

Janna Elliot
By Hannah Peet

At the end of a narrow street, there stood a tall, rickety house covered in climbing pipes. In this house, on the fifth and top floor, there lived an eleven year old girl named Janna Elliot. She had short frizzy black hair and bangs, and wore almost- round glasses. She lived with her great uncle Ettienne, who was a writer. Her parents were killed in a car crash when she was six. Janna's parents were scientists and explorers, and were on their way back from a voyage in the Amazon when they died. Uncle Ettienne was a small, thin man with a mop of unruly black hair, though now it was also very grey.

Every morning Janna would wake to see the rain on her window, for it was always raining where Janna lived. She would hear the house creaking and moaning, and her Uncle's typewriter clack - clacking away three floors below. She would pull on her jeans and a sweater, and come down going round and round and twisting and turning on the many staircases. She would make a cup of coffee for her Uncle, maybe moving some dishes, or books, or papers away in the process. She would bring the cup to him and he would smile at her.

Janna would then do some more chores, like feeding her black cat, Sam, and making breakfast; buttered toast. Soon Uncle Ettienne would trail in, and they would sit quietly as they ate their toast, or read, but always Uncle would tell her something, a strange fact. Something like;

"Did you know, that footprints on the moon will not disappear because there is no wind?"

And Janna would answer, "No Uncle, I didn't know."

Janna would bike to school, her wheels making a soft *ssssshhhh* on the wet pavement, and the rain pat-pat-pattering on the hood of her raincoat. After school she would go to Mr. Kufler's bookstore. She would browse through the aisles, and then she would sit in the only armchair and read. Sometimes Mr. Kufler would bring her a cup of tea. Mr. Kufler was an old man with wispy white hair and long eyebrows above round spectacles, and he used to be a

lawyer. Afterward she would often go to the general store and cafe, to say hello to Stephen, and to buy some things. Stephen's mother, Mrs. Morris, ran the store, and so he was always there. Him and Janna were friends...kind of. For the rest of the day Janna would go exploring, or read, or look for birds with her binoculars. Or she would rush down to the grove a few blocks away, and look at the gray sky all broken up through the canopy of leaves, and listen to the rain.

One morning Janna came downstairs to find her Uncle sitting at the kitchen table.

"Hello Uncle," She said. "Good morning."

"Depends how you look at it..." he muttered. Janna picked up the cat Sam and put him on her lap, stroking the silky midnight fur.

"I've gotten a letter." Said Uncle Ettienne, and now Janna saw it, clenched in his hand. "It's from your aunt Ruella."

"I've never heard of her."

"Well, she is also your godmother. Therefore she is your legal guardian, and she is coming to take you into her home." Janna stopped petting the cat. Her hand hovered over his slender back. The only sound was the incessant rain on the roof.

"What?"

Her Uncle repeated, "She is your rightful guardian, Janna." How does that make her just able to take her away? Just like that? And how come she hadn't come earlier?

"But... Uncle, I don't *want* to go."

Uncle Ettienne sighed.

"I'm sure we can talk it over. Perhaps we can negotiate something." He stood to leave.

"When is she coming?" asked Janna.

"Today. After school."

"*Today?! But, she's hardly given us a moment's notice!*"

Ettienne shrugged and left the room, slightly dragging his feet. Janna listened to the house, and the wind against the window.

That afternoon she rushed home from school, skipping Mr. Kufler's and Stephen. She locked up her bike as fast as she could, and rushed to the door. But it was slightly ajar, and she could see a tall woman, silhouetted darkly. Her uncle's voice called from the house;

"And here she is! Janna, come meet your Aunt!"

Janna stepped up into the doorway. Ruella turned to look at her.

"How simply *delightful* it is to meet you, Janna."

She was enormously tall. Her hair was dyed platinum blonde, and was very straight. Her mouth was thin and tight, and she had red lipstick. She held a single pink duffle bag, which she clutched tightly with two claw-like hands. Her eyes were cold and grey.

"Who are you? Are you my dad's sister or my mom's sister?" Janna demanded. Ruella turned to Ettienne with a titter.

"And so *smart* as well! Such a wonderful little girl!" She smiled again, though her eyes remained cold. "You remember your Uncle Rod? Well, I am his wife. I am *not* surprised you don't remember, you were so very young when the tragedy happened. Oh, you poor, sweet, darling girl. It must be so hard for you! So *tragic*!" she smiled. Janna narrowed her eyes at her.

"Why haven't you come earlier?" Janna asked.

"Well there have been problems. I was away in several countries on work, and I didn't hear of the *awful* news until a few months ago."

"Janna, please take your Aunt's bag," Uncle Ettienne said dazedly.

"No!" Ruella said sharply, putting the bag behind her back. She then forced another tight smile and said, "Thank you, I'm quite capable. Thank you. Now, let's see the house!" And she swept into the kitchen. Janna tried to catch her Uncle's eye.

“Uncle,” Janna tugged his sleeve. He looked down at her, and his eyes were out of focus. “Nice lady, isn’t she?” He mumbled, and tugged his arm away from Janna, to go trailing in after the woman who called herself Janna’s aunt.

Later that day, Janna was looking at things under her microscope, when she was called down for supper. She entered the kitchen to find counters and table and the stove was wiped, the floors mopped. The shelves were dusted, and there were no books, or dishes, or papers scattered around. On the table were three shining plates, bedecked with tomato spaghetti and meatballs, with strings of melted parmesan. There was also a crispy caesar salad, with croutons, and garlic bread on the side. She sat down heavily.

“This is delicious!” Ettienne reminisced. “I haven’t had such good food in a while!”

Janna picked at a lettuce leaf. Ettienne and Ruella went on to talk about the weather, “Is it always raining?”, and the school Janna would go to, and the house she would live in, and the friends she would make, blah, blah, blah. Ettienne seemed to have forgotten about negotiating.

“Why aren’t you eating?” asked Ruella to Janna.

“I’m not hungry.” Janna said.

“Now Janna, don’t be rude to your new Aunt!” Uncle Ettienne prompted.

“No really, I am quite full.”

There was a moment of silence. For a second Janna was afraid that they would force her to eat it, but instead Ruella told her to put it in the fridge for later, if she was “quite sure she was full”. She convinced them she was, but after the grown ups left for their rooms, Janna made herself two sandwiches and grabbed an apple and ate them hungrily. She then biked to Mr Kufler’s.

“Why hello Janna, you’re rather late today. I am afraid you’ll have to take your books to go, I have to close up soon.” He said. Janna rushed through the familiar aisles, her feet sliding

on the newly cleaned floors. She collected a pile of thick books. When she dropped them on the counter, Mr. Kufler was surprised.

“Not your usual selection today. Let’s see, ‘Fairy Tales from Around the World,’ ‘Evil Spells,’ and ‘How to Spot a Witch,’ ‘Everything You Need to Know About Fairy Godmothers,’ ‘A Guide to the Unseen World’...” He peered at her over his glasses.

“Well, somethings come up,” she huffed.

That night she lay stiffly under her covers, and in came Ruella. (“I’ve come to tuck you in.”) She sat beside Janna on the bed.

“How are you, my sweet plum pie?”

“Fine,” said Janna.

Ruella smiled and surveyed the room. “What a nice room you have here,” she said. “Though it is rather small and dusty. At your new home you shall have a large room, with a four poster bed. How does that sound?”

“I like my room.” Janna said.

Ruella answered dismissively, “Well of course you do.” There was a moment of silence. Janna dearly hoped Ruella would not kiss her good night. Ruella stood to leave. “We will be leaving the day after tomorrow, so I suggest you start packing.” Janna did not move. But just before Ruella closed she said,

“I know you’re not really my aunt.”

Ruella turned to look at her, and her eyes and teeth flashed. She smiled that mocking, cold smile.

“It makes no difference to me, my darling sugar plum.” She closed the door. A moment later Janna heard the lock click.

The next morning Janna dressed hurriedly. She then came downstairs to the wafting scents of bacon and eggs. She made the cup of coffee for Ettienne, and found him sitting silently, staring at the blank piece of paper in his typewriter.

Janna then tried to do her normal chores, but Ruella kept on getting in the way. When Janna put a dirty plate on the table for a moment, Ruella tutted and snatched it away, washed it quickly, and then washed the place where it had sat. Eventually Janna went to her Uncle's room. He still sat in the same spot. The coffee had not been touched.

"Uncle, do you not like the coffee?"

He said nothing. He was pulling at the cuff of his sweater, slowly unravelling it. He stared at his piece of paper. Janna took his mug of coffee and took a large sip. It had almost gone cold. She went to the kitchen and poured it down the drain.

She left early to school, and made a stop at Stephen's. They sat at a table at the back, hidden by the isles.

"Today my new Aunt will come to buy some things. I need you to keep her as long as possible, delay her as much as you can."

Stephen nodded. He did not question her. Janna pulled some toast out of her pocket, and munched on it as she biked to school. She would not eat any of the food Ruella had given her.

That afternoon Janna claimed to be feeling sick and got out of school early. She locked up her bike and crept into the house. She tip-toed across the kitchen, her thick wool socks muffling her feet. Through a slightly ajar door she could see her Uncle, sitting in the same spot. Janna snuck up the stairs, stepping carefully. Janna knew exactly how to ascend the stairs quietly, where to step, and where not to step.

When Janna reached the top floor she rushed to Ruella's room, which was down the hall from her own. She tried the door to find it locked. She had been expecting this. She promptly took out a hair pin, and started trying to pick the lock, the whole time her ears were sharpened for any sound of Ruella. Eventually the door clicked open. Janna rushed inside; picking the lock had taken a while. She scanned Ruella's perfect room, and she soon found her pink suitcase, pushed under the bed. Janna pulled it out, breathing quickly. There was another lock on this suitcase, but Ruella must have forgotten to close it. Janna pushed it open, and rifled through the contents carefully. Janna then noticed a seam along the bottom of the suitcase, and found an opening. In the little compartment there was a plain brown folder. Janna flipped through it. It was full of legal documents, and letters, and old journal entries about... *Janna's parents*. There was a last will and testament, and other legal things. Just then she heard the door open five floors below. Janna quickly closed the suitcase and shoved it under the bed. She rushed out the door, making sure to lock it behind her, and fled across to her room. She closed and locked her door, and stood there clutching the folder, her heart in her throat. Ruella had begun mounting the stairs. Where should Janna go? She jumped over her bed and opened her window. The misty rain blew into her face, as she dropped, catlike, on to the rickety fire escape.

Soon she was speeding along the road to Mr. Kufler's. She dropped her bike outside the shop and slammed the folder on the counter.

"Read it," commanded Janna. "Quickly."

Mr. Kufler skimmed through the folder. He then asked Janna lots of questions, his brow screwed up in thought. When he was done he spoke, softly and with decision.

"I think it is time to connect with some of my old lawyer friends." and he went to the telephone.

Janna waited restlessly for half an hour. What was taking them so long?

Eventually a sleek black car pulled up outside the bookstore. Out came two sharply dressed lawyers, looking as crisp and as professional as lawyers should look, thought Janna. They asked lots of questions, and read the folder, and asked more questions. Janna tried to explain that they had to be quick. Soon they told her to go away, and let the grownups do the work. Janna walked over to Stephen's, and they sat together and watched the lawyers and police stride importantly around. The rain thumped against the roof.

After what seemed like hours, the cars pulled away and Mr. Kufler came to tell them that the lawyers were going to take Ruella away for questioning- about all those papers in the pink suitcase, Janna was sure. Janna biked back through the dark, to the narrow house at the end. She watched as a policewoman shoved Ruella into a car. Ruella looked out at Janna, her eyes a bonfire of hatred and anger. Janna stuck her tongue out at her, and watched triumphantly as they drove away.

Janna and Uncle Etienne sat in the warm kitchen, and he made Janna a cup of warm milk. He was no longer dazed, and smiled proudly at Janna as she sipped her milk.

"Did you know, that not only can a starfish grow back a severed limb, but the limb can grow back an entire starfish?"

Janna wiggled her toes inside her trusty woolen socks.

"No Uncle, I didn't know."