

Romeo and Juliet: Together (and alive!) at Last
By Avi

Chapter One

Pete Saltz and I have been best friends for as long as I can remember. At South Orange River Middle School, eighth grade, we sit, eat lunch, and do weekends together. If I'm not at his house, he's at mine. Close as a pair of crossed eyes. There isn't much I don't know about him. At least that's what I thought.

Turned out Saltz had a secret.

One nice warm spring day we were heading home from school, and Saltz wasn't saying much. Normally, he has the fastest mouth this side of Nervous Purvis, a local radio DJ we like to hear. And I had been talking about Albert Hamilton.

Hamilton is the worst kind of bully: he's great at almost everything – grades, sports, and if the girls tell me true, looks. People wouldn't mind except Hamilton makes sure you know it. The way he sees it, he's God's gift to himself.

As far as I know he has only one flaw: the guy is a pyromaniac. Fire fascinates him. Give him a barn fire, a matchbook, a firecracker, and he's in a world of his own.

I was talking about Hamilton's attempts to build bigger, better firecrackers in science lab when I realized Saltz hadn't said anything for five minutes. Then, when we reached his place, he just said, "See ya," and drifted toward his front door.

"Hey!" I called, only then sensing that things weren't right. "What's up? You mad at me?"

Saltz stopped. "You wouldn't understand," he said.

"What wouldn't I understand?"

"Nothing."

"How can I not understand nothing? Do *you* understand?"

"No," he admitted.

"How about giving me a try," I coaxed. His hand was on the doorknob.

"It's just . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Hey, I'm your best friend, remember?"

After a single moment he let go of the door. But he didn't say anything; he just sat down on his front steps.

"What," he said, "do you think of Anabell Stackpoole?"

"Stackpoole?" I said, surprised. She's a girl in our class.

"Yeah," he said, "Anabell Stackpoole." His facial expression reminded me of how my dog looks when we're about to go off for a day at the beach and he knows he's staying home.

"What about her?" I said.

"I . . . I like her."

"Since when?"

He thought hard. "Two days ago."

"What happened then?"

He shrugged. "Just . . . happened."

"She like you?"

He shook his head. "She doesn't even notice me."

"You try talking to her?"

Now his look suggested how stupid I was.

"Want *me* to talk to her?"

Panic crept into his eyes.

"Okay. What are you going to do about it?"

He struggled for an answer. What he came up with was "I wrote a poem about her."
I wasn't surprised. Saltz was our poet, a kind of local Shakespeare. "Can I see it?" I asked.
From out of his portable bag of junk he hauled a spiral notebook. The spiral was half off, like a worm desperately seeking air.

Finding a sheet of ruled paper with words set between the wrinkles, he handed it over. This is what he had written:

There once was a fair beauty named Anabell
For whom Pete Saltz, truly, in love fell.
But when he offered his heart,
She jumped up with a start,
And said, "I have to go now because I just heard the end-of-the-class bell."

I looked from Saltz to the poem, then back to him, until it fully hit me: Saltz was in love!