes at an amazing speed, and soon enough they were done chopping firewood and ready to go to the bank. They remembered Count Olaf saying he had a map of the city, and they looked thoroughly for it, but they couldn't find any trace of a map, and decided it must be in the tower, where they were forbidden to go. So, without directions of any sort, the Baudelaire children set off for the city's banking district in hopes of finding Mr. Poe.

After walking through the meat district, the flower district, and the sculpture district, the three children arrived at the banking district, pausing to take a refreshing sip of water at the Fountain of Victorious Finance. The banking district consisted of several wide streets with large marble buildings on each side of them, all banks. They went first to Trustworthy Bank, and then to Faithful Savings and Loan, and then to Subservient Financial Services, each time inquiring for Mr. Poe. Finally, a receptionist at Subservient said she knew that Mr. Poe worked down the street, at Mulctuary Money Management. The building was square and rather plain-looking, though once inside, the three orphans were intimidated by the hustle and bustle of the people as they raced around the large, echoey room. Finally, they asked a uniformed guard whether they had arrived at the right place to speak to Mr. Poe, and he led them into a large office with many file cabinets and no windows.

"Why, hello," said Mr. Poe, in a puzzled tone of voice. He was sitting at a desk covered in typed papers that looked important and boring. Surrounding a small framed photograph of his wife and his two beastly sons were three telephones with flashing lights. "Please come in."

"Thank you," said Klaus, shaking Mr. Poe's hand. The Baudelaire youngsters sat down in three large and comfortable chairs.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to speak, but had to cough into a handkerchief before he could begin. "I'm very busy today," he said finally. "So I don't have too much time to

chat. Next time you should call ahead of time when you plan on being in the neighbourhood, and I will put some time aside to take you to lunch.”

“That would be very pleasant,” Violet said, “and we’re sorry we didn’t contact you before we stopped by, but we find ourselves in an urgent situation.”

“Count Olaf is a madman,” Klaus said, getting right to the point. “We cannot stay with him.”

“He struck Klaus across the face. See his bruise?” Violet said, but just as she said it, one of the telephones rang, in a loud, unpleasant wail. “Excuse me,” Mr. Poe said, and picked up the phone. “Poe here,” he said into the receiver. “What? Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Thank you.” He hung up the phone and looked at the Baudelaires as if he had forgotten they were there.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Poe said, “what were we talking about? Oh, yes, Count Olaf. I’m sorry you don’t have a good first impression of him.”

“He has only provided us with one bed,” Klaus said. “He makes us do a great many difficult chores.” “He drinks too much wine.”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Poe said, as another telephone rang. “Poe here,” he said. “Seven. Seven. Seven. Seven. Six and a half. Seven. You’re welcome.” He hung up and quickly wrote something down on one of his papers, then looked at the children. “I’m sorry,” he said, “what were you saying about Count Olaf? Making you do chores doesn’t sound too bad.”

“He calls us orphans.”

“He has terrible friends.”

“He is always asking about our money.” “Poko!” (This was from Sunny.)

Mr. Poe put up his hands to indicate he had heard enough. “Children, children,” he said. “You must give yourselves time to adjust to your new home. You’ve only been there a few days.”

“We have been there long enough to know Count Olaf is a bad man,” Klaus said.

Mr. Poe sighed, and looked at each of the three children. His face was kind, but it didn’t look like he really believed what the Baudelaire orphans were saying. “Are you familiar with the Latin term ‘in loco parentis’?” he asked.

Violet and Sunny looked at Klaus. The biggest reader of the three, he was the most likely to know vocabulary words and foreign phrases. “Something about trains?” he asked. Maybe Mr. Poe was going to take them by train to another relative.

Mr. Poe shook his head. “‘In loco parentis’ means ‘acting in the role of parent,’ ” he said. “It is a legal term and it applies to Count Olaf. Now that you are in his care, the Count may raise you using any methods he sees fit. I’m sorry if your parents did not make you do any household chores, or if you never saw them drink any wine, or if

you like their friends better than Count Olaf's friends, but these are things that you must get used to, as Count Olaf is acting in loco parentis. Understand?"

"But he struck my brother!" Violet said. "Look at his face!"

As Violet spoke, Mr. Poe reached into his pocket for his handkerchief and, covering his mouth, coughed many, many times into it. He coughed so loudly that Violet could not be certain he had heard her.

"Whatever Count Olaf has done," Mr. Poe said, glancing down at one of his papers and circling a number, "he has acted in loco parentis, and there's nothing I can do about it. Your money will be well protected by myself and by the bank, but Count Olaf's parenting techniques are his own business. Now, I hate to usher you out post-haste, but I have very much work to do."

The children just sat there, stunned. Mr. Poe looked up, and cleared his throat. "Post-haste," he said, "means-

"-means you'll do nothing to help us," Violet finished for him. She was shaking with anger and frustration. As one of the phones began ringing, she stood up and walked out of the room, followed by Klaus, who was carrying Sunny. They stalked out of the bank and stood on the street, not knowing what to do next.

"What shall we do next?" Klaus asked sadly.

Violet stared up at the sky. She wished she could invent something that could take them out of there. "It's getting a bit late," she said. "We might as well just go back and think of something else tomorrow. Perhaps we can stop and see Justice Strauss."

"But you said she wouldn't help us," Klaus said. "Not for help," Violet said, "for books."

It is very useful, when one is young, to learn the difference between "literally" and "figuratively." If something happens literally, it actually happens; if something happens figuratively, it feels like it's happening. If you are literally jumping for joy, for instance, it means you are leaping in the air because you are very happy. If you are figuratively jumping for joy, it means you are so happy that you could jump for joy, but are saving your energy for other matters. The Baudelaire orphans walked back to Count Olaf's neighbourhood and stopped at the home of Justice Strauss, who welcomed them inside and let them choose books from the library. Violet chose

several about mechanical inventions, Klaus chose several about wolves, and Sunny found a book with many pictures of teeth inside. They then went to their room and crowded together on the one bed, reading intently and happily. Figuratively, they escaped from Count Olaf and their miserable existence. They did not literally escape, because they were still in his house and vulnerable to Olaf's evil in loco parentis ways. But by immersing themselves in their favourite reading topics, they felt far away from their predicament, as if they had escaped. In the situation of the orphans, figuratively escaping was not enough, of course, but at the end of a tiring

and hopeless day, it would have to do. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny read their books and, in the back of their minds, hoped that soon their figurative escape would eventually turn into a literal one.