

★ THE O'CONNOR CHRONICLES ★



RUSSELL A. BAKER

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The O'Connor Chronicles – The American Dream

Russell A. Baker



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“No matter what!”

This phrase is often said in our home — “No matter what!”

So I dedicate this book to my girls. To Kaitlyn and Kirsten, inspirational angels who may not always get their homework done or clean their rooms, I say, “No matter what!”

To my wife, Karen, who regularly offers encouragement and kindness beyond words, and is also perpetually time challenged, I say, “No matter what!”

In spite of all *my* flaws, the sweetest words I hear from my girls are, “No matter what!”

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who said to me, “No matter what!” He daily demonstrates that love.

The O'Connor Chronicles -

The American Dream

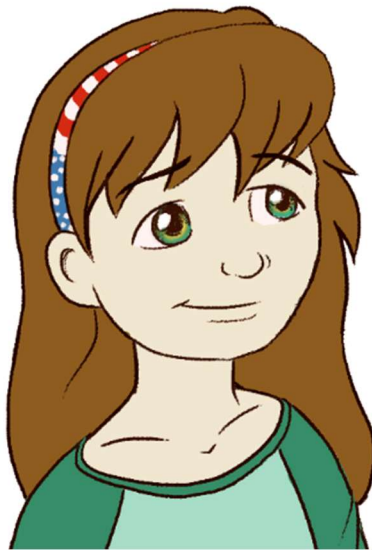
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“Knowledge not shared remains unknown.”—Mr. Lemoncello (Chris Grabenstein)

Kaitlyn



Chapter 1 – History Class

“The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.”—Abraham Lincoln

Otter Springs, Minnesota – Present Day

The bell rings as a couple of kids scramble through the classroom door and make their way to their seats. Everyone is chattering excitedly.

It’s our first day of seventh grade at Otter Springs Middle School in the Advanced Placement Program, and my expectations are high, especially for history class. History has always been my favorite subject, and I expect this school year will prove to be fun as well as memorable.

By the way, my name is Kaitlyn O’Connor, and this is my story.

Mr. Bacon, our seventh grade history teacher, and coincidentally, my next-door neighbor, has a reputation for being different than all the other teachers. He always finds a way to make learning interesting and fun. Now we’re sitting in class, waiting in anticipation for him to arrive.

We wait.

And wait.

Still waiting...



The clock ticks loudly on the wall, and still there is no sign of Mr. Bacon.

The other kids begin to whisper. Eventually the whispering becomes a murmur of annoyed seventh graders.

Suddenly there is a loud crash! Or maybe it's more of a THUD-*kersplash*.

The noise comes from the back of the room, and all heads turn to see what it is.

As the door to the utility closet bursts open, a man stumbles out wearing buckskin leggings and a loose-fitting shirt. Attached to his leather belt are a hunting knife, hatchet, powder horn, and bullet pouch. All that's missing is a coonskin cap. Instead, he is wearing a wide-brimmed beaver felt hat. (Turns out that many frontiersmen preferred the wide brim to keep the sun out of their eyes, and the beaver felt made the hat waterproof. Who knew?)

The man looks like he's just staggered out of the frontier in the 1700s instead of a utility closet...in seventh grade history no less.

With the exception of the plastic mop bucket he is trying to extract his foot from, he fits the role of frontiersman well.

He tosses the mop bucket back into the closet, and pulls out a very long rifle. From a previous history project on Daniel Boone, I recognize it as a very special musket called a Kentucky long rifle.



By now, you've probably guessed it's Mr. Bacon who stepped out of the closet. He gives friendly greetings to several students as he makes his way to the front of the classroom, still carrying the long rifle, along with an old sack slung over his shoulder.

"Greetings young fellow," he nods to Isaiah sitting in the back.

"How do you fare?" Mr. Bacon tips his hat to Anna Olson, one of the smartest girls in class, who smiles in return.

Walking between the desks while carrying his load causes him to bump into Jordan Baker.

"Pray pardon me, my good sir," the friendly frontiersman says as Jordan grins.

"Fare thee well this day, Miss O'Connor?" Mr. Bacon nods my way as he arrives at his desk, where he sets the rifle and bag down and turns to the class.

"Huzzah! Class," he shouts, "you've just experienced a small example of life in the 1700s around the time of the Revolutionary War. Any questions?"

I look around the class and notice all the hands shooting up at the same time as mine.

"Yes, Noah." Mr. Bacon gestured to Noah Richards, sitting two seats behind me.

"What does 'Huzzah' mean?" he asks.

"It has several meanings. In this case, it was an exuberant, celebratory greeting."

"Is that a real gun?" Henry Thompson asks without being called on.

"What's in the bag?" Sam Neville interjects.

"Why are you dressed that way?" Leo Soul shouts out.

The barrage of questions becomes a loud cacophony of voices.

Mr. Bacon holds up his hands as if to fend off the onslaught. "Whoa, class! All in good time."

He moves around his desk to the whiteboard. “First I think we should start with introductions and go on from there.”

“But we already know who you are, Mr. Bacon,” Siri Sherman calls out.

Mr. Bacon chuckles, his eyes showing a twinkle of mischief.

“Quite right, I imagine you do,” he says. “Still, since this is the first day of class, I’d like to attempt a little *normal* teacher stuff.” With that, he turns and writes his name on the whiteboard.

“Hello, class, my name is Mr. Bacon,” he says as he turns to face us.

“Hello, Mr. Bacon!” we sing-song back with a few of the girls giggling.

He grins broadly, tipping his hat.

“Welcome to seventh grade honors history, where the past comes to life. Now let’s get back to a few of those questions.”

Chapter 2 – A Rainy Weekend

“If there is a fifty-fifty chance that something can go wrong, then nine times out of ten it will.”—
Paul Harvey

Otter Springs, Minnesota – Present Day

It’s another rainy Saturday, and the mood is grim at the O’Connor house. Rivulets of water run down the glass as I stare moodily out my bedroom window. Now don’t get me wrong, rain can be kinda fun some times, but I have to draw the line at three weekends in a row. It never seems to rain during the school week—go figure! It’s just not fair.

My friend and classmate, Sam Neville, who also happens to be a longtime neighbor, is hanging out with me. He’s an only child, so it’s even more boring at his house.

Sam is the smartest kid in our class, maybe even in the world. Seriously. (Just don’t tell

him I said that ’cause I don’t want him to get a big head.)



He has short, light red hair under his favorite baseball cap bearing the USA logo on the front and an American flag on the back. Wire-rimmed glasses cover a face full of freckles—which he hates, but I think are kinda cute.

I look over my shoulder and see that my little sister is lying on her bed playing a game on her Nook while humming along to one of our favorite songs.

Sam and I have already played several board games and a couple of rounds of Wii Sports Resort. In fact, we’re so desperately bored we even made up our own game we called *Name That*

Artist, where we had to name the musician singing from Kirsten’s speakers. There was Adele, then Matthew West, followed by TobyMac, Jamie Grace, and our new favorite group called The Piano Guys. It was fun for a while, but now we are just sitting on the window seat in my bedroom staring out at the rain.

I sigh and give the weather one of my best angry looks. In response, I hear a loud crack of thunder—apparently it isn’t intimidated. In fact, I think it’s pouring harder, if that’s possible.

“So, Kait, what do you want to do?” Sam asks for about the millionth time today.

Kirsten chimes in from her side of the room. “We should go on an adventure.”

My sister *loves* to play imaginary adventure games. She even has a special backpack always ready to go. “*Just in case an adventure presents itself,*” she says.

“I don’t feel like it today,” I tell her. I love Kirsten’s imagination, and we often play made-up games together, but I’m just not feeling it today. Is it possible the rain has somehow sucked all the fun out of me?

Kirsten is the cutest. She has curly auburn-red hair and a sprinkle of freckles along her nose. Her style of dressing is all over the map, which matches her personality. If you ever see a nine-year-old skipping down the street wearing a football jersey and jeans under a pink tutu with a princess crown on her head, you’ve probably spotted my sister.

She is also extremely smart, creative, and inescapably curious.



“Hey! Who’s that?” Sam grabs my arm to get my attention.



“Where?” I ask as I turn to the window.

“There!” Sam points across the yard to Mr. Bacon’s driveway.

Unfortunately, the rain is falling so hard we can only make out a tall figure in a western duster coat and what looks like a cowboy hat making his way toward the garage.

“That’s just Mr. Bacon,” I say.

“Does he usually go out to his garage in the pouring rain?” Sam asks.

“It would be strange if it wasn’t Mr.

Bacon,” Kirsten pipes up. “Unless...he’s actually a secret agent going to his spy hideout!” She doesn’t look up from her game. “Or...maybe he is a superhero and he has a secret fortress in there...oh! Maybe he’s really a supervillain and he’s headed to his lair!”

Both Sam and I just smile at her. That girl could go on for hours if we let her.

“Or it might not be Mr. Bacon at all,” Kirsten speculates. “It could be a thief coming to steal Mr. Bacon’s weed whacker! I don’t think he’d be too happy about losing that.”

My sister has a wild imagination, for sure. But she makes a very good point. What if that really isn’t Mr. Bacon?

“We could be watching a thief in the act of stealing from our teacher!” I point out. “I like Mr. Bacon. How would he feel if he found out we stood by and watched as a thief stole his...weed whacker?”

“We should do something,” Sam adds.

“We need to save Mr. Bacon’s...er...*bacon!*” I say.

What starts out as just a crazy idea quickly escalates into something more.

“Well, it would certainly count as an adventure.” Sam shrugs his shoulders, apparently liking the idea of doing something other than sitting idly by the window counting raindrops, which is really not that easy or fun to do, I should add.

“Did you say *adventure?*” For the first time Kirsten stops what she is doing and looks up from her Nook. “I wanna go too!”

Sam and I look at each other, both silently debating the ramifications of her tagging along. I love my little sister, but sometimes she can boldly go where no one has or should, especially when the impulsive side of her ADHD kicks in.

She obviously notices the hesitation in my eyes and quickly adds, “Come on—you need me! I am an expert adventurer...I have my adventure pack stocked with all the survival essentials.”

As I start to shake my head, she pulls the ace out of her sleeve. “Maybe I should ask *Mom* and *Dad* if you can go out in the rain...” Kirsten *knows* that our parents wouldn’t let us go outside in this downpour.

I roll my eyes. “Okay fine, you can come along.”

She jumps up with an excited shout.

“But you gotta be quiet!” I shush her.

“Right. Stealth is the key,” Kirsten says in a whisper as she tosses her Nook aside and grabs her adventure pack. “I will be like a shadow. You won’t even know I’m there.” She holds a finger to her lips as she tiptoes backward, tripping over toys and crashing into her bookcase, noisily knocking books off the shelf.

I just sigh.

On the way downstairs we see my parents sitting on the couch. As usual, Mom is reading a book and Dad is hunkered over his laptop.

Still on the stairs, I quickly whisper our plan of action. “Okay, remember, Kirst, your job is to distract them. Sam and I will sneak past and meet you on the porch.”

Kirsten bounces down the stairs and over to our parents. Sam and I follow a few seconds later.

“Hello, Mummy! Hello, Daddy!” Kirsten says in a silly voice. They both look up at my sister and warmly smile.

“Hi there, Sparkles,” Mom says, using one of her many nicknames for my sister.

“Whatcha up to, *Pumpkin*?” Dad asks.

“I’m off on an adventure!” Kirsten says brightly. “Oh wait, that’s a secret!” She puts her finger to her lips and whispers, “I can’t tell you where I am going, but I bet it’s going to be wet...and—” I quickly interrupt before she spills all the beans.

“C’mon, Kirst, we are going to be late for our *excursion*,” I say with a smile, beaming at my parents as I try to usher her out of the room.

We almost make it before Dad stops us.

“Oh, say, Sweetie.” Dad’s nickname for me. “I just have one question for you before you go.”

Uh-oh, here it comes, I think to myself.

“What is the first thing you should do if you are attacked by a crowd of clowns?”

Somehow he says this with a straight face.

I look over at Sam, trying to prepare him for the awful punch line that is sure to follow.

“You go for the juggler!” Dad says, laughing at his own joke as the rest of us roll our eyes.

Our dad always says that he has to laugh at his own jokes 'cause no one else will. This is entirely true. I guess that's why he calls them his *moaners-and-groaners*.

“Good one, Dad,” I say as we head toward the kitchen. “Almost made me break a smile.”

We hear him call out, “Have fun storming the castle!” and I smile just a little. My dad may be a nut...but he's the best dad I have.

By the time I reach the porch, Sam and Kirsten are already getting their rain gear on. Coats, boots, hats, and the all-important umbrellas.

“Nice job with the distraction!” I say mockingly to my sister.

“Thanks, Sis!” she says with a big grin, totally oblivious to my sarcasm. “Let the adventure begin!”

Chapter 3 – Into the Squall

“In the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.”—Abraham Lincoln

Otter Springs, Minnesota – Present Day

Now suitably dressed, we quietly exit the porch into what has become a howling squall. Struggling against the wind and rain, we make our way across the yard and into Mr. Bacon’s driveway. Reaching the side door of the garage, I pause with a questioning look at Sam, whose glasses are covered in rain. At this point I’m guessing his visibility is near zero. Kirsten doesn’t pause, but pushes right by us and opens the door. We follow her in, if only to get out of the rain.

“Are there any bad guys in here?” she yells out into the shadowy darkness.

I quickly grab my sister and cover her mouth with my hand. “Shhh!” I whisper in her ear.

Taking in the dark garage, it is hard to make out details, but some things are easily recognizable. We immediately notice a beautiful old car, as well as rakes, shovels, and garden tools of all kinds hanging on the wall to one side.

On the other side of the garage is a workbench. It holds toolboxes and a myriad of other gadgets and implements neatly displayed on the surface as well as hanging on a pegboard behind it.

“I don’t see anyone,” Sam whispers.

He is right; there is no sign of anyone in the garage—besides us nosy kids, of course.

We are about to leave when I realize Kirsten is no longer with us. She must have wandered off to explore again—no surprise there.

“I’ve gotta get a leash for that kid!” I say to Sam. “Kirsten!” I whisper as loudly as I dare.

CRASH!

We look over to see Kirsten knocking tools onto the floor as she climbs up on the workbench.

“Oops! I did that by accidentally,” Kirsten confesses.

Sam and I run toward her to try to prevent injuries as well as stop her from making any more noise than she already has. “Get down from there now!” I whisper in a tone that says I mean business.

As Kirsten moves along the bench, she loses her balance and grabs a large wrench hanging on the wall to steady herself. Apparently it’s some sort of lever, because as it moves, part of the wall opens, revealing a dark tunnel.

Sam and I stand frozen, our mouths open, slack-jawed.

Kirsten, on the other hand, is definitely *not* frozen. “Cool!” she says as she jumps down off the bench and immediately moves toward the tunnel.

Luckily, I am quick enough to grab her before she actually enters the unknown passageway.

“C’mon, Kait! What are you waiting for?” she asks, trying to pull away from me. “We wanted an adventure—let’s go find it.”

“I’m not so sure about this,” Sam says in a wobbly voice.

“Hang on, Kirst,” I caution. “We don’t know where that thing goes!”

“Sure we do. *‘Adventure awaits those who dare!’*” My sister is always quoting a line from some movie or book.

“I’m pretty sure I don’t feel very daring.” Sam still sounds nervous.

“Well, that’s okay, Sam. Kait and I will protect you,” Kirsten proclaims boldly as her eyes glitter in anticipation.

I look at Sam. “Are you in?”

Knowing Sam, my friend is petrified but doesn’t want to show it in front of a couple of girls, so he nods with a gulp.

“All right, we can explore, but I’ll go first, and you stay behind me, Kirst,” I instruct my little sister, despite knowing it’s unlikely she’ll actually listen. At the first glimpse of something interesting, she’ll be after it.

“Let’s go!” Kirsten exclaims, handing me a flashlight from her adventure pack.

Relief washes over me as our first steps into the dark tunnel trigger a line of small LED lights that illuminate the passageway. They aren’t bright enough to make out details, but sufficient to avoid running into walls or tripping over our own feet.

I swallow hard to calm my nerves, while my frightened friend moves forward with us. Kirsten is having the time of her life. It’s all I can do to keep her from running off ahead of us.

The ground descends as we move forward, and we walk for what seems like a long time but in reality is probably only a few minutes. Finally we see a dim light up ahead in the shape of a rectangle. As we get closer, the rectangle becomes a door with a few steps leading down to it. We step down cautiously approaching the entrance.

In the dim light, I can’t see a doorknob or keyhole. There also doesn’t seem to be any sort of lever or secret switch to open it.

Kirsten, who’s had enough waiting, moves forward and touches the door. When nothing happens, she tries knocking. “Hello! Anyone in there?” Still nothing. Frustrated, she begins shouting at the door. “Dumb door! Open up!” To my surprise, the door slides open like the automatic sliding doors at the mall, and Kirsten turns to me with a smile. “Apparently you just have to know how to talk to doors,” she says, moving into the room.

Personally, I don't think it was *how* she talked to the door as much as the words she used. Perhaps *door* and *open* might have been the key?

Sam and I step through the doorway, our eyes widening as we take in a room illuminated by brighter LED lights.

We're in awe of the technology displayed. While my thoughts are scrambling to understand the overwhelming scene, Sam offers a nervous laugh.

In one corner is an area that's clearly dedicated to working on electronics. Scattered across the workbench are a microscope, magnifying glass, soldering tools, and all sorts of electrical components.

On the other side of the room is a large translucent smart board; it's basically like a computer screen displaying maps and graphs, as well as what looks like some sort of timeline.

Shelves full of books line the wall, and more books are spread out on a table in the center of the room. Some of them are open and at a glance look like technical manuals, while others appear to be history books, the very same books we use at school!

It is a strange mixture of technology and ancient stuff; some objects you might even see in a museum.



On one wall hang swords, spears, battle-axes, and a shield. On another, old maps and scrolls are displayed. Farther into the room a wall holds what look like some very old paintings framed in gilded dark wood.

All of these historical items are arranged alongside some of the most advanced technology I've ever seen, as well as many things I've never laid eyes on before.

I glimpse what looks like a small robot in the corner. Clearly, my sister has also noticed and is moving over to investigate. I am about to warn her to not touch anything, but I remember who I'm talking to and shrug it off.

She bends down to talk to the three-foot-tall robot.

"Hi there," she says.

At the sound of her voice, the robot's arm twitches and its head spins around.

Kirsten jumps back and squeals with delight.

Quickly she begins to explore what this new toy can do.

"Hi, my name is Kirsten," she says to the robot as if talking to a pet.

"Bwahha!" The robot howls in a man's deep voice with a slight metallic tone to it.

Kirsten jumps back instinctively, landing on her backside.

"Do ye think me a dog, girl?" The robot asks in an offended tone and a strange Scottish-sounding accent. It rolls on its two wheels right up to Kirsten's face.

The sophistication of this toy is impressive, still I take a step toward my sister to intercede if needed.

"What's your name?" Kirsten asks, not the least bit intimidated.

The robot rolls a bit closer, until it is almost touching Kirsten's nose, tilting its head as if trying to assess her.



“Buster’s me name. Ye gonna make something o’ it?”

My little sister ignores the challenging tone. “Do you want to play a game?”

“I’m fer playin’ games, but not with youngsters who canno’ give me a challenge,” the robot gruffly retorts.

“Well, I don’t like losing either, Buster.” My sister replies. “I always play my best and I plan to win!” Kirsten grins saucily as she leans back, putting her hands on her hips.

“Do ye play chess?” Buster asks.

She squeals in delight. “Do I ever!”

“Aye, then let’s commence to playin’.”

Buster adjusts the space between them and projects a 3-D holographic image of a chessboard from a panel in the center of his body.

Kirsten plops down on the smooth cement floor facing the robot.

That girl just loves to play chess. Ever since Dad taught her the game, she’s constantly gotten better and will play with any willing partner.

With Kirsten safely occupied, I begin to further explore our surroundings.

From the far corner of the room Sam calls out, “Hey, Kait, check this out.”

Moving in that direction, I notice a pedestal with a display case holding a strange object.

It looks to be made of metal, mostly gold in color, shaped like a teardrop, and about the size of a bar of soap. There are some jeweled buttons on the side and a strange blue crystal on its



face. “It must be very valuable to be displayed like this,” I comment to Sam as he reaches out to touch it.

“Sam, don’t!” I yell. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with here!”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to find out,” he snaps.

“But we don’t know if there is an alarm or something that might go off if you touch it,” I explain.

That stops him in his tracks.

“Speaking of alarms,” Sam counters, “how do you know we haven’t already set some off simply by entering this room?”

Just as I’m about to suggest we hightail it out of there, we hear a low humming sound across the room accompanied by a soft blue light. First the air looks bent or warped, then fuzzy like a bad TV picture. Suddenly standing before us is the same man in the western duster coat and cowboy hat we had seen earlier from my bedroom window...accompanied by the distinct smell of...cinnamon.