

Logline: Esther Toth is a sixteen-year-old whose entire world is Magikland, a rinky-dink Floridian amusement park on the brink of bankruptcy, where she and her parents live and work. When it becomes obvious that their efforts to save Magikland are failing, Esther must find a way to score a million dollars by any means necessary to buy Magikland before it gets sold off, or else face losing the only home she and her family has ever known.

Chapter 1

“C’mon! Give it more elbow grease, kiddo. We’ve got to get these razzle dazzle upgrades done.”

A gruff voice sounded in the haze of Florida summer heat behind me, and I paused the long-handled paint roller mid-stroke and glanced over my shoulder. Mr. Biggs was bent over inspecting the stretch of asphalt path that I had just spent the last two hours painting yellow. He puffed on a cigar wedged in the corner of his mouth.

“You competin’ for slowpoke with Rumpelstiltskin today? You got a long way to go still.” He crossed his arms and blew out a ring of smoke.

“Hey, I’ve been working my tail off.” Defensiveness bolted through me, and I gestured down the stretch of path that gleamed a bright yellow. “See at all that?”

But my heart sank at how short it looked in comparison to the bare path ahead that snaked out of sight. This path was one and a half miles of asphalt that looped its way through Magikland: past the game booths, the Caterpillar Roller Coaster, the Teacup Tilt-A-Whirl, the Witch Cauldron Ferris Wheel, and the Haunted Forest. And that isn’t even where it ended: that damn path stretched beyond Rumpelstiltskin the ancient albino alligator’s pen, cut through the Fairy Flamingo Lagoon, and then met back up at the visitor entrance. In other words, I had a long way to go with the painting.

Commented [CS1]: This might just be me, I’ll as the others, but this feels a little bit ungrounded for a beginning—we not only have dialogue that has no context, but even the main character doesn’t seem to know who is talking until a few sentences in.

We have an episode a while back with DongWon Song (an agent) who says dialogue at the beginning of a chapter is something he always flags because you never are going to have context for what’s happening so it’s an inherently rocky start. I don’t know that I agree 100%, but in this case, I think that advice holds true, especially because there isn’t immediate signaling for who is speaking or who is the main character and where they are in relation to each other. I do like the Florida sun and the paint roller pausing mid-stroke 😊

Commented [CS2]: Haha!

But also, was Rumpelstiltskin...slow?

Commented [CS3]: Is he referring to THIS Rumpelstiltskin?

Commented [CS4]: Love all these names!

I dropped the long-handled paint roller into the grass bordering the pathway and I plunked down beside it. I put my face in my hands and sweat from my forehead trickled into my palms. My back ached and I kept picturing just how much more path there was ahead. I groaned. “It’s impossible.”

Commented [CS5]: We get this from showing, so you probably don’t need to tell us 😊

Commented [CS6]: Check your sentence structure for variation—I’m only tagging it here, but probably could use a good eye throughout.

Mr. Biggs stood in front of me. “Now I was just kiddin’ about you competin’ with old Rumpelstiltskin. He wouldn’t expend this much energy for anything, much less for being dramatic.”

I squinted through the sunshine to glare up at him.

He crouched in front of me, and a trail of smoke whooshed out from between his flabby lips and hit me full on.

I grimaced and waved the smoke away from my face. “I’ve got asthma, remember? Can you blow that somewhere else?”

“Forgot about that. Sorry! But time is money, honey. That’s what I always say. Moolah, dough. It sure is.” He shook his cigar at me, and a scattering of ash fell off the end right onto my big toe.

“Ugh, get that nasty thing outta here, Mr. Biggs.” I kicked off my flip-flop and rubbed my whole foot clean in the grass.

“Hey kid,” Mr. Biggs said as he stood. “This is no nasty thing. This here is a genuine Cohiba, straight from Cuba.”

Commented [CS7]: Lots of nice characterization for Mr. Biggs, though I am beginning to wonder both why the MC is dealing with him (is he her boss, and she’s spunky enough to say what she’s thinking and sit down on the job? Or is he...a family member? Or something else?)

He blew a stream of smoke down straight at me, and I coughed as loudly as I could and pawed at the air around me.

He lifted his hands in the air. “Okay, okay. I get it. You want me to scram. But hey, this Yellow Brick Road feature is going to be the ticket.” He held his arms out on either side of him.

“Picture it, kiddo. The new and improved Magikland. We’re gonna make a lotta dough when all the new visitors come floodin’ in.”

Commented [CS8]: Using it here probably means you don’t need it above 😊

At his repeated mention of money, I flopped on my back. Dread bloomed in the pit of my stomach, and I scrunched my eyes shut, as if I could squelch the looming fear that overtook me every time Mr. Biggs talked that way. He made it sound hopeful, like some yellow paint slapped on the path would give this creaky-jointed amusement park a chance. But he didn’t have a dad huddled in the dark back bedroom of his home, lost somewhere in the maze of his own mind. He didn’t have a mom worrying herself thin over how she would pay rent and feed us if these Magikland upgrades didn’t reel in enough new visitors.

Commented [CS9]: Nice push toward character stakes here (though...the MC’s actions don’t necessarily jive with what they’re saying here? Also not sure about name, age, or gender id?)

Money. That’s what all this was about, wasn’t it? Money for Mr. Biggs, money for Magikland, but it was more than that for my family. It was about home for us. We lived here, right on Magikland property in the Backyard Mobile Home Park with the rest of the employees and their families. It was alright for Mr. Biggs if Magikland buckled. It was just one of his businesses anyways. Plus, he had his big house on the golf course near the orange groves north of here. But for all of us Backyarders, money was what we needed to keep this place pumping along; otherwise, we would all be scattered to the winds. And I knew this world had some very cruel winds, so I wrenched myself up, grabbed the long-handled paint roller and plunked it in the paint.

Commented [CS10]: Is he...the manager? How does he fit in here?

Mr. Biggs grinned and reached into the pocket of his neon green shirt. He pulled out a few loose dollars and shoved them at me. “You’re too young for a Cohiba, but go get yourself a nice big ice cream when you finish up. There’s a lot more to do, kiddo. Sooner you get done, sooner you get yourself a cold treat. Sooner we’re all done razzle-dazzling up Magikland, sooner

Commented [CS11]: This sounds like the opposite of how it would work. If this kid is the employee and Mr. Biggs owns it, then wouldn’t he be the one concerned? I mean, sure mobile home parks come with lots of stuff attached like owning a mobile home but not the land underneath that would be further complicated by living there and then the park suddenly going under...job insecurity isn’t awesome for anyone, but if the park is going under...why does the MC feel like this is the only avenue for survival?

we can make more of that dough.” And without waiting for me to respond, he turned on his leather-loafed heels and strolled away.

I tucked those bills into my pocket. The thought of an ice cream cone right about then gave me the urge to toss the painting pole and tear down the street, away from Magikland. I’d head to The Peach Pit Parlor with its rows and rows of ice cream tubs. Maybe I’d get a scoop of mint chocolate chip and another scoop of cherry chocolate. Or bubble gum and birthday cake. Or rainbow sherbet and coconut. So many different ways to escape this never-ending Yellow Brick Road.

But then a mental image barged into my daydreaming. My mom sitting at the little kitchen table, counting dollar bills and change from her cash stash jar. She’d done it again last night, sat there and counted and then recounted, even the pennies. Then she wrote the total on the tally slip she kept with the money. I’d seen her do this ritual a lot lately, but last night was the first time I noticed how deep the worry lines were on her forehead.

How could I run off and spend those dollars on ice cream? What I should do, I thought, is sneak them into her jar, and then next time she added up her stash, she would be surprised at how her money grew. But then when I resumed slopping that yellow onto the asphalt, I looked up and saw the yet-to-be painted portion of the path zigzagging far, far away into the distance, and something in me hardened. I would go to the Peach Pit Parlor after this. I would go and get myself a big, fat ice cream sundae and I would gulp it down, because this Yellow Brick Road job sucked, and I was the sucker who was going to stick with it until the end of the line.

Things we like:

- There’s some fun (gross?) characterization of Mr. Biggs
- Like the beginnings of stakes (if the park fails, we’re in trouble)

Commented [CS12]: This is feeling a little one note—one interaction with Mr. Biggs would do the same as all of everything we’ve got here.

Commented [CS13]: Interesting character work—understandable.

For a first chapter, this kind of feels a little sparse, if that makes sense? I love the showing done here, love the little conflict introduced between having to worry about parents when you’re a kid, and it’s interesting to see an MC who isn’t traditionally sympathetic (helping mom at cost to one’s own self). However, the scene on the page doesn’t actually show us very much—we get a HUGE introduction to Mr. Biggs, though he seems like sort of an annoyance rather than a driving force, and some painting (or NOT painting, which kind of goes with the I’m getting the dang ice cream stuff at the end). BUT that’s not a whole lot to go on for a story—I’m not sure about time period, what things look like, much of anything about the MC other than “yes ice cream.” We get a tiny tease about the conflict, but it doesn’t seem to touch the MC very much, so I can’t think that’s what the actual conflict is going to be, unless it’s going to be this character realizing they need to take ownership of it?

Some nice descriptions, intrigued to know more about the family!

- Interesting characterization of MC (even though I know a lot is riding on this, I don't want to paint things. Even though we're counting pennies, I'm buying ice cream)
- I like the image of mother counting through money box like a ritual
- I like using the description of where all this path-to-be-painted goes as a vehicle to describe lots of the park. I also enjoy the albino alligator

Things that might need a second look:

- For a first chapter, I know very little about the MC, gender, age, name
 - This is my biggest complaint
- The initial characterization of the MC doesn't make them very sympathetic--I'm totally on board with an MC acting this way, but with NO sympathetic qualities (like...humor, competency, caring for something) it's a little harder to want to follow them into the story.
- I feel like this chapter kind of starts to introduce conflict, but aside from that, this seems like very little information and story for a first chapter--a lot goes into blocking and dialogue that doesn't actually move the story forward.
- While I realize there are complicated dynamics around living in a mobile home (owning the house but not the land, but not actually being able to move the house) I'm not sure why the park succeeding is directly connected to their well being because they don't own it. Job insecurity makes sense...but wouldn't the answer be new job rather than hanging out at the theme park and hoping for the best? Mr. Biggs not caring about it because it's one of many investments doesn't make sense to me either. I'm not saying there isn't a rational explanation for this, but it isn't provided here, which could mean the MC doesn't understand what is going on/is an unreliable narrator, but as it reads right now, I'm struggling to understand the conflict. If there are additional factors, I'd want to see them as quickly as possible OR if it's an unreliable narrator situation, I'd want to see some lampshading (LOOK AT ME BEING PRESCRIPTIVE) or if it's something else then it's something else, but in a first chapter as it stands, it's hard to get on board.
 - I feel like a lot of this could be explained away by the narrator being young, but we don't actually know their age. Also raises questions about child labor, and by extension, when this is set