

In the science fiction novel Among the Hidden, Luke is the third child in his family—but they live in a society where families are limited to only two children. To avoid the Population Police, Luke must remain hidden in his home. Read the chapter that describes a discovery Luke makes and answer the questions that follow.

from **Among the Hidden**

by Margaret Peterson Haddix

- 1 **O**ne cool, rainy morning a few weeks later, Luke’s family left in such a rush, they barely had time to say good-bye. They dashed out the door after breakfast, Matthew and Mark complaining about their packed lunches, Dad calling back, “I’m going to that auction up at Chytlesville. Won’t be home until supper.” Mother hurried back and handed Luke a bag of cracklings and three pears and some biscuits from the night before. She muttered, “So you won’t get hungry,” and gave him a quick kiss on the head. Then she was gone, too.
- 2 Luke peeked around the stairway door, surveying the chaos of dirty pans and crumb-covered plates left in the kitchen. He knew not to look out as far as the window, but he did, anyway. His heart gave a strange jump when he saw the window was covered. Someone must have pulled the shade the night before, to try to keep the kitchen warm, and then forgotten to raise it in the morning. Luke dared to lean out a little further—yes, the shade was down on the other window, too. For the first time in almost six months, he could step out into the kitchen and not worry about being seen. He could run, skip, jump—dance, even—on the vast linoleum without fear. He could clean up the kitchen and surprise Mother. He could do anything.
- 3 He put his right foot out, tentatively, not quite daring to put his full weight on it. The floor squeaked. He froze. Nothing happened, but he retreated, anyway. He went back up the stairs, crawled along the second-floor hallway to avoid the windows, then climbed the stairs to the attic. He was so disgusted with himself, he could taste it.
- 4 *I am a coward. I am a chicken. I deserve to be locked away in the attic forever,* ran through his head. *No, no,* he countered himself, *I’m cautious. I’m making a plan.*
- 5 He climbed up onto the stool on top of a trunk that served as his perch for watching out the back vents. The neighborhood behind his house was fully occupied now. He knew all the families and had come up with names for most of them. The Big Car Family had four expensive cars sitting in their driveway. The Gold Family all had hair the color of sunshine. The Birdbrain Family had set a row of thirty

birdhouses along their backyard fence, even though Luke could have told them it was pointless to do that until spring. The house he could see best, right behind the Garners' backyard, was occupied by the Sports Family. Two teenaged boys lived there, and their deck overflowed with soccer balls, baseball bats, tennis rackets, basketballs, hockey sticks, and apparatus from games Luke could only guess at.

6 Today, he wasn't interested in games. He was interested in seeing the families leave.

7 He had noticed before that all of the houses were empty by nine in the morning, with kids off to school and grown-ups off to work. Three or four of the women didn't seem to have jobs, but they left, too, returning late in the afternoon with shopping bags. Today, he just had to make sure no one was staying home sick.

8 The Gold Family left first, two blond heads in one car, two blond heads in another. The Sports Family was next, the boys carrying football pads and helmets, their mother teetering on high heels. Then there was a flurry of cars streaming from every driveway onto the still-sparkling new streets. Luke counted each person, keeping track so carefully that he made scratches on the wall, and counted the scratches twice again at the end. Yes—twenty-eight people gone. He was safe.

9 Luke scrambled down from his chair, his head spinning with plans. First, he'd clean up the kitchen; then he'd start some bread for supper. He'd never made bread before, but he'd watched Mother a million times. Then maybe he could pull the shades in the rest of the house and clean it thoroughly. He couldn't vacuum—that'd be too loud—but he could dust and scrub and polish. Mother would be so pleased. Then, in the afternoon, before Matthew or Mark or the kids in the neighborhood got back, he could put something on for supper. Maybe potato soup. Why, he could do this every day. He'd never considered housework or cooking particularly thrilling before—Matthew and Mark always scoffed at it as women's work—but it was better than nothing. And maybe, just maybe, if this worked, he could convince Dad to let him sneak out to the barn and help there, too.

10 Luke was so excited, he stepped into the kitchen without a second thought this time. Who cared if the floor creaked? No one was there to hear it. He gathered up dishes from the table and piled them into the sink, scrubbing everything with extraordinary zeal. He measured out flour and lard and milk and yeast and was putting it all in a bowl when it occurred to him it might be okay to turn on the radio, very softly. Nobody'd hear. And if they did, they'd just figure the family had forgotten to turn it off, just as they'd forgotten to raise the shades.

11 The bread was in the oven and Luke was picking up lint by hand from the living room rug when he heard tires on the gravel driveway. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, too early for the school bus or Mother or Dad. Luke sprinted for the stairs, hoping whoever it was would just go away.

12 No luck. He heard the side door creaking open, then Dad exclaiming, "What the—"

13 He was back early. That shouldn't matter. But hiding on the staircase, Luke suddenly felt like the radio was as loud as an entire orchestra, like the smell of baking bread could fill three counties.

14 "Luke!" Dad yelled.

15 Luke heard his father's hand on the doorknob. He opened the door.

16 "I was just trying to help," Luke blubbered. "I was safe. You left the shades down, so I thought it was okay, and I made sure everyone was gone from the neighborhood, and—"

17 Dad glared. "You can't be sure," he snapped. "People like that—they get deliveries all the time, they get sick and come home from work, they have maids come during the day—"

18 Luke could have protested, no, the maids never come before the kids get home from school. But he didn't want to give himself away any more than he already had.

19 "The shades were down," he said. "I didn't turn on a single light. Even if there were a thousand people back there, nobody would know I was here! Please—I've just got to do something. Look, I made bread, and cleaned up, and—"

20 "What if a Government inspector or someone had stopped by here?"

21 "I would have hidden. Like always."

22 Dad was shaking his head. "And leave them smelling bread baking in an empty house? You don't seem to understand," he said. "You can't take any chances. You can't. Because—"

23 At that precise moment, the buzzer on the oven went off, sounding as loud as a siren. Dad gave Luke a dirty look and stalked over to the oven. He pulled out the two bread pans and tossed them on the stove top. He flipped off the radio.

24 "I don't want you in the kitchen again," he said. "You stay hidden. That's an order."

25 He went out the door without looking back.

26 Luke fled up the stairs. He wanted to stomp, angrily, but he couldn't. No noise allowed. In his room, he hesitated, too upset to read, too restless to do anything else. He kept hearing *You stay hidden. That's an order*, echoing in his ears. But he'd been hidden. He'd been careful. To

prove his point—to himself, at least—he climbed back up on his perch by the back vents and looked out on the quiet neighborhood.

27 All the driveways were empty. Nothing moved, not even the flag on the Gold Family's flagpole or the spokes on the Birdbrain Family's fake windmill. And then, out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught a glimpse of something behind one window of the Sports Family's house.

28 A face. A child's face. In a house where two boys already lived.