

Ida B. ...and her plans to Maximize Fun, Avoid Disaster, and (Possibly) Save the World
by Katherine Hannigan

Chapter Title	Opening sentences	Inferences
1	<p>“Ida B,” Mama said to me on one of those days that start right and just keep heading toward perfect until you go to sleep, “when you’re done with the dishes, you can go play. Daddy and I are going to be working till dinner.”</p>	
2	<p>On my way out of the house, I grabbed a pencil and enough paper to make four good drawings and one mistake. And in my right pants pocket, I stuffed some string to tie the sticks together for the rafts I build and send down the brook with notes attached to them saying things like:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>What is life like in Canada?</i> <i>Please respond.</i> <i>Ida B. Applewood</i> <i>PO Box 42</i> <i>Lawson’s Grove, Wisconsin 55500</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>or</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>If this raft reaches the ocean,</i> <i>will you please let us know?</i> <i>Thank you very much.</i> <i>Applewood Raft Construction Company</i> <i>PO Box 42</i> <i>Lawson’s Grove, Wisconsin 55500</i></p> <p>It is my belief that the brook ends up at one of these two places, but I haven’t heard anything back yet to prove that.</p>	
3	<p>“Eyedabee.” This is how Mama and Daddy and anybody who knows me particularly well say my name. My mama’s name is Ida, and even though our names are near-to-identical, my daddy says them real different. Most of the time when Daddy says “Ida B,” it’s fast and it’s smiling and goes up and down real quick, like tapping your feet to some happy music.</p>	
4	<p>On nights when he was done with the day’s work, and we were full up from dinner, and Rufus was moping about hoping for some company and travel, and the stars were all out shinning and looking like they were so close you could pick them, Daddy might say, “Ida B, let’s take Rufus and go look at the world while it’s sleeping.”</p>	
5	<p>This is what I eat for breakfast every single day: hot rolled oats with raisins and milk, no sugar. Even in the summer. Especially in the winter.</p>	
6	<p>When I was five years old, I went to school for two weeks and three days. I was in Ms. Myers’s kindergarten class at the Ernest B. Lawson Elementary School. Ms. Myers had pretty brown curls around her face and smiled a small sad-happy smile, where your mouth turns up but your eyes look pained, almost all of the time.</p>	
7	<p>Just as I figured, things didn’t get any better. If anything, they were worse. Because not only did we have all of those rules about not talking and not touching, but every day we were supposed to be getting better at following them. And every day I’d be slower and slower coming back to myself after school was finished.</p>	

8	<p>In the morning, I'm like a snake in the spring: I need to lie out on a warm rock and let the sun sink into me for a while before I can start wiggling around and get on with the day. But Mama and Daddy aren't like that at all. They're like birds: they wake up before the it's light, and they're singing and fluttering around just as soon as their eyes are open.</p>	
9	<p>Mama had a lump. The lump had cancer in it. That was the nothing that wasn't nothing, but it didn't seem too-terrible-everything at first. It seemed like a penny-up-your-nose kind of thing: you have to get it out because it doesn't belong there, and if you kept it there for too long, you'd have an awful hard time with a cold. So you could go to the doctor, she takes it out real quick, and pretty soon you forget how it felt to have a sore, stuffed-up, stretched-out nose. That's how I thought it was going to be with the lump.</p>	
10	<p>One day in August, the house and my heart got to feeling so gloomy and gray I decided to give talking to that old tree another try. I left Rufus home with Mama, hiked to the top of the mountain, climbed up the trunk, and sat on my usual spot. "I don't mean to complain and I don't want to whine, but Mama's not Mama, and Daddy's not Daddy, and I miss them, and I miss the life we used to have, and I am so lonely," I told the tree.</p>	
11	<p>Daddy had to sell part of the orchard and some of the farmland to pay Mama's hospital bills. One day in September he took me out to the barn, sat me down with Rufus beside me, and told me about it.</p>	
12	<p>After Daddy left, I was hurting something terrible, like every single part of me was cut and torn up. But my heart hurt the most. I couldn't do anything except curl up like a ball on the floor of the barn and lie there, crying. The kind of tears that burn your eyes, and the sort of sobs that make your chest ache so that you're sure it's going to bust open.</p>	
13	<p>Things happened pretty fast after that. Sunday night I got my clothes ready for the next morning: black jeans, black T-shirt, black socks. And if I'd had black underwear, I'd have worn that, too. Daddy packed my lunch, and Mama asked me if I wanted ribbons in my hair tomorrow.</p>	
14	<p>The bus stops at the end of the drive at seven thirty sharp, Ida B," Daddy said at breakfast the next morning, even though he'd already told me that three times the day before.</p>	
15	<p>I stopped in the doorway of Room 130 for a minute, just taking it in so I could do like soldiers do before a battle: assess the enemy, formulate a plan, get armed, and attack.</p>	
16	<p>The Yellow Prison of Propulsion dropped me off just where it had picked me up that morning. "See you tomorrow," the bus driver hollered as he closed the door behind me. And that was the worst thing he could have said. I was full up with foulness again.</p>	

17	<p>One night at dinner a couple of weeks later Daddy told me, "We've sold the lots Ida B. To one family. And they're going to keep some of the trees." "Maybe they'll have kids your age, baby," added Mama, who seemed to be doing better since she'd started her new treatments, but it was hard to tell since I was avoiding eye contact and word contact with both of these particular people. "Wouldn't that be great to have friends just down the road?" "Great," I said in that way I had of talking then, a way that used words but didn't tell anybody anything.</p>	
18	<p>Back at school, Ms. Washington was trying to wear me down. Every day at recess I'd sit on the steps. Every day she'd come sit beside me and say, "Anything you want to talk about, Ida?" And every day I'd say, "No, ma'am."</p>	
19	<p>Ronnie DeKuyper was small and blond and ran faster than anybody in our grade. He was almost always smiling, and if I was going to like somebody, I suppose it would have been him. He was real friendly, even when people were kind of rude, and he never picked on other kids. But he was bad in math.</p>	
20	<p>One day after lunch Ms. W told the class, "I know it's time to read, but I don't think I can do it today. My voice is too tired." She put her hand on her throat and scrunched up her face like something was paining her.</p>	
21	<p>"How was school today, Ida B?" Mama and Daddy would ask me every day after I first went back to Ernest B. Lawson Elementary School. And every day I'd say, "It was O.K.," which now also stood for Overwhelming Kalamity.</p>	
22	<p>That Saturday, the intruders came to visit. I was sitting on the front porch and I saw a strange car, a big white one, coming down the road and turn left at the T, down to the building site, and park. I ran behind our house, around the base of the mountain, and through the woods till I was directly across from their partly finished house.</p>	
23	<p>I went to dinner that night all set for a tussle. I was feeling pretty confident after my victory that morning, and I was thinking I was ready to take on my most formidable foes: Mama and, especially, Daddy. Maybe there was no going back to the way things were before Mama was sick. For sure, there was no bringing back those trees that had been cut down. But that didn't mean there was no use in those two people feeling miserable about the sadness and destruction they and their completely-unacceptable-and-breaking-their-word-in-one-hundred-places decisions had brought into the valley and to me.</p>	
24	<p>Even if you win a battle, as long as the enemy's got a heart that's beating and a brain that's working, you'd better be prepared for a counterattack.</p>	
25	<p>There was a little idea trying to get my attention, and it kept getting bigger every day, even though most of the time I refused to pay it any mind. So it would wait till my guard was down and sneak up to the front of my brain. Then it would start out with small disguised-as-almost-friendly-up-to-nothing-in-particular questions like, "What if Claire isn't quite as completely evil and nasty as you thought, Ida B?"</p>	

26	<p>On Wednesday at recess, Ms. W sat down next to me on the steps, just like always. Just like always she asked me, "Anything you want to talk about, Ida?" "No ma'am," I said right away, because that's what I always did. And thank goodness Ms. W always stayed for a few extra minutes. Because I was thinking that if I didn't talk to someone pretty soon, all that stuff I'd been holding inside of me was going to bust out screaming, bursting through my outsides so it could get some air and find an ear.</p>	
27	<p>Right away I started planning. I would apologize, I decided, but I had not abandoned my resolve to avoid any possible pain or public humiliation at Ernest B Lawson Elementary School.</p>	
28	<p>If you are going to intercept somebody in the lavatory, you get, at best, about two chances a day: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. On Thursday morning, Claire faked me out.</p>	
29	<p>Saturday morning, I was sitting on the front porch, waiting for nothing, with nothing I wanted to do.</p>	
30	<p>Apologizing is like spring-cleaning. First of all, you don't want to do it. But there's something inside you, or somebody outside you who's standing there with her hands on her hips saying, "It's time to make things right around here," and there's no getting out of it.</p>	
31	<p>I suppose it would seem real nice if Claire and I got together on Monday and started chatting and playing dodgeball and decided we were twins separated at birth and would be best friends for the rest of our lives, living right down the road from each other. But we didn't.</p>	
32	<p>Friday night after dinner, Daddy was working in the barn, and Mama and I were doing dishes. Mama was washing slow, and I was drying slower, like we were giving the dishes some room to tell us something if they needed to.</p>	