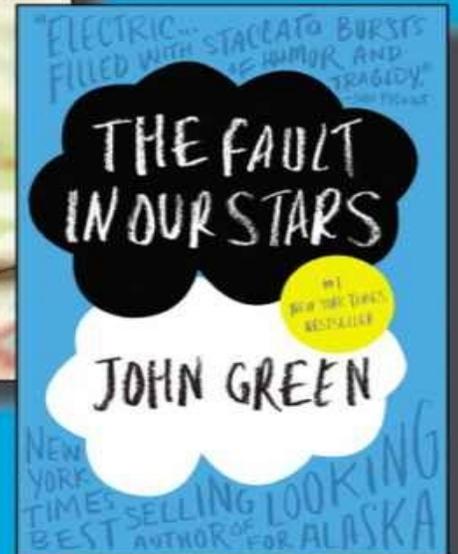
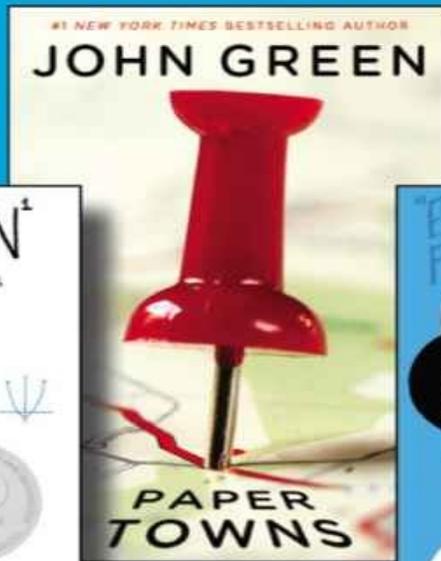
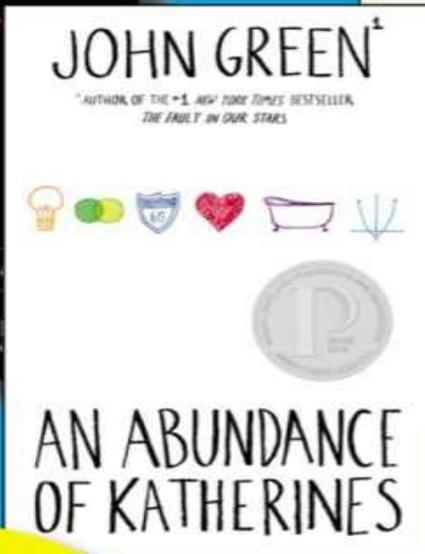
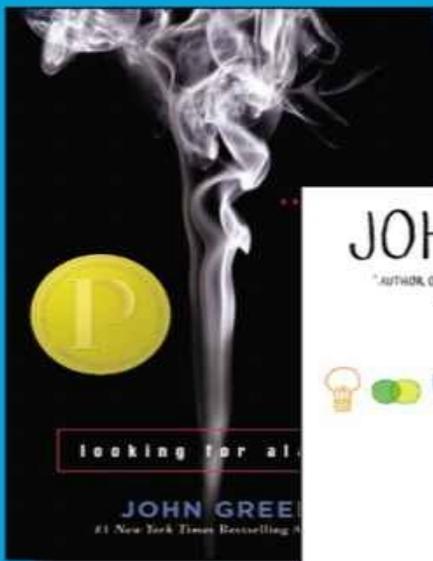


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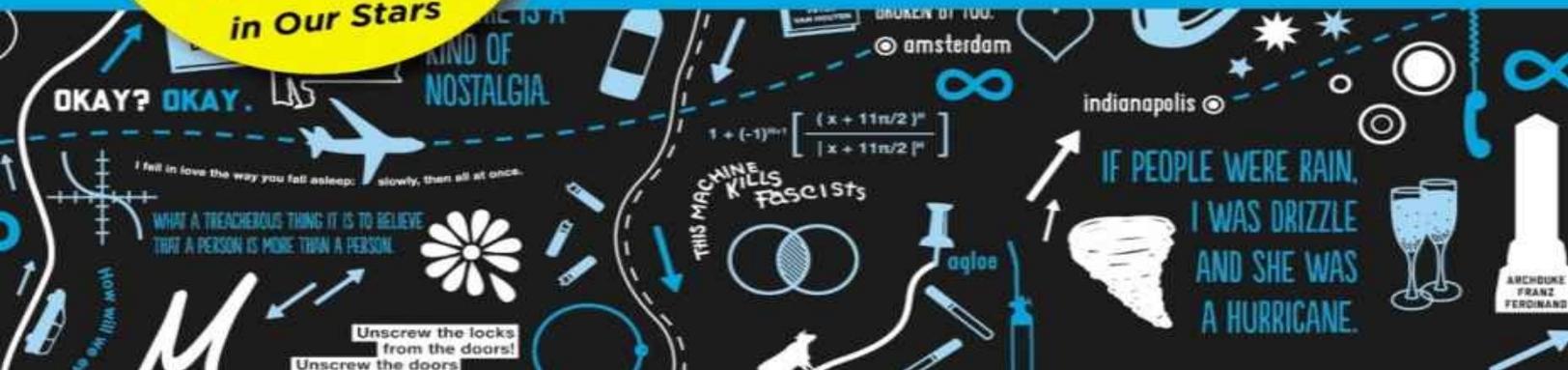
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Paper Towns,
AND *The Fault in Our Stars*

“Damn near genius.”
—*TIME* magazine

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—*KLIATT* on *Let It Snow*

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a novel



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JOHN GREEN

**looking for
alaska**

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speak

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Pages 18–19 and 155: Excerpt from *The General in His Labyrinth*,
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Page 85: Poetry quote from “As I Walked Out One Evening,” by W. H. Auden

Page 89: Poetry quote from “Not So Far as the Forest,” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

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To my family: Sydney Green, Mike Green, and Hank Green

“I have tried so hard to do right.”

(last words of President Grover Cleveland)

acknowledgments

USING SMALL TYPE that does not reflect the size of my debt, I need to acknowledge some things:

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before

one hundred thirty-six days before

THE WEEK BEFORE I left my family and Florida and the rest of my minor life to go to boarding school in Alabama, my mother insisted on throwing me a going-away party. To say that I had low expectations would be to underestimate the matter dramatically. Although I was more or less forced to invite all my “school friends,” i.e., the ragtag bunch of drama people and English geeks I sat with by social necessity in the cavernous cafeteria of my public school, I knew they wouldn’t come. Still, my mother persevered, awash in the delusion that I had kept my popularity secret from her all these years. She cooked a small mountain of artichoke dip. She festooned our living room in green and yellow streamers, the colors of my new school. She bought two dozen champagne poppers and placed them around the edge of our coffee table.

And when that final Friday came, when my packing was mostly done, she sat with my dad and me on the living-room couch at 4:56 P.M. and patiently awaited the arrival of the Good-bye to Miles Cavalry. Said cavalry consisted of exactly two people: Marie Lawson, a tiny blonde with rectangular glasses, and her chunky (to put it charitably) boyfriend, Will.

“Hey, Miles,” Marie said as she sat down.

“Hey,” I said.

“How was your summer?” Will asked.

“Okay. Yours?”

“Good. We did *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I helped with the sets. Marie did lights,” said Will.

“That’s cool.” I nodded knowingly, and that about exhausted our conversational topics. I might have asked a question about *Jesus Christ Superstar*, except that 1. I didn’t know what it was, and 2. I didn’t care to learn, and 3. I never really excelled at small talk. My mom, however, can talk small for hours, and so she extended the awkwardness by asking them about their rehearsal schedule, and how the show had gone, and whether it was a success.

“I guess it was,” Marie said. “A lot of people came, I guess.” Marie was the sort of person to guess a lot.

Finally, Will said, “Well, we just dropped by to say good-bye. I’ve got to get Marie home by six. Have fun at boarding school, Miles.”

“Thanks,” I answered, relieved. The only thing worse than having a party

that no one attends is having a party attended only by two vastly, deeply uninteresting people.

They left, and so I sat with my parents and stared at the blank TV and wanted to turn it on but knew I shouldn't. I could feel them both looking at me, waiting for me to burst into tears or something, as if I hadn't known all along that it would go precisely like this. But I *had* known. I could feel their pity as they scooped artichoke dip with chips intended for my imaginary friends, but they needed pity more than I did: I wasn't disappointed. My expectations had been met.

"Is this why you want to leave, Miles?" Mom asked.

I mulled it over for a moment, careful not to look at her. "Uh, no," I said.

"Well, why then?" she asked. This was not the first time she had posed the question. Mom was not particularly keen on letting me go to boarding school and had made no secret of it.

"Because of me?" my dad asked. He had attended Culver Creek, the same boarding school to which I was headed, as had both of his brothers and all of their kids. I think he liked the idea of me following in his footsteps. My uncles had told me stories about how famous my dad had been on campus for having simultaneously raised hell and aced all his classes. That sounded like a better life than the one I had in Florida. But no, it wasn't because of Dad. Not exactly.

"Hold on," I said. I went into Dad's study and found his biography of François Rabelais. I liked reading biographies of writers, even if (as was the case with Monsieur Rabelais) I'd never read any of their actual writing. I flipped to the back and found the highlighted quote ("NEVER USE A HIGHLIGHTER IN MY BOOKS," my dad had told me a thousand times. But how else are you supposed to find what you're looking for?).

"So this guy," I said, standing in the doorway of the living room. "François Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were 'I go to seek a Great Perhaps.' That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps."

And that quieted them. I was after a Great Perhaps, and they knew as well as I did that I wasn't going to find it with the likes of Will and Marie. I sat back down on the couch, between my mom and my dad, and my dad put his arm around me, and we stayed there like that, quiet on the couch together, for a long time, until it seemed okay to turn on the TV, and then we ate artichoke dip for dinner and watched the History Channel, and as going-away parties go, it certainly could have been worse.

one hundred twenty-eight days before

FLORIDA WAS PLENTY HOT, certainly, and humid, too. Hot enough that your clothes stuck to you like Scotch tape, and sweat dripped like tears from your forehead into your eyes. But it was only hot outside, and generally I only went outside to walk from one air-conditioned location to another.

This did not prepare me for the unique sort of heat that one encounters fifteen miles south of Birmingham, Alabama, at Culver Creek Preparatory School. My parents' SUV was parked in the grass just a few feet outside my dorm room, Room 43. But each time I took those few steps to and from the car to unload what now seemed like far too much stuff, the sun burned through my clothes and into my skin with a vicious ferocity that made me genuinely fear hellfire.

Between Mom and Dad and me, it only took a few minutes to unload the car, but my unair-conditioned dorm room, although blessedly out of the sunshine, was only modestly cooler. The room surprised me: I'd pictured plush carpet, wood-paneled walls, Victorian furniture. Aside from one luxury—a private bathroom—I got a box. With cinder-block walls coated thick with layers of white paint and a green-and-white-checkered linoleum floor, the place looked more like a hospital than the dorm room of my fantasies. A bunk bed of unfinished wood with vinyl mattresses was pushed against the room's back window. The desks and dressers and bookshelves were all attached to the walls in order to prevent creative floor planning. *And no air-conditioning.*

I sat on the lower bunk while Mom opened the trunk, grabbed a stack of the biographies my dad had agreed to part with, and placed them on the bookshelves.

"I can unpack, Mom," I said. My dad stood. He was ready to go.

"Let me at least make your bed," Mom said.

"No, really. I can do it. It's okay." Because you simply cannot draw these things out forever. At some point, you just pull off the Band-Aid and it hurts, but then it's over and you're relieved.

"God, we'll miss you," Mom said suddenly, stepping through the minefield of suitcases to get to the bed. I stood and hugged her. My dad walked over, too, and we formed a sort of huddle. It was too hot, and we were too sweaty, for the hug to last terribly long. I knew I ought to cry, but I'd lived with my parents for sixteen years, and a trial separation seemed overdue.

"Don't worry." I smiled. "It's a-gonna learn how t'talk right Southern." Mom laughed.

"Don't do anything stupid," my dad said.

“Okay.”

“No drugs. No drinking. No cigarettes.” As an alumnus of Culver Creek, he had done the things I had only heard about: the secret parties, streaking through hay fields (he always whined about how it was all boys back then), drugs, drinking, and cigarettes. It had taken him a while to kick smoking, but his badass days were now well behind him.

“I love you,” they both blurted out simultaneously. It needed to be said, but the words made the whole thing horribly uncomfortable, like watching your grandparents kiss.

“I love you, too. I’ll call every Sunday.” Our rooms had no phone lines, but my parents had requested I be placed in a room near one of Culver Creek’s five pay phones.

They hugged me again—Mom, then Dad—and it was over. Out the back window, I watched them drive the winding road off campus. I should have felt a gooey, sentimental sadness, perhaps. But mostly I just wanted to cool off, so I grabbed one of the desk chairs and sat down outside my door in the shade of the overhanging eaves, waiting for a breeze that never arrived. The air outside sat as still and oppressive as the air inside. I stared out over my new digs: Six one-story buildings, each with sixteen dorm rooms, were arranged in a hexagram around a large circle of grass. It looked like an oversize old motel. Everywhere, boys and girls hugged and smiled and walked together. I vaguely hoped that someone would come up and talk to me. I imagined the conversation:

“Hey. Is this your first year?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m from Florida.”

“That’s cool. So you’re used to the heat.”

“I wouldn’t be used to this heat if I were from Hades,” I’d joke. I’d make a good first impression. *Oh, he’s funny. That guy Miles is a riot.*

That didn’t happen, of course. Things never happened like I imagined them.

Bored, I went back inside, took off my shirt, lay down on the heat-soaked vinyl of the lower bunk mattress, and closed my eyes. I’d never been born again with the baptism and weeping and all that, but it couldn’t feel much better than being born again as a guy with no known past. I thought of the people I’d read about—John F. Kennedy, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart—who went to boarding school, and their adventures—Kennedy, for example, loved pranks. I thought of the Great Perhaps and the things that might happen and the people I might meet and who my roommate might be (I’d gotten a letter a few weeks before that gave me his name, Chip Martin, but no other information). Whoever Chip Martin was, I hoped to God he would bring an arsenal of high-powered fans, because I hadn’t packed even one, and I could already feel my sweat

pooling on the vinyl mattress, which disgusted me so much that I stopped thinking and got off my ass to find a towel to wipe up the sweat with. And then I thought, *Well, before the adventure comes the unpacking.*

I managed to tape a map of the world to the wall and get most of my clothes into drawers before I noticed that the hot, moist air made even the walls sweat, and I decided that now was not the time for manual labor. Now was the time for a magnificently cold shower.

The small bathroom contained a huge, full-length mirror behind the door, and so I could not escape the reflection of my naked self as I leaned in to turn on the shower faucet. My skinniness always surprised me: My thin arms didn't seem to get much bigger as they moved from wrist to shoulder, my chest lacked any hint of either fat or muscle, and I felt embarrassed and wondered if something could be done about the mirror. I pulled open the plain white shower curtain and ducked into the stall.

Unfortunately, the shower seemed to have been designed for someone approximately three feet, seven inches tall, so the cold water hit my lower rib cage—with all the force of a dripping faucet. To wet my sweat-soaked face, I had to spread my legs and squat significantly. Surely, John F. Kennedy (who was six feet tall according to his biography, my height exactly) did not have to *squat* at *his* boarding school. No, this was a different beast entirely, and as the dribbling shower slowly soaked my body, I wondered whether I could find a Great Perhaps here at all or whether I had made a grand miscalculation.

When I opened the bathroom door after my shower, a towel wrapped around my waist, I saw a short, muscular guy with a shock of brown hair. He was hauling a gigantic army-green duffel bag through the door of my room. He stood five feet and nothing, but was well-built, like a scale model of Adonis, and with him arrived the stink of stale cigarette smoke. *Great*, I thought. *I'm meeting my roommate naked.* He heaved the duffel into the room, closed the door, and walked over to me.

"I'm Chip Martin," he announced in a deep voice, the voice of a radio deejay. Before I could respond, he added, "I'd shake your hand, but I think you should hold on damn tight to that towel till you can get some clothes on."

I laughed and nodded my head at him (that's cool, right? the nod?) and said, "I'm Miles Halter. Nice to meet you."

"Miles, as in 'to go before I sleep'?" he asked me.

"Huh?"

"It's a Robert Frost poem. You've never read him?"

I shook my head no.

"Consider yourself lucky." He smiled.

I grabbed some clean underwear, a pair of blue Adidas soccer shorts, and a white T-shirt, mumbled that I'd be back in a second, and ducked back into the bathroom. So much for a good first impression.

"So where are your parents?" I asked from the bathroom.

"My parents? The father's in California right now. Maybe sitting in his La-Z-Boy. Maybe driving his truck. Either way, he's drinking. My mother is probably just now turning off campus."

"Oh," I said, dressed now, not sure how to respond to such personal information. I shouldn't have asked, I guess, if I didn't want to know.

Chip grabbed some sheets and tossed them onto the top bunk. "I'm a top bunk man. Hope that doesn't bother you."

"Uh, no. Whatever is fine."

"I see you've decorated the place," he said, gesturing toward the world map. "I like it."

And then he started naming countries. He spoke in a monotone, as if he'd done it a thousand times before.

Afghanistan.

Albania.

Algeria.

American Samoa.

Andorra.

And so on. He got through the A's before looking up and noticing my incredulous stare.

"I could do the rest, but it'd probably bore you. Something I learned over the summer. God, you can't imagine how boring New Hope, Alabama, is in the summertime. Like watching soybeans grow. Where are you from, by the way?"

"Florida," I said.

"Never been."

"That's pretty amazing, the countries thing," I said.

"Yeah, everybody's got a talent. I can memorize things. And you can...?"

"Um, I know a lot of people's last words." It was an indulgence, learning last words. Other people had chocolate; I had dying declarations.

"Example?"

"I like Henrik Ibsen's. He was a playwright." I knew a lot about Ibsen, but I'd never read any of his plays. I didn't like reading plays. I liked reading biographies.

"Yeah, I know who he was," said Chip.

"Right, well, he'd been sick for a while and his nurse said to him, 'You seem to be feeling better this morning,' and Ibsen looked at her and said, 'On the

contrary,' and then he died.”

Chip laughed. “That’s morbid. But I like it.”

He told me he was in his third year at Culver Creek. He had started in ninth grade, the first year at the school, and was now a junior like me. A scholarship kid, he said. Got a full ride. He’d heard it was the best school in Alabama, so he wrote his application essay about how he wanted to go to a school where he could read long books. The problem, he said in the essay, was that his dad would always hit him with the books in his house, so Chip kept his books short and paperback for his own safety. His parents got divorced his sophomore year. He liked “the Creek,” as he called it, but “You have to be careful here, with students and with teachers. And I do hate being careful.” He smirked. I hated being careful, too—or wanted to, at least.

He told me this while ripping through his duffel bag, throwing clothes into drawers with reckless abandon. Chip did not believe in having a sock drawer or a T-shirt drawer. He believed that all drawers were created equal and filled each with whatever fit. My mother would have died.

As soon as he finished “unpacking,” Chip hit me roughly on the shoulder, said, “I hope you’re stronger than you look,” and walked out the door, leaving it open behind him. He peeked his head back in a few seconds later and saw me standing still. “Well, come on, Miles To Go Halter. We got shit to do.”

We made our way to the TV room, which according to Chip contained the only cable TV on campus. Over the summer, it served as a storage unit. Packed nearly to the ceiling with couches, fridges, and rolled-up carpets, the TV room undulated with kids trying to find and haul away their stuff. Chip said hello to a few people but didn’t introduce me. As he wandered through the couch-stocked maze, I stood near the room’s entrance, trying my best not to block pairs of roommates as they maneuvered furniture through the narrow front door.

It took ten minutes for Chip to find his stuff, and an hour more for us to make four trips back and forth across the dorm circle between the TV room and Room 43. By the end, I wanted to crawl into Chip’s minifridge and sleep for a thousand years, but Chip seemed immune to both fatigue and heatstroke. I sat down on his couch.

“I found it lying on a curb in my neighborhood a couple years ago,” he said of the couch as he worked on setting up my PlayStation 2 on top of his footlocker. “I know the leather’s got some cracks, but come on. That’s a damn nice couch.” The leather had more than a few cracks—it was about 30 percent baby blue faux leather and 70 percent foam—but it felt damn good to me anyway.

“All right,” he said. “We’re about done.” He walked over to his desk and

pulled a roll of duct tape from a drawer. “We just need your trunk.”

I got up, pulled the trunk out from under the bed, and Chip situated it between the couch and the PlayStation 2 and started tearing off thin strips of duct tape. He applied them to the trunk so that they spelled out COFFEE TABLE.

“There,” he said. He sat down and put his feet up on the, uh, coffee table. “Done.”

I sat down next to him, and he looked over at me and suddenly said, “Listen. I’m not going to be your entrée to Culver Creek social life.”

“Uh, okay,” I said, but I could hear the words catch in my throat. I’d just carried this guy’s couch beneath a white-hot sun and now he didn’t like me?

“Basically you’ve got two groups here,” he explained, speaking with increasing urgency. “You’ve got the regular boarders, like me, and then you’ve got the Weekday Warriors; they board here, but they’re all rich kids who live in Birmingham and go home to their parents’ air-conditioned mansions every weekend. Those are the cool kids. I don’t like them, and they don’t like me, and so if you came here thinking that you were hot shit at public school so you’ll be hot shit here, you’d best not be seen with me. You did go to public school, didn’t you?”

“Uh...” I said. Absentmindedly, I began picking at the cracks in the couch’s leather, digging my fingers into the foamy whiteness.

“Right, you did, probably, because if you had gone to a private school your freakin’ shorts would fit.” He laughed.

I wore my shorts just below my hips, which I thought was cool. Finally I said, “Yeah, I went to public school. But I wasn’t hot shit there, Chip. I was regular shit.”

“Ha! That’s good. And don’t call me Chip. Call me the Colonel.”

I stifled a laugh. “The *Colonel*?”

“Yeah. The Colonel. And we’ll call you...hmm. Pudge.”

“Huh?”

“Pudge,” the Colonel said. “Because you’re skinny. It’s called irony, Pudge. Heard of it? Now, let’s go get some cigarettes and start this year off right.”

He walked out of the room, again just assuming I’d follow, and this time I did. Mercifully, the sun was descending toward the horizon. We walked five doors down to Room 48. A dry-erase board was taped to the door using duct tape. In blue marker, it read: *Alaska has a single!*

The Colonel explained to me that 1. this was Alaska’s room, and that 2. she had a single room because the girl who was supposed to be her roommate got kicked out at the end of last year, and that 3. Alaska had cigarettes, although the Colonel neglected to ask whether 4. I smoked, which 5. I didn’t.

He knocked once, loudly. Through the door, a voice screamed, “Oh my God come in you short little man because I have the best story.”

We walked in. I turned to close the door behind me, and the Colonel shook his head and said, “After seven, you have to leave the door open if you’re in a girl’s room,” but I barely heard him because the hottest girl in all of human history was standing before me in cutoff jeans and a peach tank top. And she was talking over the Colonel, talking loud and fast.

“So first day of summer, I’m in grand old Vine Station with this boy named Justin and we’re at his house watching TV on the couch—and mind you, I’m already dating Jake—actually I’m still dating him, miraculously enough, but Justin is a friend of mine from when I was a kid and so we’re watching TV and literally chatting about the SATs or something, and Justin puts his arm around me and I think, *Oh that’s nice, we’ve been friends for so long and this is totally comfortable*, and we’re just chatting and then I’m in the middle of a sentence about analogies or something and like a hawk he reaches down and he honks my boob. *HONK*. A much-too-firm, two- to three-second *HONK*. And the first thing I thought was *Okay, how do I extricate this claw from my boob before it leaves permanent marks?* and the second thing I thought was *God, I can’t wait to tell Takumi and the Colonel.*”

The Colonel laughed. I stared, stunned partly by the force of the voice emanating from the petite (but God, curvy) girl and partly by the gigantic stacks of books that lined her walls. Her library filled her bookshelves and then overflowed into waist-high stacks of books everywhere, piled haphazardly against the walls. If just one of them moved, I thought, the domino effect could engulf the three of us in an asphyxiating mass of literature.

“Who’s the guy that’s not laughing at my very funny story?” she asked.

“Oh, right. Alaska, this is Pudge. Pudge memorizes people’s last words. Pudge, this is Alaska. She got her boob honked over the summer.” She walked over to me with her hand extended, then made a quick move downward at the last moment and pulled down my shorts.

“Those are the biggest shorts in the state of Alabama!”

“I like them baggy,” I said, embarrassed, and pulled them up. They had been cool back home in Florida.

“So far in our relationship, Pudge, I’ve seen your chicken legs entirely too often,” the Colonel deadpanned. “So, Alaska. Sell us some cigarettes.” And then somehow, the Colonel talked me into paying five dollars for a pack of Marlboro Lights I had no intention of ever smoking. He asked Alaska to join us, but she said, “I have to find Takumi and tell him about The Honk.” She turned to me and asked, “Have you seen him?” I had no idea whether I’d seen Takumi, since I had

no idea who he was. I just shook my head.

“All right. Meet ya at the lake in a few minutes, then.” The Colonel nodded.

At the edge of the lake, just before the sandy (and, the Colonel told me, fake) beach, we sat down in an Adirondack swing. I made the obligatory joke: “Don’t grab my boob.” The Colonel gave an obligatory laugh, then asked, “Want a smoke?” I had never smoked a cigarette, but when in Rome...

“Is it safe here?”

“Not really,” he said, then lit a cigarette and handed it to me. I inhaled. Coughed. Wheezed. Gaspd for breath. Coughed again. Considered vomiting. Grabbed the swinging bench, head spinning, and threw the cigarette to the ground and stomped on it, convinced my Great Perhaps did not involve cigarettes.

“Smoke much?” He laughed, then pointed to a white speck across the lake and said, “See that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “What is that? A bird?”

“It’s the swan,” he said.

“Wow. A school with a swan. Wow.”

“That swan is the spawn of Satan. Never get closer to it than we are now.”

“Why?”

“It has some issues with people. It was abused or something. It’ll rip you to pieces. The Eagle put it there to keep us from walking around the lake to smoke.”

“The Eagle?”

“Mr. Starnes. Code name: the Eagle. The dean of students. Most of the teachers live on campus, and they’ll all bust you. But only the Eagle lives in the dorm circle, and he sees all. He can smell a cigarette from like five miles.”

“Isn’t his house back there?” I asked, pointing to it. I could see the house quite clearly despite the darkness, so it followed he could probably see us.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t really go into blitzkrieg mode until classes start,” Chip said nonchalantly.

“God, if I get in trouble my parents will kill me,” I said.

“I suspect you’re exaggerating. But look, you’re going to get in trouble. Ninety-nine percent of the time, your parents never have to know, though. The school doesn’t want your parents to think you became a fuckup here any more than *you* want your parents to think you’re a fuckup.” He blew a thin stream of smoke forcefully toward the lake. I had to admit: He looked cool doing it. Taller, somehow. “Anyway, when you get in trouble, just don’t tell on anyone. I mean, I

hate the rich snots here with a fervent passion I usually reserve only for dental work and my father. But that doesn't mean I would rat them out. Pretty much the only important thing is never never never never rat."

"Okay," I said, although I wondered: *If someone punches me in the face, I'm supposed to insist that I ran into a door?* It seemed a little stupid. How do you deal with bullies and assholes if you can't get them into trouble? I didn't ask Chip, though.

"All right, Pudge. We have reached the point in the evening when I'm obliged to go and find my girlfriend. So give me a few of those cigarettes you'll never smoke anyway, and I'll see you later."

I decided to hang out on the swing for a while, half because the heat had finally dissipated into a pleasant, if muggy, eighty-something, and half because I thought Alaska might show up. But almost as soon as the Colonel left, the bugs encroached: no-see-ums (which, for the record, you can see) and mosquitoes hovered around me in such numbers that the tiny noise of their rubbing wings sounded cacophonous. And then I decided to smoke.

Now, I did think, *The smoke will drive the bugs away.* And, to some degree, it did. I'd be lying, though, if I claimed I became a smoker to ward off insects. I became a smoker because 1. I was on an Adirondack swing by myself, and 2. I had cigarettes, and 3. I figured that if everyone else could smoke a cigarette without coughing, I could damn well, too. In short, I didn't have a very good reason. So yeah, let's just say that 4. it was the bugs.

I made it through three entire drags before I felt nauseous and dizzy and only semipleasantly buzzed. I got up to leave. As I stood, a voice behind me said:

"So do you really memorize last words?"

She ran up beside me and grabbed my shoulder and pushed me back onto the porch swing.

"Yeah," I said. And then hesitantly, I added, "You want to quiz me?"

"JFK," she said.

"That's obvious," I answered.

"Oh, is it now?" she asked.

"No. Those were his last words. Someone said, 'Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you,' and then he said, 'That's obvious,' and then he got shot."

She laughed. "God, that's awful. I shouldn't laugh. But I will," and then she laughed again. "Okay, Mr. Famous Last Words Boy. I have one for you." She reached into her overstuffed backpack and pulled out a book. "Gabriel García Márquez. *The General in His Labyrinth*. Absolutely one of my favorites. It's about Simón Bolívar." I didn't know who Simón Bolívar was, but she didn't

give me time to ask. “It’s a historical novel, so I don’t know if this is true, but in the book, do you know what his last words are? No, you don’t. But I am about to tell you, Señor Parting Remarks.”

And then she lit a cigarette and sucked on it so hard for so long that I thought the entire thing might burn off in one drag. She exhaled and read to me:

“‘He’—that’s Simón Bolívar—‘was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness. “Damn it,” he sighed. “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!”’”

I knew great last words when I heard them, and I made a mental note to get ahold of a biography of this Simón Bolívar fellow. Beautiful last words, but I didn’t quite understand. “So what’s the labyrinth?” I asked her.

And now is as good a time as any to say that she was beautiful. In the dark beside me, she smelled of sweat and sunshine and vanilla, and on that thin-mooned night I could see little more than her silhouette except for when she smoked, when the burning cherry of the cigarette washed her face in pale red light. But even in the dark, I could see her eyes—fierce emeralds. She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor. And not just beautiful, but hot, too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing, flip-flops dangling from her electric-blue-painted toes. It was right then, between when I asked about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realized the *importance* of curves, of the thousand places where girls’ bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I’d *noticed* curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance.

Her mouth close enough to me that I could feel her breath warmer than the air, she said, “That’s the mystery, isn’t it? Is the labyrinth living or dying? Which is he trying to escape—the world or the end of it?” I waited for her to keep talking, but after a while it became obvious she wanted an answer.

“Uh, I don’t know,” I said finally. “Have you really read all those books in your room?”

She laughed. “Oh God no. I’ve maybe read a third of ’em. But I’m *going to* read them all. I call it my Life’s Library. Every summer since I was little, I’ve gone to garage sales and bought all the books that looked interesting. So I always have something to read. But there is so much to do: cigarettes to smoke, sex to have, swings to swing on. I’ll have more time for reading when I’m old and boring.”

She told me that I reminded her of the Colonel when he came to Culver Creek. They were freshmen together, she said, both scholarship kids with, as she put it, “a shared interest in booze and mischief.” The phrase *booze and mischief* left me worrying I’d stumbled into what my mother referred to as “the wrong crowd,” but for the wrong crowd, they both seemed awfully smart. As she lit a new cigarette off the butt of her previous one, she told me that the Colonel was smart but hadn’t done much living when he got to the Creek.

“I got rid of that problem quickly.” She smiled. “By November, I’d gotten him his first girlfriend, a perfectly nice non-Weekday Warrior named Janice. He dumped her after a month because she was too rich for his poverty-soaked blood, but whatever. We pulled our first prank that year—we filled Classroom 4 with a thin layer of marbles. We’ve progressed some since then, of course.” She laughed. So Chip became the Colonel—the military-style planner of their pranks, and Alaska was ever Alaska, the larger-than-life creative force behind them.

“You’re smart like him,” she said. “Quieter, though. And cuter, but I didn’t even just say that, because I love my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, you’re not bad either,” I said, overwhelmed by her compliment. “But I didn’t just say that, because I love my girlfriend. Oh, wait. Right. I don’t have one.”

She laughed. “Yeah, don’t worry, Pudge. If there’s one thing I can get you, it’s a girlfriend. Let’s make a deal: You figure out what the labyrinth is and how to get out of it, and I’ll get you laid.”

“Deal.” We shook on it.

Later, I walked toward the dorm circle beside Alaska. The cicadas hummed their one-note song, just as they had at home in Florida. She turned to me as we made our way through the darkness and said, “When you’re walking at night, do you ever get creeped out and even though it’s silly and embarrassing you just want to run home?”

It seemed too secret and personal to admit to a virtual stranger, but I told her, “Yeah, totally.”

For a moment, she was quiet. Then she grabbed my hand, whispered, “Run run run run run,” and took off, pulling me behind her.

one hundred twenty-seven days before

EARLY THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I blinked sweat from my eyes as I taped a van

Gogh poster to the back of the door. The Colonel sat on the couch judging whether the poster was level and fielding my endless questions about Alaska. *What's her story?* “She’s from Vine Station. You could drive past it without noticing—and from what I understand, you ought to. Her boyfriend’s at Vanderbilt on scholarship. Plays bass in some band. Don’t know much about her family.” *So she really likes him?* “I guess. She hasn’t cheated on him, which is a first.” And so on. All morning, I’d been unable to care about anything else, not the van Gogh poster and not video games and not even my class schedule, which the Eagle had brought by that morning. He introduced himself, too:

“Welcome to Culver Creek, Mr. Halter. You’re given a large measure of freedom here. If you abuse it, you’ll regret it. You seem like a nice young man. I’d hate to have to bid you farewell.”

And then he stared at me in a manner that was either serious or seriously malicious. “Alaska calls that the Look of Doom,” the Colonel told me after the Eagle left. “The next time you see that, you’re busted.”

“Okay, Pudge,” the Colonel said as I stepped away from the poster. Not entirely level, but close enough. “Enough with the Alaska already. By my count, there are ninety-two girls at this school, and every last one of them is less crazy than Alaska, who, I might add, *already has a boyfriend*. I’m going to lunch. It’s bufriedo day.” He walked out, leaving the door open. Feeling like an overinfatuated idiot, I got up to close the door. The Colonel, already halfway across the dorm circle, turned around. “Christ. Are you coming or what?”

You can say a lot of bad things about Alabama, but you can’t say that Alabamans as a people are unduly afraid of deep fryers. In that first week at the Creek, the cafeteria served fried chicken, chicken-fried steak, and fried okra, which marked my first foray into the delicacy that is the fried vegetable. I half expected them to fry the iceberg lettuce. But nothing matched the bufriedo, a dish created by Maureen, the amazingly (and understandably) obese Culver Creek cook. A deep-fried bean burrito, the bufriedo proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that frying *always* improves a food. Sitting with the Colonel and five guys I didn’t know at a circular table in the cafeteria that afternoon, I sank my teeth into the crunchy shell of my first bufriedo and experienced a culinary orgasm. My mom cooked okay, but I immediately wanted to bring Maureen home with me over Thanksgiving.

The Colonel introduced me (as “Pudge”) to the guys at the wobbly wooden table, but I only registered the name Takumi, whom Alaska had mentioned yesterday. A thin Japanese guy only a few inches taller than the Colonel, Takumi talked with his mouth full as I chewed slowly, savoring the bean-y crunch.

“God,” Takumi said to me, “there’s nothing like watching a man eat his first

bufriedo.”

I didn’t say much—partly because no one asked me any questions and partly because I just wanted to eat as much as I could. But Takumi felt no such modesty—he could, and did, eat and chew and swallow while talking.

The lunch discussion centered on the girl who was supposed to have been Alaska’s roommate, Marya, and her boyfriend, Paul, who had been a Weekday Warrior. They’d gotten kicked out in the last week of the previous school year, I learned, for what the Colonel called “the Trifecta”—they were caught committing three of Culver Creek’s expellable offenses at once. Lying naked in bed together (“genital contact” being offense #1), already drunk (#2), they were smoking a joint (#3) when the Eagle burst in on them. Rumors had it that someone had ratted them out, and Takumi seemed intent on finding out who—intent enough, anyway, to shout about it with his mouth jam-packed with bufriedo.

“Paul was an asshole,” the Colonel said. “I wouldn’t have ratted on them, but anyone who shacks up with a Jaguar-driving Weekday Warrior like Paul deserves what she gets.”

“Dude,” Takumi responded, “yaw guhfwend,” and then he swallowed a bite of food, “is a Weekday Warrior.”

“True.” The Colonel laughed. “Much to my chagrin, that is an incontestable fact. But she is not as big an asshole as Paul.”

“Not quite.” Takumi smirked. The Colonel laughed again, and I wondered why he wouldn’t stand up for his girlfriend. I wouldn’t have cared if my girlfriend was a Jaguar-driving Cyclops with a beard—I’d have been grateful just to have someone to make out with.

That evening, when the Colonel dropped by Room 43 to pick up the cigarettes (he seemed to have forgotten that they were, technically, *mine*), I didn’t really care when he didn’t invite me out with him. In public school, I’d known plenty of people who made it a habit to hate this kind of person or that kind—the geeks hated the preps, etc.—and it always seemed like a big waste of time to me. The Colonel didn’t tell me where he’d spent the afternoon, or where he was going to spend the evening, but he closed the door behind him when he left, so I guessed I wasn’t welcome.

Just as well: I spent the night surfing the Web (no porn, I swear) and reading *The Final Days*, a book about Richard Nixon and Watergate. For dinner, I microwaved a refrigerated bufriedo the Colonel had snuck out of the cafeteria. It reminded me of nights in Florida—except with better food and no air-

conditioning. Lying in bed and reading felt pleasantly familiar.

I decided to heed what I'm sure would have been my mother's advice and get a good night's sleep before my first day of classes. French II started at 8:10, and figuring it couldn't take more than eight minutes to put on some clothes and walk to the classrooms, I set my alarm for 8:02. I took a shower, and then lay in bed waiting for sleep to save me from the heat. Around 11:00, I realized that the tiny fan clipped to my bunk might make more of a difference if I took off my shirt, and I finally fell asleep on top of the sheets wearing just boxers.

A decision I found myself regretting some hours later when I awoke to two sweaty, meaty hands shaking the holy hell out of me. I woke up completely and instantly, sitting up straight in bed, terrified, and I couldn't understand the voices for some reason, couldn't understand why there were any voices at all, and what the hell time was it anyway? And finally my head cleared enough to hear, "C'mon, kid. Don't make us kick your ass. Just get up," and then from the top bunk, I heard, "Christ, Pudge. Just *get up*." So I got up, and saw for the first time three shadowy figures. Two of them grabbed me, one with a hand on each of my upper arms, and walked me out of the room. On the way out, the Colonel mumbled, "Have a good time. Go easy on him, Kevin."

They led me, almost at a jog, behind my dorm building, and then across the soccer field. The ground was grassy but gravelly, too, and I wondered why no one had shown the common courtesy to tell me to put on shoes, and why was I out there in my underwear, chicken legs exposed to the world? A thousand humiliations crossed my mind: *There's the new junior, Miles Halter, handcuffed to the soccer goal wearing only his boxers*. I imagined them taking me into the woods, where we now seemed headed, and beating the shit out of me so that I looked great for my first day of school. And the whole time, I just stared at my feet, because I didn't want to look at them and I didn't want to fall, so I watched my steps, trying to avoid the bigger rocks. I felt the fight-or-flight reflex swell up in me over and over again, but I knew that neither fight nor flight had ever worked for me before. They took me a roundabout way to the fake beach, and then I knew what would happen—a good, old-fashioned dunking in the lake—and I calmed down. I could handle that.

When we reached the beach, they told me to put my arms at my sides, and the beefiest guy grabbed two rolls of duct tape from the sand. With my arms flat against my sides like a soldier at attention, they mummified me from my shoulder to my wrists. Then they threw me down on the ground; the sand from the fake beach cushioned the landing, but I still hit my head. Two of them pulled my legs together while the other one—Kevin, I'd figured out—put his angular, strong-jawed face up so close to mine that the gel-soaked spikes of hair pointing

out from his forehead poked at my face, and told me, “This is for the Colonel. You shouldn’t hang out with that asshole.” They taped my legs together, from ankles to thighs. I looked like a silver mummy. I said, “Please guys, don’t,” just before they taped my mouth shut. Then they picked me up and hurled me into the water.

Sinking. Sinking, but instead of feeling panic or anything else, I realized that “Please guys, don’t” were terrible last words. But then the great miracle of the human species—our buoyancy—came through, and as I felt myself floating toward the surface, I twisted and turned as best I could so that the warm night air hit my nose first, and I breathed. I wasn’t dead and wasn’t going to die.

Well, I thought, that wasn’t so bad.

But there was still the small matter of getting to shore before the sun rose. First, to determine my position vis-à-vis the shoreline. If I tilted my head too much, I felt my whole body start to roll, and on the long list of unpleasant ways to die, “facedown in soaking-wet white boxers” is pretty high up there. So instead I rolled my eyes and craned my neck back, my eyes almost underwater, until I saw that the shore—not ten feet away—was directly behind my head. I began to swim, an armless silver mermaid, using only my hips to generate motion, until finally my ass scraped against the lake’s mucky bottom. I turned then and used my hips and waist to roll three times, until I came ashore near a ratty green towel. They’d left me a towel. How thoughtful.

The water had seeped under the duct tape and loosened the adhesive’s grip on my skin, but the tape was wrapped around me three layers deep in places, which necessitated wiggling like a fish out of water. Finally it loosened enough for me to slip my left hand up and out against my chest and rip the tape off.

I wrapped myself in the sandy towel. I didn’t want to go back to my room and see Chip, because I had no idea what Kevin had meant—maybe if I went back to the room, they’d be waiting for me and they’d get me for real; maybe I needed to show them, “Okay. Got your message. He’s just my roommate, not my friend.” And anyway, I didn’t feel terribly friendly toward the Colonel. *Have a good time*, he’d said. *Yeah*, I thought. *I had a ball.*

So I went to Alaska’s room. I didn’t know what time it was, but I could see a faint light underneath her door. I knocked softly.

“Yeah,” she said, and I came in, wet and sandy and wearing only a towel and soaking boxers. This was not, obviously, how you want the world’s hottest girl to see you, but I figured she could explain to me what had just happened.

She put down a book and got out of bed with a sheet wrapped around her shoulders. For a moment, she looked concerned. She looked like the girl I met yesterday, the girl who said I was cute and bubbled over with energy and

silliness and intelligence. And then she laughed.

“Guess you went for a swim, huh?” And she said it with such casual malice that I felt that everyone had known, and I wondered why the whole damn school agreed in advance to possibly drown Miles Halter. But Alaska *liked* the Colonel, and in the confusion of the moment, I just looked at her blankly, unsure even of what to ask.

“Give me a break,” she said. “Come on. You know what? There are people with real problems. I’ve got real problems. Mommy ain’t here, so buck up, big guy.”

I left without saying a word to her and went to my room, slamming the door behind me, waking the Colonel, and stomping into the bathroom. I got in the shower to wash the algae and the lake off me, but the ridiculous faucet of a showerhead failed spectacularly, and how could Alaska and Kevin and those other guys already dislike me? After I finished the shower, I dried off and went into the room to find some clothes.

“So,” he said. “What took you so long? Get lost on your way home?”

“They said it was because of you,” I said, and my voice betrayed a hint of annoyance. “They said I shouldn’t hang out with you.”

“What? No, it happens to everybody,” the Colonel said. “It happened to me. They throw you in the lake. You swim out. You walk home.”

“I couldn’t just swim out,” I said softly, pulling on a pair of jean shorts beneath my towel. “They duct-taped me. I couldn’t even move, really.”

“Wait. Wait,” he said, and hopped out of his bunk, staring at me through the darkness. “They *taped* you? How?” And I showed him: I stood like a mummy, with my feet together and my hands at my sides, and showed him how they’d wrapped me up. And then I plopped down onto the couch.

“Christ! You could have drowned! They’re just supposed to throw you in the water in your underwear and run!” he shouted. “What the hell were they thinking? Who was it? Kevin Richman and who else? Do you remember their faces?”

“Yeah, I think.”

“Why the hell would they do that?” he wondered.

“Did you do something to them?” I asked.

“No, but I’m sure as shit gonna do something to ’em now. We’ll get them.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. I got out fine.”

“You could have *died*.” And I could have, I suppose. But I didn’t.

“Well, maybe I should just go to the Eagle tomorrow and tell him,” I said.

“Absolutely not,” he answered. He walked over to his crumpled shorts lying on the floor and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He lit two and handed one to me.

I smoked the whole goddamned thing. “You’re not,” he continued, “because that’s not how shit gets dealt with here. And besides, you really don’t want to get a reputation for ratting. But we will deal with those bastards, Pudge. I promise you. They will regret messing with one of my friends.”

And if the Colonel thought that calling me his friend would make me stand by him, well, he was right. “Alaska was kind of mean to me tonight,” I said. I leaned over, opened an empty desk drawer, and used it as a makeshift ashtray.

“Like I said, she’s moody.”

I went to bed wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and socks. No matter how miserably hot it got, I resolved, I would sleep in my clothes every night at the Creek, feeling—probably for the first time in my life—the fear and excitement of living in a place where you never know what’s going to happen or when.

one hundred twenty-six days before

“WELL, NOW IT’S WAR,” the Colonel shouted the next morning. I rolled over and looked at the clock: 7:52. My first Culver Creek class, French, started in eighteen minutes. I blinked a couple times and looked up at the Colonel, who was standing between the couch and the COFFEE TABLE, holding his well-worn, once-white tennis shoes by the laces. For a long time, he stared at me, and I stared at him. And then, almost in slow motion, a grin crept across the Colonel’s face.

“I’ve got to hand it to them,” he said finally. “That was pretty clever.”

“What?” I asked.

“Last night—before they woke you up, I guess—they pissed in my shoes.”

“Are you sure?” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Do you care to smell?” he asked, holding the shoes toward me. “Because I went ahead and smelled them, and yes, I am sure. If there’s one thing I know, it’s when I’ve just stepped in another man’s piss. It’s like my mom always says: ‘Ya think you’s a-walkin’ on water, but turns out you just got piss in your shoes.’ Point those guys out to me if you see them today,” he added, “because we need to figure out why they’re so, uh, pissed at me. And then we need to go ahead and start thinking about how we’re going to ruin their miserable little lives.”

When I received the Culver Creek Handbook over the summer and noticed happily that the “Dress Code” section contained only two words, *casual* and *modesty*, it never occurred to me that girls would show up for class half asleep in

cotton pajama shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops. Modest, I guess, and casual.

And there *was* something about girls wearing pajamas (even if modest), which might have made French at 8:10 in the morning bearable, if I'd had any idea what Madame O'Malley was talking about. *Comment dis-tu* "Oh my God, I don't know nearly enough French to pass French II" *en français*? My French I class back in Florida did not prepare me for Madame O'Malley, who skipped the "how was your summer" pleasantries and dove directly into something called the *passé composé*, which is apparently a verb tense. Alaska sat directly across from me in the circle of desks, but she didn't look at me once the entire class, even though I could notice little but her. Maybe she could be mean...but the way she talked that first night about getting out of the labyrinth—so smart. And the way her mouth curled up on the right side all the time, like she was preparing to smirk, like she'd mastered the right half of the *Mona Lisa*'s inimitable smile...

From my room, the student population seemed manageable, but it overwhelmed me in the classroom area, which was a single, long building just beyond the dorm circle. The building was split into fourteen rooms facing out toward the lake. Kids crammed the narrow sidewalks in front of the classrooms, and even though finding my classes wasn't hard (even with my poor sense of direction, I could get from French in Room 3 to precalc in Room 12), I felt unsettled all day. I didn't know anyone and couldn't even figure out whom I should be trying to know, and the classes were *hard*, even on the first day. My dad had told me I'd have to study, and now I believed him. The teachers were serious and smart and a lot of them went by "Dr.," and so when the time came for my last class before lunch, World Religions, I felt tremendous relief. A vestige from when Culver Creek was a Christian boys' school, I figured the World Religions class, required of every junior and senior, might be an easy A.

It was my only class all day where the desks weren't arranged either in a square or a circle, so, not wanting to seem eager, I sat down in the third row at 11:03. I was seven minutes early, partly because I liked to be punctual, and partly because I didn't have anyone to chat with out in the halls. Shortly thereafter, the Colonel came in with Takumi, and they sat down on opposite sides of me.

"I heard about last night," Takumi said. "Alaska's pissed."

"That's weird, since she was such a bitch last night," I blurted out.

Takumi just shook his head. "Yeah, well, she didn't know the whole story. And people are moody, dude. You gotta get used to living with people. You could have worse friends than—"

The Colonel cut him off. “Enough with the psychobabble, MC Dr. Phil. Let’s talk counterinsurgency.” People were starting to file into class, so the Colonel leaned in toward me and whispered, “If any of ’em are in this class, let me know, okay? Just, here, just put x’s where they’re sitting,” and he ripped a sheet of paper out of his notebook and drew a square for each desk. As people filed in, I saw one of them—the tall one with immaculately spiky hair—Kevin. Kevin stared down the Colonel as he walked past, but in trying to stare, he forgot to watch his step and bumped his thigh against a desk. The Colonel laughed. One of the other guys, the one who was either a little fat or worked out too much, came in behind Kevin, sporting pleated khaki pants and a short-sleeve black polo shirt. As they sat down, I crossed through the appropriate squares on the Colonel’s diagram and handed it to him. Just then, the Old Man shuffled in.

He breathed slowly and with great labor through his wide-open mouth. He took tiny steps toward the lectern, his heels not moving much past his toes. The Colonel nudged me and pointed casually to his notebook, which read, *The Old Man only has one lung*, and I did not doubt it. His audible, almost desperate breaths reminded me of my grandfather when he was dying of lung cancer. Barrel-chested and ancient, the Old Man, it seemed to me, might die before he ever reached the podium.

“My name,” he said, “is Dr. Hyde. I have a first name, of course. So far as you are concerned, it is Doctor. Your parents pay a great deal of money so that you can attend school here, and I expect that you will offer them some return on their investment by reading what I tell you to read when I tell you to read it and consistently attending this class. And when you are here, you will listen to what I say.” Clearly not an easy A.

“This year, we’ll be studying three religious traditions: Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. We’ll tackle three more traditions next year. And in my classes, I will talk most of the time, and you will listen most of the time. Because you may be smart, but I’ve been smart longer. I’m sure some of you do not like lecture classes, but as you have probably noted, I’m not as young as I used to be. I would love to spend my remaining breath chatting with you about the finer points of Islamic history, but our time together is short. I must talk, and you must listen, for we are engaged here in the most important pursuit in history: the search for meaning. What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer? In short: What are the rules of this game, and how might we best play it?”

The nature of the labyrinth, I scribbled into my spiral notebook, *and the way out of it*. This teacher rocked. I hated discussion classes. I hated talking, and I

hated listening to everyone else stumble on their words and try to phrase things in the vaguest possible way so they wouldn't sound dumb, and I hated how it was all just a game of trying to figure out what the teacher wanted to hear and then saying it. I'm in *class*, so *teach me*. And teach me he did: In those fifty minutes, the Old Man made me take religion seriously. I'd never been religious, but he told us that religion is important whether or not *we* believed in one, in the same way that historical events are important whether or not you personally lived through them. And then he assigned us fifty pages of reading for the next day—from a book called *Religious Studies*.

That afternoon, I had two classes and two free periods. We had nine fifty-minute class periods each day, which means that most everyone had three “study periods” (except for the Colonel, who had an extra independent-study math class on account of being an Extra Special Genius). The Colonel and I had biology together, where I pointed out the other guy who'd duct-taped me the night before. In the top corner of his notebook, the Colonel wrote, *Longwell Chase. Senior W-day Warrior. Friends w/Sara. Weird.* It took me a minute to remember who Sara was: the Colonel's girlfriend.

I spent my free periods in my room trying to read about religion. I learned that *myth* doesn't mean a lie; it means a traditional story that tells you something about people and their worldview and what they hold sacred. Interesting. I also learned that after the events of the previous night, I was far too tired to care about myths or anything else, so I slept on top of the covers for most of the afternoon, until I awoke to Alaska singing, “WAKE UP, LITTLE PUIHHHHHDGIE!” directly into my left ear canal. I held the religion book close up against my chest like a small paperback security blanket.

“That was terrible,” I said. “What do I need to do to ensure that never happens to me again?”

“Nothing you can do!” she said excitedly. “I'm unpredictable. God, don't you hate Dr. Hyde? Don't you? He's so condescending.”

I sat up and said, “I think he's a genius,” partly because I thought it was true and partly because I just felt like disagreeing with her.

She sat down on the bed. “Do you always sleep in your clothes?”

“Yup.”

“Funny,” she said. “You weren't wearing much last night.” I just glared at her.

“C'mon, Pudge. I'm teasing. You have to be tough here. I didn't know how bad it was—and I'm sorry, and they'll regret it—but you have to be tough.” And then she left. That was all she had to say on the subject. *She's cute*, I thought, *but you don't need to like a girl who treats you like you're ten: You've already got a*

mom.

one hundred twenty-two days before

AFTER MY LAST CLASS of my first week at Culver Creek, I entered Room 43 to an unlikely sight: the diminutive and shirtless Colonel, hunched over an ironing board, attacking a pink button-down shirt. Sweat trickled down his forehead and chest as he ironed with great enthusiasm, his right arm pushing the iron across the length of the shirt with such vigor that his breathing nearly duplicated Dr. Hyde's.

"I have a date," he explained. "This is an emergency." He paused to catch his breath. "Do you know"—breath—"how to iron?"

I walked over to the pink shirt. It was wrinkled like an old woman who'd spent her youth sunbathing. If only the Colonel didn't ball up his every belonging and stuff it into random dresser drawers. "I think you just turn it on and press it against the shirt, right?" I said. "I don't know. I didn't even know we *had* an iron."

"We don't. It's Takumi's. But Takumi doesn't know how to iron, either. And when I asked Alaska, she started yelling, 'You're not going to impose the patriarchal paradigm on *me*.' Oh, God, I need to smoke. I need to smoke, but I can't reek when I see Sara's parents. Okay, screw it. We're going to smoke in the bathroom with the shower on. The shower has steam. Steam gets rid of wrinkles, right?"

"By the way," he said as I followed him into the bathroom, "if you want to smoke inside during the day, just turn on the shower. The smoke follows the steam up the vents."

Though this made no scientific sense, it seemed to work. The shower's shortage of water pressure and low showerhead made it all but useless for showering, but it worked great as a smoke screen.

Sadly, it made a poor iron. The Colonel tried ironing the shirt once more ("I'm just gonna push really hard and see if that helps") and finally put it on wrinkled. He matched the shirt with a blue tie decorated with horizontal lines of little pink flamingos.

"The one thing my lousy father taught me," the Colonel said as his hands nimbly threaded the tie into a perfect knot, "was how to tie a tie. Which is odd, since I can't imagine when he ever had to wear one."

Just then, Sara knocked on the door. I'd seen her once or twice before, but the Colonel never introduced me to her and didn't have a chance to that night.

“Oh. My God. Can’t you at least press your shirt?” she asked, even though the Colonel was standing in front of the ironing board. “We’re going out with my *parents*.” Sara looked awfully nice in her blue summer dress. Her long, pale blond hair was pulled up into a twist, with a strand of hair falling down each side of her face. She looked like a movie star—a bitchy one.

“Look, I did my best. We don’t all have maids to do our ironing.”

“Chip, that chip on your shoulder makes you look even shorter.”

“Christ, can’t we get out the door without fighting?”

“I’m just saying. It’s *the opera*. It’s a big deal to my parents. Whatever. Let’s go.” I felt like leaving, but it seemed stupid to hide in the bathroom, and Sara was standing in the doorway, one hand cocked on her hip and the other fiddling with her car keys as if to say, *Let’s go*.

“I could wear a tuxedo and your parents would still hate me!” he shouted.

“That’s not my fault! You antagonize them!” She held up the car keys in front of him. “Look, we’re going now or we’re not going.”

“Fuck it. I’m not going anywhere with you,” the Colonel said.

“Fine. Have a great night.” Sara slammed the door so hard that a sizable biography of Leo Tolstoy (last words: “The truth is...I care a great deal...what they...”) fell off my bookshelf and landed with a thud on our checkered floor like an echo of the slamming door.

“AHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” he screamed.

“So that’s Sara,” I said.

“Yes.”

“She seems nice.”

The Colonel laughed, knelt down next to the minifridge, and pulled out a gallon of milk. He opened it, took a swig, winced, half coughed, and sat down on the couch with the milk between his legs.

“Is it sour or something?”

“Oh, I should have mentioned that earlier. This isn’t milk. It’s five parts milk and one part vodka. I call it ambrosia. Drink of the gods. You can barely smell the vodka in the milk, so the Eagle can’t catch me unless he actually takes a sip. The downside is that it tastes like sour milk and rubbing alcohol, but it’s Friday night, Pudge, and my girlfriend is a bitch. Want some?”

“I think I’ll pass.” Aside from a few sips of champagne on New Year’s under the watchful eye of my parents, I’d never really drunk any alcohol, and “ambrosia” didn’t seem like the drink with which to start. Outside, I heard the pay phone ring. Given the fact that 190 boarders shared five pay phones, I was amazed at how infrequently it rang. We weren’t supposed to have cell phones, but I’d noticed that some of the Weekday Warriors carried them surreptitiously.

And most non-Warriors called their parents, as I did, on a regular basis, so parents only called when their kids forgot.

“Are you going to get that?” the Colonel asked me. I didn’t feel like being bossed around by him, but I also didn’t feel like fighting.

Through a buggy twilight, I walked to the pay phone, which was drilled into the wall between Rooms 44 and 45. On both sides of the phone, dozens of phone numbers and esoteric notes were written in pen and marker (205.555.1584; *Tommy to airport 4:20*; 773.573.6521; *JG—Kuffs?*). Calling the pay phone required a great deal of patience. I picked up on about the ninth ring.

“Can you get Chip for me?” Sara asked. It sounded like she was on a cell phone.

“Yeah, hold on.”

I turned, and he was already behind me, as if he knew it would be her. I handed him the receiver and walked back to the room.

A minute later, three words made their way to our room through the thick, still air of Alabama at almost-night. “Screw you too!” the Colonel shouted.

Back in the room, he sat down with his ambrosia and told me, “She says I ratted out Paul and Marya. That’s what the Warriors are saying. That I ratted them out. *Me*. That’s why the piss in the shoes. That’s why the nearly killing you. ’Cause you live with me, and they say I’m a rat.”

I tried to remember who Paul and Marya were. The names were familiar, but I had heard so many names in the last week, and I couldn’t match “Paul” and “Marya” with faces. And then I remembered why: I’d never seen them. They got kicked out the year before, having committed the Trifecta.

“How long have you been dating her?” I asked.

“Nine months. We never got along. I mean, I didn’t even briefly like her. Like, my mom and my dad—my dad would get pissed, and then he would beat the shit out of my mom. And then my dad would be all nice, and they’d have like a honeymoon period. But with Sara, there’s never a honeymoon period. God, how could she think I was a rat? I know, I know: Why don’t we break up?” He ran a hand through his hair, clutching a fistful of it atop his head, and said, “I guess I stay with her because she stays with me. And that’s not an easy thing to do. I’m a bad boyfriend. She’s a bad girlfriend. We deserve each other.”

“But—”

“I can’t believe they think that,” he said as he walked to the bookshelf and pulled down the almanac. He took a long pull off his ambrosia. “Goddamn Weekday Warriors. It was probably one of them that ratted out Paul and Marya and then blamed me to cover their tracks. Anyway, it’s a good night for staying in. Staying in with Pudge and ambrosia.”

“I still—” I said, wanting to say that I didn’t understand how you could kiss someone who believed you were a rat if being a rat was the worst thing in the world, but the Colonel cut me off.

“Not another word about it. You know what the capital of Sierra Leone is?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” he said, “but I intend to find out.” And with that, he stuck his nose in the almanac, and the conversation was over.

one hundred ten days before

KEEPING UP WITH MY CLASSES proved easier than I’d expected. My general predisposition to spending a lot of time inside reading gave me a distinct advantage over the average Culver Creek student. By the third week of classes, plenty of kids had been sunburned to a bufriedo-like golden brown from days spent chatting outside in the shadeless dorm circle during free periods. But I was barely pink: I studied.

And I listened in class, too, but on that Wednesday morning, when Dr. Hyde started talking about how Buddhists believe that all things are interconnected, I found myself staring out the window. I was looking at the wooded, slow-sloping hill beyond the lake. And from Hyde’s classroom, things did seem connected: The trees seemed to clothe the hill, and just as I would never think to notice a particular cotton thread in the magnificently tight orange tank top Alaska wore that day, I couldn’t see the trees for the forest—everything so intricately woven together that it made no sense to think of one tree as independent from that hill. And then I heard my name, and I knew I was in trouble.

“Mr. Halter,” the Old Man said. “Here I am, straining my lungs for your edification. And yet *something* out there seems to have caught your fancy in a way that I’ve been unable to do. Pray tell: What have you discovered out there?”

Now I felt my own breath shorten, the whole class watching me, thanking God they *weren’t* me. Dr. Hyde had already done this three times, kicking kids out of class for not paying attention or writing notes to one another.

“Um, I was just looking outside at the, uh, at the hill and thinking about, um, the trees and the forest, like you were saying earlier, about the way—”

The Old Man, who obviously did not tolerate vocalized rambling, cut me off. “I’m going to ask you to leave class, Mr. Halter, so that you can go out there and discover the relationship between the um-trees and the uh-forest. And tomorrow, when you’re ready to take this class seriously, I will welcome you back.”

I sat still, my pen resting in my hand, my notebook open, my face flushed

and my jaw jutting out into an underbite, an old trick I had to keep from looking sad or scared. Two rows behind me, I heard a chair move and turned around to see Alaska standing up, slinging her backpack over one arm.

“I’m sorry, but that’s bullshit. You can’t just throw him out of class. You drone on and on for an hour every day, and we’re not allowed to glance out the window?”

The Old Man stared back at Alaska like a bull at a matador, then raised a hand to his sagging face and slowly rubbed the white stubble on his cheek. “For fifty minutes a day, five days a week, you abide by my rules. Or you fail. The choice is yours. Both of you leave.”

I stuffed my notebook into my backpack and walked out, humiliated. As the door shut behind me, I felt a tap on my left shoulder. I turned, but there was no one there. Then I turned the other way, and Alaska was smiling at me, the skin between her eyes and temple crinkled into a starburst. “The oldest trick in the book,” she said, “but everybody falls for it.”

I tried a smile, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Dr. Hyde. It was worse than the Duct Tape Incident, because I always knew that the Kevin Richmans of the world didn’t like me. But my teachers had always been card-carrying members of the Miles Halter Fan Club.

“I told you he was an asshole,” she said.

“I still think he’s a genius. He’s right. I wasn’t listening.”

“Right, but he didn’t need to be a jerk about it. Like he needs to prove his power by humiliating you?! Anyway,” she said, “the only real geniuses are artists: Yeats, Picasso, García Márquez: *geniuses*. Dr. Hyde: bitter old man.”

And then she announced we were going to look for four-leaf clovers until class ended and we could go smoke with the Colonel and Takumi, “both of whom,” she added, “are big-time assholes for not marching out of class right behind us.”

When Alaska Young is sitting with her legs crossed in a brittle, periodically green clover patch leaning forward in search of four-leaf clovers, the pale skin of her sizable cleavage clearly visible, it is a plain fact of human physiology that it becomes impossible to join in her clover search. I’d gotten in enough trouble already for looking where I wasn’t supposed to, but still...

After perhaps two minutes of combing through a clover patch with her long, dirty fingernails, Alaska grabbed a clover with three full-size petals and an undersize, runt of a fourth, then looked up at me, barely giving me time to avert my eyes.

“Even though you were *clearly* not doing your part in the clover search, perv,” she said wryly, “I really would give you this clover. Except luck is for

suckers.” She pinched the runt petal between the nails of her thumb and finger and plucked it. “There,” she said to the clover as she dropped it onto the ground. “Now you’re not a genetic freak anymore.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said. The bell rang, and Takumi and the Colonel were first out the door. Alaska stared at them.

“What?” asked the Colonel. But she just rolled her eyes and started walking. We followed in silence through the dorm circle and then across the soccer field. We ducked into the woods, following the faint path around the lake until we came to a dirt road. The Colonel ran up to Alaska, and they started fighting about something quietly enough that I couldn’t hear the words so much as the mutual annoyance, and I finally asked Takumi where we were headed.

“This road dead-ends into the barn,” he said. “So maybe there. But probably the smoking hole. You’ll see.”

From here, the woods were a totally different creature than from Dr. Hyde’s classroom. The ground was thick with fallen branches, decaying pine needles, and brambly green bushes; the path wound past pine trees sprouting tall and thin, their stubby needles providing a lace of shade from another sunburned day. And the smaller oak and maple trees, which from Dr. Hyde’s classroom had been invisible beneath the more majestic pines, showed hints of an as-yet-thermally-unforeseeable fall: Their still-green leaves were beginning to droop.

We came to a rickety wooden bridge—just thick plywood laid over a concrete foundation—over Culver Creek, the winding rivulet that doubled back over and over again through the outskirts of campus. On the far side of the bridge, there was a tiny path leading down a steep slope. Not even a path so much as a series of hints—a broken branch here, a patch of stomped-down grass there—that people had come this way before. As we walked down single file, Alaska, the Colonel, and Takumi each held back a thick maple branch for one another, passing it along until I, last in line, let it snap back into place behind me. And there, beneath the bridge, an oasis. A slab of concrete, three feet wide and ten feet long, with blue plastic chairs stolen long ago from some classroom. Cooled by the creek and the shade of the bridge, I felt unhot for the first time in weeks.

The Colonel dispensed the cigarettes. Takumi passed; the rest of us lit up.

“He has no right to condescend to us is all I’m saying,” Alaska said, continuing her conversation with the Colonel. “Pudge is done with staring out the window, and I’m done with going on tirades about it, but he’s a terrible teacher, and you won’t convince me otherwise.”

“Fine,” the Colonel said. “Just don’t make another scene. Christ, you nearly killed the poor old bastard.”

“Seriously, you’ll never win by crossing Hyde,” Takumi said. “He’ll eat you alive, shit you out, and then piss on his dump. Which by the way is what we should be doing to whoever ratted on Marya. Has anyone heard anything?”

“It must have been some Weekday Warrior,” Alaska said. “But apparently they think it was the Colonel. So who knows. Maybe the Eagle just got lucky. She was stupid; she got caught; she got expelled; it’s over. That’s what happens when you’re stupid and you get caught.” Alaska made an O with her lips, moving her mouth like a goldfish eating, trying unsuccessfully to blow smoke rings.

“Wow,” Takumi said, “if I ever get kicked out, remind me to even the score myself, since I sure can’t count on you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she responded, not angry so much as dismissive. “I don’t understand why you’re so obsessed with figuring out everything that happens here, like we have to unravel every mystery. God, it’s over. Takumi, you gotta stop stealing other people’s problems and get some of your own.” Takumi started up again, but Alaska raised her hand as if to swat the conversation away.

I said nothing—I hadn’t known Marya, and anyway, “listening quietly” was my general social strategy.

“Anyway,” Alaska said to me. “I thought the way he treated you was just awful. I wanted to cry. I just wanted to kiss you and make it better.”

“Shame you didn’t,” I deadpanned, and they laughed.

“You’re adorable,” she said, and I felt the intensity of her eyes on me and looked away nervously. “Too bad I love my boyfriend.” I stared at the knotted roots of the trees on the creek bank, trying hard not to look like I’d just been called adorable.

Takumi couldn’t believe it either, and he walked over to me, tussling my hair with his hand, and started rapping to Alaska. “Yeah, Pudge is adorable / but you want incorrigible / so Jake is more endurable / ’cause he’s so—damn. Damn. I almost had four rhymes on *adorable*. But all I could think of was *unfloorable*, which isn’t even a word.”

Alaska laughed. “That made me not be mad at you anymore. God, rapping is sexy. Pudge, did you even know that you’re in the presence of the sickest emcee in Alabama?”

“Um, no.”

“Drop a beat, Colonel Catastrophe,” Takumi said, and I laughed at the idea that a guy as short and dorky as the Colonel could have a rap name. The Colonel cupped his hands around his mouth and started making some absurd noises that I suppose were intended to be beats. *Puh-chi. Puh-puhpuh-chi.* Takumi laughed.

“Right here, by the river, you want me to kick it? / If your smoke was a Popsicle, I’d surely lick it / My rhymin’ is old school, sort of like the ancient Romans / The Colonel’s beats is sad like Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman / Sometimes I’m accused of being a showman / ICanRhymeFast and I can rhyme slow, man.”

He paused, took a breath, and then finished.

“Like Emily Dickinson, I ain’t afraid of slant rhyme / And that’s the end of this verse; emcee’s out on a high.”

I didn’t know slant rhyme from regular rhyme, but I was suitably impressed. We gave Takumi a soft round of applause. Alaska finished her cigarette and flicked it into the river.

“Why do you smoke so damn fast?” I asked.

She looked at me and smiled widely, and such a wide smile on her narrow face might have looked goofy were it not for the unimpeachably elegant green in her eyes. She smiled with all the delight of a kid on Christmas morning and said, “Y’all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die.”

one hundred nine days before

DINNER IN THE CAFETERIA the next night was meat loaf, one of the rare dishes that didn’t arrive deep-fried, and, perhaps as a result, meat loaf was Maureen’s greatest failure—a stringy, gravy-soaked concoction that did not much resemble a loaf and did not much taste like meat. Although I’d never ridden in it, Alaska apparently had a car, and she offered to drive the Colonel and me to McDonald’s, but the Colonel didn’t have any money, and I didn’t have much either, what with constantly paying for his extravagant cigarette habit.

So instead the Colonel and I reheated two-day-old bufriedos—unlike, say, french fries, a microwaved bufriedo lost nothing of its taste or its satisfying crunch—after which the Colonel insisted on attending the Creek’s first basketball game of the season.

“Basketball in the fall?” I asked the Colonel. “I don’t know much about sports, but isn’t that when you play football?”

“The schools in our league are too small to have football teams, so we play basketball in the fall. Although, man, the Culver Creek football team would be a thing of beauty. Your scrawny ass could probably start at lineman. Anyway, the basketball games are great.”

I hated sports. I hated sports, and I hated people who played them, and I hated people who watched them, and I hated people who didn’t hate people who

watched or played them. In third grade—the very last year that one could play T-ball—my mother wanted me to make friends, so she forced me onto the Orlando Pirates. I made friends all right—with a bunch of kindergartners, which didn't really bolster my social standing with my peers. Primarily because I towered over the rest of the players, I nearly made it onto the T-ball all-star team that year. The kid who beat me, Clay Wurtzel, had one arm. I was an unusually tall third grader with two arms, and I got beat out by kindergartner Clay Wurtzel. And it wasn't some pity-the-one-armed-kid thing, either. Clay Wurtzel could flat-out *hit*, whereas I sometimes struck out even with the ball sitting on the tee. One of the things that appealed to me most about Culver Creek was that my dad assured me there was no PE requirement.

“There is only one time when I put aside my passionate hatred for the Weekday Warriors and their country-club bullshit,” the Colonel told me. “And that's when they pump up the air-conditioning in the gym for a little old-fashioned Culver Creek basketball. You can't miss the first game of the year.”

As we walked toward the airplane hangar of a gym, which I had seen but never even thought to approach, the Colonel explained to me the most important thing about our basketball team: They were not very good. The “star” of the team, the Colonel said, was a senior named Hank Walsten, who played power forward despite being five-foot-eight. Hank's primary claim to campus fame, I already knew, was that he always had weed, and the Colonel told me that for four years, Hank started every game without ever once playing sober.

“He loves weed like Alaska loves sex,” the Colonel said. “This is a man who once constructed a bong using only the barrel of an air rifle, a ripe pear, and an eight-by-ten glossy photograph of Anna Kournikova. Not the brightest gem in the jewelry shop, but you've got to admire his single-minded dedication to drug abuse.”

From Hank, the Colonel told me, it went downhill until you reached Wilson Carbod, the starting center, who was almost six feet tall. “We're so bad,” the Colonel said, “we don't even have a mascot. I call us the Culver Creek Nothings.”

“So they just suck?” I asked. I didn't quite understand the point of watching your terrible team get walloped, though the air-conditioning was reason enough for me.

“Oh, they suck,” the Colonel replied. “But we always beat the shit out of the deaf-and-blind school.” Apparently, basketball wasn't a big priority at the Alabama School for the Deaf and Blind, and so we usually came out of the season with a single victory.

When we arrived, the gym was packed with most every Culver Creek student

—I noticed, for instance, the Creek’s three goth girls reapplying their eyeliner as they sat on the top row of the gym’s bleachers. I’d never attended a school basketball game back home, but I doubted the crowds there were quite so inclusive. Even so, I was surprised when none other than Kevin Richman sat down on the bleacher directly in front of me while the opposing school’s cheerleading team (their unfortunate school colors were mud-brown and dehydrated-piss-yellow) tried to fire up the small visitors’ section in the crowd. Kevin turned around and stared at the Colonel.

Like most of the other guy Warriors, Kevin dressed preppy, looking like a lawyer-who-enjoys-golfing waiting to happen. And his hair, a blond mop, short on the sides and spiky on top, was always soaked through with so much gel that it looked perennially wet. I didn’t hate him like the Colonel did, of course, because the Colonel hated him on principle, and principled hate is a hell of a lot stronger than “Boy, I wish you hadn’t mummified me and thrown me into the lake” hate. Still, I tried to stare at him intimidatingly as he looked at the Colonel, but it was hard to forget that this guy had seen my skinny ass in nothing but boxers a couple weeks ago.

“You ratted out Paul and Marya. We got you back. Truce?” Kevin asked.

“I didn’t rat them out. Pudge here *certainly* didn’t rat them out, but you brought him in on your fun. Truce? Hmm, let me take a poll real quick.” The cheerleaders sat down, holding their pom-poms close to their chest as if praying. “Hey, Pudge,” the Colonel said. “What do you think of a truce?”

“It reminds me of when the Germans demanded that the U.S. surrender at the Battle of the Bulge,” I said. “I guess I’d say to this truce offer what General McAuliffe said to that one: Nuts.”

“Why would you try to kill this guy, Kevin? He’s a genius. Nuts to your truce.”

“Come on, dude. I know you ratted them out, and we had to defend our friend, and now it’s over. Let’s end it.” He seemed very sincere, perhaps due to the Colonel’s reputation for pranking.

“I’ll make you a deal. You pick one dead American president. If Pudge doesn’t know that guy’s last words, truce. If he does, you spend the rest of your life lamenting the day you pissed in my shoes.”

“That’s retarded.”

“All right, no truce,” the Colonel shot back.

“Fine. Millard Fillmore,” Kevin said. The Colonel looked at me hurriedly, his eyes saying, *Was that guy a president?* I just smiled.

“When Fillmore was dying, he was super hungry. But his doctor was trying to starve his fever or whatever. Fillmore wouldn’t shut up about wanting to eat,

though, so finally the doctor gave him a tiny teaspoon of soup. And all sarcastic, Fillmore said, ‘The nourishment is palatable,’ and then died. No truce.”

Kevin rolled his eyes and walked away, and it occurred to me that I could have made up any last words for Millard Fillmore and Kevin probably would have believed me if I’d used that same tone of voice, the Colonel’s confidence rubbing off on me.

“That was your first badass moment!” The Colonel laughed. “Now, it’s true that I gave you an easy target. But still. Well done.”

Unfortunately for the Culver Creek Nothings, we weren’t playing the deaf-and-blind school. We were playing some Christian school from downtown Birmingham, a team stocked with huge, gargantuan apemen with thick beards and a strong distaste for turning the other cheek.

At the end of the first quarter: 20–4.

And that’s when the fun started. The Colonel led all of the cheers.

“Cornbread!” he screamed.

“CHICKEN!” the crowd responded.

“Rice!”

“PEAS!”

And then, all together: “WE GOT HIGHER SATs.”

“Hip Hip Hip Hooray!” the Colonel cried.

“YOU’LL BE WORKIN’ FOR US SOMEDAY!”

The opposing team’s cheerleaders tried to answer our cheers with “The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! Hell is in your future if you give in to desire,” but we could always do them one better.

“Buy!”

“SELL!”

“Trade!”

“BARTER!”

“YOU’RE MUCH BIGGER, BUT WE ARE SMARTER!”

When the visitors shoot a free throw on most every court in the country, the fans make a lot of noise, screaming and stomping their feet. It doesn’t work, because players learn to tune out white noise. At Culver Creek, we had a much better strategy. At first, everyone yelled and screamed like in a normal game. But then everyone said, “*Shh!*” and there was absolute silence. Just as our hated opponent stopped dribbling and prepared for his shot, the Colonel stood up and screamed something. Like:

“For the love of God, please shave your back hair!” Or:

“I need to be saved. Can you minister to me after your shot?!”

Toward the end of the third quarter, the Christian-school coach called a time-out and complained to the ref about the Colonel, pointing at him angrily. We were down 56–13. The Colonel stood up. “What?! You have a problem with me!?”

The coach screamed, “You’re bothering my players!”

“THAT’S THE POINT, SHERLOCK!” the Colonel screamed back. The ref came over and kicked him out of the gym. I followed him.

“I’ve gotten thrown out of thirty-seven straight games,” he said.

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Once or twice, I’ve had to go really crazy. I ran onto the court with eleven seconds left once and stole the ball from the other team. It wasn’t pretty. But, you know. I have a streak to maintain.”

The Colonel ran ahead of me, gleeful at his ejection, and I jogged after him, trailing in his wake. I wanted to be one of those people who have streaks to maintain, who scorch the ground with their intensity. But for now, at least I knew such people, and they needed me, just like comets need tails.

one hundred eight days before

THE NEXT DAY, Dr. Hyde asked me to stay after class. Standing before him, I realized for the first time how hunched his shoulders were, and he seemed suddenly sad and kind of old. “You like this class, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yessir.”

“You’ve got a lifetime to mull over the Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness.” He spoke every sentence as if he’d written it down, memorized it, and was now reciting it. “But while you were looking out the window, you missed the chance to explore the equally interesting Buddhist belief in being present for every facet of your daily life, of being truly present. Be present in this class. And then, when it’s over, be present out there,” he said, nodding toward the lake and beyond.

“Yessir.”

one hundred one days before

ON THE FIRST MORNING of October, I knew something was wrong as soon as I woke up enough to turn off the alarm clock. The bed didn’t smell right. And I

didn't feel right. It took me a groggy minute before I realized: I felt *cold*. Well, at the very least, the small fan clipped to my bunk seemed suddenly unnecessary. "It's cold!" I shouted.

"Oh God, what time is it?" I heard above me.

"Eight-oh-four," I said.

The Colonel, who didn't have an alarm clock but almost always woke up to take a shower before mine went off, swung his short legs over the side of the bed, jumped down, and dashed to his dresser. "I suppose I missed my window of opportunity to shower," he said as he put on a green CULVER CREEK BASKETBALL T-shirt and a pair of shorts. "Oh well. There's always tomorrow. And it's not cold. It's probably eighty."

Grateful to have slept fully dressed, I just put on shoes, and the Colonel and I jogged to the classrooms. I slid into my seat with twenty seconds to spare. Halfway through class, Madame O'Malley turned around to write something in French on the blackboard, and Alaska passed me a note.

Nice bedhead. Study at McDonald's for lunch?

Our first significant precalc test was only two days away, so Alaska grabbed the six precalc kids she did not consider Weekday Warriors and piled us into her tiny blue two-door. By happy coincidence, a cute sophomore named Lara ended up sitting on my lap. Lara'd been born in Russia or someplace, and she spoke with a slight accent. Since we were only four layers of clothes from doing it, I took the opportunity to introduce myself.

"I know who you are." She smiled. "You're Alaska's freend from FlowReeda."

"Yup. Get ready for a lot of dumb questions, 'cause I suck at precalc," I said.

She started to answer, but then she was thrown back against me as Alaska shot out of the parking lot.

"Kids, meet Blue Citrus. So named because she is a lemon," Alaska said. "Blue Citrus, meet the kids. If you can find them, you might want to fasten your seat belts. Pudge, you might want to serve as a seat belt for Lara." What the car lacked in speed, Alaska made up for by refusing to move her foot from the accelerator, damn the consequences. Before we even got off campus, Lara was lurching helplessly whenever Alaska took hard turns, so I took Alaska's advice and wrapped my arms around Lara's waist.

"Thanks," she said, almost inaudibly.

After a fast if reckless three miles to McDonald's, we ordered seven large french fries to share and then went outside and sat on the lawn. We sat in a circle around the trays of fries, and Alaska taught class, smoking while she ate.

Like any good teacher, she tolerated little dissension. She smoked and talked

and ate for an hour without stopping, and I scribbled in my notebook as the muddy waters of tangents and cosines began to clarify. But not everyone was so fortunate.

As Alaska zipped through something obvious about linear equations, stoner/baller Hank Walsten said, “Wait, wait. I don’t get it.”

“That’s because you have eight functioning brain cells.”

“Studies show that marijuana is better for your health than those cigarettes,” Hank said.

Alaska swallowed a mouthful of french fries, took a drag on her cigarette, and blew smoke at Hank. “I may die young,” she said. “But at least I’ll die smart. Now, back to tangents.”

one hundred days before

“NOT TO ASK the obvious question, but why *Alaska*?” I asked. I’d just gotten my precalc test back, and I was awash with admiration for Alaska, since her tutoring had paved my way to a B-plus. She and I sat alone in the TV lounge watching MTV on a drearily cloudy Saturday. Furnished with couches left behind by previous generations of Culver Creek students, the TV room had the musty air of dust and mildew—and, perhaps for that reason, was almost perennially unoccupied. Alaska took a sip of Mountain Dew and grabbed my hand in hers.

“Always comes up eventually. All right, so my mom was something of a hippie when I was a kid. You know, wore oversize sweaters she knitted herself, smoked a lot of pot, et cetera. And my dad was a real Republican type, and so when I was born, my mom wanted to name me Harmony Springs Young, and my dad wanted to name me Mary Frances Young.” As she talked, she bobbed her head back and forth to the MTV music, even though the song was the kind of manufactured pop ballad she professed to hate.

“So instead of naming me Harmony *or* Mary, they agreed to let me decide. So when I was little, they called me Mary. I mean, they called me sweetie or whatever, but like on school forms and stuff, they wrote *Mary Young*. And then on my seventh birthday, my present was that I got to pick my name. Cool, huh? So I spent the whole day looking at my dad’s globe for a really cool name. And so my first choice was Chad, like the country in Africa. But then my dad said that was a boy’s name, so I picked Alaska.”

I wish my parents had let me pick *my* name. But they went ahead and picked the only name firstborn male Halters have had for a century. “But why *Alaska*?” I asked her.

She smiled with the right side of her mouth. “Well, later, I found out what it means. It’s from an Aleut word, *Alyeska*. It means ‘that which the sea breaks against,’ and I love that. But at the time, I just saw Alaska up there. And it was big, just like I wanted to be. And it was damn far away from Vine Station, Alabama, just like I wanted to be.”

I laughed. “And now you’re all grown up and fairly far away from home,” I said, smiling. “So congratulations.” She stopped the head bobbing and let go of my (unfortunately sweaty) hand.

“Getting out isn’t that easy,” she said seriously, her eyes on mine like I knew the way out and wouldn’t tell her. And then she seemed to switch conversational horses in midstream. “Like after college, know what I want to do? Teach disabled kids. I’m a good teacher, right? Shit, if I can teach you precalc, I can teach anybody. Like maybe kids with autism.”

She talked softly and thoughtfully, like she was telling me a secret, and I leaned in toward her, suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that we must kiss, that we ought to kiss right now on the dusty orange couch with its cigarette burns and its decades of collected dust. And I would have: I would have kept leaning toward her until it became necessary to tilt my face so as to miss her ski-slope nose, and I would have felt the shock of her so-soft lips. I would have. But then she snapped out of it.

“No,” she said, and I couldn’t tell at first whether she was reading my kiss-obsessed mind or responding to herself out loud. She turned away from me, and softly, maybe to herself, said, “Jesus, I’m not going to be one of those people who sits around talking about what they’re gonna do. I’m just going to do it. Imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you’ll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present.”

I guess that made sense. I had imagined that life at the Creek would be a bit more exciting than it was—in reality, there’d been more homework than adventure—but if I hadn’t imagined it, I would never have gotten to the Creek at all.

She turned back to the TV, a commercial for a car now, and made a joke about Blue Citrus needing its own car commercial. Mimicking the deep-voiced passion of commercial voice-overs, she said, “It’s small, it’s slow, and it’s shitty, but it runs. Sometimes. Blue Citrus: See Your Local Used-Car Dealer.” But I wanted to talk more about her and Vine Station and the future.

“Sometimes I don’t get you,” I said.

She didn't even glance at me. She just smiled toward the television and said, "You never get me. That's the whole point."

ninety-nine days before

I SPENT MOST of the next day lying in bed, immersed in the miserably uninteresting fictional world of *Ethan Frome*, while the Colonel sat at his desk, unraveling the secrets of differential equations or something. Although we tried to ration our smoke breaks amid the shower's steam, we ran out of cigarettes before dark, necessitating a trip to Alaska's room. She lay on the floor, holding a book over her head.

"Let's go smoke," he said.

"You're out of cigarettes, aren't you?" she asked without looking up.

"Well. Yes."

"Got five bucks?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Pudge?" she asked.

"Yeah, all right." I fished a five out of my pocket, and Alaska handed me a pack of twenty Marlboro Lights. I knew I'd smoke maybe five of them, but so long as I subsidized the Colonel's smoking, he couldn't really attack me for being another rich kid, a Weekday Warrior who just didn't happen to live in Birmingham.

We grabbed Takumi and walked down to the lake, hiding behind a few trees, laughing. The Colonel blew smoke rings, and Takumi called them "pretentious," while Alaska followed the smoke rings with her fingers, stabbing at them like a kid trying to pop bubbles.

And then we heard a branch break. It might have been a deer, but the Colonel busted out anyway. A voice directly behind us said, "Don't run, Chipper," and the Colonel stopped, turned around, and returned to us sheepishly.

The Eagle walked toward us slowly, his lips pursed in disgust. He wore a white shirt and a black tie, like always. He gave each of us in turn the Look of Doom.

"Y'all smell like a North Carolina tobacco field in a wildfire," he said.

We stood silent. I felt disproportionately terrible, like I had just been caught fleeing the scene of a murder. Would he call my parents?

"I'll see you in Jury tomorrow at five," he announced, and then walked away. Alaska crouched down, picked up the cigarette she had thrown away, and started smoking again. The Eagle wheeled around, his sixth sense detecting

Insubordination To Authority Figures. Alaska dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. The Eagle shook his head, and even though he must have been crazy mad, I swear to God he smiled.

“He loves me,” Alaska told me as we walked back to the dorm circle. “He loves all y’all, too. He just loves the school more. That’s the thing. He thinks busting us is good for the school and good for us. It’s the eternal struggle, Pudge. The Good versus the Naughty.”

“You’re awfully philosophical for a girl that just got busted,” I told her.

“Sometimes you lose a battle. But mischief always wins the war.”

ninety-eight days before

ONE OF THE UNIQUE THINGS about Culver Creek was the Jury. Every semester, the faculty elected twelve students, three from each class, to serve on the Jury. The Jury meted out punishment for nonexpellable offenses, for everything from staying out past curfew to smoking. Usually, it was smoking or being in a girl’s room after seven. So you went to the Jury, you made your case, and they punished you. The Eagle served as the judge, and he had the right to overturn the Jury’s verdict (just like in the real American court system), but he almost never did.

I made my way to Classroom 4 right after my last class—forty minutes early, just to be safe. I sat in the hall with my back against the wall and read my American history textbook (kind of remedial reading for me, to be honest) until Alaska showed up and sat down next to me. She was chewing on her bottom lip, and I asked whether she was nervous.

“Well, yeah. Listen, just sit tight and don’t talk,” she told me. “You don’t need to be nervous. But this is the seventh time I’ve been caught smoking. I just don’t want — whatever. I don’t want to upset my dad.”

“Does your mom smoke or something?” I asked.

“Not anymore,” Alaska said. “It’s fine. You’ll be fine.”

I didn’t start to worry until it got to be 4:50 and the Colonel and Takumi were still unaccounted for. The members of the Jury filed in one by one, walking past us without any eye contact, which made me feel worse. I counted all twelve by 4:56, plus the Eagle.

At 4:58, the Colonel and Takumi rounded the corner toward the classrooms.

I never saw anything like it. Takumi wore a starched white shirt with a red tie with a black paisley print; the Colonel wore his wrinkled pink button-down and flamingo tie. They walked in step, heads up and shoulders back, like some

kind of action-movie heroes.

I heard Alaska sigh. “The Colonel’s doing his Napoleon walk.”

“It’s all good,” the Colonel told me. “Just don’t say anything.”

We walked in—two of us wearing ties, and two of us wearing ratty T-shirts—and the Eagle banged an honest-to-God gavel against the podium in front of him. The Jury sat in a line behind a rectangular table. At the front of the room, by the blackboard, were four chairs. We sat down, and the Colonel explained exactly what happened.

“Alaska and I were smoking down by the lake. We usually go off campus, but we forgot. We’re sorry. It won’t happen again.”

I didn’t know what was going on. But I knew my job: sit tight and shut up. One of the kids looked at Takumi and asked, “What about you and Halter?”

“We were keeping them company,” Takumi said calmly.

The kid turned to the Eagle then and asked, “Did you see anyone smoking?”

“I only saw Alaska, but Chip ran away, which struck me as cowardly, as does Miles and Takumi’s aw-shucks routine,” the Eagle said, giving me the Look of Doom. I didn’t want to look guilty, but I couldn’t hold his stare, so I just looked down at my hands.

The Colonel gritted his teeth, like it pained him to lie. “It is the truth, sir.”

The Eagle asked if any of us wanted to say anything, and then asked if there were any more questions, and then sent us outside.

“What the hell was that?” I asked Takumi when we got outside.

“Just sit tight, Pudge.”

Why have Alaska confess when she’d already been in trouble so many times? Why the Colonel, who literally couldn’t afford to get in serious trouble? Why not me? I’d never been busted for anything. I had the least to lose. After a couple minutes, the Eagle came out and motioned for us to come back inside.

“Alaska and Chip,” a member of the Jury said, “you get ten work hours—doing dishes in the cafeteria—and you’re both officially one problem away from a phone call home. Takumi and Miles, there’s nothing in the rules about watching someone smoke, but the Jury will remember your story if you break the rules again. Fair?”

“Fair,” Alaska said quickly, obviously relieved. On my way out, the Eagle spun me around. “Don’t abuse your privileges at this school, young man, or you will regret it.” I nodded.

eighty-nine days before

“WE FOUND YOU A GIRLFRIEND,” Alaska said to me. Still, no one had explained to me what happened the week before with the Jury. It didn’t seem to have affected Alaska, though, who was 1. in our room after dark with the door closed, and 2. smoking a cigarette as she sat on the mostly foam couch. She had stuffed a towel into the bottom of our door and insisted it was safe, but I worried—about the cigarette and the “girlfriend.”

“All I have to do now,” she said, “is convince you to like her and convince her to like you.”

“Monumental tasks,” the Colonel pointed out. He lay on the top bunk, reading for his English class. *Moby-Dick*.

“How can you read and talk at the same time?” I asked.

“Well, I usually can’t, but neither the book nor the conversation is particularly intellectually challenging.”

“I like that book,” Alaska said.

“Yes.” The Colonel smiled and leaned over to look at her from his top bunk. “You would. Big white whale is a metaphor for everything. You live for pretentious metaphors.”

Alaska was unfazed. “So, Pudge, what’s your feeling on the former Soviet bloc?”

“Um. I’m in favor of it?”

She flicked the ashes of her cigarette into my pencil holder. I almost protested, but why bother. “You know that girl in our precalc class,” Alaska said, “soft voice, says *thees*, not *this*. Know that girl?”

“Yeah. Lara. She sat on my lap on the way to McDonald’s.”

“Right. I know. And she liked you. You thought she was quietly discussing precalc, when she was clearly talking about having hot sex with you. Which is why you need me.”

“She has great breasts,” the Colonel said without looking up from the whale.

“DO NOT OBJECTIFY WOMEN’S BODIES!” Alaska shouted.

Now he looked up. “Sorry. Perky breasts.”

“That’s not any better!”

“Sure it is,” he said. “*Great* is a judgment on a woman’s body. *Perky* is merely an observation. They *are* perky. I mean, Christ.”

“You’re hopeless,” she said. “So she thinks you’re cute, Pudge.”

“Nice.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. Problem with you is that if you talk to her you’ll ‘uh um uh’ your way to disaster.”

“Don’t be so hard on him,” the Colonel interrupted, as if he was my mom. “God, I understand whale anatomy. Can we move on now, Herman?”

“So Jake is going to be in Birmingham this weekend, and we’re going on a triple date. Well, triple and a half, since Takumi will be there, too. Very low pressure. You won’t be able to screw up, because I’ll be there the whole time.”

“Okay.”

“Who’s my date?” the Colonel asked.

“Your girlfriend is your date.”

“All right,” he said, and then deadpanned, “but we don’t get along very well.”

“So Friday? Do you have plans for Friday?” And then I laughed, because the Colonel and I didn’t have plans for this Friday, or for any other Friday for the rest of our lives.

“I didn’t think so.” She smiled. “Now, we gotta go do dishes in the cafeteria, Chipper. God, the sacrifices I make.”

eighty-seven days before

OUR TRIPLE-AND-A-HALF DATE started off well enough. I was in Alaska’s room—for the sake of getting me a girlfriend, she’d agreed to iron a green button-down shirt for me—when Jake showed up. With blond hair to his shoulders, dark stubble on his cheeks, and the kind of faux-ruggedness that gets you a career as a catalog model, Jake was every bit as good-looking as you’d expect Alaska’s boyfriend to be. She jumped onto him and wrapped her legs around him (*God forbid anyone ever does that to me*, I thought. *I’ll fall over*). I’d heard Alaska talk about kissing, but I’d never seen her kiss until then: As he held her by her waist, she leaned forward, her pouty lips parted, her head just slightly tilted, and enveloped his mouth with such passion that I felt I should look away but couldn’t. A good while later, she untangled herself from Jake and introduced me.

“This is Pudge,” she said. Jake and I shook hands.

“I’ve heard a lot about ya.” He spoke with a slight Southern accent, one of the few I’d heard outside of McDonald’s. “I hope your date works out tonight, ’cause I wouldn’t want you stealin’ Alaska out from under me.”

“God, you’re so adorable,” Alaska said before I could answer, kissing him again. “I’m sorry.” She laughed. “I just can’t seem to stop kissing my boyfriend.”

I put on my freshly starched green shirt, and the three of us gathered up the Colonel, Sara, Lara, and Takumi and then walked to the gym to watch the Culver Creek Nothings take on Harsden Academy, a private day school in Mountain Brook, Birmingham’s richest suburb. The Colonel’s hatred for Harsden burned with the fire of a thousand suns. “The only thing I hate more than rich people,” he told me as we walked to the gym, “is stupid people. And all the kids at Harsden are rich, and they’re all too stupid to get into the Creek.”

Since we were supposed to be on a date and all, I thought I’d sit next to Lara at the game, but as I tried to walk past a seated Alaska on my way to Lara, Alaska shot me a look and patted the empty spot next to her on the bleachers.

“I’m not allowed to sit next to my date?” I asked.

“Pudge, one of us has been a girl her whole life. The other of us has never gotten to second base. If I were you, I’d sit down, look cute, and be your pleasantly aloof self.”

“Okay. Whatever you say.”

Jake said, “That’s pretty much my strategy for pleasing Alaska.”

“Aww,” she said, “so sweet! Pudge, did I tell you that Jake is recording an album with his band? They’re fantastic. They’re like Radiohead meets the Flaming Lips. Did I tell you that I came up with their name, Hickman Territory?” And then, realizing she was being silly: “Did I tell you that Jake is hung like a horse and a beautiful, sensual lover?”

“Baby, Jesus.” Jake smiled. “Not in front of the kids.”

I wanted to hate Jake, of course, but as I watched them together, smiling and fumbling all over each other, I didn’t hate him. I wanted to *be* him, sure, but I tried to remember I was ostensibly on a date with someone else.

Harsden Academy’s star player was a six-foot-seven Goliath named Travis Eastman that everyone—even his mother, I suspect—called the Beast. The first time the Beast got to the free-throw line, the Colonel could not keep himself from swearing while he taunted:

“You owe everything to your daddy, you stupid redneck bastard.”

The Beast turned around and glared, and the Colonel almost got kicked out after the first free throw, but he smiled at the ref and said, “Sorry!”

“I want to stay around for a good part of this one,” he said to me.

At the start of the second half, with the Creek down by a surprisingly slim margin of twenty-four points and the Beast at the foul line, the Colonel looked at Takumi and said, “It’s time.” Takumi and the Colonel stood up as the crowd went, “*Shhh...*”

“I don’t know if this is the best time to tell you this,” the Colonel shouted at the Beast, “but Takumi here hooked up with your girlfriend just before the game.”

That made everyone laugh—except the Beast, who turned from the free throw line and walked calmly, with the ball, toward us.

“I think we run now,” Takumi said.

“I haven’t gotten kicked out,” the Colonel answered.

“Later,” Takumi said.

I don’t know whether it was the general anxiety of being on a date (albeit one with my would-be date sitting five people away from me) or the specific anxiety of having the Beast stare in my direction, but for some reason, I took off running after Takumi. I thought we were in the clear as we began to round the corner of the bleachers, but then I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a cylindrical orange object getting bigger and bigger, like a fast-approaching sun.

I thought: *I think that is going to hit me.*

I thought: *I should duck.*

But in the time between when something gets thought and when it gets done, the ball hit me square across the side of the face. I fell, the back of my head slamming against the gym floor. I then stood up immediately, as if unhurt, and left the gym.

Pride had gotten me off the floor of the gym, but as soon as I was outside, I sat down.

“I am concussed,” I announced, entirely sure of my self-diagnosis.

“You’re fine,” Takumi said as he jogged back toward me. “Let’s get out of here before we’re killed.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I can’t get up. I have suffered a mild concussion.”

Lara ran out and sat down next to me.

“Are you okay?”

“I am concussed,” I said.

Takumi sat down with me and looked me in the eye. “Do you know what happened to you?”

“The Beast got me.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“I’m on a triple-and-a-half date.”

“You’re fine,” Takumi said. “Let’s go.”

And then I leaned forward and threw up onto Lara’s pants. I can’t say why I didn’t lean backward or to the side. I leaned forward and aimed my mouth toward her jeans—a nice, butt-flattering pair of jeans, the kind of pants a girl wears when she wants to look nice but not look like she is trying to look nice—and I threw up all over them.

Mostly peanut butter, but also clearly some corn.

“Oh!” she said, surprised and slightly horrified.

“Oh God,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“I think you might have a concussion,” Takumi said, as if the idea had never been suggested.

“I am suffering from the nausea and dizziness typically associated with a mild concussion,” I recited. While Takumi went to get the Eagle and Lara changed pants, I lay on the concrete sidewalk. The Eagle came back with the school nurse, who diagnosed me with—get this—a concussion, and then Takumi drove me to the hospital with Lara riding shotgun. Apparently I lay in the back and slowly repeated the words “The. Symptoms. Generally. Associated. With. Concussion.”

So I spent my date at the hospital with Lara and Takumi. The doctor told me to go home and sleep a lot, but to make sure and have someone wake me up every four hours or so.

I vaguely remember Lara standing in the doorway, the room dark and the outside dark and everything mild and comfortable but sort of spinnny, the world pulsing as if from a heavy bass beat. And I vaguely remember Lara smiling at me from the doorway, the glittering ambiguity of a girl’s smile, which seems to promise an answer to the question but never gives it. *The* question, the one we’ve all been asking since girls stopped being gross, the question that is too simple to be uncomplicated: Does she like me or *like* me? And then I fell deeply, endlessly asleep and slept until three in the morning, when the Colonel woke me up.

“She dumped me,” he said.

“I am concussed,” I responded.

“So I heard. Hence my waking you up. Video game?”

“Okay. But keep it on mute. My head hurts.”

“Yeah. Heard you puked on Lara. Very suave.”

“Dumped?” I asked, getting up.

“Yeah. Sara told Jake that I had a hard-on for Alaska. Those words. In that order. And I was like, ‘Well, I don’t have a hard-on for *anything* at this moment. You can check if you’d like,’ and Sara thought I was being too glib, I suppose,

because then she said she knew for a fact I'd hooked up with Alaska. Which, incidentally, is ridiculous. I. Don't. Cheat," he said, and finally the game finished loading and I half listened as I drove a stock car in circles around a silent track in Talladega. The circles nauseated me, but I kept at it.

"So Alaska went ballistic, basically." He affected Alaska's voice then, making it more shrill and headache-inducing than it actually was. "'No woman should ever lie about another woman! You've violated the sacred covenant between women! How will stabbing one another in the back help women to rise above patriarchal oppression?!' And so on. And then Jake came to Alaska's defense, saying that she would never cheat because she loved him, and then I was like, 'Don't worry about Sara. She just likes bullying people.' And then Sara asked me why I never stood up for her, and somewhere in there I called her a crazy bitch, which didn't go over particularly well. And then the waitress asked us to leave, and so we were standing in the parking lot and she said, 'I've had enough,' and I just stared at her and she said, 'Our relationship is over.'"

He stopped talking then. "'Our relationship is over?'" I repeated. I felt very spacey and thought it was just best to repeat the last phrase of whatever the Colonel said so he could keep talking.

"Yeah. So that's it. You know what's lame, Pudge? I really care about her. I mean, we were hopeless. Badly matched. But still. I mean, I said I loved her. I lost my virginity to her."

"You lost your virginity to her?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I never told you that? She's the only girl I've slept with. I don't know. Even though we fought, like, ninety-four percent of the time, I'm really sad."

"You're really sad?"

"Sadder than I thought I'd be, anyway. I mean, I knew it was inevitable. We haven't had a pleasant moment this whole year. Ever since I got here, I mean, we were just on each other relentlessly. I should have been nicer to her. I don't know. It's sad."

"It is sad," I repeated.

"I mean, it's stupid to miss someone you didn't even get along with. But, I don't know, it was nice, you know, having someone you could always fight with."

"Fighting," I said, and then, confused, barely able to drive, I added, "is nice."

"Right. I don't know what I'll do now. I mean, it was nice to have her. I'm a mad guy, Pudge. What do I do with that?"

"You can fight with me," I said. I put my controller down and leaned back on our foam couch and was asleep. As I drifted off, I heard the Colonel say, "I

can't be mad at you, you harmless skinny bastard."

eighty-four days before

THREE DAYS LATER, the rain began. My head still hurt, and the sizable knot above my left temple looked, the Colonel thought, like a miniaturized topographical map of Macedonia, which I had not previously known was a place, let alone a country. And as the Colonel and I walked over the parched, half-dead grass that Monday, I said, "I suppose we could use some rain," and the Colonel looked up at the low clouds coming in fast and threatening, and then he said, "Well, use it or not, we're sure as shit going to get some."

And we sure as shit did. Twenty minutes into French class, Madame O'Malley was conjugating the verb *to believe* in the subjunctive. *Que je croie. Que tu croies. Qu'il ou qu'elle croie*. She said it over and over, like it wasn't a verb so much as a Buddhist mantra. *Que je croie; que tu croies; qu'il ou qu'elle croie*. What a funny thing to say over and over again: I would believe; you would believe; he or she would believe. *Believe what?* I thought, and right then, the rain came.

It came all at once and in a furious torrent, like God was mad and wanted to flood us out. Day after day, night after night, it rained. It rained so that I couldn't see across the dorm circle, so that the lake swelled up and lapped against the Adirondack swing, swallowing half of the fake beach. By the third day, I abandoned my umbrella entirely and walked around in a perpetual state of wetness. Everything at the cafeteria tasted like the minor acid of rainwater and everything stank of mildew and showers became ludicrously inappropriate because the whole goddamned world had better water pressure than the showers.

And the rain made hermits of us all. The Colonel spent every not-in-class moment sitting on the couch, reading the almanac and playing video games, and I wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk or whether he just wanted to sit on the white foam and drink his ambrosia in peace.

After the disaster that was our "date," I felt it best not to speak to Lara under any circumstances, lest I suffer a concussion and/or an attack of puking, even though she'd told me in precalc the next day that it was "no beeg deal."

And I saw Alaska only in class and could never talk to her, because she came to every class late and left the moment the bell rang, before I could even cap my pen and close my notebook. On the fifth evening of the rain, I walked into the cafeteria fully prepared to go back to my room and eat a reheated bufriedo for dinner if Alaska and/or Takumi weren't eating (I knew full well the Colonel was

in Room 43, dining on milk 'n' vodka). But I stayed, because I saw Alaska sitting alone, her back to a rain-streaked window. I grabbed a heaping plate of fried okra and sat down next to her.

“God, it’s like it’ll never end,” I said, referring to the rain.

“Indeed,” she said. Her wet hair hung from her head and mostly covered her face. I ate some. She ate some.

“How’ve you been?” I finally asked.

“I’m really not up for answering any questions that start with *how*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *what*.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“That’s a *what*. I’m not doing *what*’s right now. All right, I should go.” She pursed her lips and exhaled slowly, like the way the Colonel blew out smoke.

“What—” Then I stopped myself and reworded. “Did I do something?” I asked.

She gathered her tray and stood up before answering. “Of course not, sweetie.”

Her “sweetie” felt condescending, not romantic, like a boy enduring his first biblical rainstorm couldn’t possibly understand her problems—whatever they were. It took a sincere effort not to roll my eyes at her, though she wouldn’t have even noticed as she walked out of the cafeteria with her hair dripping over her face.

seventy-six days before

“**I FEEL BETTER,**” the Colonel told me on the ninth day of the rainstorm as he sat down next to me in religion class. “I had an epiphany. Do you remember that night when she came to the room and was a complete and total bitch?”

“Yeah. The opera. The flamingo tie.”

“Right.”

“What about it?” I asked.

The Colonel pulled out a spiral notebook, the top half of which was soaking wet, and slowly pulled the pages apart until he found his place. “That was the epiphany. She’s a complete and total bitch.”

Hyde hobbled in, leaning heavily on a black cane. As he made his way toward his chair, he drily noted, “My trick knee is warning me that we might have some rain. So prepare yourselves.” He stood in front of his chair, leaned back cautiously, grabbed it with both hands, and collapsed into the chair with a series of quick, shallow breaths—like a woman in labor.

“Although it isn’t due for more than two months, you’ll be receiving your paper topic for this semester today. Now, I’m quite sure that you’ve all read the syllabus for this class with such frequency and seriousness that by now you’ve committed it to memory.” He smirked. “But a reminder: This paper is fifty percent of your grade. I encourage you to take it seriously. Now, about this Jesus fellow.”

Hyde talked about the Gospel of Mark, which I hadn’t read until the day before, although I was a Christian. I guess. I’d been to church, uh, like four times. Which is more frequently than I’d been to a mosque or a synagogue.

He told us that in the first century, around the time of Jesus, some of the Roman coins had a picture of the Emperor Augustus on them, and that beneath his picture were inscribed the words *Filius Dei*. The Son of God.

“We are speaking,” he said, “of a time in which gods had sons. It was not so unusual to be a son of God. The miracle, at least in that time and in that place, was that *Jesus*—a peasant, a Jew, a nobody in an empire ruled exclusively by somebodies—was the son of *that* God, the all-powerful God of Abraham and Moses. That God’s son was not an emperor. Not even a trained rabbi. A peasant and a Jew. A nobody like you. While the Buddha was special because he abandoned his wealth and noble birth to seek enlightenment, Jesus was special because he lacked wealth and noble birth, but inherited the ultimate nobility: King of Kings. Class over. You can pick up a copy of your final exam on the way out. Stay dry.” It wasn’t until I stood up to leave that I noticed Alaska had skipped class—how could she skip the only class worth attending? I grabbed a copy of the final for her.

The final exam: *What is the most important question human beings must answer? Choose your question wisely, and then examine how Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity attempt to answer it.*

“I hope that poor bastard lives the rest of the school year,” the Colonel said as we jogged home through the rain, “because I’m sure starting to enjoy that class. What’s your most important question?”

After thirty seconds of running, I was already winded. “What happens...to us...when we die?”

“Christ, Pudge, if you don’t stop running, you’re going to find out.” He slowed to a walk. “My question is: Why do good people get rotten lots in life? Holy shit, is that Alaska?”

She was running at us at full speed, and she was screaming, but I couldn’t hear her over the pounding rain until she was so close to us that I could see her spit flying.

“The fuckers flooded my room. They ruined like a hundred of my books!

Goddamned pissant Weekday Warrior shit. Colonel, they poked a hole in the gutter and connected a plastic tube from the gutter down through my back window into my room! The whole place is soaking wet. My copy of *The General in His Labyrinth* is absolutely ruined.”

“That’s pretty good,” the Colonel said, like an artist admiring another’s work.

“Hey!” she shouted.

“Sorry. Don’t worry, dude,” he said. “God will punish the wicked. And before He does, we will.”

sixty-seven days before

SO THIS IS HOW NOAH FELT. You wake up one morning and God has forgiven you and you walk around squinting all day because you’ve forgotten how sunlight feels warm and rough against your skin like a kiss on the cheek from your dad, and the whole world is brighter and cleaner than ever before, like central Alabama has been put in the washing machine for two weeks and cleaned with extra-superstrength detergent with color brightener, and now the grass is greener and the bufriedos are crunchier.

I stayed by the classrooms that afternoon, lying on my stomach in the newly dry grass and reading for American history—the Civil War, or as it was known around these parts, the War Between the States. To me, it was the war that spawned a thousand good last words. Like General Albert Sidney Johnston, who, when asked if he was injured, answered, “Yes, and I fear seriously.” Or Robert E. Lee, who, many years after the war, in a dying delirium, announced, “Strike the tent!”

I was mulling over why the Confederate generals had better last words than the Union ones (Ulysses S. Grant’s last word, “Water,” was pretty lame) when I noticed a shadow blocking me from the sun. It had been some time since I’d seen a shadow, and it startled me a bit. I looked up.

“I brought you a snack,” Takumi said, dropping an oatmeal cream pie onto my book.

“Very nutritious.” I smiled.

“You’ve got your oats. You’ve got your meal. You’ve got your cream. It’s a fuckin’ food pyramid.”

“Hell yeah it is.”

And then I didn’t know what to say. Takumi knew a lot about hip-hop; I knew a lot about last words and video games. Finally, I said, “I can’t believe

those guys flooded Alaska's room."

"Yeah," Takumi said, not looking at me. "Well, they had their reasons. You have to understand that with like everybody, even the Weekday Warriors, Alaska is famous for pranking. I mean, last year, we put a Volkswagen Beetle in the library. So if they have a reason to try and one-up her, they'll try. And that's pretty ingenious, to divert water from the gutter to her room. I mean, I don't want to admire it..."

I laughed. "Yeah. That will be tough to top." I unwrapped the cream pie and bit into it. Mmm...hundreds of delicious calories per bite.

"She'll think of something," he said. "Pudge," he said. "Hmm. Pudge, you need a cigarette. Let's go for a walk."

I felt nervous, as I invariably do when someone says my name twice with a *hmm* in between. But I got up, leaving my books behind, and walked toward the Smoking Hole. But as soon as we got to the edge of the woods, Takumi turned away from the dirt road. "Not sure the Hole is safe," he said. *Not safe?* I thought. *It's the safest place to smoke a cigarette in the known universe.* But I just followed him through the thick brush, weaving through pine trees and threatening, chest-high brambly bushes. After a while, he just sat down. I cupped my hand around my lighter to protect the flame from the slight breeze and lit up.

"Alaska ratted out Marya," he said. "So the Eagle might know about the Smoking Hole, too. I don't know. I've never seen him down that way, but who knows what she told him."

"Wait, how do you know?" I asked, dubious.

"Well, for one thing, I figured it out. And for another, Alaska admitted it. She told me at least part of the truth, that right at the end of school last year, she tried to sneak off campus one night after lights-out to go visit Jake and then got busted. She said she was careful—no headlights or anything—but the Eagle caught her, and she had a bottle of wine in her car, so she was fucked. And the Eagle took her into his house and gave her the same offer he gives to everyone when they get fatally busted. 'Either tell me everything you know or go to your room and pack up your stuff.' So Alaska broke and told him that Marya and Paul were drunk and in her room right then. And then she told him God knows what else. And so the Eagle let her go, because he needs rats to do his job. She was smart, really, to rat on one of her friends, because no one ever thinks to blame the friends. That's why the Colonel is so sure it was Kevin and his boys. I didn't believe it could be Alaska, either, until I figured out that she was the only person on campus who could've known what Marya was doing. I suspected Paul's roommate, Longwell—one of the guys who pulled the armless-mermaid bit on you. Turns out he was at home that night. His aunt had died. I checked the obit

in the paper. Hollis Burnis Chase—hell of a name for a woman.”

“So the Colonel doesn’t know?” I asked, stunned. I put out my cigarette, even though I wasn’t quite finished, because I felt spooked. I’d never suspected Alaska could be disloyal. Moody, yes. But not a rat.

“No, and he can’t know, because he’ll go crazy and get her expelled. The Colonel takes all this honor and loyalty shit pretty seriously, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Takumi shook his head, his hands pushing aside leaves to dig into the still-wet dirt beneath. “I just don’t get why she’d be so afraid of getting expelled. I’d hate to get expelled, but you have to take your lumps. I don’t get it.”

“Well, she obviously doesn’t like home.”

“True. She only goes home over Christmas and the summer, when Jake is there. But whatever. I don’t like home, either. But I’d never give the Eagle the satisfaction.” Takumi picked up a twig and dug it into the soft red dirt. “Listen, Pudge. I don’t know what kind of prank Alaska and the Colonel are going to come up with to end this, but I’m sure we’ll both be involved. I’m telling you all this so you can know what you’re getting into, because if you get caught, you had better take it.”

I thought of Florida, of my “school friends,” and realized for the first time how much I would miss the Creek if I ever had to leave it. I stared down at Takumi’s twig sticking erect out of the mud and said, “I swear to God I won’t rat.”

I finally understood that day at the Jury: Alaska wanted to show us that we could trust her. Survival at Culver Creek meant loyalty, and she had ignored that. But then she’d shown me the way. She and the Colonel had taken the fall for me to show me how it was done, so I would know what to do when the time came.

fifty-eight days before

ABOUT A WEEK LATER I woke up at 6:30—6:30 on a Saturday!—to the sweet melody of *Decapitation*: automatic gunfire blasted out above the menacing, bass-heavy background music of the video game. I rolled over and saw Alaska pulling the controller up and to the right, as if that would help her escape certain death. I had the same bad habit.

“Can you at least mute it?”

“*Pudge*,” she said, faux-condescending, “the sound is an integral part of the artistic experience of this video game. Muting *Decapitation* would be like

reading only every other word of *Jane Eyre*. The Colonel woke up about half an hour ago. He seemed a little annoyed, so I told him to go sleep in my room.”

“Maybe I’ll join him,” I said groggily.

Rather than answering my question, she remarked, “So I heard Takumi told you. Yeah, I ratted out Marya, and I’m sorry, and I’ll never do it again. In other news, are you staying here for Thanksgiving? Because I am.”

I rolled back toward the wall and pulled the comforter over my head. I didn’t know whether to trust Alaska, and I’d certainly had enough of her unpredictability—cold one day, sweet the next; irresistibly flirty one moment, resistibly obnoxious the next. I preferred the Colonel: At least when he was cranky, he had a *reason*.

In a testament to the power of fatigue, I managed to fall asleep quickly, convinced that the shrieking of dying monsters and Alaska’s delighted squeals upon killing them were nothing more than a pleasant sound track by which to dream. I woke up half an hour later, when she sat down on my bed, her butt against my hip. *Her underwear, her jeans, the comforter, my corduroys, and my boxers between us*, I thought. Five layers, and yet I felt it, the nervous warmth of touching—a pale reflection of the fireworks of one mouth on another, but a reflection nonetheless. And in the almostness of the moment, I cared at least enough. I wasn’t sure whether I liked her, and I doubted whether I could trust her, but I cared at least enough to try to find out. Her on my bed, wide green eyes staring down at me. The enduring mystery of her sly, almost smirking, smile. Five layers between us.

She continued as if I hadn’t been asleep. “Jake has to study. So he doesn’t want me in Nashville. Says he can’t pay attention to musicology while staring at me. I said I would wear a burka, but he wasn’t convinced, so I’m staying here.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Oh, don’t be. I’ll have loads to do. There’s a prank to plan. But I was thinking you should stay here, too. In fact, I have composed a list.”

“A list?”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a heavily folded piece of notebook paper and began to read.

“*Why Pudge Should Stay at the Creek for Thanksgiving: A List*, by Alaska Young.

“*One*. Because he is a very conscientious student, Pudge has been deprived of many wonderful Culver Creek experiences, including but not limited to *A*. drinking wine with me in the woods, and *B*. getting up early on a Saturday to eat breakfast at McInedible and then driving through the greater Birmingham area smoking cigarettes and talking about how pathetically boring the greater

Birmingham area is, and also *C.* going out late at night and lying in the dewy soccer field and reading a Kurt Vonnegut book by moonlight.

“*Two.* Although she certainly does not excel at endeavors such as teaching the French language, Madame O’Malley makes a mean stuffing, and she invites all the students who stay on campus to Thanksgiving dinner. Which is usually just me and the South Korean exchange student, but whatever. Pudge would be welcome.

“*Three.* I don’t really have a *Three*, but *One* and *Two* were awfully good.”

One and *Two* appealed to me, certainly, but mostly I liked the idea of just her and just me on campus. “I’ll talk to my parents. Once they wake up,” I said. She coaxed me onto the couch, and we played *Decapitation* together until she abruptly dropped the controller.

“I’m not flirting. I’m just tired,” she said, kicking off her flip-flops. She pulled her feet onto the foam couch, tucking them behind a cushion, and scooted up to put her head in my lap. My corduroys. My boxers. Two layers. I could feel the warmth of her cheek on my thigh.

There are times when it is appropriate, even preferable, to get an erection when someone’s face is in close proximity to your penis.

This was not one of those times.

So I stopped thinking about the layers and the warmth, muted the TV, and focused on *Decapitation*.

At 8:30, I turned off the game and scooted out from underneath Alaska. She turned onto her back, still asleep, the lines of my corduroy pants imprinted on her cheek.

I usually only called my parents on Sunday afternoons, so when my mom heard my voice, she instantly overreacted. “What’s wrong, Miles? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Mom. I think—if it’s okay with you, I think I might stay here for Thanksgiving. A lot of my friends are staying”—lie—“and I have a lot of work to do”—double lie. “I had no idea how hard the classes would be, Mom”—truth.

“Oh, sweetie. We miss you so much. And there’s a big Thanksgiving turkey waiting for you. And all the cranberry sauce you can eat.”

I hated cranberry sauce, but for some reason my mom persisted in her lifelong belief that it was my very favorite food, even though every single Thanksgiving I politely declined to include it on my plate.

“I know, Mom. I miss you guys, too. But I really want to do well here”—truth—“and plus it’s really nice to have, like, *friends*”—truth.

I knew that playing the friend card would sell her on the idea, and it did. So I

got her blessing to stay on campus after promising to hang out with them for every minute of Christmas break (as if I had other plans).

I spent the morning at the computer, flipping back and forth between my religion and English papers. There were only two weeks of classes before exams—the coming one and the one after Thanksgiving—and so far, the best personal answer I had to “What happens to people after they die?” was “Well, something. Maybe.”

The Colonel came in at noon, his thick übermath book cradled in his arms.

“I just saw Sara,” he said.

“How’d that work out for ya?”

“Bad. She said she still loved me. God, ‘I love you’ really is the gateway drug of breaking up. Saying ‘I love you’ while walking across the dorm circle inevitably leads to saying ‘I love you’ while you’re doing it. So I just bolted.” I laughed. He pulled out a notebook and sat down at his desk.

“Yeah. Ha-ha. So Alaska said you’re staying here.”

“Yeah. I feel a little guilty about ditching my parents, though.”

“Yeah, well. If you’re staying here in hopes of making out with Alaska, I sure wish you wouldn’t. If you unmoor her from the rock that is Jake, God have mercy on us all. That would be some drama, indeed. And as a rule, I like to avoid drama.”

“It’s not because I want to make out with her.”

“Hold on.” He grabbed a pencil and scrawled excitedly at the paper as if he’d just made a mathematical breakthrough and then looked back up at me. “I just did some calculations, and I’ve been able to determine that you’re full of shit.”

And he was right. How could I abandon my parents, who were nice enough to pay for my education at Culver Creek, my parents who had always loved me, just because I maybe liked some girl with a boyfriend? How could I leave them alone with a giant turkey and mounds of inedible cranberry sauce? So during third period, I called my mom at work. I wanted her to say it was okay, I guess, for me to stay at the Creek for Thanksgiving, but I didn’t quite expect her to excitedly tell me that she and Dad had bought plane tickets to England immediately after I called and were planning to spend Thanksgiving in a castle on their second honeymoon.

“Oh, that—that’s awesome,” I said, and then quickly got off the phone because I did not want her to hear me cry. I guess Alaska heard me slam down the phone from her room, because she opened the door as I turned away, but said nothing. I walked across the dorm circle, and then straight through the soccer

field, bushwhacking through the woods, until I ended up on the banks of Culver Creek just down from the bridge. I sat with my butt on a rock and my feet in the dark dirt of the creek bed and tossed pebbles into the clear, shallow water, and they landed with an empty *plop*, barely audible over the rumbling of the creek as it danced its way south. The light filtered through the leaves and pine needles above as if through lace, the ground spotted in shadow.

I thought of the one thing about home that I missed, my dad's study with its built-in, floor-to-ceiling shelves sagging with thick biographies, and the black leather chair that kept me just uncomfortable enough to keep from feeling sleepy as I read. It was stupid, to feel as upset as I did. *I ditched them*, but it felt the other way around. Still, I felt unmistakably homesick.

I looked up toward the bridge and saw Alaska sitting on one of the blue chairs at the Smoking Hole, and though I'd thought I wanted to be alone, I found myself saying, "Hey." Then, when she did not turn to me, I screamed, "Alaska!" She walked over.

"I was looking for you," she said, joining me on the rock.

"Hey."

"I'm really sorry, Pudge," she said, and put her arms around me, resting her head against my shoulder. It occurred to me that she didn't even know what had happened, but she still sounded sincere.

"What am I going to do?"

"You'll spend Thanksgiving with me, silly. Here."

"So why don't you go home for vacations?" I asked her.

"I'm just scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them."

fifty-two days before

AFTER EVERYONE LEFT; after the Colonel's mom showed up in a beat-up hatchback and he threw his giant duffel bag into the backseat; and after he said, "I'm not much for saying good-bye. I'll see you in a week. Don't do anything I wouldn't do"; and after a green limousine arrived for Lara, whose father was the only doctor in some small town in southern Alabama; and after I joined Alaska on a harrowing, we-don't-need-no-stinking-brakes drive to the airport to drop off Takumi; and after the campus settled into an eerie quiet, with no doors slamming and no music playing and no one laughing and no one screaming; after all that:

We made our way down to the soccer field, and she took me to edge of the field where the woods start, the same steps I'd walked on my way to being thrown into the lake. Beneath the full moon she cast a shadow, and you could

see the curve from her waist to her hips in the shadow, and after a while she stopped and said, “Dig.”

And I said, “Dig?” and she said, “Dig,” and we went on like that for a bit, and then I got on my knees and dug through the soft black dirt at the edge of the woods, and before I could get very far, my fingers scratched glass, and I dug around the glass until I pulled out a bottle of pink wine—Strawberry Hill, it was called, I suppose because if it had not tasted like vinegar with a dash of maple syrup, it might have tasted like strawberries.

“I have a fake ID,” she said, “but it sucks. So every time I go to the liquor store, I try to buy ten bottles of this, and some vodka for the Colonel. And so when it finally works, I’m covered for a semester. And then I give the Colonel his vodka, and he puts it wherever he puts it, and I take mine and bury it.”

“Because you’re a pirate,” I said.

“Aye, matey. Precisely. Although wine consumption has risen a bit this semester, so we’ll need to take a trip tomorrow. This is the last bottle.” She unscrewed the cap—no corks here—sipped, and handed it to me. “Don’t worry about the Eagle tonight,” she said. “He’s just happy most everyone’s gone. He’s probably masturbating for the first time in a month.”

I worried about it for a moment as I held the bottle by the neck, but I wanted to trust her, and so I did. I took a minor sip, and as soon as I swallowed, I felt my body rejecting the stinging syrup of it. It washed back up my esophagus, but I swallowed hard, and there, yes, I did it. I was drinking on campus.

So we lay in the tall grass between the soccer field and the woods, passing the bottle back and forth and tilting our heads up to sip the wince-inducing wine. As promised in the list, she brought a Kurt Vonnegut book, *Cat’s Cradle*, and she read aloud to me, her soft voice mingling with the the frogs’ croaking and the grasshoppers landing softly around us. I did not hear her words so much as the cadence of her voice. She’d obviously read the book many times before, and so she read flawlessly and confidently, and I could hear her smile in the reading of it, and the sound of that smile made me think that maybe I would like novels better if Alaska Young read them to me. After a while, she put down the book, and I felt warm but not drunk with the bottle resting between us—my chest touching the bottle and her chest touching the bottle but us not touching each other, and then she placed her hand on my leg.

Her hand just above my knee, the palm flat and soft against my jeans and her index finger making slow, lazy circles that crept toward the inside of my thigh, and with one layer between us, God I wanted her. And lying there, amid the tall, still grass and beneath the star-drunk sky, listening to the just-this-side-of-inaudible sound of her rhythmic breathing and the noisy silence of the bullfrogs,

the grasshoppers, the distant cars rushing endlessly on I-65, I thought it might be a fine time to say the Three Little Words. And I steeled myself to say them as I stared up at that starriest night, convinced myself that she felt it, too, that her hand so alive and vivid against my leg was more than playful, and fuck Lara and fuck Jake because I do, Alaska Young, I do love you and what else matters but that and my lips parted to speak and before I could even begin to breathe out the words, she said, “It’s not life or death, the labyrinth.”

“Um, okay. So what is it?”

“Suffering,” she said. “Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That’s the problem. Bolívar was talking about the pain, not about the living or dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. And I felt the absence of her hand on me.

“Nothing’s wrong. But there’s always suffering, Pudge. Homework or malaria or having a boyfriend who lives far away when there’s a good-looking boy lying next to you. Suffering is universal. It’s the one thing Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims are all worried about.”

I turned to her. “Oh, so maybe Dr. Hyde’s class isn’t total bullshit.” And both of us lying on our sides, she smiled, our noses almost touching, my unblinking eyes on hers, her face blushing from the wine, and I opened my mouth again but this time not to speak, and she reached up and put a finger to my lips and said, “Shh. Shh. Don’t ruin it.”

fifty-one days before

THE NEXT MORNING, I didn’t hear the knocking, if there was any.

I just heard, “UP! Do you know what time it is?!”

I looked at the clock and groggily muttered, “It’s seven thirty-six.”

“No, Pudge. It’s party time! We’ve only got seven days left before everyone comes back. Oh God, I can’t even tell you how nice it is to have you here. Last Thanksgiving, I spent the whole time constructing one massive candle using the wax from all my little candles. God, it was boring. I counted the ceiling tiles. Sixty-seven down, eighty-four across. Talk about suffering! Absolute torture.”

“I’m really tired. I—” I said, and then she cut me off.

“Poor Pudge. Oh, poor poor Pudge. Do you want me to climb into bed with you and cuddle?”

“Well, if you’re offering—”

“NO! UP! NOW!”

She took me behind a wing of Weekday Warrior rooms—50 to 59—and

stopped in front of a window, placed her palms flat against it, and pushed up until the window was half open, then crawled inside. I followed.

“What do you see, Pudge?”

I saw a dorm room—the same cinder-block walls, the same dimensions, even the same layout as my own. Their couch was nicer, and they had an actual coffee table instead of COFFEE TABLE. They had two posters on the wall. One featured a huge stack of hundred-dollar bills with the caption THE FIRST MILLION IS THE HARDEST. On the opposite wall, a poster of a red Ferrari. “Uh, I see a dorm room.”

“You’re not looking, Pudge. When I go into your room, I see a couple of guys who love video games. When I look at my room, I see a girl who loves books.” She walked over to the couch and picked up a plastic soda bottle. “Look at this,” she said, and I saw that it was half filled with a brackish, brown liquid. Dip spit. “So they dip. And they obviously aren’t hygienic about it. So are they going to care if we pee on their toothbrushes? They won’t care enough, that’s for sure. Look. Tell me what these guys love.”

“They love money,” I said, pointing to the poster. She threw up her hands, exasperated.

“They *all* love money, Pudge. Okay, go into the bathroom. Tell me what you see there.”

The game was annoying me a little, but I went into the bathroom as she sat down on that inviting couch. Inside the shower, I found a dozen bottles of shampoo and conditioner. In the medicine cabinet, I found a cylindrical bottle of something called Rewind. I opened it—the bluish gel smelled like flowers and rubbing alcohol, like a fancy hair salon. (Under the sink, I also found a tub of Vaseline so big that it could have only had one possible use, which I didn’t care to dwell on.) I came back into the room and excitedly said, “They love their hair.”

“*Precisely!*” she shouted. “Look on the top bunk.” Perilously positioned on the thin wooden headboard of the bed, a bottle of STA-WET gel. “Kevin doesn’t just *wake up* with that spiky bedhead look, Pudge. He *works* for it. He loves that hair. They leave their hair products here, Pudge, because they have *duplicates* at home. All those boys do. And you know why?”

“Because they’re compensating for their tiny little penises?” I asked.

“Ha ha. No. That’s why they’re macho assholes. They love their hair because they aren’t smart enough to love something more interesting. So we hit them where it hurts: the scalp.”

“Ohh-kaay,” I said, unsure of how, exactly, to prank someone’s scalp.

She stood up and walked to the window and bent over to shimmy out. “Don’t

look at my ass,” she said, and so I looked at her ass, spreading out wide from her thin waist. She effortlessly somersaulted out the half-opened window. I took the feetfirst approach, and once I got my feet on the ground, I limboed my upper body out the window.

“Well,” she said. “That looked awkward. Let’s go to the Smoking Hole.”

She shuffled her feet to kick up dry orange dirt on the road to the bridge, seeming not to walk so much as cross-country ski. As we followed the almost-trail down from the bridge to the Hole, she turned around and looked back at me, stopping. “I wonder how one would go about acquiring industrial-strength blue dye,” she said, and then held a tree branch back for me.

forty-nine days before

TWO DAYS LATER—Monday, the first real day of vacation—I spent the morning working on my religion final and went to Alaska’s room in the afternoon. She was reading in bed.

“Auden,” she announced. “What were his last words?”

“Don’t know. Never heard of him.”

“Never *heard* of him? You poor, illiterate boy. Here, read this line.” I walked over and looked down at her index finger. “You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart,” I read aloud. “Yeah. That’s pretty good,” I said.

“Pretty good? Sure, and bufriedos are pretty good. Sex is pretty fun. The sun is pretty hot. Jesus, it says so much about love and brokenness—it’s perfect.”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded unenthusiastically.

“You’re hopeless. Wanna go porn hunting?”

“Huh?”

“We can’t love our neighbors till we know how crooked their hearts are. Don’t you like porn?” she asked, smiling.

“Um,” I answered. The truth was that I hadn’t seen much porn, but the idea of looking at porn with Alaska had a certain appeal.

We started with the 50s wing of dorms and made our way backward around the hexagon—she pushed open the back windows while I looked out and made sure no one was walking by.

I’d never been in most people’s rooms. After three months, I knew most people, but I regularly talked to very few—just the Colonel and Alaska and Takumi, really. But in a few hours, I got to know my classmates quite well.

Wilson Carbod, the center for the Culver Creek Nothings, had hemorrhoids,

or at least he kept hemorrhoidal cream secreted away in the bottom drawer of his desk. Chandra Kilers, a cute girl who loved math a little too much, and who Alaska believed was the Colonel's future girlfriend, collected Cabbage Patch Kids. I don't mean that she collected Cabbage Patch Kids when she was, like, five. She collected them now—dozens of them—black, white, Latino, and Asian, boys and girls, babies dressed like farmhands and budding businessmen. A senior Weekday Warrior named Holly Moser sketched nude self-portraits in charcoal pencil, portraying her rotund form in all its girth.

I was stunned by how many people had booze. Even the Weekday Warriors, who got to go home every weekend, had beer and liquor stashed everywhere from toilet tanks to the bottoms of dirty-clothes hampers.

“God, I could have ratted out anyone,” Alaska said softly as she unearthed a forty-ounce bottle of Magnum malt liquor from Longwell Chase's closet. I wondered, then, why she had chosen Paul and Marya.

Alaska found everyone's secrets so fast that I suspected she'd done this before, but she couldn't possibly have had advance knowledge of the secrets of Ruth and Margot Blowker, ninth-grade twin sisters who were new and seemed to socialize even less than I did. After crawling into their room, Alaska looked around for a moment, then walked to the bookshelf. She stared at it, then pulled out the King James Bible, and there—a purple bottle of Maui Wowie wine cooler.

“How clever,” she said as she twisted off the cap. She drank it down in two long sips, and then proclaimed, “Maui WOWIE!”

“They'll know you were here!” I shouted.

Her eyes widened. “Oh no, you're right, Pudge!” she said. “Maybe they'll go to the Eagle and tell him that someone stole their wine cooler!” She laughed and leaned out the window, throwing the empty bottle into the grass.

And we found plenty of porn magazines haphazardly stuffed in between mattresses and box springs. It turns out that Hank Walsten did like something other than basketball and pot: he liked *Juggs*. But we didn't find a *movie* until Room 32, occupied by a couple of guys from Mississippi named Joe and Marcus. They were in our religion class and sometimes sat with the Colonel and me at lunch, but I didn't know them well.

Alaska read the sticker on the top of the video. “*The Bitches of Madison County*. Well. Ain't that just delightful.”

We ran with it to the TV room, closed the blinds, locked the door, and watched the movie. It opened with a woman standing on a bridge with her legs spread while a guy knelt in front of her, giving her oral sex. No time for dialogue, I suppose. By the time they started doing it, Alaska commenced with

her righteous indignation. “They just don’t make sex look fun for women. The girl is just an object. Look! Look at that!”

I was already looking, needless to say. A woman crouched on her hands and knees while a guy knelt behind her. She kept saying “Give it to me” and moaning, and though her eyes, brown and blank, betrayed her lack of interest, I couldn’t help but take mental notes. *Hands on her shoulders*, I noted. *Fast, but not too fast or it’s going to be over, fast. Keep your grunting to a minimum.*

As if reading my mind, she said, “God, Pudge. Never do it that hard. That would *hurt*. That looks like torture. And all she can do is just sit there and take it? This is not a *man* and a *woman*. It’s a penis and a vagina. What’s erotic about that? Where’s the kissing?”

“Given their position, I don’t think they can kiss right now,” I noted.

“That’s my point. Just by virtue of how they’re doing it, it’s objectification. He can’t even see her face! This is what can happen to women, Pudge. That woman is someone’s daughter. This is what you make us do for money.”

“Well, not *me*,” I said defensively. “I mean, not technically. I don’t, like, produce porn movies.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me this doesn’t turn you on, Pudge.”

I couldn’t. She laughed. It was fine, she said. Healthy. And then she got up, stopped the tape, lay down on her stomach across the couch, and mumbled something.

“What did you say?” I asked, walking to her, putting my hand on the small of her back.

“Shhhh,” she said. “I’m sleeping.”

Just like that. From a hundred miles an hour to asleep in a nanosecond. I wanted so badly to lie down next to her on the couch, to wrap my arms around her and sleep. Not fuck, like in those movies. Not even have sex. Just sleep together, in the most innocent sense of the phrase. But I lacked the courage and she had a boyfriend and I was gawky and she was gorgeous and I was hopelessly boring and she was endlessly fascinating. So I walked back to my room and collapsed on the bottom bunk, thinking that if people were rain, I was drizzle and she was a hurricane.

forty-seven days before

ON WEDNESDAY MORNING, I woke up with a stuffy nose to an entirely new Alabama, a crisp and cold one. As I walked to Alaska’s room that morning, the frosty grass of the dorm circle crunched beneath my shoes. You don’t run into

frost much in Florida—and I jumped up and down like I was stomping on bubble wrap. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.*

Alaska was holding a burning green candle in her hand upside down, dripping the wax onto a larger, homemade volcano that looked a bit like a Technicolor middle-school-science-project volcano.

“Don’t burn yourself,” I said as the flame crept up toward her hand.

“Night falls fast. Today is in the past,” she said without looking up.

“Wait, I’ve read that before. What is that?” I asked.

With her free hand, she grabbed a book and tossed it toward me. It landed at my feet. “Poem,” she said. “Edna St. Vincent Millay. You’ve read that? I’m stunned.”

“Oh, I read her biography! Didn’t have her last words in it, though. I was a little bitter. All I remember is that she had a lot of sex.”

“I know. She’s my hero,” Alaska said without a trace of irony. I laughed, but she didn’t notice. “Does it seem at all odd to you that you enjoy biographies of great writers a lot more than you enjoy their actual writing?”

“Nope!” I announced. “Just because they were interesting people doesn’t mean I care to hear their musings on nighttime.”

“It’s about depression, dumb-ass.”

“Ooooooh, really? Well, jeez, then it’s *brilliant*,” I answered.

She sighed. “All right. The snow may be falling in the winter of my discontent, but at least I’ve got sarcastic company. Sit down, will ya?”

I sat down next to her with my legs crossed and our knees touching. She pulled a clear plastic crate filled with dozens of candles out from underneath her bed. She looked at it for a moment, then handed me a white one and a lighter.

We spent all morning burning candles—well, and occasionally lighting cigarettes off the burning candles after we stuffed a towel into the crack at the bottom of her door. Over the course of two hours, we added a full foot to the summit of her polychrome candle volcano.

“Mount St. Helens on acid,” she said

At 12:30, after two hours of me begging for a ride to McDonald’s, Alaska decided it was time for lunch. As we began to walk to the student parking lot, I saw a strange car. A small green car. A hatchback. *I’ve seen that car*, I thought. *Where have I seen the car?* And then the Colonel jumped out and ran to meet us.

Rather than, like, I don’t know, “hello” or something, the Colonel began, “I have been instructed to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner at Chez Martín.”

Alaska whispered into my ear, and then I laughed and said, “I have been instructed to accept your invitation.” So we walked over to the Eagle’s house, told him we were going to eat turkey trailer-park style, and sped away in the

hatchback.

The Colonel explained it to us on the two-hour car ride south. I was crammed into the backseat because Alaska had called shotgun. She usually drove, but when she didn't, she was shotgun-calling queen of the world. The Colonel's mother heard that we were on campus and couldn't bear the thought of leaving us familyless for Thanksgiving. The Colonel didn't seem too keen on the whole idea—"I'm going to have to sleep in a tent," he said, and I laughed.

Except it turns out he did have to sleep in a tent, a nice four-person green outfit shaped like half an egg, but still a tent. The Colonel's mom lived in a trailer, as in the kind of thing you might see attached to a large pickup truck, except this particular one was old and falling apart on its cinder blocks, and probably couldn't have been hooked up to a truck without disintegrating. It wasn't even a particularly big trailer. I could just barely stand up to my full height without scraping the ceiling. Now I understood why the Colonel was short—he couldn't afford to be any taller. The place was really one long room, with a full-size bed in the front, a kitchenette, and a living area in the back with a TV and a small bathroom—so small that in order to take a shower, you pretty much had to sit on the toilet.

"It ain't much," the Colonel's mom ("That's Dolores, not Miss Martin") told us. "But y'all's a-gonna have a turkey the size o' the kitchen." She laughed. The Colonel ushered us out of the trailer immediately after our brief tour, and we walked through the neighborhood, a series of trailers and mobile homes on dirt roads.

"Well, now you get why I hate rich people." And I did. I couldn't fathom how the Colonel grew up in such a small place. The entire trailer was smaller than our dorm room. I didn't know what to say to him, how to make him feel less embarrassed.

"I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable," he said. "I know it's probably foreign."

"Not to me," Alaska piped up.

"Well, you don't live in a trailer," he told her.

"Poor is poor."

"I suppose," the Colonel said.

Alaska decided to go help Dolores with dinner. She said that it was sexist to

leave the cooking to the women, but better to have good sexist food than crappy boy-prepared food. So the Colonel and I sat on the pull-out couch in the living room, playing video games and talking about school.

“I finished my religion paper. But I have to type it up on your computer when we get back. I think I’m ready for finals, which is good, since we have an ank-pray to an-play.”

“Your mom doesn’t know pig Latin?” I smirked.

“Not if I talk fast. Christ, be quiet.”

The food—fried okra, steamed corn on the cob, and pot roast that was so tender it fell right off the plastic fork—convinced me that Dolores was an even better cook than Maureen. Culver Creek’s okra had less grease, more crunch. Dolores was also the funniest mom I’d ever met. When Alaska asked her what she did for work, she smiled and said, “I’m a culinary engineer. That’s a short-order cook at the Waffle House to y’all.”

“Best Waffle House in Alabama.” The Colonel smiled, and then I realized, he wasn’t embarrassed of his mom at all. He was just scared that we would act like condescending boarding-school snobs. I’d always found the Colonel’s I-hate-the-rich routine a little overwrought until I saw him with his mom. He was the same Colonel, but in a totally different context. It made me hope that one day, I could meet Alaska’s family, too.

Dolores insisted that Alaska and I share the bed, and she slept on the pull-out while the Colonel was out in his tent. I worried he would get cold, but frankly I wasn’t about to give up my bed with Alaska. We had separate blankets, and there were never fewer than three layers between us, but the possibilities kept me up half the night.

forty-six days before

BEST THANKSGIVING FOOD I’d ever had. No crappy cranberry sauce. Just huge slabs of moist white meat, corn, green beans cooked in enough bacon fat to make them taste like they weren’t good for you, biscuits with gravy, pumpkin pie for dessert, and a glass of red wine for each of us. “I believe,” Dolores said, “that yer s’posed to drink white with turkey, but—now I don’t know ’bout y’all—but I don’t s’pose I give a shit.”

We laughed and drank our wine, and then after the meal, we each listed our gratitudes. My family always did that before the meal, and we all just rushed through it to get to the food. So the four of us sat around the table and shared our

blessings. I was thankful for the fine food and the fine company, for having a home on Thanksgiving. “A trailer, at least,” Dolores joked.

“Okay, my turn,” Alaska said. “I’m grateful for having just had my best Thanksgiving in a decade.”

Then the Colonel said, “I’m just grateful for you, Mom,” and Dolores laughed and said, “That dog won’t hunt, boy.”

I didn’t exactly know what that phrase meant, but apparently it meant, “That was inadequate,” because then the Colonel expanded his list to acknowledge that he was grateful to be “the smartest human being in this trailer park,” and Dolores laughed and said, “Good enough.”

And Dolores? She was grateful that her phone was back on, that her boy was home, that Alaska helped her cook and that I had kept the Colonel out of her hair, that her job was steady and her coworkers were nice, that she had a place to sleep and a boy who loved her.

I sat in the back of the hatchback on the drive home—and that is how I thought of it: home—and fell asleep to the highway’s monotonous lullaby.

forty-four days before

“COOSA LIQUORS’ entire business model is built around selling cigarettes to minors and alcohol to adults.” Alaska looked at me with disconcerting frequency when she drove, particularly since we were winding through a narrow, hilly highway south of school, headed to the aforementioned Coosa Liquors. It was Saturday, our last day of real vacation. “Which is great, if all you need is cigarettes. But we need booze. And they card for booze. And my ID blows. But I’ll flirt my way through.” She made a sudden and unsignaled left turn, pulling onto a road that dropped precipitously down a hill with fields on either side, and she gripped the steering wheel tight as we accelerated, and she waited until the last possible moment to brake, just before we reached the bottom of the hill. There stood a plywood gas station that no longer sold gas with a faded sign bolted to the roof: COOSA LIQUORS: WE CATER TO YOUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS.

Alaska went in alone and walked out the door five minutes later weighed down by two paper bags filled with contraband: three cartons of cigarettes, five bottles of wine, and a fifth of vodka for the Colonel. On the way home, Alaska said, “You like knock-knock jokes?”

“Knock-knock jokes?” I asked. “You mean like, ‘Knock knock...’”

“Who’s there?” replied Alaska.

“Who.”

“Who Who?”

“What are you, an owl?” I finished. *Lame.*

“That was brilliant,” said Alaska. “I have one. You start.”

“Okay. Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?” said Alaska.

I looked at her blankly. About a minute later, I got it, and laughed.

“My mom told me that joke when I was six. It’s still funny.”

So I could not have been more surprised when she showed up sobbing at Room 43 just as I was putting the finishing touches on my final paper for English. She sat down on the couch, her every exhalation a mix of whimper and scream.

“I’m sorry,” she said, heaving. Snot was dribbling down her chin.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. She picked up a Kleenex from the COFFEE TABLE and wiped at her face.

“I don’t...” she started, and then a sob came like a tsunami, her cry so loud and childlike that it scared me, and I got up, sat down next her, and put my arm around her. She turned away, pushing her head into the foam of the couch. “I don’t understand why I screw everything up,” she said.

“What, like with Marya? Maybe you were just scared.”

“Scared isn’t a good excuse!” she shouted into the couch. “Scared is the excuse everyone has always used!” I didn’t know who “everyone” was, or when “always” was, and as much as I wanted to understand her ambiguities, the slyness was growing annoying.

“Why are you upset about this *now*?”

“It’s not just that. It’s everything. But I told the Colonel in the car.” She sniffled but seemed done with the sobs. “While you were sleeping in the back. And he said he’d never let me out of his sight during pranks. That he couldn’t trust me on my own. And I don’t blame him. I don’t even trust me.”

“It took guts to tell him,” I said.

“I have guts, just not when it counts. Will you—um,” and she sat up straight and then moved toward me, and I raised my arm as she collapsed into my skinny chest and cried. I felt bad for her, but she’d done it to herself. She didn’t *have* to rat.

“I don’t want to upset you, but maybe you just need to tell us all why you told on Marya. Were you scared of going home or something?”

She pulled away from me and gave me a Look of Doom that would have made the Eagle proud, and I felt like she hated me or hated my question or both, and then she looked away, out the window, toward the soccer field, and said,

“There’s no home.”

“Well, you *have* a family,” I backpedaled. She’d talked to me about her mom just that morning. How could the girl who told that joke three hours before become a sobbing mess?

Still staring at me, she said, “I try not to be scared, you know. But I still ruin everything. I still fuck up.”

“Okay,” I told her. “It’s okay.” I didn’t even know what she was talking about anymore. One vague notion after another.

“Don’t you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don’t love the crazy, sullen bitch.”

And there was something to that, truth be told.

christmas

WE ALL WENT HOME for Christmas break—even purportedly homeless Alaska.

I got a nice watch and a new wallet—“grown-up gifts,” my dad called them. But mostly I just studied for those two weeks. Christmas vacation wasn’t really a vacation, on account of how it was our last chance to study for exams, which started the day after we got back. I focused on precalc and biology, the two classes that most deeply threatened my goal of a 3.4 GPA. I wish I could say I was in it for the thrill of learning, but mostly I was in it for the thrill of getting into a worthwhile college.

So, yeah, I spent a lot of my time at home studying math and memorizing French vocab, just like I had before Culver Creek. Really, being at home for two weeks was just like my entire life before Culver Creek, except my parents were more emotional. They talked very little about their trip to London. I think they felt guilty. That’s a funny thing about parents. Even though I pretty much stayed at the Creek over Thanksgiving because I wanted to, my parents still felt guilty. It’s nice to have people who will feel guilty for you, although I could have lived without my mom crying during every single family dinner. She would say, “I’m a bad mother,” and my dad and I would immediately reply, “No, you’re not.”

Even my dad, who is affectionate but not, like, *sentimental*, randomly, while we were watching *The Simpsons*, said he missed me. I said I missed him, too, and I did. Sort of. They’re such nice people. We went to movies and played card games, and I told them the stories I could tell without horrifying them, and they listened. My dad, who sold real estate for a living but read more books than anyone I knew, talked with me about the books I was reading for English class,

and my mom insisted that I sit with her in the kitchen and learn how to make simple dishes—macaroni, scrambled eggs—now that I was “living on my own.” Never mind that I didn’t have, or want, a kitchen. Never mind that I didn’t like eggs *or* macaroni and cheese. By New Year’s Day, I could make them anyway.

When I left, they both cried, my mom explaining that it was just empty-nest syndrome, that they were just so proud of me, that they loved me so much. That put a lump in my throat, and I didn’t care about Thanksgiving anymore. I had a family.

eight days before

ALASKA WALKED IN on the first day back from Christmas break and sat beside the Colonel on the couch. The Colonel was hard at work, breaking a land-speed record on the PlayStation.

She didn’t say she missed us, or that she was glad to see us. She just looked at the couch and said, “You really need a new couch.”

“Please don’t address me when I’m racing,” the Colonel said. “God. Does Jeff Gordon have to put up with this shit?”

“I’ve got an idea,” she said. “It’s great. What we need is a pre-prank that coincides with an attack on Kevin and his minions,” she said.

I was sitting on the bed, reading the textbook in preparation for my American history exam the next day.

“A pre-prank?” I asked.

“A prank designed to lull the administration into a false sense of security,” the Colonel answered, annoyed by the distraction. “After the pre-prank, the Eagle will think the junior class has done its prank and won’t be waiting for it when it actually comes.” Every year, the junior and senior classes pulled off a prank at some point in the year—usually something lame, like Roman candles in the dorm circle at five in the morning on a Sunday.

“Is there always a pre-prank?” I asked.

“No, you idiot,” the Colonel said. “If there was always a pre-prank, then the Eagle would *expect* two pranks. The last time a pre-prank was used—hmm. Oh, right: 1987. When the pre-prank was cutting off electricity to campus, and then the actual prank was putting five hundred live crickets in the heating ducts of the classrooms. Sometimes you can still hear the chirping.”

“Your rote memorization is, like, so impressive,” I said.

“You guys are like an old married couple.” Alaska smiled. “In a creepy way.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” the Colonel said. “You should see this kid try to crawl into bed with me at night.”

“Hey!”

“Let’s get on subject!” Alaska said. “Pre-prank. This weekend, since there’s a new moon. We’re staying at the barn. You, me, the Colonel, Takumi, and, as a special gift to you, Pudge, Lara Buterskaya.”

“The Lara Buterskaya I puked on?”

“She’s just shy. She still likes you.” Alaska laughed. “Puking made you look—vulnerable.”

“Very perky boobs,” the Colonel said. “Are you bringing Takumi for me?”

“You need to be single for a while.”

“True enough,” the Colonel said.

“Just spend a few more months playing video games,” she said. “That hand-eye coordination will come in handy when you get to third base.”

“Gosh, I haven’t heard the base system in so long, I think I’ve forgotten third base,” the Colonel responded. “I would roll my eyes at you, but I can’t afford to look away from the screen.”

“French, Feel, Finger, Fuck. It’s like you skipped third grade,” Alaska said.

“I *did* skip third grade,” the Colonel answered.

“So,” I said, “what’s our pre-prank?”

“The Colonel and I will work that out. No need to get you into trouble—yet.”

“Oh. Okay. Um, I’m gonna go for a cigarette, then.”

I left. It wasn’t the first time Alaska had left me out of the loop, certainly, but after we’d been together so much over Thanksgiving, it seemed ridiculous to plan the prank with the Colonel but without me. Whose T-shirts were wet with her tears? Mine. Who’d listened to her read Vonnegut? Me. Who’d been the butt of the world’s worst knock-knock joke? Me. I walked to the Sunny Convenience Kiosk across from school and smoked. This never happened to me in Florida, this oh-so-high-school angst about who likes whom more, and I hated myself for letting it happen now. *You don’t have to care about her*, I told myself. *Screw her.*

four days before

THE COLONEL WOULDN’T TELL ME a word about the pre-prank, except that it was to be called Barn Night, and that when I packed, I should pack for two days.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were torture. The Colonel was always with Alaska, and I was never invited. So I spent an inordinate amount of time

studying for finals, which helped my GPA considerably. And I finally finished my religion paper.

My answer to the question was straightforward enough, really. Most Christians and Muslims believe in a heaven and a hell, though there's a lot of disagreement within both religions over what, exactly, will get you into one afterlife or the other. Buddhists are more complicated—because of the Buddha's doctrine of *anatta*, which basically says that people don't have eternal souls. Instead, they have a bundle of energy, and that bundle of energy is transitory, migrating from one body to another, reincarnating endlessly until it eventually reaches enlightenment.

I never liked writing concluding paragraphs to papers—where you just repeat what you've already said with phrases like *In summation*, and *To conclude*. I didn't do that—instead I talked about why I thought it was an important question. People, I thought, wanted security. They couldn't bear the idea of death being a big black nothing, couldn't bear the thought of their loved ones not existing, and couldn't even *imagine* themselves not existing. I finally decided that people believed in an afterlife because they couldn't bear not to.

three days before

ON FRIDAY, after a surprisingly successful precalc exam that brought my first set of Culver Creek finals to a close, I packed clothes (“Think New York trendy,” the Colonel advised. “Think black. Think sensible. Comfortable, but warm.”) and my sleeping bag into a backpack, and we picked up Takumi in his room and walked to the Eagle's house. The Eagle was wearing his only outfit, and I wondered whether he just had thirty identical white button-down shirts and thirty identical black ties in his closet. I pictured him waking up in the morning, staring at his closet, and thinking, *Hmm...hmm...how about a white shirt and a black tie?* Talk about a guy who could use a wife.

“I'm taking Miles and Takumi home for the weekend to New Hope,” the Colonel told him.

“Miles liked his taste of New Hope that much?” the Eagle asked me.

“Yee haw! There's a gonna be a hoedown at the trailer park!” the Colonel said. He could actually have a Southern accent when he wanted to, although like most everyone at Culver Creek, he didn't usually speak with one.

“Hold on one moment while I call your mom,” the Eagle said to the Colonel. Takumi looked at me with poorly disguised panic, and I felt lunch—fried

chicken—rising in my stomach. But the Colonel just smiled. “Sure thing.”

“Chip and Miles and Takumi will be at your house this weekend?...Yes, ma’am....Ha!...Okay. Bye now.” The Eagle looked up at the Colonel. “Your mom is a wonderful woman.” The Eagle smiled.

“You’re tellin’ me.” The Colonel grinned. “See you on Sunday.”

As we walked toward the gym parking lot, the Colonel said, “I called her yesterday and asked her to cover for me, and she didn’t even ask why. She just said, ‘I sure trust you, son,’ and hot damn she does.” Once out of sight of the Eagle’s house, we took a sharp right into the woods.

We walked on the dirt road over the bridge and back to the school’s barn, a dilapidated leak-prone structure that looked more like a long-abandoned log cabin than a barn. They still stored hay there, although I don’t know what for. It wasn’t like we had an equestrian program or anything. The Colonel, Takumi, and I got there first, setting up our sleeping bags on the softest bales of hay. It was 6:30.

Alaska came shortly after, having told the Eagle she was spending the weekend with Jake. The Eagle didn’t check that story, because Alaska spent at least one weekend there every month, and he knew that her parents never cared. Lara showed up half an hour later. She’d told the Eagle that she was driving to Atlanta to see an old friend from Romania. The Eagle called Lara’s parents to make sure that they knew she was spending a weekend off campus, and they didn’t mind.

“They trust me.” She smiled.

“You don’t sound like you have an accent sometimes,” I said, which was pretty stupid, but a darn sight better than throwing up on her.

“Eet’s only soft *i*’s.”

“No soft *i*’s in Russian?” I asked.

“Romanian,” she corrected me. Turns out Romanian is a language. Who knew? My cultural sensitivity quotient was going to have to drastically increase if I was going to share a sleeping bag with Lara anytime soon.

Everybody was sitting on sleeping bags, Alaska smoking with flagrant disregard for the overwhelming flammability of the structure, when the Colonel pulled out a single piece of computer paper and read from it.

“The point of this evening’s festivities is to prove once and for all that we are to pranking what the Weekday Warriors are to sucking. But we’ll also have the opportunity to make life unpleasant for the Eagle, which is always a welcome pleasure. And so,” he said, pausing as if for a drumroll, “we fight tonight a battle

on three fronts:

“Front One: The pre-prank: We will, as it were, light a fire under the Eagle’s ass.

“Front Two: Operation Baldy: Wherein Lara flies solo in a retaliatory mission so elegant and cruel that it could only have been the brainchild of, well, me.”

“Hey!” Alaska interrupted. “It was *my* idea.”

“Okay, fine. It was Alaska’s idea.” He laughed. “And finally, Front Three: The Progress Reports: We’re going to hack into the faculty computer network and use their grading database to send out letters to Kevin et al.’s families saying that they are failing some of their classes.”

“We are definitely going to get expelled,” I said.

“I hope you didn’t bring the Asian kid along thinking he’s a computer genius. Because I am not,” Takumi said.

“We’re not going to get expelled and *I’m* the computer genius. The rest of you are muscle and distraction. We won’t get expelled even if we get caught because there are no expellable offenses here—well, except for the five bottles of Strawberry Hill in Alaska’s backpack, and that will be well hidden. We’re just, you know, wreaking a little havoc.”

The plan was laid out, and it left no room for error. The Colonel relied so heavily on perfect synchronicity that if one of us messed up even slightly, the endeavor would collapse entirely.

He had printed up individual itineraries for each of us, including times exact to the second. Our watches synchronized, our clothes black, our backpacks on, our breath visible in the cold, our minds filled with the minute details of the plan, our hearts racing, we walked out of the barn together once it was completely dark, around seven. The five of us walking confidently in a row, I’d never felt cooler. The Great Perhaps was upon us, and we were invincible. The plan may have had faults, but we did not.

After five minutes, we split up to go to our destinations. I stuck with Takumi. We were the distraction.

“We’re the fucking Marines,” he said.

“First to fight. First to die,” I agreed nervously.

“Hell yes.”

He stopped and opened his bag.

“Not here, dude,” I said. “We have to go to the Eagle’s.”

“I know. I know. Just—hold on.” He pulled out a thick headband. It was brown, with a plush fox head on the front. He put it on his head.

I laughed. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s my fox hat.”

“Your fox hat?”

“Yeah, Pudge. My *fox hat*.”

“Why are you wearing your *fox hat*?” I asked.

“Because no one can catch the motherfucking fox.”

Two minutes later, we were crouched behind the trees fifty feet from the Eagle’s back door. My heart thumped like a techno drumbeat.

“Thirty seconds,” Takumi whispered, and I felt the same spooked nervousness that I had felt that first night with Alaska when she grabbed my hand and whispered *run run run run run*. But I stayed put.

I thought: *We are not close enough.*

I thought: *He will not hear it.*

I thought: *He will hear it and be out so fast that we will have no chance.*

I thought: *Twenty seconds.* I was breathing hard and fast.

“Hey, Pudge,” Takumi whispered, “you can do this, dude. It’s just running.”

“Right.” *Just running. My knees are good. My lungs are fair. It’s just running.*

“Five,” he said. “Four. Three. Two. One. Light it. Light it. Light it.”

It lit with a sizzle that reminded me of every July Fourth with my family. We stood still for a nanosecond, staring at the fuse, making sure it was lit. *And now,* I thought. *Now. Run run run run run.* But my body didn’t move until I heard Takumi shout-whisper, “Go go go fucking go.”

And we went.

Three seconds later, a huge burst of pops. It sounded, to me, like the automatic gunfire in *Decapitation*, except louder. We were twenty steps away already, and I thought my eardrums would burst.

I thought: *Well, he will certainly hear it.*

We ran past the soccer field and into the woods, running uphill and with only the vaguest sense of direction. In the dark, fallen branches and moss-covered rocks appeared at the last possible second, and I slipped and fell repeatedly and worried that the Eagle would catch up, but I just kept getting up and running beside Takumi, away from the classrooms and the dorm circle. We ran like we had golden shoes. I ran like a cheetah—well, like a cheetah that smoked too much. And then, after precisely one minute of running, Takumi stopped and ripped open his backpack.

My turn to count down. Staring at my watch. Terrified. By now, he was surely out. He was surely running. I wondered if he was fast. He was old, but

he'd be mad.

"Five four three two one," and the sizzle. We didn't pause that time, just ran, still west. Breath heaving. I wondered if I could do this for thirty minutes. The firecrackers exploded.

The pops ended, and a voice cried out, "STOP RIGHT NOW!" But we did not stop. Stopping was not in the plan.

"I'm the motherfucking fox," Takumi whispered, both to himself and to me. "No one can catch the fox."

A minute later, I was on the ground. Takumi counted down. The fuse lit. We ran.

But it was a dud. We had prepared for one dud, bringing an extra string of firecrackers. Another, though, would cost the Colonel and Alaska a minute. Takumi crouched down on the ground, lit the fuse, and ran. The popping started. The fireworks *bangbangbanged* in sync with my heartbeat.

When the firecrackers finished, I heard, "STOP OR I'LL CALL THE POLICE!" And though the voice was distant, I could feel his Look of Doom bearing down on me.

"The pigs can't stop the fox; I'm too quick," Takumi said to himself. "I can rhyme while I run; I'm that slick."

The Colonel warned us about the police threat, told us not to worry. The Eagle didn't like to bring the police to campus. Bad publicity. So we ran. Over and under and through all manner of trees and bushes and branches. We fell. We got up. We ran. If he couldn't follow us with the firecrackers, he could sure as hell follow the sound of our whispered *shits* as we tripped over dead logs and fell into briar bushes.

One minute. I knelt down, lit the fuse, ran. *Bang.*

Then we turned north, thinking we'd gotten past the lake. This was key to the plan. The farther we got while still staying on campus, the farther the Eagle would follow us. The farther he followed us, the farther he would be from the classrooms, where the Colonel and Alaska were working their magic. And then we planned to loop back near the classrooms and swing east along the creek until we came to the bridge over our Smoking Hole, where we would rejoin the road and walk back to the barn, triumphant.

But here's the thing: We made a slight error in navigation. We weren't past the lake; instead we were staring at a field and then the lake. Too close to the classrooms to run anywhere but along the lakefront, I looked over at Takumi, who was running with me stride for stride, and he just said, "Drop one now."

So I dropped down, lit the fuse, and we ran. We were running through a clearing now, and if the Eagle was behind us, he could see us. We got to the

south corner of the lake and started running along the shore. The lake wasn't all that big—maybe a quarter mile long, so we didn't have far to go when I saw it.

The swan.

Swimming toward us like a swan possessed. Wings flapping furiously as it came, and then it was on the shore in front of us, making a noise that sounded like nothing else in this world, like all the worst parts of a dying rabbit plus all the worst parts of a crying baby, and there was no other way, so we just ran. I hit the swan at a full run and felt it bite into my ass. And then I was running with a noticeable limp, because my ass was on fire, and I thought to myself, *What the hell is in swan saliva that burns so badly?*

The twenty-third string was a dud, costing us one minute. At that point, I wanted a minute. I was dying. The burning sensation in my left buttock had dulled to an intense aching, magnified each time I landed on my left leg, so I was running like an injured gazelle trying to evade a pride of lions. Our speed, needless to say, had slowed considerably. We hadn't heard the Eagle since we got across the lake, but I didn't think he had turned around. He was trying to lull us into complacency, but it would not work. Tonight, we were invincible.

Exhausted, we stopped with three strings left and hoped we'd given the Colonel enough time. We ran for a few more minutes, until we found the bank of the creek. It was so dark and so still that the tiny stream of water seemed to roar, but I could still hear our hard, fast breaths as we collapsed on wet clay and pebbles beside the creek. Only when we stopped did I look at Takumi. His face and arms were scratched, the fox head now directly over his left ear. Looking at my own arms, I noticed blood dripping from the deeper cuts. There were, I remembered now, some wicked briar patches, but I was feeling no pain.

Takumi picked thorns out of his leg. "The fox is fucking tired," he said, and laughed.

"The swan bit my ass," I told him.

"I saw." He smiled. "Is it bleeding?" I reached my hand into my pants to check. No blood, so I smoked to celebrate.

"Mission accomplished," I said.

"Pudge, my friend, we are indefuckingstructible."

We couldn't figure out where we were, because the creek doubles back so many times through the campus, so we followed the creek for about ten minutes, figuring we walked half as fast as we ran, and then turned left.

"Left, you think?" Takumi asked.

"I'm pretty lost," I said.

"The fox is pointing left. So left." And, sure enough, the fox took us right back to the barn.

“You’re okay!” Lara said as we walked up. “I was worried. I saw the Eagle run out of hees house. He was wearing pajamas. He sure looked mad.”

I said, “Well, if he was mad then, I wouldn’t want to see him now.”

“What took you so long?” she asked me.

“We took the long way home,” Takumi said. “Plus Pudge is walking like an old lady with hemorrhoids ’cause the swan bit him on the ass. Where’s Alaska and the Colonel?”

“I don’t know,” Lara said, and then we heard footsteps in the distance, mutters and cracking branches. In a flash, Takumi grabbed our sleeping bags and backpacks and hid them behind bales of hay. The three of us ran through the back of the barn and into the waist-high grass, and lay down. *He tracked us back to the barn, I thought. We fucked everything up.*

But then I heard the Colonel’s voice, distinct and very annoyed, saying, “Because it narrows the list of possible suspects by twenty-three! Why couldn’t you just follow the plan? Christ, where is everybody?”

We walked back to the barn, a bit sheepish from having overreacted. The Colonel sat down on a bale of hay, his elbows on his knees, his head bowed, his palms against his forehead. Thinking.

“Well, we haven’t been caught yet, anyway. Okay, first,” he said without looking up, “tell me everything else went all right. Lara?”

She started talking. “Yes. Good.”

“Can I have some more detail, please?”

“I deed like your paper said. I stayed behind the Eagle’s house until I saw heem run after Miles and Takumi, and then I ran behind the dorms. And then I went through the weindow eento Keveen’s room. Then I put the stuff een the gel and the conditioner, and then I deed the same thing een Jeff and Longwell’s room.”

“The stuff?” I asked.

“Undiluted industrial-strength blue number-five hair dye,” Alaska said. “Which I bought with your cigarette money. Apply it to wet hair, and it won’t wash out for months.”

“We dyed their hair blue?”

“Well, technically,” the Colonel said, still speaking into his lap, “they’re going to dye their own hair blue. But we have certainly made it easier for them. I know you and Takumi did all right, because we’re here and you’re here, so you did your job. And the good news is that the three assholes who had the gall to prank us have progress reports coming saying that they are failing three classes.”

“Uh-oh. What’s the bad news?” Lara asked.

“Oh, c’mon,” Alaska said. “The *other* good news is that while the Colonel

was worried he'd heard something and ran into the woods, I saw to it that twenty other Weekday Warriors *also* have progress reports coming. I printed out reports for all of them, stuffed them into metered school envelopes, and then put them in the mailbox." She turned to the Colonel. "You were sure gone a long time," she said. "The wittle Colonel: so scared of getting expelled."

The Colonel stood up, towering over the rest of us as we sat. "That is not good news! That was not in the plan! That means there are twenty-three people who the Eagle can eliminate as suspects. Twenty-three people who might figure out it was us and rat!"

"If that happens," Alaska said very seriously, "I'll take the fall."

"Right." The Colonel sighed. "Like you took the fall for Paul and Marya. You'll say that while you were traipsing through the woods lighting firecrackers you were simultaneously hacking into the faculty network and printing out false progress reports on school stationery? Because I'm sure that will fly with the Eagle!"

"Relax, dude," Takumi said. "First off, we're not gonna get caught. Second off, if we do, I'll take the fall with Alaska. You've got more to lose than any of us." The Colonel just nodded. It was an undeniable fact: The Colonel would have no chance at a scholarship to a good school if he got expelled from the Creek.

Knowing that nothing cheered up the Colonel like acknowledging his brilliance, I asked, "So how'd you hack the network?"

"I climbed in the window of Dr. Hyde's office, booted up his computer, and I typed in his password," he said, smiling.

"You guessed it?"

"No. On Tuesday I went into his office and asked him to print me a copy of the recommended reading list. And then I watched him type the password: *J3ckylnhyd3.*"

"Well, shit," Takumi said. "I could have done that."

"Sure, but then you wouldn't have gotten to wear that sexy hat," the Colonel said, laughing. Takumi took the headband off and put it in his bag.

"Kevin is going to be pissed about his hair," I said.

"Yeah, well, I'm really pissed about my waterlogged library. Kevin is a blowup doll," Alaska said. "Prick us, we bleed. Prick him, he pops."

"It's true," said Takumi. "The guy is a dick. He kind of tried to kill you, after all."

"Yeah, I guess," I acknowledged.

"There are a lot of people here like that," Alaska went on, still fuming. "You know? Fucking blowup-doll rich kids."

But even though Kevin had sort of tried to kill me and all, he really didn't seem worth hating. Hating the cool kids takes an awful lot of energy, and I'd given up on it a long time ago. For me, the prank was just a response to a previous prank, just a golden opportunity to, as the Colonel said, wreak a little havoc. But to Alaska, it seemed to be something else, something more.

I wanted to ask her about it, but she lay back down behind the piles of hay, invisible again. Alaska was done talking, and when she was done talking, that was it. We didn't coax her out for two hours, until the Colonel unscrewed a bottle of wine. We passed around the bottle till I could feel it in my stomach, sour and warm.

I wanted to like booze more than I actually did (which is more or less the precise opposite of how I felt about Alaska). But that night, the booze felt great, as the warmth of the wine in my stomach spread through my body. I didn't like feeling stupid or out of control, but I liked the way it made everything (laughing, crying, peeing in front of your friends) easier. Why did we drink? For me, it was just fun, particularly since we were risking expulsion. The nice thing about the constant threat of expulsion at Culver Creek is that it lends excitement to every moment of illicit pleasure. The bad thing, of course, is that there is always the possibility of actual expulsion.

two days before

I WOKE UP EARLY the next morning, my lips dry and my breath visible in the crisp air. Takumi had brought a camp stove in his backpack, and the Colonel was huddled over it, heating instant coffee. The sun shone bright but could not combat the cold, and I sat with the Colonel and sipped the coffee ("The thing about instant coffee is that it smells pretty good but tastes like stomach bile," the Colonel said), and then one by one, Takumi and Lara and Alaska woke up, and we spent the day hiding out, but loudly. Hiding out loud.

At the barn that afternoon, Takumi decided we needed to have a freestyle contest.

"You start, Pudge," Takumi said. "Colonel Catastrophe, you're our beat box."

"Dude, I can't rap," I pled.

"That's okay. The Colonel can't drop beats, either. Just try and rhyme a little and then send it over to me."

With his hand cupped over his mouth, the Colonel started to make absurd

noises that sounded more like farting than bass beats, and I, uh, rapped.

“Um, we’re sittin’ in the barn and the sun’s goin’ down / when I was a kid at Burger King I wore a crown / dude, I can’t rhyme for shit / so I’ll let my boy Takumi rip it.”

Takumi took over without pausing. “Damn, Pudge, I’m not sure I’m quite ready / but like *Nightmare on Elm Street’s* Freddy / I’ve always got the goods to rip shit up / last night I drank wine it was like hiccup hiccup / the Colonel’s beats are sick like malaria / when I rock the mike the ladies suffer hysteria / I represent Japan as well as Birmingham / when I was a kid they called me yellow man / but I ain’t ashamed a’ my skin color / and neither are the countless bitches that call me lover.”

Alaska jumped in.

“Oh shit did you just diss the feminine gender / I’ll pummel your ass then stick you in a blender / you think I like Tori and Ani so I can’t rhyme / but I got flow like Ghostbusters got slime / objectify women and it’s fuckin’ on / you’ll be dead and gone like ancient Babylon.”

Takumi picked it up again.

“If my eye offends me I will pluck it out / I got props for girls like old men got gout / oh shit now my rhyming got all whack / Lara help me out and pick up the slack.”

Lara rhymed quietly and nervously—and with even more flagrant disregard for the beat than me. “My name’s Lara and I’m from Romania / thees is pretty hard, um, I once visited Albania / I love riding in Alaska’s Geo / My two best vowels in English are *EO* / I’m not so good weeth the leetle *i*’s / but they make me sound cosmopoleeteen, right? / Oh, Takumi, I think I’m done / end thees game weeth some fun.”

“I drop bombs like Hiroshima, or better yet Nagasaki / when girls hear me flow they think that I’m Rocky / to represent my homeland I still drink sake / the kids don’t get my rhymin’ so sometimes they mock me / my build ain’t small but I wouldn’t call it stocky / then again, unlike Pudge, I’m not super gawky / I’m the fuckin’ fox and this is my crew / our freestyle’s infused with funk like my gym shoes. And we’re out.”

The Colonel rapped it up with freestyle beat-boxing, and we gave ourselves a round of applause.

“You ripped it up, Alaska,” Takumi says, laughing.

“I do what I can to represent the ladies. Lara had my back.”

“Yeah, I deed.”

And then Alaska decided that although it wasn’t nearly dark yet, it was time for us to get shitfaced.

“Two nights in a row is maybe pushing our luck,” Takumi said as Alaska opened the wine.

“Luck is for suckers.” She smiled and put the bottle to her lips. We had saltines and a hunk of Cheddar cheese provided by the Colonel for dinner, and sipping the warm pink wine out of the bottle with our cheese and saltines made for a fine dinner. And when we ran out of cheese, well, all the more room for Strawberry Hill.

“We have to slow down or I’ll puke,” I remarked after we finished the first bottle.

“I’m sorry, Pudge. I wasn’t aware that someone was holding open your throat and pouring wine down it,” the Colonel responded, tossing me a bottle of Mountain Dew.

“It’s a little charitable to call this shit wine,” Takumi cracked.

And then, as if out of nowhere, Alaska announced, “Best Day/Worst Day!”

“Huh?” I asked.

“We are all going to puke if we just drink. So we’ll slow it down with a drinking game. Best Day/Worst Day.”

“Never heard of it,” the Colonel said.

“’Cause I just made it up.” She smiled. She lay on her side across two bales of hay, the afternoon light brightening the green in her eyes, her tan skin the last memory of fall. With her mouth half open, it occurred to me that she must already be drunk as I noticed the far-off look in her eyes. *The thousand-yard stare of intoxication*, I thought, and as I watched her with an idle fascination, it occurred to me that, yeah, I was a little drunk, too.

“Fun! What are the rules?” Lara asked.

“Everybody tells the story of their best day. The best storyteller doesn’t have to drink. Then everybody tells the story of their worst day, and the best storyteller doesn’t have to drink. Then we keep going, second best day, second worst day, until one of y’all quits.”

“How do you know it’ll be one of us?” Takumi asked.

“’Cause I’m the best drinker *and* the best storyteller,” she answered. Hard to disagree with that logic. “You start, Pudge. Best day of your life.”

“Um. Can I take a minute to think of one?”

“Couldn’ta been that good if you have to think about it,” the Colonel said.

“Fuck you, dude.”

“Touchy.”

“Best day of my life was today,” I said. “And the story is that I woke up next to a very pretty Hungarian girl and it was cold but not too cold and I had a cup of lukewarm instant coffee and ate Cheerios without milk and then walked through

the woods with Alaska and Takumi. We skipped stones across the creek, which sounds dumb but it wasn't. I don't know. Like the way the sun is right now, with the long shadows and that kind of bright, soft light you get when the sun isn't quite setting? That's the light that makes everything better, everything prettier, and today, everything just seemed to be in that light. I mean, I didn't do anything. But just sitting here, even if I'm watching the Colonel whittle, or whatever. Whatever. Great day. Today. Best day of my life."

"You think I'm pretty?" Lara said, and laughed, bashful. I thought, *It'd be good to make eye contact with her now*, but I couldn't. "And I'm *Romaneean!*"

"That story ended up being a hell of a lot better than I thought it would be," Alaska said, "but I've still got you beat."

"Bring it on, baby," I said. A breeze picked up, the tall grass outside the barn tilting away from it, and I pulled my sleeping bag over my shoulders to stay warm.

"Best day of my life was January 9, 1997. I was eight years old, and my mom and I went to the zoo on a class trip. I liked the bears. She liked the monkeys. Best day ever. End of story."

"That's it?!" the Colonel said. "That's the best day of your whole life?!"

"Yup."

"I liked eet," Lara said. "I like the monkeys, too."

"Lame," said the Colonel. I didn't think it was lame so much as more of Alaska's intentional vagueness, another example of her furthering her own mysteriousness. But still, even though I knew it was intentional, I couldn't help but wonder: *What's so fucking great about the zoo?* But before I could ask, Lara spoke.

"Kay, my turn," said Lara. "Eet's easy. The day I came here. I knew Engleesh and my parents deedn't, and we came off the airplane and my relatives were here, aunts and uncles I had not ever seen, in the airport, and my parents were so happy. I was twelve, and I had always been the leetle baby, but that was the first day that my parents needed me and treated me like a grown-up. Because they did not know the language, right? They need me to order food and to translate tax and immigration forms and everytheeng else, and that was the day they stopped treating me like a keed. Also, in Romania, we were poor. And here, we're kinda reech." She laughed.

"All right." Takumi smiled, grabbing the bottle of wine. "I lose. Because the best day of my life was the day I lost my virginity. And if you think I'm going to tell you that story, you're gonna have to get me drunker than this."

"Not bad," the Colonel said. "That's not bad. Want to know my best day?"

"That's the game, Chip," Alaska said, clearly annoyed.

“Best day of my life hasn’t happened yet. But I know it. I see it every day. The best day of my life is the day I buy my mom a huge fucking house. And not just like out in the woods, but in the middle of Mountain Brook, with all the Weekday Warriors’ parents. With all y’all’s parents. And I’m not buying it with a mortgage either. I’m buying it with cash money, and I am driving my mom there, and I’m going to open her side of the car door and she’ll get out and look at this house—this house is like picket fence and two stories and everything, you know—and I’m going to hand her the keys to her house and I’ll say, ‘Thanks.’ Man, she helped fill out my application to this place. And she let me come here, and that’s no easy thing when you come from where we do, to let your son go away to school. So that’s the best day of my life.”

Takumi tilted the bottle up and swallowed a few times, then handed it to me. I drank, and so did Lara, and then Alaska put her head back and turned the bottle upside down, quickly downing the last quarter of the bottle.

As she unscrewed the next bottle, Alaska smiled at the Colonel. “You won that round. Now what’s your worst day?”

“Worst day was when my dad left. He’s old—he’s like seventy now—and he was old when he married my mom, and he *still* cheated on her. And she caught him, and she got pissed, so he hit her. And then she kicked him out, and he left. I was here, and my mom called, and she didn’t tell me the whole story with the cheating and everything and the hitting until later. She just said that he was gone and not coming back. And I haven’t seen him since. All that day, I kept waiting for him to call me and explain it, but he never did. He never called at all. I at least thought he would say good-bye or something. That was the worst day.”

“Shit, you got me beat again,” I said. “My worst day was in seventh grade, when Tommy Hewitt pissed on my gym clothes and then the gym teacher said I had to wear my uniform or I’d fail the class. Seventh-grade gym, right? There are worse things to fail. But it was a big deal then, and I was crying, and trying to explain to the teacher what happened, but it was so embarrassing, and he just yelled and yelled and yelled until I put on these piss-soaked shorts and T-shirt. That was the day I stopped caring what people did. I just never cared anymore, about being a loser or not having friends or any of that. So I guess it was good for me in a way, but that moment was awful. I mean, imagine me playing volleyball or whatever in pee-soaked gym clothes while Tommy Hewitt tells everyone what he did. That was the worst day.”

Lara was laughing. “I’m sorry, Miles.”

“All good,” I said. “Just tell me yours so I can laugh at *your* pain,” and I smiled, and we laughed together.

“My worst day was probably the same day as my best. Because I left

everytheeng. I mean, eet sounds dumb, but my childhood, too, because most twelve-year-olds do not, you know, have to feegure out W-2 forms.”

“What’s a W-2 form?” I asked.

“That’s my point. Eet’s for taxes. So. Same day.”

Lara had always needed to talk for her parents, I thought, and so maybe she never learned how to talk for herself. And I wasn’t great at talking for myself either. We had something important in common, then, a personality quirk I didn’t share with Alaska or anybody else, although almost by definition Lara and I couldn’t express it to each other. So maybe it was just the way the not-yet-setting sun shone against her lazy dark curls, but at that moment, I wanted to kiss her, and we did not need to talk in order to kiss, and the puking on her jeans and the months of mutual avoidance melted away.

“Eet’s your turn, Takumi.”

“Worst day of my life,” Takumi said. “June 9, 2000. My grandmother died in Japan. She died in a car accident, and I was supposed to leave to go see her two days later. I was going to spend the whole summer with her and my grandfather, but instead I flew over for her funeral, and the only time I really saw what she looked like, I mean other than in pictures, was at her funeral. She had a Buddhist funeral, and they cremated her, but before they did she was on this, like—well, it’s not really Buddhist. I mean, religion is complicated there, so it’s a little Buddhist and a little Shinto, but y’all don’t care—point being that she was on this, like, funeral pyre or whatever. And that’s the only time I ever saw her, was just before they burned her up. That was the worst day.”

The Colonel lit a cigarette, threw it to me, and lit one of his own. It was eerie, that he could tell when I wanted a cigarette. We *were* like an old married couple. For a moment, I thought, *It’s massively unwise to throw lit cigarettes around a barn full of hay*, but then the moment of caution passed, and I just made a sincere effort not to flick ash onto any hay.

“No clear winner yet,” the Colonel said. “The field is wide open. Your turn, buddy.”

Alaska lay on her back, her hands locked behind her head. She spoke softly and quickly, but the quiet day was becoming a quieter night—the bugs gone now with the arrival of winter—and we could hear her clearly.

“The day after my mom took me to the zoo where she liked the monkeys and I liked the bears, it was a Friday. I came home from school. She gave me a hug and told me to go do my homework in my room so I could watch TV later. I went into my room, and she sat down at the kitchen table, I guess, and then she screamed, and I ran out, and she had fallen over. She was lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking. And I freaked out. I should have called 911, but I

just started screaming and crying until finally she stopped jerking, and I thought she had fallen asleep and that whatever had hurt didn't hurt anymore. So I just sat there on the floor with her until my dad got home an hour later, and he's screaming, 'Why didn't you call 911?' and trying to give her CPR, but by then she was plenty dead. Aneurysm. Worst day. I win. You drink."

And so we did.

No one talked for a minute, and then Takumi asked, "Your dad blamed you?"

"Well, not after that first moment. But yeah. How could he not?"

"Well, you were a little kid," Takumi argued. I was too surprised and uncomfortable to talk, trying to fit this into what I knew about Alaska's family. Her mom told her the knock-knock joke—when Alaska was six. Her mom used to smoke—but didn't anymore, obviously.

"Yeah. I was a little kid. Little kids can dial 911. They do it all the time. Give me the wine," she said, deadpan and emotionless. She drank without lifting her head from the hay.

"I'm sorry," Takumi said.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" the Colonel asked, his voice soft.

"It never came up." And then we stopped asking questions. *What the hell do you say?*

In the long quiet that followed, as we passed around the wine and slowly became drunker, I found myself thinking about President William McKinley, the third American president to be assassinated. He lived for several days after he was shot, and toward the end, his wife started crying and screaming, "I want to go, too! I want to go, too!" And with his last measure of strength, McKinley turned to her and spoke his last words: "We are all going."

It was the central moment of Alaska's life. When she cried and told me that she fucked everything up, I knew what she meant now. And when she said she failed everyone, I knew whom she meant. It was the everything and the everyone of her life, and so I could not help but imagine it: I imagined a scrawny eight-year-old with dirty fingers, looking down at her mother convulsing. So she sat down with her dead-or-maybe-not mother, who I imagine was not breathing by then but wasn't yet cold either. And in the time between dying and death, a little Alaska sat with her mother in silence. And then through the silence and my drunkenness, I caught a glimpse of her as she might have been. She must have come to feel so powerless, I thought, that the one thing she might have done—pick up the phone and call an ambulance—never even occurred to her. There

comes a time when we realize that our parents cannot save themselves or save us, that everyone who wades through time eventually gets dragged out to sea by the undertow—that, in short, we are all going.

So she became impulsive, scared by her inaction into perpetual action. When the Eagle confronted her with expulsion, maybe she blurted out Marya's name because it was the first that came to mind, because in that moment she didn't want to get expelled and couldn't think past that moment. She was scared, sure. But more importantly, maybe she'd been scared of being paralyzed by fear again.

"We are all going," McKinley said to his wife, and we sure are. There's your labyrinth of suffering. We are all going. Find your way out of that maze.

None of which I said out loud to her. Not then and not ever. We never said another word about it. Instead, it became just another worst day, albeit the worst of the bunch, and as night fell fast, we continued on, drinking and joking.

Later that night, after Alaska stuck her finger down her throat and made herself puke in front of all of us because she was too drunk to walk into the woods, I lay down in my sleeping bag. Lara was lying beside me, in her bag, which was almost touching mine. I moved my arm to the edge of my bag and pushed it so it slightly overlapped with hers. I pressed my hand against hers. I could feel it, although there were two sleeping bags between us. My plan, which struck me as very slick, was to pull my arm out of my sleeping bag and put it into hers, and then hold her hand. It was a good plan, but when I tried to actually get my arm out of the mummy bag, I flailed around like a fish out of water, and nearly dislocated my shoulder. She was laughing—and not with me, at me—but we still didn't speak. Having passed the point of no return, I slid my hand into her sleeping bag anyway, and she stifled a giggle as my fingers traced a line from her elbow to her wrist.

"That teekles," she whispered. So much for me being sexy.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"No, it's a nice teekle," she said, and held my hand. She laced her fingers in mine and squeezed. And then she rolled over and keessed me. I am sure that she tasted like stale booze, but I did not notice, and I'm sure I tasted like stale booze and cigarettes, but she didn't notice. We were kissing.

I thought: *This is good.*

I thought: *I am not bad at this kissing. Not bad at all.*

I thought: *I am clearly the greatest kisser in the history of the universe.*

Suddenly she laughed and pulled away from me. She wiggled a hand out of

her sleeping bag and wiped her face. “You slobbered on my nose,” she said, and laughed.

I laughed, too, trying to give her the impression that my nose-slobbering kissing style was intended to be funny. “I’m sorry.” To borrow the base system from Alaska, I hadn’t hit more than five singles in my entire life, so I tried to chalk it up to inexperience. “I’m a bit new at this,” I said.

“Eet was a nice slobbering,” she said, laughed, and kissed me again. Soon we were entirely out of our sleeping bags, making out quietly. She lay on top of me, and I held her small waist in my hands. I could feel her breasts against my chest, and she moved slowly on top of me, her legs straddling me. “You feel nice,” she said.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, and smiled at her. In the dark, I could make out the outline of her face and her large, round eyes blinking down at me, her eyelashes almost fluttering against my forehead.

“Could the two people who are making out please be quiet?” the Colonel asked loudly from his sleeping bag. “Those of us who are not making out are drunk and tired.”

“Mostly. Drunk,” Alaska said slowly, as if enunciation required great effort.

We had almost never talked, Lara and I, and we didn’t get a chance to talk anymore because of the Colonel. So we kissed quietly and laughed softly with our mouths and our eyes. After so much kissing that it almost started to get boring, I whispered, “Do you want to be my girlfriend?” And she said, “Yes please,” and smiled. We slept together in her sleeping bag, which felt a little crowded, to be honest, but was still nice. I had never felt another person against me as I slept. It was a fine end to the best day of my life.

one day before

THE NEXT MORNING, a term I use loosely since it was not yet dawn, the Colonel shook me awake. Lara was wrapped in my arms, folded into my body.

“We gotta go, Pudge. Time to roll up.”

“Dude. Sleeping.”

“You can sleep after we check in. IT’S TIME TO GO!” he shouted.

“All right. All right. No screaming. Head hurts.” And it did. I could feel last night’s wine in my throat and my head throbbed like it had the morning after my concussion. My mouth tasted like a skunk had crawled into my throat and died. I made an effort not to exhale near Lara as she groggily extricated herself from the sleeping bag.

We packed everything quickly, threw our empty bottles into the tall grass of the field—littering was an unfortunate necessity at the Creek, since no one wanted to throw an empty bottle of booze in a campus trash can—and walked away from the barn. Lara grabbed my hand and then shyly let go. Alaska looked like a train wreck, but insisted on pouring the last few sips of Strawberry Hill into her cold instant coffee before chucking the bottle behind her.

“Hair of the dog,” she said.

“How ya doin’?” the Colonel asked her.

“I’ve had better mornings.”

“Hungover?”

“Like an alcoholic preacher on Sunday morning.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t drink so much,” I suggested.

“Pudge.” She shook her head and sipped the cold coffee and wine. “Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person.”

We walked side by side down the washed-out dirt road on our way back to campus. Just after we reached the bridge, Takumi stopped, said “uh-oh,” got on his hands and knees, and puked a volcano of yellow and pink.

“Let it out,” Alaska said. “You’ll be fine.”

He finished, stood up, and said, “I finally found something that can stop the fox. The fox cannot summit Strawberry Hill.”

Alaska and Lara walked to their rooms, planning to check in with the Eagle later in the day, while Takumi and I stood behind the Colonel as he knocked on the Eagle’s door at 9:00 A.M.

“Y’all are home early. Have fun?”

“Yes sir,” the Colonel said.

“How’s your mom, Chip?”

“She’s doing well, sir. She’s in good shape.”

“She feed y’all well?”

“Oh yes sir,” I said. “She tried to fatten me up.”

“You need it. Y’all have a good day.”

“Well, I don’t think he suspected anything,” the Colonel said on our way back to Room 43. “So maybe we actually pulled it off.” I thought about going over to see Lara, but I was pretty tired, so I just went to bed and slept through my hangover.

It was not an eventful day. I should have done extraordinary things. I should have sucked the marrow out of life. But on that day, I slept eighteen hours out of

a possible twenty-four.

the last day

THE NEXT MORNING, the first Monday of the new semester, the Colonel came out of the shower just as my alarm went off.

As I pulled on my shoes, Kevin knocked once and then opened the door, stepping inside.

“You’re looking good,” the Colonel said casually. Kevin’s now sported a crew cut, a small patch of short blue hair on each side of his head, just above the ear. His lower lip jutted out—the morning’s first dip. He walked over to our COFFEE TABLE, picked up a can of Coke, and spit into it.

“You almost didn’t get me. I noticed it in my conditioner and got right back in the shower. But I didn’t notice it in my gel. It didn’t show up in Jeff’s hair at all. But Longwell and me, we had to go with the Marine look. Thank God I have clippers.”

“It suits you,” I said, although it didn’t. The short hair accentuated his features, specifically his too-close-together beady eyes, which did not stand up well to accentuation. The Colonel was trying hard to look tough—ready for whatever Kevin might do—but it’s hard to look tough when you’re only wearing an orange towel.

“Truce?”

“Well, your troubles aren’t over, I’m afraid,” the Colonel said, referring to the mailed-but-not-yet-received progress reports.

“A’ight. If you say so. We’ll talk when it’s over, I guess.”

“I guess so,” the Colonel said. As Kevin walked out, the Colonel said, “Take the can you spit in, you unhygienic shit.” Kevin just closed the door behind him. The Colonel grabbed the can, opened the door, and threw it at Kevin—missing him by a good margin.

“Jeez, go easy on the guy.”

“No truce yet, Pudge.”

I spent that afternoon with Lara. We were very cutesy, even though we didn’t know the first thing about each other and barely talked. But we made out. She grabbed my butt at one point, and I sort of jumped. I was lying down, but I did the best version of jumping that one can do lying down, and she said, “Sorry,” and I said, “No, it’s okay. It’s just a little sore from the swan.”

We walked to the TV room together, and I locked the door. We were

watching *The Brady Bunch*, which she had never seen. The episode, where the Bradys visit the gold-mining ghost town and they all get locked up in the one-room jail by some crazy old gold panner with a scraggly white beard, was especially horrible, and gave us a lot to laugh about. Which is good, since we didn't have much to *talk* about.

Just as the Bradys were getting locked in jail, Lara randomly asked me, "Have you ever gotten a blow job?"

"Um, that's out of the blue," I said.

"The blue?"

"Like, you know, out of left field."

"Left field?"

"Like, in baseball. Like, out of nowhere. I mean, what made you think of that?"

"I've just never geeven one," she answered, her little voice dripping with seductiveness. It was so brazen. I thought I would explode. I never thought. I mean, from Alaska, hearing that stuff was one thing. But to hear her sweet little Romanian voice go so sexy all of the sudden...

"No," I said. "I never have."

"Think it would be fun?"

DO II?!?!?!?!?!?!?!! "Um, yeah. I mean, you don't have to."

"I think I want to," she said, and we kissed a little, and then. And then with me sitting watching *The Brady Bunch*, watching Marcia Marcia Marcia up to her Brady antics, Lara unbuttoned my pants and pulled my boxers down a little and pulled out my penis.

"Wow," she said.

"What?"

She looked up at me, but didn't move, her face nanometers away from my penis. "It's weird."

"What do you mean *weird*?"

"Just beeg, I guess."

I could live with that kind of weird. And then she wrapped her hand around it and put it into her mouth.

And waited.

We were both very still. She did not move a muscle in her body, and I did not move a muscle in mine. I knew that at this point something else was supposed to happen, but I wasn't quite sure what.

She stayed still. I could feel her nervous breath. For minutes, for as long as it took the Bradys to steal the key and unlock themselves from the ghost-town jail, she lay there, stock-still with my penis in her mouth, and I sat there, waiting.

And then she took it out of her mouth and looked up at me quizzically.

“Should I do something?”

“Um. I don’t know,” I said. Everything I’d learned from watching porn with Alaska suddenly exited my brain. I thought maybe she should move her head up and down, but wouldn’t that choke her? So I just stayed quiet.

“Should I, like, bite?”

“Don’t bite! I mean, I don’t think. I think—I mean, that felt good. That was nice. I don’t know if there’s something else.”

“I mean, you didn’t—”

“Um. Maybe we should ask Alaska.”

So we went to her room and asked Alaska. She laughed and laughed. Sitting on her bed, she laughed until she cried. She walked into the bathroom, returned with a tube of toothpaste, and showed us. In detail. Never have I so wanted to be Crest Complete.

Lara and I went back to her room, where she did exactly what Alaska told her to do, and I did exactly what Alaska said I would do, which was die a hundred little ecstatic deaths, my fists clenched, my body shaking. It was my first orgasm with a girl, and afterward, I was embarrassed and nervous, and so, clearly, was Lara, who finally broke the silence by asking, “So, want to do some homework?”

There was little to do on the first day of the semester, but she read for her English class. I picked up a biography of Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara—whose face adorned a poster on the wall—that Lara’s roommate had on her bookshelf, then I lay down next to Lara on the bottom bunk. I began at the end, as I sometimes did with biographies I had no intention of reading all the way through, and found his last words without too much searching. Captured by the Bolivian army, Guevara said, “Shoot, coward. You are only going to kill a man.” I thought back to Simón Bolívar’s last words in García Márquez’s novel—“How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!” South American revolutionaries, it would seem, died with flair. I read the last words out loud to Lara. She turned on her side, placing her head on my chest.

“Why do you like last words so much?”

Strange as it might seem, I’d never really thought about why. “I don’t know,” I said, placing my hand against the small of her back. “Sometimes, just because they’re funny. Like in the Civil War, a general named Sedgwick said, ‘They couldn’t hit an elephant from this distance—’ and then he got shot.” She laughed. “But a lot of times, people die how they live. And so last words tell me a lot about who people were, and why they became the sort of people biographies get written about. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Yeah?” Just yeah?

“Yeah,” she said, and then went back to reading.

I didn’t know how to talk to her. And I was frustrated with trying, so after a little while, I got up to go.

I kissed her good-bye. I could do that, at least.

I picked up Alaska and the Colonel at our room and we walked down to the bridge, where I repeated in embarrassing detail the fellatio fiasco.

“I can’t believe she went down on you twice in one day,” the Colonel said.

“Only technically. Really just once,” Alaska corrected.

“Still. I mean. Still. Pudge got his hog smoked.”

“The poor Colonel,” Alaska said with a rueful smile. “I’d give you a pity blow, but I really am attached to Jake.”

“That’s just creepy,” the Colonel said. “You’re only supposed to flirt with Pudge.”

“But Pudge has a *giiirrrrrlll*friend.” She laughed.

That night, the Colonel and I walked down to Alaska’s room to celebrate our Barn Night success. She and the Colonel had been celebrating a lot the past couple days, and I didn’t feel up to climbing Strawberry Hill, so I sat and munched on pretzels while Alaska and the Colonel drank wine from paper cups with flowers on them.

“We ain’t drinkin’ out the bottle tonight, hun,” the Colonel said. “We classin’ it up!”

“It’s an old-time Southern drinking contest,” Alaska responded. “We’s a-gonna treat Pudge to an evening of real Southern livin’: We go’n match each other Dixie cup for Dixie cup till the lesser drinker falls.”

And that is pretty much what they did, pausing only to turn out the lights at 11:00 so the Eagle wouldn’t drop by. They chatted some, but mostly they drank, and I drifted out of the conversation and ended up squinting through the dark, looking at the book spines in Alaska’s Life Library. Even minus the books she’d lost in the miniflood, I could have stayed up until morning reading through the haphazard stacks of titles. A dozen white tulips in a plastic vase were precariously perched atop one of the book stacks, and when I asked her about them, she just said, “Jake and my’s anniversary,” and I didn’t care to continue that line of dialogue, so I went back to scanning titles, and I was just wondering how I could go about learning Edgar Allan Poe’s last words (for the record:

“Lord help my poor soul”) when I heard Alaska say, “Pudge isn’t even listening to us.”

And I said, “I’m listening.”

“We were just talking about Truth or Dare. Played out in seventh grade or still cool?”

“Never played it,” I said. “No friends in seventh grade.”

“Well, that does it!” she shouted, a bit too loud given the late hour and also given the fact that she was openly drinking wine in the room. “Truth or Dare!”

“All right,” I agreed, “but I’m not making out with the Colonel.”

The Colonel sat slumped in the corner. “Can’t make out. Too drunk.”

Alaska started. “Truth or Dare, Pudge.”

“Dare.”

“Hook up with me.”

So I did.

It was that quick. I laughed, looked nervous, and she leaned in and tilted her head to the side, and we were kissing. Zero layers between us. Our tongues dancing back and forth in each other’s mouth until there was no her mouth and my mouth but only our mouths intertwined. She tasted like cigarettes and Mountain Dew and wine and Chap Stick. Her hand came to my face and I felt her soft fingers tracing the line of my jaw. We lay down as we kissed, she on top of me, and I began to move beneath her. I pulled away for a moment, to say, “What is going on here?” and she put one finger to her lips and we kissed again. A hand grabbed one of mine and she placed it on her stomach. I moved slowly on top of her and felt her arching her back fluidly beneath me.

I pulled away again. “What about Lara? Jake?” Again, she *sshed* me. “Less tongue, more lips,” she said, and I tried my best. I thought the tongue was the whole point, but she was the expert.

“Christ,” the Colonel said quite loudly. “That wretched beast, drama, draws nigh.”

But we paid no attention. She moved my hand from her waist to her breast, and I felt cautiously, my fingers moving slowly under her shirt but over her bra, tracing the outline of her breasts and then cupping one in my hand, squeezing softly. “You’re good at that,” she whispered. Her lips never left mine as she spoke. We moved together, my body between her legs.

“This is so fun,” she whispered, “but I’m so sleepy. To be continued?” She kissed me for another moment, my mouth straining to stay near hers, and then she moved from beneath me, placed her head on my chest, and fell asleep instantly.

We didn’t have sex. We never got naked. I never touched her bare breast,

and her hands never got lower than my hips. It didn't matter. As she slept, I whispered, "I love you, Alaska Young."

Just as I was falling asleep, the Colonel spoke. "Dude, did you just make out with Alaska?"

"Yeah."

"This is going to end poorly," he said to himself.

And then I was asleep. That deep, can-still-taste-her-in-my-mouth sleep, that sleep that is not particularly restful but is difficult to wake from all the same. And then I heard the phone ring. I think. And I think, although I can't know, that I felt Alaska get up. I think I heard her leave. I think. How long she was gone is impossible to know.

But the Colonel and I both woke up when she returned, whenever that was, because she slammed the door. She was sobbing, like that post-Thanksgiving morning but worse.

"I have to get out of here!" she cried.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I forgot! God, how many times can I fuck up?" she said. I didn't even have time to wonder what she forgot before she screamed, "I JUST HAVE TO GO. HELP ME GET OUT OF HERE!"

"Where do you need to go?"

She sat down and put her head between her legs, sobbing. "Just please distract the Eagle right now so I can go. Please."

The Colonel and I, at the same moment, equal in our guilt, said, "Okay."

"Just don't turn on your lights," the Colonel said. "Just drive slow and don't turn on your lights. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fuck," she said. "Just get rid of the Eagle for me," she said, her sobs childlike half screams. "God oh God, I'm so sorry."

"Okay," the Colonel said. "Start the car when you hear the second string."

We left.

We did not say: *Don't drive. You're drunk.*

We did not say: *We aren't letting you in that car when you are upset.*

We did not say: *We insist on going with you.*

We did not say: *This can wait until tomorrow. Anything—everything—can wait.*

We walked to our bathroom, grabbed the three strings of leftover firecrackers from beneath the sink, and ran to the Eagle's. We weren't sure that it would work again.

But it worked well enough. The Eagle tore out of his house as soon as the first string of firecrackers started popping—he was waiting for us, I suppose—

and we headed for the woods and got him in deeply enough that he never heard her drive away. The Colonel and I doubled back, wading through the creek to save time, slipped in through the back window of Room 43, and slept like babies.

after

the day after

THE COLONEL SLEPT the not-restful sleep of the drunk, and I lay on my back on the bottom bunk, my mouth tingling and alive as if still kissing, and we would have likely slept through our morning classes had the Eagle not awoken us at 8:00 with three quick knocks. I rolled over as he opened the door, and the morning light rushed into the room.

“I need y’all to go to the gym,” he said. I squinted toward him, the Eagle himself backlit into invisibility by the too bright sun. “Now,” he added, and I knew it. We were done for. Caught. Too many progress reports. Too much drinking in too short a time. Why did they have to drink last night? And then I could taste her again, the wine and the cigarette smoke and the Chap Stick and Alaska, and I wondered if she had kissed me because she was drunk. *Don’t expel me*, I thought. *Don’t. I have just begun to kiss her.*

And as if answering my prayers, the Eagle said, “You’re not in any trouble. But you need to go to the gym now.”

I heard the Colonel rolling over above me. “What’s wrong?”

“Something terrible has happened,” the Eagle said, and then closed the door.

As he grabbed a pair of jeans lying on the floor, the Colonel said, “This happened a couple years ago. When Hyde’s wife died. I guess it’s the Old Man himself now. Poor bastard really *didn’t* have many breaths left.” He looked up at me, his half-open eyes bloodshot, and yawned.

“You look a little hungover,” I observed.

He closed his eyes. “Well, then I’m putting up a good front, Pudge, ’cause I’m actually a lot hungover.”

“I kissed Alaska.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t *that* drunk. Let’s go.”

We walked across the dorm circle to the gym. I sported baggy jeans, a sweatshirt with no shirt underneath, and a bad case of bedhead. All the teachers were in the dorm circle knocking on doors, but I didn’t see Dr. Hyde. I imagined him lying dead in his house, wondered who had found him, how they even knew he was missing before he failed to show up for class.

“I don’t see Dr. Hyde,” I told the Colonel.

“Poor bastard.”

The gym was half full by the time we arrived. A podium had been set up in the middle of the basketball court, close to the bleachers. I sat in the second row, with the Colonel directly in front of me. My thoughts were split between sadness for Dr. Hyde and excitement about Alaska, remembering the up-close sight of her mouth whispering, “To be continued?”

And it did not occur to me—not even when Dr. Hyde shuffled into the gym, taking tiny, slow steps toward the Colonel and me.

I tapped the Colonel on the shoulder and said, “Hyde’s here,” and the Colonel said, “Oh shit,” and I said, “What?” and he said, “Where’s Alaska?” and I said, “No,” and he said, “Pudge, is she here or not?” and then we both stood up and scanned the faces in the gym.

The Eagle walked up to the podium and said, “Is everyone here?”

“No,” I said to him. “Alaska isn’t here.”

The Eagle looked down. “Is everyone else here?”

“Alaska isn’t here!”

“Okay, Miles. Thank you.”

“We can’t start without Alaska.”

The Eagle looked at me. He was crying, noiselessly. Tears just rolled from his eyes to his chin and then fell onto his corduroy pants. He stared at me, but it was not the Look of Doom. His eyes blinking the tears down his face, the Eagle looked, for all the world, sorry.

“Please, sir,” I said. “Can we please wait for Alaska?” I felt all of them staring at us, trying to understand what I now knew, but didn’t quite believe.

The Eagle looked down and bit his lower lip. “Last night, Alaska Young was in a terrible accident.” His tears came faster, then. “And she was killed. Alaska has passed away.”

For a moment, everyone in the gym was silent, and the place had never been so quiet, not even in the moments before the Colonel ridiculed opponents at the free-throw stripe. I stared down at the back of the Colonel’s head. I just stared, looking at his thick and bushy hair. For a moment, it was so quiet that you could hear the sound of not-breathing, the vacuum created by 190 students shocked out of air.

I thought: *It’s all my fault.*

I thought: *I don’t feel very good.*

I thought: *I’m going to throw up.*

I stood up and ran outside. I made it to a trash can outside the gym, five feet from the double doors, and heaved toward Gatorade bottles and half-eaten

McDonald's. But nothing much came out. I just heaved, my stomach muscles tightening and my throat opening and a gasping, guttural *blech*, going through the motions of vomiting over and over again. In between gags and coughs, I sucked air in hard. Her mouth. Her dead, cold mouth. To not be continued. I knew she was drunk. Upset. Obviously you don't let someone drive drunk and pissed off. *Obviously*. And Christ, Miles, what the hell is wrong with you? And then comes the puke, finally, splashing onto the trash. And here is whatever of her I had left in my mouth, here in this trash can. And then it comes again, more—and then okay, calm down, okay, seriously, she's not dead.

She's not dead. She's alive. She's alive somewhere. She's in the woods. Alaska is hiding in the woods and she's not dead, she's just hiding. She's just playing a trick on us. This is just an Alaska Young Prank Extraordinaire. It's Alaska being Alaska, funny and playful and not knowing when or how to put on the brakes.

And then I felt much better, because she had not died at all.

I walked back into the gym, and everyone seemed to be in various stages of disintegration. It was like something you see on TV, like a *National Geographic* special on funeral rituals. I saw Takumi standing over Lara, his hands on her shoulders. I saw Kevin with his crew cut, his head buried between his knees. A girl named Molly Tan, who'd studied with us for precalc, wailed, beating balled fists against her thighs. All these people I sort of knew and sort of didn't, and all of them disintegrating, and then I saw the Colonel, his knees tucked into his chest, lying on his side on the bleachers, Madame O'Malley sitting next to him, reaching toward his shoulder but not actually touching it. The Colonel was screaming. He would inhale, and then scream. Inhale. Scream. Inhale. Scream.

I thought, at first, that it was only yelling. But after a few breaths, I noticed a rhythm. And after a few more, I realized that the Colonel was saying words. He was screaming, "I'm so sorry."

Madame O'Malley grabbed his hand. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, Chip. There was nothing you could have done." But if only she knew.

And I just stood there, looking at the scene, thinking about her not dead, and I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around to see the Eagle, and I said, "I think she's playing a dumb prank," and he said, "No, Miles, no, I'm sorry," and I felt the heat in my cheeks and said, "She's really good. She could pull this off," and he said, "I saw her. I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"Somebody was setting off firecrackers in the woods," he said, and I closed my eyes tight, the ineluctable fact of the matter at hand: I had killed her. "I went out after them, and I guess she drove off campus. It was late. She was on I-65

just south of downtown. A truck had jackknifed, blocking both lanes. A police car had just gotten to the scene. She hit the cruiser without ever swerving. I believe she must have been very intoxicated. The police said they smelled alcohol.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I saw her, Miles. I talked to the police. It was instant. The steering wheel hit her chest. I’m so sorry.”

And I said, you saw her and he said yes and I said how did she look and he said, just a bit of blood coming out of her nose, and I sat down on the floor of the gym. I could hear the Colonel still screaming, and I could feel hands on my back as I hunched forward, but I could only see her lying naked on a metal table, a small trickle of blood falling out of her half-teardrop nose, her green eyes open, staring off into the distance, her mouth turned up just enough to suggest the idea of a smile, and she had felt so warm against me, her mouth soft and warm on mine.

The Colonel and I are walking back to our dorm room in silence. I am staring at the ground beneath me. I cannot stop thinking that she is dead, and I cannot stop thinking that she cannot possibly be dead. People do not just die. I can’t catch my breath. I feel afraid, like someone has told me they’re going to kick my ass after school and now it’s sixth period and I know full well what’s coming. It is so cold today—literally freezing—and I imagine running to the creek and diving in headfirst, the creek so shallow that my hands scrape against the rocks, and my body slides into the cold water, the shock of the cold giving way to numbness, and I would stay there, float down with that water first to the Cahaba River, then to the Alabama River, then to Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

I want to melt into the brown, crunchy grass that the Colonel and I step on as we silently make our way back to our room. His feet are so large, too large for his short body, and the new generic tennis shoes he wears since his old ones were pissed in look almost like clown shoes. I think of Alaska’s flip-flops clinging to her blue toes as we swung on the swing down by the lake. Will the casket be open? Can a mortician re-create her smile? I could still hear her saying it: “This is so fun, but I’m so sleepy. To be continued?”

Nineteenth-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher’s last words were “Now comes the mystery.” The poet Dylan Thomas, who liked a good drink at least as much as Alaska, said, “I’ve had eighteen straight whiskeys. I do believe that’s a record,” before dying. Alaska’s favorite was playwright Eugene O’Neill: “Born

in a hotel room, and—God damn it—died in a hotel room.” Even car-accident victims sometimes have time for last words. Princess Diana said, “Oh God. What’s happened?” Movie star James Dean said, “They’ve got to see us,” just before slamming his Porsche into another car. I know so many last words. But I will never know hers.

I am several steps in front of him before I realize that the Colonel has fallen down. I turn around, and he is lying on his face. “We have to get up, Chip. We have to get up. We just have to get to the room.”

The Colonel turns his face from the ground to me and looks me dead in the eye and says, “I. Can’t. Breathe.”

But he *can* breathe, and I know this because he is hyperventilating, breathing as if trying to blow air back into the dead. I pick him up, and he grabs onto me and starts sobbing, again saying, “I’m so sorry,” over and over again. We have never hugged before, me and the Colonel, and there is nothing much to say, because he ought to be sorry, and I just put my hand on the back of his head and say the only true thing. “I’m sorry, too.”

two days after

I DIDN’T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. Dawn was slow in coming, and even when it did, the sun shining bright through the blinds, the rickety radiator couldn’t keep us warm, so the Colonel and I sat wordlessly on the couch. He read the almanac.

The night before, I’d braved the cold to call my parents, and this time when I said, “Hey, it’s Miles,” and my mom answered with, “What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” I could safely tell her no, everything was not okay. My dad picked up the line then.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Don’t yell,” my mother said.

“I’m not yelling; it’s just the phone.”

“Well, talk quieter,” she said, and so it took some time before I could say anything, and then once I could, it took some time to say the words in order—my friend Alaska died in a car crash. I stared at the numbers and messages scrawled on the wall by the phone.

“Oh, Miles,” Mom said. “I’m so sorry, Miles. Do you want to come home?”

“No,” I said. “I want to be here...I can’t believe it,” which was still partly true.

“That’s just awful,” my dad said. “Her poor parents.” *Poor parent*, I thought,

and wondered about her dad. I couldn't even imagine what my parents would do if I died. Driving drunk. God, if her father ever found out, he would disembowel the Colonel and me.

"What can we do for you right now?" my mom asked.

"I just needed you to pick up. I just needed you to answer the phone, and you did." I heard a snuffle behind me—from cold or grief, I didn't know—and told my parents, "Someone's waiting for the phone. I gotta go."

All night, I felt paralyzed into silence, terrorized. What was I so afraid of, anyway? The thing had happened. She was dead. She was warm and soft against my skin, my tongue in her mouth, and she was laughing, trying to teach me, make me better, promising to be continued. And now.

And now she was colder by the hour, more dead with every breath I took. I thought: *That is the fear: I have lost something important, and I cannot find it, and I need it. It is fear like if someone lost his glasses and went to the glasses store and they told him that the world had run out of glasses and he would just have to do without.*

Just before eight in the morning, the Colonel announced to no one in particular, "I think there are bufriedos at lunch today."

"Yeah," I said. "Are you hungry?"

"God no. But she named them, you know. They were called fried burritos when we got here, and Alaska started calling them bufriedos, and then everyone did, and then finally Maureen officially changed the name." He paused. "I don't know what to do, Miles."

"Yeah. I know."

"I finished memorizing the capitals," he said.

"Of the states?"

"No. That was fifth grade. Of the countries. Name a country."

"Canada," I said.

"Something hard."

"Um. Uzbekistan?"

"Tashkent." He didn't even take a moment to think. It was just there, at the tip of his tongue, as if he'd been waiting for me to say "Uzbekistan" all along. "Let's smoke."

We walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower, and the Colonel pulled a pack of matches from his jeans and struck a match against the matchbook. It didn't light. Again, he tried and failed, and again, smacking at the matchbook with a crescendoing fury until he finally threw the matches to the

ground and screamed, “GODDAMN IT!”

“It’s okay,” I said, reaching into my pocket for a lighter.

“No, Pudge, it’s not,” he said, throwing down his cigarette and standing up, suddenly pissed. “Goddamn it! God, how did this happen? How could she be so stupid! She just never thought anything through. So goddamned impulsive. Christ. It is not okay. I can’t believe she was so *stupid!*”

“We should have stopped her,” I said.

He reached into the stall to turn off the dribbling shower and then pounded an open palm against the tile wall. “Yeah, I know we should have stopped her, damn it. I am shit sure keenly aware that we should have stopped her. But we shouldn’t have *had* to. You had to watch her like a *three-year-old*. You do one thing wrong, and then she just dies. Christ! I’m losing it. I’m going on a walk.”

“Okay,” I answered, trying to keep my voice calm.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I feel so screwed up. I feel like I might die.”

“You might,” I said.

“Yeah. Yeah. I might. You never know. It’s just. It’s like. *POOF*. And you’re gone.”

I followed him into the room. He grabbed the almanac from his bunk, zipped his jacket, closed the door, and *POOF*. He was gone.

With morning came visitors. An hour after the Colonel left, resident stoner Hank Walsten dropped by to offer me some weed, which I graciously turned down. Hank hugged me and said, “At least it was instant. At least there wasn’t any pain.”

I knew he was only trying to help, but he didn’t get it. There was pain. A dull endless pain in my gut that wouldn’t go away even when I knelt on the stinging frozen tile of the bathroom, dry-heaving.

And what is an “instant” death anyway? How long is an instant? Is it one second? Ten? The pain of those seconds must have been awful as her heart burst and her lungs collapsed and there was no air and no blood to her brain and only raw panic. What the hell is *instant*? Nothing is instant. Instant rice takes five minutes, instant pudding an hour. I doubt that an instant of blinding pain *feels* particularly instantaneous.

Was there time for her life to flash before her eyes? Was I there? Was Jake? And she promised, I remembered, she promised to be continued, but I knew, too, that she was driving north when she died, north toward Nashville, toward Jake. Maybe it hadn’t meant anything to her, had been nothing more than another grand impulsivity. And as Hank stood in the doorway, I just looked past him,

looking across the too-quiet dorm circle, wondering if it had mattered to her, and I can only tell myself that of course, yes, she had promised. To be continued.

Lara came next, her eyes heavy with swelling. “What happened?” she asked me as I held her, standing on my tiptoes so I could place my chin on top of her head.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Deed you see her that night?” she asked, speaking into my collarbone.

“She got drunk,” I told her. “The Colonel and I went to sleep, and I guess she drove off campus.” And that became the standard lie.

I felt Lara’s fingers, wet with her tears, press against my palm, and before I could think better of it, I pulled my hand away. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Eet’s okay,” she said. “I’ll be een my room eef you want to come by.” I did not drop by. I didn’t know what to say to her—I was caught in a love triangle with one dead side.

That afternoon, we all filed into the gym again for a town meeting. The Eagle announced that the school would charter a bus on Sunday to the funeral in Vine Station. As we got up to leave, I noticed Takumi and Lara walking toward me. Lara caught my eye and smiled wanly. I smiled back, but quickly turned and hid myself amid the mass of mourners filing out of the gym.

I am sleeping, and Alaska flies into the room. She is naked, and intact. Her breasts, which I felt only very briefly and in the dark, are luminously full as they hang down from her body. She hovers inches above me, her breath warm and sweet against my face like a breeze passing through tall grass.

“Hi,” I say. “I’ve missed you.”

“You look good, Pudge.”

“So do you.”

“I’m so naked,” she says, and laughs. “How did I get so *naked*?”

“I just want you to stay,” I say.

“No,” she says, and her weight falls dead on me, crushing my chest, stealing away my breath, and she is cold and wet, like melting ice. Her head is split in half and a pink-gray sludge oozes from the fracture in her skull and drips down onto my face, and she stinks of formaldehyde and rotting meat. I gag and push her off me, terrified.

I woke up falling, and landed with a thud on the floor. Thank God I’m a bottom-

bunk man. I had slept for fourteen hours. It was morning. Wednesday, I thought. Her funeral Sunday. I wondered if the Colonel would get back by then, where he was. He *had* to come back for the funeral, because I could not go alone, and going with anyone other than the Colonel would amount to alone.

The cold wind buffeted against the door, and the trees outside the back window shook with such force that I could hear it from our room, and I sat in my bed and thought of the Colonel out there somewhere, his head down, his teeth clenched, walking into the wind.

four days after

IT WAS FIVE IN THE MORNING and I was reading a biography of the explorer Meriwether Lewis (of & Clark fame) and trying to stay awake when the door opened and the Colonel walked in.

His pale hands shook, and the almanac he held looked like a puppet dancing without strings.

“Are you cold?” I asked.

He nodded, slipped off his sneakers, and climbed into my bed on the bottom bunk, pulling up the covers. His teeth chattered like Morse code.

“Jesus. Are you all right?”

“Better now. Warmer,” he said. A small, ghost white hand appeared from beneath the comforter. “Hold my hand, will ya?”

“All right, but that’s it. No kissing.” The quilt shook with his laughter.

“Where have you been?”

“I walked to Montevallo.”

“Forty miles?!”

“Forty-two,” he corrected me. “Well. Forty-two there. Forty-two back. Eighty-two miles. No. Eighty-four. Yes. Eighty-four miles in forty-five hours.”

“What the hell’s in Montevallo?” I asked.

“Not much. I just walked till I got too cold, and then I turned around.”

“You didn’t sleep?”

“No! The dreams are terrible. In my dreams, she doesn’t even look like herself anymore. I don’t even remember what she looked like.”

I let go of his hand, grabbed last year’s yearbook, and found her picture. In the black-and-white photograph, she’s wearing her orange tank top and cutoff jeans that stretch halfway down her skinny thighs, her mouth open wide in a frozen laugh as her left arm holds Takumi in a headlock. Her hair falls over her face just enough to obscure her cheeks.

“Right,” the Colonel said. “Yeah. I was so tired of her getting upset for no reason. The way she would get sulky and make references to the freaking oppressive weight of tragedy or whatever but then never said what was wrong, never have any goddamned *reason* to be sad. And I just think you ought to have a *reason*. My girlfriend dumped me, so I’m sad. I got caught smoking, so I’m pissed off. My head hurts, so I’m cranky. She never had a *reason*, Pudge. I was just so tired of putting up with her drama. And I just let her go. Christ.”

Her moodiness had annoyed me, too, sometimes, but not that night. That night I let her go because she told me to. It was that simple for me, and that stupid.

The Colonel’s hand was so little, and I grabbed it tight, his cold seeping into me and my warmth into him. “I memorized the populations,” he said.

“Uzbekistan.”

“Twenty-four million seven hundred fifty-five thousand five hundred and nineteen.”

“Cameroon,” I said, but it was too late. He was asleep, his hand limp in mine. I placed it back under the quilt and climbed up into his bed, a top-bunk man for this night at least. I fell asleep listening to his slow, even breaths, his stubbornness finally melting away in the face of insurmountable fatigue.

six days after

THAT SUNDAY, I got up after three hours of sleep and showered for the first time in a long while. I put on my only suit. I almost hadn’t brought it, but my mom insisted that you never know when you’re going to need a suit, and sure enough.

The Colonel did not own a suit, and by virtue of his stature could not borrow one from anyone at the Creek, so he wore black slacks and a gray button-down.

“I don’t suppose I can wear the flamingo tie,” he said as he pulled on black socks.

“It’s a bit festive, given the occasion,” I responded.

“Can’t wear it to the opera,” said the Colonel, almost smiling. “Can’t wear it to a funeral. Can’t use it to hang myself. It’s a bit useless, as ties go.” I gave him a tie.

The school had chartered buses to ferry students north to Alaska’s hometown of Vine Station, but Lara, the Colonel, Takumi, and I drove in Takumi’s SUV, taking the back roads so we didn’t have to drive past the spot on the highway. I stared out the window, watching as the suburban sprawl surrounding

Birmingham faded into the slow-sloping hills and fields of northern Alabama.

Up front, Takumi told Lara about the time Alaska got her boob honked over the summer, and Lara laughed. That was the first time I had seen her, and now we were coming to the last. More than anything, I felt the unfairness of it, the inarguable injustice of loving someone who might have loved you back but can't due to deadness, and then I leaned forward, my forehead against the back of Takumi's headrest, and I cried, whimpering, and I didn't even feel sadness so much as pain. It hurt, and that is not a euphemism. It hurt like a beating.

Meriwether Lewis's last words were, "I am not a coward, but I am so strong. So hard to die." I don't doubt that it is, but it cannot be much harder than being left behind. I thought of Lewis as I followed Lara into the A-frame chapel attached to the single-story funeral home in Vine Station, Alabama, a town every bit as depressed and depressing as Alaska had always made it out to be. The place smelled of mildew and disinfectant, and the yellow wallpaper in the foyer was peeling at the corners.

"Are y'all here for Ms. Young?" a guy asked the Colonel, and the Colonel nodded. We were led to a large room with rows of folding chairs populated by only one man. He knelt before a coffin at the front of the chapel. The coffin was closed. Closed. Never going to see her again. Can't kiss her forehead. Can't see her one last time. But I needed to, I needed to *see* her, and much too loud, I asked, "Why is it closed?" and the man, whose potbelly pushed out from his too-tight suit, turned around and walked toward me.

"Her mother," he said. "Her mother had an open casket, and Alaska told me, 'Don't ever let them see me dead, Daddy,' and so that's that. Anyway, son, she's not in there. She's with the Lord."

And he put his hands on my shoulders, this man who had grown fat since he'd last had to wear a suit, and I couldn't believe what I had done to him, his eyes glittering green like Alaska's but sunk deep into dark sockets, like a green-eyed, still-breathing ghost, and don't no don't don't die, Alaska. Don't die. And I walked out of his embrace and past Lara and Takumi to her casket and knelt before it and placed my hands on the finished wood, the dark mahogany, the color of her hair. I felt the Colonel's small hands on my shoulders, and a tear dripped onto my head, and for a few moments, it was just the three of us—the buses of students hadn't arrived, and Takumi and Lara had faded away, and it was just the three of us—three bodies and two people—the three who knew what had happened and too many layers between all of us, too much keeping us from one another. The Colonel said, "I just want to save her so bad," and I said, "Chip, she's gone," and he said, "I thought I'd feel her looking down on us, but you're right. She's just gone," and I said, "Oh God, Alaska, I love you. I love

you,” and the Colonel whispered, “I’m so sorry, Pudge. I know you did,” and I said, “No. Not past tense.” She wasn’t even a person anymore, just flesh rotting, but I loved her present tense. The Colonel knelt down beside me and put his lips to the coffin and whispered, “I am sorry, Alaska. You deserved a better friend.”

Is it so hard to die, Mr. Lewis? Is that labyrinth really worse than this one?

seven days after

I SPENT THE NEXT DAY in our room, playing football on mute, at once unable to do nothing and unable to do anything much. It was Martin Luther King Day, our last day before classes started again, and I could think of nothing but having killed her. The Colonel spent the morning with me, but then he decided to go to the cafeteria for meat loaf.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Not hungry.”

“You have to eat.”

“Wanna bet?” I asked without looking up from the game.

“Christ. Fine.” He sighed and left, slamming the door behind him. *He’s still very angry*, I found myself thinking with a bit of pity. No reason to be angry. Anger just distracts from the all-encompassing sadness, the frank knowledge that you killed her and robbed her of a future and a life. Getting pissed wouldn’t fix it. Damn it.

“How’s the meat loaf?” I asked the Colonel when he returned.

“About as you remember it. Neither meaty nor loafy.” The Colonel sat down next to me. “The Eagle ate with me. He wanted to know if we set off the fireworks.” I paused the game and turned to him. With one hand, he picked at one of the last remaining pieces of blue vinyl on our foam couch.

“And you said?” I asked.

“I didn’t rat. Anyway, he said her aunt or something is coming tomorrow to clean out her room. So if there’s anything that’s ours, or anything her aunt wouldn’t want to find...”

I turned back to the game and said, “I’m not up for it today.”

“Then I’ll do it alone,” he answered. He turned and walked outside, leaving the door open, and the bitter remnants of the cold snap quickly overwhelmed the radiator, so I paused the game and stood up to close the door, and when I peeked around the corner to see if the Colonel had entered her room, he was standing there, just outside our door, and he grabbed onto my sweatshirt, smiled, and said,

“I *knew* you wouldn’t make me do that alone. I *knew* it.” I shook my head and rolled my eyes but followed him down the sidewalk, past the pay phone, and into her room.

I hadn’t thought of her smell since she died. But when the Colonel opened the door, I caught the edge of her scent: wet dirt and grass and cigarette smoke, and beneath that the vestiges of vanilla-scented skin lotion. She flooded into my present, and only tact kept me from burying my face in the dirty laundry overflowing the hamper by her dresser. It looked as I remembered it: hundreds of books stacked against the walls, her lavender comforter crumpled at the foot of her bed, a precarious stack of books on her bedside table, her volcanic candle just peeking out from beneath the bed. It looked as I knew it would, but the smell, unmistakably her, shocked me. I stood in the center of the room, my eyes shut, inhaling slowly through my nose, the vanilla and the uncut autumn grass, but with each slow breath, the smell faded as I became accustomed to it, and soon she was gone again.

“This is unbearable,” I said matter-of-factly, because it was. “God. These books she’ll never read. Her Life’s Library.”

“Bought at garage sales and now probably destined for another one.”

“Ashes to ashes. Garage sale to garage sale,” I said.

“Right. Okay, down to business. Get anything her aunt wouldn’t want to find,” the Colonel said, and I saw him kneeling at her desk, the drawer beneath her computer pulled open, his small fingers pulling out groups of stapled papers. “Christ, she kept every paper she ever wrote. *Moby-Dick*. *Ethan Frome*.”

I reached between her mattress and box spring for the condoms I knew she hid for Jake’s visits. I pocketed them, and then went over to her dresser, searching through her underwear for hidden bottles of liquor or sex toys or God knows what. I found nothing. And then I settled on the books, staring at them stacked on their sides, spines out, the haphazard collection of literature that was Alaska. There was one book I wanted to take with me, but I couldn’t find it.

The Colonel was sitting on the floor next to her bed, his head bent toward the floor, looking under her bed frame. “She sure didn’t leave any booze, did she?” he asked.

And I almost said, *She buried it in the woods out by the soccer field*, but I realized that the Colonel didn’t know, that she never took him to the edge of the woods and told him to dig for buried treasure, that she and I had shared that alone, and I kept it for myself like a keepsake, as if sharing the memory might lead to its dissipation.

“Do you see *The General in His Labyrinth* anywhere?” I asked while scanning the titles on the book spines. “It has a lot of green on the cover, I think. It’s a paperback, and it got flooded, so the pages are probably bloated, but I don’t think she—” and then he cut me off with, “Yeah, it’s right here,” and I turned around and he was holding it, the pages fanned out like an accordion from Longwell, Jeff, and Kevin’s prank, and I walked over to him and took it and sat down on her bed. The places she’d underlined and the little notes she’d written had all been blurred out by the soaking, but the book was still mostly readable, and I was thinking I would take it back to my room and try to read it even though it wasn’t a biography when I flipped to that page, toward the back:

He was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness. “Damn it,” he sighed. “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!”

The whole passage was underlined in bleeding, water-soaked black ink. But there was another ink, this one a crisp blue, postflood, and an arrow led from “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!” to a margin note written in her loop-heavy cursive: *Straight & Fast*.

“Hey, she wrote something in here after the flood,” I said. “But it’s weird. Look. Page one ninety-two.”

I tossed the book to the Colonel, and he flipped to the page and then looked up at me. “Straight and fast,” he said.

“Yeah. Weird, huh? The way out of the labyrinth, I guess.”

“Wait, how did it happen? What happened?”

And because there was only one *it*, I knew to what he was referring. “I told you what the Eagle told me. A truck jackknifed on the road. A cop car showed up to stop traffic, and she ran into the cop car. She was so drunk she didn’t even swerve.”

“So *drunk*? So *drunk*? The cop car would have had its lights on. Pudge, she ran into a cop car that had its lights on,” he said hurriedly. “Straight and fast. Straight and fast. Out of the labyrinth.”

“No,” I said, but even as I said it, I could see it. I could see her drunk enough and pissed off enough. (About what—about cheating on Jake? About hurting me? About wanting me and not him? Still pissed about ratting out Marya?) I could see her staring down the cop car and aiming for it and not giving a shit about anyone else, not thinking of her promise to me, not thinking of her father or anyone, and that bitch, that bitch, she killed herself. But no. No. That was not

her. No. She said *To be continued*. Of course. “No.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” the Colonel said. He dropped the book, sat down on the bed next to me, and put his forehead in his hands. “Who drives six miles off campus to kill herself? Doesn’t make any sense. But ‘straight and fast.’ Bit of an odd premonition, isn’t it? And we still don’t really know what happened, if you think about it. Where she was going, why. Who called. Someone *called*, right, or did I make—”

And the Colonel kept talking, puzzling it out, while I picked up the book and found my way to that page where the general’s headlong race came to its end, and we were both stuck in our heads, the distance between us unbridgeable, and I could not listen to the Colonel, because I was busy trying to get the last hints of her smell, busy telling myself that of course she had not done it. It was me—I had done it, and so had the Colonel. He could try to puzzle his way out of it, but I knew better, knew that we could never be anything but wholly, unforgivably guilty.

eight days after

TUESDAY—WE HAD SCHOOL for the first time. Madame O’Malley had a moment of silence at the beginning of French class, a class that was always punctuated with long moments of silence, and then asked us how we were feeling.

“Awful,” a girl said.

“*En français*,” Madame O’Malley replied. “*En français*.”

Everything looked the same, but more still: the Weekday Warriors still sat on the benches outside the library, but their gossip was quiet, understated. The cafeteria clamored with the sounds of plastic trays against wooden tables and forks scraping plates, but any conversations were muted. But more than the noiselessness of everyone else was the silence where she should have been, the bubbling bursting storytelling Alaska, but instead it felt like those times when she had withdrawn into herself, like she was refusing to answer *how* or *why* questions, only this time for good.

The Colonel sat down next to me in religion class, sighed, and said, “You reek of smoke, Pudge.”

“Ask me if I give a shit.”

Dr. Hyde shuffled into class then, our final exams stacked underneath one arm. He sat down, took a series of labored breaths, and began to talk. “It is a law that parents should not have to bury their children,” he said. “And someone

should enforce it. This semester, we're going to continue studying the religious traditions to which you were introduced this fall. But there's no doubting that the questions we'll be asking have more immediacy now than they did just a few days ago. What happens to us after we die, for instance, is no longer a question of idle philosophical interest. It is a question we must ask about our classmate. And how to live in the shadow of grief is not something nameless Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have to explore. The questions of religious thought have become, I suspect, personal."

He shuffled through our exams, pulling one out from the pile before him. "I have here Alaska's final. You'll recall that you were asked what the most important question facing people is, and how the three traditions we're studying this year address that question. This was Alaska's question."

With a sigh, he grabbed hold of his chair and lifted himself out of it, then wrote on the blackboard: *How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?* —A. Y.

"I'm going to leave that up for the rest of the semester," he said. "Because everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question. At some point we all look up and realize we are lost in a maze, and I don't want us to forget Alaska, and I don't want to forget that even when the material we study seems boring, we're trying to understand how people have answered that question and the questions each of you posed in your papers—how different traditions have come to terms with what Chip, in his final, called 'people's rotten lots in life.'"

Hyde sat down. "So, how are you guys doing?"

The Colonel and I said nothing, while a bunch of people who didn't know Alaska extolled her virtues and professed to be devastated, and at first, it bothered me. I didn't want the people she didn't know—and the people she didn't like—to be sad. They'd never cared about her, and now they were carrying on as if she were a sister. But I guess I didn't know her completely, either. If I had, I'd have known what she'd meant by "To be continued?" And if I had cared about her as I should have, as I thought I did, how could I have let her go?

So they didn't bother me, really. But next to me, the Colonel breathed slowly and deeply through his nose like a bull about to charge.

He actually rolled his eyes when Weekday Warrior Brooke Blakely, whose parents had received a progress report courtesy of Alaska, said, "I'm just sad I never told her I loved her. I just don't understand *why*."

“That’s such bullshit,” the Colonel said as we walked to lunch. “As if Brooke Blakely gives two shits about Alaska.”

“If Brooke Blakely died, wouldn’t you be sad?” I asked.

“I guess, but I wouldn’t bemoan the fact I never told her I *loved* her. I *don’t* love her. She’s an idiot.”

I thought everyone else had a better excuse to grieve than we did—after all, they hadn’t killed her—but I knew better than to try to talk to the Colonel when he was mad.

nine days after

“I’VE GOT A THEORY,” the Colonel said as I walked in the door after a miserable day of classes. The cold had begun to let up, but word had not spread to whoever ran the furnaces, so the classrooms were all stuffy and overheated, and I just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep until the time came to do it all over again.

“Missed you in class today,” I noted as I sat down on my bed. The Colonel sat at his desk, hunched over a notebook. I lay down on my back and pulled the covers up over my head, but the Colonel was undiscouraged.

“Right, well, I was busy coming up with the theory, which isn’t terribly likely, admittedly, but it’s plausible. So, listen. She kisses you. That night, someone calls. Jake, I imagine. They have a fight—about cheating or about something else—who knows. So she’s upset, and she wants to go see him. She comes back to the room crying, and she tells us to help her get off campus. And she’s freaked out, because, I don’t know, let’s say because if she can’t go visit him, Jake will break up with her. That’s just a hypothetical reason. So she gets off campus, drunk and all pissed off, and she’s furious at herself over whatever it is, and she’s driving along and sees the cop car and then in a flash everything comes together and the end to her labyrinthine mystery is staring her right in the face and she just does it, straight and fast, just aims at the cop car and never swerves, not because she’s drunk but because she killed herself.”

“That’s ridiculous. She wasn’t thinking about Jake or fighting with Jake. *She was making out with me.* I tried to bring up the whole Jake thing, but she just shushed me.”

“So who called her?”

I kicked off my comforter and, my fist balled, smashed my hand against the wall with each syllable as I said, “I! DON’T! KNOW! And you know what, it doesn’t matter. She’s dead. Is the brilliant Colonel going to figure out something that’s gonna make her less freaking dead?” But it did matter, of course, which is

why I kept pounding at our cinder-block walls and why the questions had floated beneath the surface for a week. Who'd called? What was wrong? Why did she leave? Jake had not gone to her funeral. Nor had he called us to say he was sorry, or to ask us what happened. He had just disappeared, and of course, I had wondered. I had wondered if she had any intention of keeping her promise that we would be continued. I had wondered who called, and why, and what made her so upset. But I'd rather wonder than get answers I couldn't live with.

"Maybe she was driving there to break up with Jake, then," the Colonel said, his voice suddenly edgeless. He sat down on the corner of my bed.

"I don't know. I don't really want to know."

"Yeah, well," he said. "I want to know. Because if she knew what she was doing, Pudge, she made us accomplices. And I hate her for that. I mean, God, look at us. We can't even talk to anyone anymore. So listen, I wrote out a game plan: *One*. Talk to eyewitnesses. *Two*. Figure out how drunk she was. *Three*. Figure out where she was going, and why."

"I don't want to talk to Jake," I said halfheartedly, already resigned to the Colonel's incessant planning. "If he knows, I definitely don't want to talk to him. And if he doesn't, I don't want to pretend like it didn't happen."

The Colonel stood up and sighed. "You know what, Pudge? I feel bad for you. I do. I know you kissed her, and I know you're broken up about it. But honestly, shut up. If Jake knows, you're not gonna make it any worse. And if he doesn't, he won't find out. So just stop worrying about your goddamned self for one minute and think about your dead friend. Sorry. Long day."

"It's fine," I said, pulling the covers back over my head. "It's fine," I repeated. And, whatever. It *was* fine. It had to be. I couldn't afford to lose the Colonel.

thirteen days after

BECAUSE OUR MAIN SOURCE of vehicular transportation was interred in Vine Station, Alabama, the Colonel and I were forced to walk to the Pelham Police Department to search for eyewitnesses. We left after eating dinner in the cafeteria, the night falling fast and early, and trudged up Highway 119 for a mile and a half before coming to a single-story stucco building situated between a Waffle House and a gas station.

Inside, a long desk that rose to the Colonel's solar plexus separated us from the police station proper, which seemed to consist of three uniformed officers sitting at three desks, all of them talking on the phone.

“I’m Alaska Young’s brother,” the Colonel announced brazenly. “And I want to talk to the cop who saw her die.”

A pale, thin man with a reddish blond beard spoke quickly into the phone and then hung up. “I seen ’er,” he said. “She hit mah cruiser.”

“Can we talk to you outside?” the Colonel asked.

“Yup.”

The cop grabbed a coat and walked toward us, and as he approached, I could see the blue veins through the translucent skin of his face. For a cop, he didn’t seem to get out much. Once outside, the Colonel lit a cigarette.

“You nineteen?” the cop asked. In Alabama, you can get married at eighteen (fourteen with Mom and Dad’s permission), but you have to be nineteen to smoke.

“So fine me. I just need to know what you saw.”

“Ah most always work from six t’ midnight, but I was coverin’ the graveyard shift. We got a call ’bout a jackknifed truck, and I’s only about a mile away, so I headed over, and I’d just pulled up. I’s still in mah cruiser, and I seen out the corner a’ my eye the headlights, and my lights was on and I turned the siren on, but the lights just kept comin’ straight at me, son, and I got out quick and run off and she just barreled inta me. I seen plenty, but I ain’t never seen that. She didn’t tarn. She didn’t brake. She jest hit it. I wa’n’t more than ten feet from the cruiser when she hit it. I thought I’d die, but here ah am.”

For the first time, the Colonel’s theory seemed plausible. She didn’t hear *the siren*? She didn’t see *the lights*? She was sober enough to kiss well, I thought. Surely she was sober enough to swerve.

“Did you see her face before she hit the car? Was she asleep?” the Colonel asked.

“That I cain’t tell ya. I didn’t see ’er. There wa’n’t much time.”

“I understand. She was dead when you got to the car?” he asked.

“I—I did everything I could. Ah run right up to her, but the steerin’ wheel—well, ah reached in there, thought if ah could git that steerin’ wheel loose, but there weren’t no gettin’ her outta that car alive. It fairly well crushed her chest, see.”

I winced at the image. “Did she say anything?” I asked.

“She was passed on, son,” he said, shaking his head, and my last hope of last words faded.

“Do you think it was an accident?” the Colonel asked as I stood beside him, my shoulders slouching, wanting a cigarette but nervous to be as audacious as him.

“Ah been an officer here twenty-six years, and ah’ve seen more drunks than

you'n count, and ah ain't never seen someone so drunk they cain't swerve. But ah don't know. The coroner said it was an accident, and maybe it was. That ain't my field, y'know. I s'pose that's 'tween her and the Lord now."

"How drunk was she?" I asked. "Like, did they test her?"

"Yeah. Her BAL was point twenty-four. That's drunk, certainly. That's a powerful drunk."

"Was there anything in the car?" the Colonel asked. "Anything, like, unusual that you remember?"

"I remember them brochures from colleges—places in Maine and Ohia and Texas—I thought t' myself that girl must be from Culver Crick and that was mighty sad, see a girl like that lookin' t' go t' college. That's a goddamned shame. And they's flowers. They was flowers in her backseat. Like, from a florist. Tulips."

Tulips? I thought immediately of the tulips Jake had sent her. "Were they white?" I asked.

"They sure was," the cop answered. Why would she have taken his tulips with her? But the cop wouldn't have an answer for that one.

"Ah hope y'all find out whatever y'all's lookin' for. I have thought it over some, 'cause I never seen nothing like that before. Ah've thought hard on it, wondered if I'da started up the cruiser real quick and drove it off, if she'da been all right. There mightn't've been time. No knowing now. But it don't matter, t' my mind, whether it were an accident or it weren't. It's a goddamned shame either way."

"There was nothing you could have done," the Colonel said softly. "You did your job, and we appreciate it."

"Well. Thanks. Y'all go 'long now, and take care, and let me know if ya have any other questions. This is mah card if you need anything."

The Colonel put the card in his fake leather wallet, and we walked toward home.

"White tulips," I said. "Jake's tulips. Why?"

"One time last year, she and Takumi and I were at the Smoking Hole, and there was this little white daisy on the bank of the creek, and all of a sudden she just jumped waist-deep into the water and waded across and grabbed it. She put it behind her ear, and when I asked her about it, she told me that her parents always put white flowers in her hair when she was little. Maybe she wanted to die with white flowers."

"Maybe she was going to return them to Jake," I said.

"Maybe. But that cop just shit sure convinced me that it might have been a suicide."

“Maybe we should just let her be dead,” I said, frustrated. It seemed to me that nothing we might find out would make anything any better, and I could not get the image of the steering wheel careening into her chest out of my mind, her chest “fairly well crushed” while she sucked for a last breath that would never come, and no, this was not making anything better. “What if she *did* do it?” I asked the Colonel. “We’re not any less guilty. All it does is make her into this awful, selfish bitch.”

“Christ, Pudge. Do you even remember the person she actually *was*? Do you remember how she *could* be a selfish bitch? That was part of her, and you used to know it. It’s like now you only care about the Alaska you made up.”

I sped up, walking ahead of the Colonel, silent. And he couldn’t know, because he wasn’t the last person she kissed, because he hadn’t been left with an unkeepable promise, because he wasn’t me. *Screw this*, I thought, and for the first time, I imagined just going back home, ditching the Great Perhaps for the old comforts of school friends. Whatever their faults, I’d never known my school friends in Florida to die on me.

After a considerable distance, the Colonel jogged up to me and said, “I just want it to be normal again,” he said. “You and me. Normal. Fun. Just, normal. And I feel like if we knew—”

“Okay, fine,” I cut him off. “Fine. We’ll keep looking.”

The Colonel shook his head, but then he smiled. “I have always appreciated your enthusiasm, Pudge. And I’m just going to go ahead and pretend you still have it until it comes back. Now let’s go home and find out why people off themselves.”

fourteen days after

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE the Colonel and I found on the Web:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Verbally threatening suicide
- Giving away prized possessions
- Collecting and discussing methods of suicide
- Expressions of hopelessness and anger at oneself and/or the world
- Writing, talking, reading, and drawing about death and/or depression
- Suggesting that the person would not be missed if s/he were gone
- Self-injury
- Recent loss of a friend or family member through death or suicide

Sudden and dramatic decline in academic performance
Eating disorders, sleeplessness, excessive sleeping, chronic headaches
Use (or increased use) of mind-altering substances
Loss of interest in sex, hobbies, and other activities previously enjoyed

Alaska displayed two of those warning signs. She had lost, although not recently, her mother. And her drinking, always pretty steady, had definitely increased in the last month of her life. She did talk about dying, but she always seemed to be at least half kidding.

“I make jokes about death all the time,” the Colonel said. “I made a joke last week about hanging myself with my tie. And I’m not gonna off myself. So that doesn’t count. And she didn’t give anything away, and she sure as hell didn’t lose interest in sex. One would have to like sex an awful lot to make out with your scrawny ass.”

“Funny,” I said.

“I know. God, I’m a genius. And her grades were good. And I don’t recall her talking about killing herself.”

“Once, with the cigarettes, remember? ‘You smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die.’”

“That was a *joke*.”

But when prodded by the Colonel, maybe to prove to him that I could remember Alaska as she really was and not just as I wanted her to be, I kept returning the conversation to those times when she would be mean and moody, when she didn’t feel like answering *how*, *when*, *why*, *who*, or *what* questions. “She could seem so *angry*,” I thought aloud.

“What, and I can’t?” the Colonel retorted. “I’m plenty angry, Pudge. And you haven’t been the picture of placidity of late, either, and you aren’t going to off yourself. Wait, are you?”

“No,” I said. And maybe it was only because Alaska couldn’t hit the brakes and I couldn’t hit the accelerator. Maybe she just had an odd kind of courage that I lacked, but no.

“Good to know. So yeah, she was up and down—from fire and brimstone to smoke and ashes. But partly, this year at least, it was the whole Marya thing. Look, Pudge, she obviously wasn’t thinking about killing herself when she was making out with you. After that, she was asleep until the phone rang. So she decided to kill herself at some point between that ringing phone and crashing, or it was an accident.”

“But why wait until you’re six miles off campus to die?” I asked.

He sighed and shook his head. “She did like being mysterious. Maybe she

wanted it like this.” I laughed then, and the Colonel said, “What?”

“I was just thinking—*Why do you run head-on into a cop car with its lights on?* and then I thought, *Well, she hated authority figures.*”

The Colonel laughed. “Hey, look at that. Pudge made a funny!”

It felt almost normal, and then my distance from the event itself seemed to evaporate and I found myself back in the gym, hearing the news for the first time, the Eagle’s tears dripping onto his pants, and I looked over at the Colonel and thought of all the hours we’d spent on this foam couch in the past two weeks—everything she’d ruined. Too pissed off to cry, I said, “This is only making me hate her. I don’t want to hate her. And what’s the point, if that’s all it’s making me do?” Still refusing to answer *how* and *why* questions. Still insisting on an aura of mystery.

I leaned forward, head between my knees, and the Colonel placed a hand on my upper back. “The point is that there are always answers, Pudge.” And then he pushed air out between his pursed lips and I could hear the angry quiver in his voice as he repeated, “There are *always* answers. We just have to be smart enough. The Web says that suicides usually involve carefully thought-out plans. So clearly she did not commit suicide.” I felt embarrassed to be still falling apart two weeks later when the Colonel could take his medicine so stoically, and I sat up.

“Okay, fine” I answered. “It wasn’t suicide.”

“Although it sure doesn’t make sense as an accident,” the Colonel said.

I laughed. “We sure are making progress.”

We were interrupted by Holly Moser, the senior I knew primarily from viewing her nude self-portraits over Thanksgiving with Alaska. Holly hung with the Weekday Warriors, which explains why I’d previously said about two words to her in my life, but she just came in without knocking and said that she’d had a mystical indicator of Alaska’s presence.

“I was in the Waffle House, and suddenly all the lights went off, except for, like, the light over my booth, which started flashing. It would be like on for a second and then off for a while and then on for a couple of seconds and then off. And I realized, you know, it was Alaska. I think she was trying to talk to me in Morse code. But, like, I don’t know Morse code. She probably didn’t know that. Anyway, I thought you guys should know.”

“Thanks,” I said curtly, and she stood for a while, looking at us, her mouth opening as if to speak, but the Colonel was staring at her through half-closed eyes, his jaw jutting out and his distaste uncontained. I understood how he felt: I didn’t believe in ghosts who used Morse code to communicate with people they’d never liked. And I disliked the possibility that Alaska would give

someone else peace but not me.

“God, people like that shouldn’t be allowed to live,” he said after she left.

“It was pretty stupid.”

“It’s not just stupid, Pudge. I mean, as if Alaska would talk to Holly Moser. God! I can’t stand these fake grievors. Stupid bitch.”

I almost told him that Alaska wouldn’t want him to call *any* woman a bitch, but there was no use fighting with the Colonel.

twenty days after

IT WAS SUNDAY, and the Colonel and I decided against the cafeteria for dinner, instead walking off campus and across Highway 119 to the Sunny Konvenience Kiosk, where we indulged in a well-balanced meal of two oatmeal cream pies apiece. Seven hundred calories. Enough energy to sustain a man for half a day. We sat on the curb in front of the store, and I finished dinner in four bites.

“I’m going to call Jake tomorrow, just so you know. I got his phone number from Takumi.”

“Fine,” I said.

I heard a bell jangle behind me and turned toward the opening door.

“Y’all’s loitering,” said the woman who’d just sold us dinner.

“We’re eating,” the Colonel answered.

The woman shook her head and ordered, as if to a dog, “Git.”

So we walked behind the store and sat by the stinking, fetid Dumpster.

“Enough with the *fine*’s already, Pudge. That’s ridiculous. I’m going to call Jake, and I’m going to write down everything he says, and then we’re going to sit down together and try and figure out what happened.”

“No. You’re on your own with that. I don’t want to know what happened between her and Jake.”

The Colonel sighed and pulled a pack of Pudge Fund cigarettes of his jeans pocket. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to! Do I have provide you with an in-depth analysis of every decision I make?”

The Colonel lit the cigarette with a lighter I’d paid for and took a drag. “Whatever. It needs to be figured out, and I need your help to do it, because between the two of us we knew her pretty well. So that’s that.”

I stood up and stared down at him sitting smugly, and he blew a thin stream of smoke at my face, and I’d had enough. “I’m tired of following orders, asshole! I’m not going to sit with you and discuss the finer points of her

relationship with Jake, goddamn it. I can't say it any clearer: *I don't want to know* about them. I *already know* what she told me, and that's all I need to know, and you can be a condescending prick as long as you'd like, but I'm not going to sit around and chat with you about how goddamned much she loved Jake! Now give me my cigarettes." The Colonel threw the pack on the ground and was up in a flash, a fistful of my sweater in his hand, trying but failing to pull me down to his height.

"You don't even care about her!" he shouted. "All that matters is you and your precious fucking fantasy that you and Alaska had this goddamned secret love affair and she was going to leave Jake for you and you'd live happily ever after. But she kissed a lot of guys, Pudge. And if she were here, we both know that she would still be Jake's girlfriend and that there'd be nothing but drama between the two of you—not love, not sex, just you pining after her and her like, 'You're cute, Pudge, but I love Jake.' If she loved you so much, why did she leave you that night? And if you loved her so much, why'd you help her go? I was drunk. What's your excuse?"

The Colonel let go of my sweater, and I reached down and picked up the cigarettes. Not screaming, not through clenched teeth, not with the veins pulsing in my forehead, but calmly. Calmly. I looked down at the Colonel and said, "Fuck you."

The vein-pulsing screaming came later, after I had jogged across Highway 119 and through the dorm circle and across the soccer field and down the dirt road to the bridge, when I found myself at the Smoking Hole. I picked up a blue chair and threw it against the concrete wall, and the clang of plastic on concrete echoed beneath the bridge as the chair fell limply on its side, and then I lay on my back with my knees hanging over the precipice and screamed. I screamed because the Colonel was a self-satisfied, condescending bastard, and I screamed because he was right, for I did want to believe that I'd had a secret love affair with Alaska. Did she love me? Would she have left Jake for me? Or was it just another impulsive Alaska moment? It was not enough to be the last guy she kissed. I wanted to be the last one she loved. And I knew I wasn't. I knew it, and I hated her for it. I hated her for not caring about me. I hated her for leaving that night, and I hated myself, too, not only because I let her go but because if I had been enough for her, she wouldn't have even wanted to leave. She would have just lain with me and talked and cried, and I would have listened and kissed at her tears as they pooled in her eyes.

I turned my head and looked at one of the little blue plastic chairs on its side.

I wondered if there would ever be a day when I didn't think about Alaska, wondered whether I should hope for a time when she would be a distant memory—recalled only on the anniversary of her death, or maybe a couple of weeks after, remembering only after having forgotten.

I knew that I would know more dead people. The bodies pile up. Could there be a space in my memory for each of them, or would I forget a little of Alaska every day for the rest of my life?

Once, early on in the year, she and I had walked down to the Smoking Hole, and she jumped into Culver Creek with her flip-flops still on. She stepped across the creek, picking her steps carefully over the mossy rocks, and grabbed a waterlogged stick from the creek bank. As I sat on the concrete, my feet dangling toward the water, she overturned rocks with the stick and pointed out the skittering crawfish.

“You boil 'em and then suck the heads out,” she said excitedly. “That's where all the good stuff is—the heads.”

She taught me everything I knew about crawfish and kissing and pink wine and poetry. She made me different.

I lit a cigarette and spit into the creek. “You can't just make me different and then leave,” I said out loud to her. “Because I was fine before, Alaska. I was fine with just me and last words and school friends, and you can't just make me different and then die.” For she had embodied the Great Perhaps—she had proved to me that it was worth it to leave behind my minor life for grander maybes, and now she was gone and with her my faith in perhaps. I could call everything the Colonel said and did “fine.” I could try to pretend that I didn't care anymore, but it could never be true again. You can't just make yourself matter and then die, Alaska, because now I am irretrievably different, and I'm sorry I let you go, yes, but you made the choice. You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth. And now I don't even know if you chose the straight and fast way out, if you left me like this on purpose. And so I never knew you, did I? I can't remember, because I never knew.

And as I stood up to walk home and make my peace with the Colonel, I tried to imagine her in that chair, but I could not remember whether she crossed her legs. I could still see her smiling at me with half of *Mona Lisa's* smirk, but I couldn't picture her hands well enough to see her holding a cigarette. I needed, I decided, to really know her, because I needed more to remember. Before I could begin the shameful process of forgetting the how and the why of her living and dying, I needed to learn it: *How. Why. When. Where. What.*

At Room 43, after quickly offered and accepted apologies, the Colonel said, “We've made a tactical decision to push back calling Jake. We're going to

pursue some other avenues first.”

twenty-one days after

AS DR. HYDE shuffled into class the next morning, Takumi sat down next to me and wrote a note on the edge of his notebook. *Lunch at McInedible*, it read.

I scribbled *Okay* on my own notebook and then turned to a blank page as Dr. Hyde started talking about Sufism, the mystical sect of Islam. I’d only scanned through the reading—I’d been studying only enough not to fail—but in my scanning, I’d come across great last words. This poor Sufi dressed in rags walked into a jewelry store owned by a rich merchant and asked him, “Do you know how you’re going to die?” The merchant answered, “No. No one knows how they’re going to die.” And the Sufi said, “I do.”

“How?” asked the merchant.

And the Sufi lay down, crossed his arms, said, “Like this,” and died, whereupon the merchant promptly gave up his store to live a life of poverty in pursuit of the kind of spiritual wealth the dead Sufi had acquired.

But Dr. Hyde was telling a different story, one that I’d skipped. “Karl Marx famously called religion ‘the opiate of the masses.’ Buddhism, particularly as it is popularly practiced, promises improvement through karma. Islam and Christianity promise eternal paradise to the faithful. And that is a powerful opiate, certainly, the hope of a better life to come. But there’s a Sufi story that challenges the notion that people believe only because they need an opiate. Rabe’a al-Adiwiyah, a great woman saint of Sufism, was seen running through the streets of her hometown, Basra, carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When someone asked her what she was doing, she answered, ‘I am going to take this bucket of water and pour it on the flames of hell, and then I am going to use this torch to burn down the gates of paradise so that people will not love God for want of heaven or fear of hell, but because He is God.’”

A woman so strong she burns heaven and drenches hell. *Alaska would have liked this Rabe’a woman*, I wrote in my notebook. But even so, the afterlife mattered to me. Heaven and hell and reincarnation. As much as I wanted to know how Alaska had died, I wanted to know where she was now, if anywhere. I liked to imagine her looking down on us, still aware of us, but it seemed like a fantasy, and I never really *felt* it—just as the Colonel had said at the funeral that she wasn’t there, wasn’t anywhere. I couldn’t honestly imagine her as anything but dead, her body rotting in Vine Station, the rest of her just a ghost alive only

in our remembering. Like Rabe'a, I didn't think people should believe in God because of heaven and hell. But I didn't feel a need to run around with a torch. You can't burn down a made-up place.

After class, as Takumi picked through his fries at McInedible, eating only the crunchiest, I felt the total loss of her, still reeling from the idea that she was not only gone from this world but from all of them.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"Uh," he said, a mouth full of fries, "nah good. You?"

"Not good." I took a bite of cheeseburger. I'd gotten a plastic stock car with my Happy Meal, and it sat overturned on the table. I spun the wheels.

"I miss her," Takumi said, pushing away his tray, uninterested in the remaining soggy fries.

"Yeah. I do, too. I'm sorry, Takumi," and I meant it in the largest possible way. I was sorry we ended up like this, spinning wheels at a McDonald's. Sorry the person who had brought us together now lay dead between us. I was sorry I let her die. *Sorry I haven't talked to you because you couldn't know the truth about the Colonel and me, and I hated being around you and having to pretend that my grief is this uncomplicated thing—pretending that she died and I miss her instead of that she died because of me.*

"Me too. You're not dating Lara anymore, are you?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay. She was kind of wondering."

I had been ignoring her, but by then she had begun to ignore me back, so I figured it was over, but maybe not. "Well," I told Takumi, "I just can't—I don't know, man. That's pretty complicated."

"Sure. She'll understand. Sure. All good."

"Okay."

"Listen, Pudge. I—ah, I don't know. It sucks, huh?"

"Yeah."

twenty-seven days after

SIX DAYS LATER, four Sundays after the last Sunday, the Colonel and I were trying to shoot each other with paintball guns while turning 900s in a half pipe.

"We need booze. And we need to borrow the Eagle's Breathalyzer."

"Borrow it? Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah. He's never made you take one?"

“Um. No. He thinks I’m a nerd.”

“You *are* a nerd, Pudge. But you’re not gonna let a detail like that keep you from drinking.” Actually, I hadn’t drunk since that night, and didn’t feel particularly inclined to ever take it up ever again.

Then I nearly elbowed the Colonel in the face, swinging my arms wildly as if contorting my body in the right ways mattered as much as pressing the right buttons at the right moments—the same video-game-playing delusion that had always gripped Alaska. But the Colonel was so focused on the game he didn’t even notice. “Do you have a plan for how, exactly, we’re going to steal the Breathalyzer from *inside the Eagle’s house*?”

The Colonel looked over at me and said, “Do you suck at this game?” and then, without turning back to the screen, shot my skater in the balls with a blue paint blast. “But first, we gotta get some liquor, because the ambrosia’s sour and my booze connection is—”

“*POOF*. Gone,” I finished.

When I opened his door, Takumi was sitting at his desk, boxy headphones surrounding his entire head, bouncing his head to the beat. He seemed oblivious to us. “Hey,” I said. Nothing. “Takumi!” Nothing. “TAKUMI!” He turned around and pulled off his headphones. I closed the door behind me and said, “You got any alcohol?”

“Why?” he asked.

“Uh, because we want to get drunk?” the Colonel answered.

“Great. I’ll join you.”

“Takumi,” the Colonel said. “This is—we need to do this alone.”

“No. I’ve had enough of that shit.” Takumi stood up, walked into his bathroom, and came out with a Gatorade bottle filled with clear liquid. “I keep it in the medicine cabinet,” Takumi said. “On account of how it’s medicine.” He pocketed the bottle and then walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind him. A moment later, he peeked his head back in and, brilliantly mimicking the Colonel’s bossy bass voice, said, “Christ, you comin’ or what?”

“Takumi,” the Colonel said. “Okay. Look, what we’re doing is a little dangerous, and I don’t want you caught up in it. Honestly. But, listen, we’ll tell you everything starting tomorrow.”

“I’m tired of all this secret shit. She was my friend, too.”

“Tomorrow. Honestly.”

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket and tossed it to me. “Tomorrow,” he said.

“I don’t really want him to know,” I said as we walked back to the room, the Gatorade bottle stuffed in the pocket of my sweatshirt. “He’ll hate us.”

“Yeah, well, he’ll hate us more if we keep pretending he doesn’t exist,” the Colonel answered.

Fifteen minutes later, I stood at the Eagle’s doorstep.

He opened the door with a spatula in hand, smiled, and said, “Miles, come in. I was just making an egg sandwich. Want one?”

“No thanks,” I said, following the Eagle into his kitchen.

My job was to keep him out of his living room for thirty seconds so the Colonel could get the Breathalyzer undetected. I coughed loudly to let the Colonel know the coast was clear. The Eagle picked up his egg sandwich and took a bite. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” he asked.

“I just wanted to tell you that the Colonel—I mean, Chip Martin—he’s my roommate, you know, he’s having a tough time in Latin.”

“Well, he’s not attending the class, from what I understand, which can make it very difficult to learn the language.” He walked toward me. I coughed again, and backpedaled, the Eagle and I tangoing our way toward his living room.

“Right, well, he’s up all night every night thinking about Alaska,” I said, standing up straight and tall, trying to block the Eagle’s view of the living room with my none-too-wide shoulders. “They were very close, you know.”

“I know that—” he said, and in the living room, the Colonel’s sneakers squeaked against the hardwood floor. The Eagle looked at me quizzically and sidestepped me. I quickly said, “Is that burner on?” and pointed toward the frying pan.

The Eagle wheeled around, looked at the clearly not-on burner, then dashed into the living room.

Empty. He turned back to me. “Are you up to something, Miles?”

“No, sir. Honestly. I just wanted to talk about Chip.”

He arched his eyebrows, skeptical. “Well, I understand that this is a devastating loss for Alaska’s close friends. It’s just awful. There’s no comfort to this grief, is there?”

“No sir.”

“I’m sympathetic to Chip’s troubles. But school is important. Alaska would have wanted, I’m sure, for Chip’s studies to continue unimpeded.”

I’m sure, I thought. I thanked the Eagle, and he promised me an egg sandwich at some point in the future, which made me nervous that he would just show up at our room one afternoon with an egg sandwich in hand to find us A.

illegally smoking while the Colonel *B.* illegally drank milk and vodka out of a gallon jug.

Halfway across the dorm circle, the Colonel ran up to me. “That was smooth, with the ‘Is that burner on?’ If you hadn’t pulled that, I was toast. Although I guess I’ll have to start going to Latin. Stupid Latin.”

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. God, I hope he doesn’t go looking for it tonight. Although, really, he could never suspect anything. Why would someone *steal a Breathalyzer?*”

At two o’clock in the morning, the Colonel took his sixth shot of vodka, grimaced, then frantically motioned with his hand toward the bottle of Mountain Dew I was drinking. I handed it to him, and he took a long pull on it.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to go to Latin tomorrow,” he said. His words were slightly slurred, as if his tongue were swollen.

“One more,” I pleaded.

“Okay. This is it, though.” He poured a sip of vodka into a Dixie cup, swallowed, pursed his lips, and squeezed his hands into tight little fists. “*Oh God*, this is bad. It’s so much better with milk. This better be point two-four.”

“We have to wait for fifteen minutes after your last drink before we test it,” I said, having downloaded instructions for the Breathalyzer off the Internet. “Do you feel drunk?”

“If drunk were cookies, I’d be Famous Amos.”

We laughed. “Chips Ahoy! would have been funnier,” I said.

“Forgive me. Not at my best.”

I held the Breathalyzer in my hand, a sleek, silver gadget about the size of a small remote control. Beneath an LCD screen was a small hole. I blew into it to test it: 0.00, it read. I figured it was working.

After fifteen minutes, I handed it to the Colonel. “Blow really hard onto it for at least two seconds,” I said.

He looked up at me. “Is that what you told Lara in the TV room? Because, see, Pudge, they only *call* it a blow job.”

“Shut up and blow,” I said.

His cheeks puffed out, the Colonel blew into the hole hard and long, his face turning red.

.16. “Oh no,” the Colonel said. “Oh God.”

“You’re two-thirds of the way there,” I said encouragingly.

“Yeah, but I’m like three-fourths of the way to puking.”

“Well, obviously it’s possible. *She* did it. C’mon! You can outdrink a girl, can’t you?”

“Give me the Mountain Dew,” he said stoically.

And then I heard footsteps outside. Footsteps. We’d waited till 1:00 to turn on the lights, figuring everyone would be long asleep—it was a school night after all—but footsteps, shit, and as the Colonel looked at me confused, I grabbed the Breathalyzer from him and stuffed it between the foam cushions of the couch and grabbed the Dixie cup and the Gatorade bottle of vodka and stashed them behind the COFFEE TABLE, and in one motion I grabbed a cigarette from a pack and lit it, hoping the smell of smoke would cover up the smell of booze. I puffed the cigarette without inhaling, trying to smoke up the room, and I was almost back to the couch when the three quick knocks came against the door and the Colonel looked at me, his eyes wide, his suddenly unpromising future flashing before his eyes, and I whispered, “Cry,” as the Eagle turned the knob.

The Colonel hunched forward, his head between his knees and his shoulders shaking, and I put my arm around him as the Eagle came in.

“I’m sorry,” I said before the Eagle could say anything. “He’s having a tough night.”

“Are you *smoking?*” the Eagle asked. “*In your room? Four hours after lights-out?*”

I dropped the cigarette into a half-empty Coke can. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m just trying to stay awake with him.”

The Eagle walked up toward the couch, and I felt the Colonel start to rise, but I held his shoulders down firmly, because if the Eagle smelled the Colonel’s breath we were done for sure. “Miles,” the Eagle said. “I understand that this is a difficult time for you. But you will respect the rules of this school, or you will matriculate someplace else. I’ll see you in Jury tomorrow. Is there anything I can do for you, Chip?”

Without looking up, the Colonel answered in a quivering, tear-soaked voice, “No, sir. I’m just glad I have Miles.”

“Well, I am, too,” the Eagle said. “Perhaps you should encourage him to live within the confines of our rules, lest he risk his place on this campus.”

“Yessir,” the Colonel said.

“Y’all can leave your lights on until you’re ready to go to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow, Miles.”

“Good night, sir,” I said, imagining the Colonel sneaking the Breathalyzer back into the Eagle’s house while I got harangued at Jury. As the Eagle closed the door behind him, the Colonel shot up, smiling at me, and still nervous that the Eagle might be outside, whispered, “That was a thing of beauty.”

“I learned from the best,” I said. “Now drink.”

An hour later, the Gatorade bottle mostly empty, the Colonel hit .24.

“Thank you, Jesus!” he exclaimed, and then added, “This is awful. This is not fun drunk.”

I got up and cleared the COFFEE TABLE out of the way so the Colonel could walk the length of the room without hitting any obstacles, and said, “Okay, can you stand?”

The Colonel pushed his arms into the foam of the couch and began to rise, but then fell backward onto the couch, lying on his back. “Spinning room,” he observed. “Gonna puke.”

“Don’t puke. That will ruin everything.”

I decided to give him a field sobriety test, like the cops do. “Okay. Get over here and try to walk a straight line.” He rolled off the couch and fell to the floor, and I caught him beneath his armpits and held him up. I positioned him in between two tiles of the linoleum floor. “Follow that line of tiles. Walk straight, toe to heel.” He raised one leg and immediately leaned to the left, his arms windmilling. He took a single unsteady step, sort of a waddle, as his feet were seemingly unable to land directly in front of each other. He regained his balance briefly, then took a step backward and landed on the couch. “I fail,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Okay, how’s your depth perception?”

“My what perwhatshun?”

“Look at me. Is there one of me? Are there two of me? Could you accidentally drive into me if I were a cop car?”

“Everything’s very spinny, but I don’t think so. This is bad. Was she really like this?”

“Apparently. Could you drive like this?”

“Oh God no. No. No. She was really drunk, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“We were really stupid.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m spinning. But no. No cop car. I can *see*.”

“So there’s your evidence.”

“Maybe she fell asleep. I feel awfully sleepy.”

“We’ll find out,” I said, trying to play the role that the Colonel had always played for me.

“Not tonight,” he answered. “Tonight, we’re gonna throw up a little, and

then we are going to sleep through our hangover.”

“Don’t forget about Latin.”

“Right. Fucking Latin.”

twenty-eight days after

THE COLONEL MADE IT to Latin the next morning—“I feel awesome right now, because I’m still drunk. But God help me in a couple of hours”—and I took a French test for which I had studied *un petit peu*. I did all right on the multiple choice (which-verb-tense-makes-sense-here type questions), but the essay question, *In Le Petit Prince, what is the significance of the rose?* threw me a bit.

Had I read *The Little Prince* in English or French, I suspect this question might have been quite easy. Unfortunately, I’d spent the evening getting the Colonel drunk. So I answered, *Elle symbolise l’amour* (“It symbolizes love”). Madame O’Malley had left us with an entire page to answer the question, but I figured I’d covered it nicely in three words.

I’d kept up in my classes well enough to get B-minuses and not worry my parents, but I didn’t really care much anymore. *The significance of the rose?* I thought. *Who gives a shit? What’s the significance of the white tulips?* There was a question worth answering.

After I’d gotten a lecture and ten work hours at Jury, I came back to Room 43 to find the Colonel telling Takumi everything—well, everything except the kiss. I walked in to the Colonel saying, “So we helped her go.”

“You set off the fireworks,” he said.

“How’d you know about the fireworks?”

“I’ve been doing a bit of investigating,” Takumi answered. “Well, anyway, that was dumb. You shouldn’t have done it. But we all let her go, really,” he said, and I wondered what the hell he meant by that, but I didn’t have time to ask before he said to me, “So you think it was suicide?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t see how she could have hit the cop by accident unless she was asleep.”

“Maybe she was going to visit her father,” Takumi said. “Vine Station is on the way.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Everything’s a maybe, isn’t it?”

The Colonel reached in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes. “Well, here’s another one: *Maybe* Jake has the answers,” he said. “We’ve exhausted other strategies, so I’m calling him tomorrow, okay?”

I wanted answers now, too, but not to some questions. “Yeah, okay,” I said. “But listen—don’t tell me anything that’s not relevant. I don’t want to know anything unless it’s going to help me know where she was going and why.”

“Me neither, actually,” Takumi said. “I feel like maybe some of that shit should stay private.”

The Colonel stuffed a towel under the door, lit a cigarette, and said, “Fair enough, kids. We’ll work on a need-to-know basis.”

twenty-nine days after

AS I WALKED HOME from classes the next day, I saw the Colonel sitting on the bench outside the pay phone, scribbling into a notebook balanced on his knees as he cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder.

I hurried into Room 43, where I found Takumi playing the racing game on mute. “How long has he been on the phone?” I asked.

“Dunno. He was on when I got here twenty minutes ago. He must have skipped Smart Boy Math. Why, are you scared Jake’s gonna drive down here and kick your ass for letting her go?”

“Whatever,” I said, thinking, *This is precisely why we shouldn’t have told him.* I walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and lit a cigarette. Takumi came in not long after.

“What’s up?” he said.

“Nothing. I just want to know what happened to her.”

“Like you really want to know the truth? Or like you want to find out that she fought with him and was on her way to break up with him and was going to come back here and fall into your arms and you were going to make hot, sweet love and have genius babies who memorized last words *and* poetry?”

“If you’re pissed at me, just say so.”

“I’m not pissed at you for letting her go. But I’m tired of you acting like you were the only guy who ever wanted her. Like you had some monopoly on liking her,” Takumi answered. I stood up, lifted the toilet seat, and flushed my unfinished cigarette.

I stared at him for a moment, and then said, “I kissed her that night, and I’ve got a monopoly on that.”

“What?” he stammered.

“I kissed her.”

His mouth opened as if to speak, but he said nothing. We stared at each other for a while, and I felt ashamed of myself for what amounted to bragging, and

finally I said, “I—look, you know how she was. She wanted to do something, and she did it. I was probably just the guy who happened to be there.”

“Yeah. Well, I was never that guy,” he said. “I—well, Pudge, God knows I can’t blame you.”

“Don’t tell Lara.”

He was nodding as we heard the three quick knocks on the front door that meant the Eagle, and I thought, *Shit, caught twice in a week*, and Takumi pointed into the shower, and so we jumped in together and pulled the curtain shut, the too-low showerhead spitting water onto us from rib cage down. Forced to stand closer together than seemed entirely necessary, we stayed there, silent, the sputtering shower slowly soaking our T-shirts and jeans for a few long minutes, while we waited for the steam to lift the smoke into the vents. But the Eagle never knocked on the bathroom door, and eventually Takumi turned off the shower. I opened the bathroom door a crack and peeked out to see the Colonel sitting on the foam couch, his feet propped up on the COFFEE TABLE, finishing Takumi’s NASCAR race. I opened the door and Takumi and I walked out, fully clothed and dripping wet.

“Well, there’s something you don’t see every day,” the Colonel said nonchalantly.

“What the hell?” I asked.

“I knocked like the Eagle to scare you.” He smiled. “But shit, if y’all need privacy, just leave a note on the door next time.”

Takumi and I laughed, and then Takumi said, “Yeah, Pudge and I were getting a little testy, but man, ever since we showered together, Pudge, I feel really close to you.”

“So how’d it go?” I asked. I sat down on the COFFEE TABLE, and Takumi plopped down on the couch next to the Colonel, both of us wet and vaguely cold but more concerned with the Colonel’s talk with Jake than with getting dry.

“It was interesting. Here’s what you need to know: He gave her those flowers, like we thought. They didn’t fight. He just called because he had promised to call at the exact moment of their eight-month anniversary, which happened to be three-oh-two in the A.M., which—let’s agree—is a little ridiculous, and I guess somehow she heard the phone ringing. So they talked about nothing for like five minutes, and then completely out of nowhere, she freaked out.”

“Completely out of nowhere?” Takumi asked.

“Allow me to consult my notes.” The Colonel flipped through his notebook. “Okay. Jake says, ‘Did you have a nice anniversary?’ and then Alaska says, ‘I had a *splendid* anniversary,’” and I could hear in the Colonel’s reading the

excitement of her voice, the way she leaped onto certain words like *splendid* and *fantastic* and *absolutely*. “Then it’s quiet, then Jake says, ‘What are you doing?’ and Alaska says, ‘Nothing, just doodling,’ and then she says, ‘Oh God.’ And then she says, ‘Shit shit shit’ and starts sobbing, and told him she had to go but she’d talk to him later, but she didn’t say she was driving to see him, and Jake doesn’t think she was. He doesn’t know where she was going, but he says she always asked if she could come up and see him, and she didn’t ask, so she must not have been coming. Hold on, lemme find the quote.” He flipped a page in the notebook. “Okay, here: ‘She said she’d talk to me later, not that she’d see me.’”

“She tells me ‘To be continued’ and tells him she’ll talk to him later,” I observed.

“Yes. Noted. Planning for a future. Admittedly inconsistent with suicide. So then she comes back into her room screaming about forgetting something. And then her headlong race comes to its end. So no answers, really.”

“Well, we know where she wasn’t going.”

“Unless she was feeling particularly impulsive,” Takumi said. He looked at me. “And from the sound of things, she was feeling rather impulsive that night.”

The Colonel looked over at me curiously, and I nodded.

“Yeah,” Takumi said. “I know.”

“Okay, then. And you were pissed, but then you took a shower with Pudge and it’s all good. Excellent. So, so that night...” the Colonel continued.

And we tried to resurrect the conversation that last night as best we could for Takumi, but neither of us remembered it terribly well, partly because the Colonel was drunk and I wasn’t paying attention until she brought up Truth or Dare. And, anyway, we didn’t know how much it might mean. Last words are always harder to remember when no one knows that someone’s about to die.

“I mean,” the Colonel said, “I think she and I were talking about how much I adored skateboarding on the computer but how it would never even occur to me to try and step on a skateboard in real life, and then she said, ‘Let’s play Truth or Dare’ and then you fucked her.”

“Wait, you *fucked* her? *In front of the Colonel?*” Takumi cried.

“I didn’t fuck her.”

“Calm down, guys,” the Colonel said, throwing up his hands. “It’s a euphemism.”

“For what?” Takumi asked.

“Kissing.”

“Brilliant euphemism.” Takumi rolled his eyes. “Am I the only one who thinks that might be significant?”

“Yeah, that never occurred to me before,” I deadpanned. “But now I don’t

know. She didn't tell Jake. It couldn't have been that important."

"Maybe she was racked with guilt," he said.

"Jake said she seemed normal on the phone before she freaked out," the Colonel said. "But it must have been that phone call. Something happened that we aren't seeing." The Colonel ran his hands through his thick hair, frustrated. "Christ, something. Something inside of her. And now we just have to figure out what that was."

"So we just have to read the mind of a dead person," Takumi said. "Easy enough."

"Precisely. Want to get shitfaced?" the Colonel asked.

"I don't feel like drinking," I said.

The Colonel reached into the foam recesses of the couch and pulled out Takumi's Gatorade bottle. Takumi didn't want any either, but the Colonel just smirked and said, "More for me," and chugged.

thirty-seven days after

THE NEXT WEDNESDAY, I ran into Lara after religion class—literally. I'd seen her, of course. I'd seen her almost every day—in English or sitting in the library whispering to her roommate, Katie. I saw her at lunch and dinner at the cafeteria, and I probably would have seen her at breakfast, if I'd ever gotten up for it. And surely, she saw me as well, but we hadn't, until that morning, looked at each other simultaneously.

By now, I assumed she'd forgotten me. After all, we only dated for about a day, albeit an eventful one. But when I plowed right into her left shoulder as I hustled toward precalc, she spun around and looked up at me. Angry, and not because of the bump. "I'm sorry," I blurted out, and she just squinted at me like someone about to either fight or cry, and disappeared silently into a classroom. First two words I'd said to her in a month.

I wanted to want to talk to her. I knew I'd been awful—*Imagine*, I kept telling myself, *if you were Lara, with a dead friend and a silent ex-boyfriend*—but I only had room for one true want, and she was dead, and I wanted to know the how and why of it, and Lara couldn't tell me, and that was all that mattered.

forty-five days after

FOR WEEKS, the Colonel and I had relied on charity to support our cigarette habit

—we’d gotten free or cheap packs from everyone from Molly Tan to the once-crew-cutted Longwell Chase. It was as if people wanted to help and couldn’t think of a better way. But by the end of February, we ran out of charity. Just as well, really. I never felt right taking people’s gifts, because they did not know that we’d loaded the bullets and put the gun in her hand.

So after our classes, Takumi drove us to Coosa “We Cater to Your Spiritual Needs” Liquors. That afternoon, Takumi and I had learned the disheartening results of our first major precalc test of the semester. Possibly because Alaska was no longer available to teach us precalc over a pile of McInedible french fries and possibly because neither of us had really studied, we were both in danger of getting progress reports sent home.

“The thing is that I just don’t find precalc very interesting,” Takumi said matter-of-factly.

“It might be hard to explain that to the director of admissions at Harvard,” the Colonel responded.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I find it pretty compelling.”

And we laughed, but the laughs drifted into a thick, pervasive silence, and I knew we were all thinking of her, dead and laughless, cold, no longer Alaska. The idea that Alaska didn’t exist still stunned me every time I thought about it. *She’s rotting underground in Vine Station, Alabama*, I thought, but even that wasn’t quite it. Her body was there, but she was nowhere, nothing, *POOF*.

The times that were the most fun seemed always to be followed by sadness now, because it was when life started to feel like it did when she was with us that we realized how utterly, totally gone she was.

I bought the cigarettes. I’d never entered Coosa Liquors, but it was every bit as desolate as Alaska described. The dusty wooden floor creaked as I made my way to the counter, and I saw a large barrel filled with brackish water that purported to contain LIVE BAIT, but in fact contained a veritable school of dead, floating minnows. The woman behind the counter smiled at me with all four of her teeth when I asked her for a carton of Marlboro Lights.

“You go t’ Culver Creek?” she asked me, and I did not know whether to answer truthfully, since no high-school student was likely to be nineteen, but she grabbed the carton of cigarettes from beneath her and put it on the counter without asking for an ID, so I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“How’s school?” she asked.

“Pretty good,” I answered.

“Heard y’all had a death up there.”

“Yes’m,” I say.

“I’s awful sorry t’ hear it.”

“Yes’m.”

The woman, whose name I did not know because this was not the sort of commercial establishment to waste money on name tags, had one long, white hair growing from a mole on her left cheek. It wasn’t disgusting, exactly, but I couldn’t stop glancing at it and then looking away.

Back in the car, I handed a pack of cigarettes to the Colonel.

We rolled down the windows, although the February cold bit at my face and the loud wind made conversation impossible. I sat in my quarter of the car and smoked, wondering why the old woman at Coosa Liquors didn’t just pull that one hair out of her mole. The wind blew through Takumi’s rolled-down window in front of me and against my face. I scooted to the middle of the backseat and looked up at the Colonel sitting shotgun, smiling, his face turned to the wind blowing in through his window.

forty-six days after

I DIDN’T WANT TO TALK TO LARA, but the next day at lunch, Takumi pulled the ultimate guilt trip. “How do you think Alaska would feel about this shit?” he asked as he stared across the cafeteria at Lara. She was sitting three tables away from us with her roommate, Katie, who was telling some story, and Lara smiled whenever Katie laughed at one of her own jokes. Lara scooped up a forkful of canned corn and held it above her plate, moving her mouth to it and bowing her head toward her lap as she took the bite from the fork—a quiet eater.

“She could talk to *me*,” I told Takumi.

Takumi shook his head. His open mouth gooey with mashed potatoes, he said, “Yuh ha’ to.” He swallowed. “Let me ask you a question, Pudge. When you’re old and gray and your grandchildren are sitting on your knee and look up at you and say, ‘Grandpappy, who gave you your first blow job?’ do you want to have to tell them it was some girl you spent the rest of high school ignoring? No!” He smiled. “You want to say, ‘My dear friend Lara Buterskaya. Lovely girl. Prettier than your grandma by a wide margin.’” I laughed. So yeah, okay. I had to talk to Lara.

After classes, I walked over to Lara’s room and knocked, and then she stood in the doorway, looking like, *What? What now? You’ve done the damage you could, Pudge*, and I looked past her, into the room I’d only entered once, where I learned that kissing or no, I couldn’t talk to her—and before the silence could get too uncomfortable, I talked. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?” she asked, still looking toward me but not quite at me.

“For ignoring you. For everything,” I said.

“You deesn’t have to be my boyfriend.” She looked so pretty, her big eyes blinking fast, her cheeks soft and round, and still the roundness could only remind me of Alaska’s thin face and her high cheekbones. But I could live with it—and, anyway, I had to. “You could have just been my friend,” she said.

“I know. I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t forgive that asshole,” Katie cried from inside the room.

“I forgivee you.” Lara smiled and hugged me, her hands tight around the small of my back. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and smelled violets in her hair.

“I don’t forgive you,” Katie said, appearing in the doorway. And although Katie and I were not well acquainted, she felt comfortable enough to knee me in the balls. She smiled then, and as I crumpled into a bow, Katie said, “Now I forgive you.”

Lara and I took a walk to the lake—sans Katie—and we talked. We talked—about Alaska and about the past month, about how she had to miss me *and* miss Alaska, while I only had to miss Alaska (which was true enough). I told her as much of the truth as I could, from the firecrackers to the Pelham Police Department and the white tulips.

“I loved her,” I said, and Lara said she loved her, too, and I said, “I know, but that’s why. I loved her, and after she died I couldn’t think about anything else. It felt, like, dishonest. Like cheating.”

“That’s not a good reason,” she said.

“I know,” I answered.

She laughed softly. “Well, good then. As long as you know.” I knew I wasn’t going to erase that anger, but we were talking.

As darkness spread that evening, the frogs croaked and a few newly resurrected insects buzzed about campus, and the four of us—Takumi, Lara, the Colonel, and I—walked through the cold gray light of a full moon to the Smoking Hole.

“Hey, Colonel, why do you call eet the Smoking Hole?” Lara asked. “Eet’s, like, a tunnel.”

“It’s like fishing hole,” the Colonel said. “Like, if we fished, we’d fish here. But we smoke. I don’t know. I think Alaska named it.” The Colonel pulled a cigarette out of his pack and threw it into the water.

“What the hell?” I asked.

“For her,” he said.

I half smiled and followed his lead, throwing in a cigarette of my own. I

handed Takumi and Lara cigarettes, and they followed suit. The smokes bounced and danced in the stream for a few moments, and then they floated out of sight.

I was not religious, but I liked rituals. I liked the idea of connecting an action with remembering. In China, the Old Man had told us, there are days reserved for grave cleaning, where you make gifts to the dead. And I imagined that Alaska would want a smoke, and so it seemed to me that the Colonel had begun an excellent ritual.

The Colonel spit into the stream and broke the silence. “Funny thing, talking to ghosts,” he said. “You can’t tell if you’re making up their answers or if they are really talking to you.”

“I say we make a list,” Takumi said, steering clear of introspective talk. “What kind of proof do we have of suicide?” The Colonel pulled out his omnipresent notebook.

“She never hit the brakes,” I said, and the Colonel started scribbling.

And she was awfully upset about something, although she’d been awfully upset without committing suicide many times before. We considered that maybe the flowers were some kind of memorial to herself—like a funeral arrangement or something. But that didn’t seem very Alaskan to us. She was cryptic, sure, but if you’re going to plan your suicide down to the flowers, you probably have a plan as to how you’re actually going to die, and Alaska had no way of knowing a police car was going to present itself on I-65 for the occasion.

And the evidence suggesting an accident?

“She was really drunk, so she could have thought she wasn’t going to hit the cop, although I don’t know how,” Takumi said.

“She could have fallen asleep,” Lara offered.

“Yeah, we’ve thought about that,” I said. “But I don’t think you keep driving straight if you fall asleep.”

“I can’t think of a way to find out that does not put our lives in considerable danger,” the Colonel deadpanned. “Anyway, she didn’t show warning signs of suicide. I mean, she didn’t talk about wanting to die or give away her stuff or anything.”

“That’s two. Drunk and no plans to die,” Takumi said. This wasn’t going anywhere. Just a different dance with the same question. What we needed wasn’t more thinking. We needed more evidence.

“We have to find out where she was going,” the Colonel said.

“The last people she talked to were me, you, and Jake,” I said to him. “And we don’t know. So how the hell are we going to find out?”

Takumi looked over at the Colonel and sighed. “I don’t think it would help, to know where she was going. I think that would make it worse for us. Just a gut

feeling.”

“Well, *my* gut wants to know,” Lara said, and only then did I realize what Takumi meant the day we’d showered together—I may have kissed her, but I really *didn’t* have a monopoly on Alaska; the Colonel and I weren’t the only ones who cared about her, and weren’t alone in trying to figure out how she died and why.

“Well, regardless,” said the Colonel, “we’re at a dead end. So one of you think of something to do. Because I’m out of investigative tools.”

He flicked his cigarette butt into the creek, stood up, and left. We followed him. Even in defeat, he was still the Colonel.

fifty-one days after

THE INVESTIGATION STALLED, I took to reading for religion class again, which seemed to please the Old Man, whose pop quizzes I’d been failing consistently for a solid six weeks. We had one that Wednesday morning: *Share an example of a Buddhist koan*. A koan is like a riddle that’s supposed to help you toward enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. For my answer, I wrote about this guy Banzan. He was walking through the market one day when he overheard someone ask a butcher for his best piece of meat. The butcher answered, “Everything in my shop is the best. You cannot find a piece of meat that is not the best.” Upon hearing this, Banzan realized that there is no best and no worst, that those judgments have no real meaning because there is only what is, and *poof*, he reached enlightenment. Reading it the night before, I’d wondered if it would be like that for me—if in one moment, I would finally understand her, know her, and understand the role I’d played in her dying. But I wasn’t convinced enlightenment struck like lightning.

After we’d passed our quizzes, the Old Man, sitting, grabbed his cane and motioned toward Alaska’s fading question on the blackboard. “Let’s look at one sentence on page ninety-four of this very entertaining introduction to Zen that I had you read this week. ‘Everything that comes together falls apart,’” the Old Man said. “Everything. The chair I’m sitting on. It was built, and so it will fall apart. I’m gonna fall apart, probably before this chair. And you’re gonna fall apart. The cells and organs and systems that make you you—they came together, grew together, and so must fall apart. The Buddha knew one thing science didn’t prove for millennia after his death: Entropy increases. Things fall apart.”

We are all going, I thought, and it applies to turtles and tortle-necks, Alaska the girl and Alaska the place, because nothing can last, not even the earth itself.

The Buddha said that suffering was caused by desire, we'd learned, and that the cessation of desire meant the cessation of suffering. When you stopped wishing things wouldn't fall apart, you'd stop suffering when they did.

Someday no one will remember that she ever existed, I wrote in my notebook, and then, *or that I did*. Because memories fall apart, too. And then you're left with nothing, left not even with a ghost but with its shadow. In the beginning, she had haunted me, haunted my dreams, but even now, just weeks later, she was slipping away, falling apart in my memory and everyone else's, dying again.

The Colonel, who had driven the Investigation from the start, who had cared about what happened to her when I only cared if she loved me, had given up on it, answerless. And I didn't like what answers I had: She hadn't even cared enough about what happened between us to tell Jake; instead, she had just talked cute with him, giving him no reason to think that minutes before, I'd tasted her boozy breath. And then something invisible snapped inside her, and that which had come together commenced to fall apart.

And maybe that was the only answer we'd ever have. She fell apart because that's what happens. The Colonel seemed resigned to that, but if the Investigation had once been his idea, it was now the thing that held me together, and I still hoped for enlightenment.

sixty-two days after

THE NEXT SUNDAY, I slept in until the late-morning sunlight slivered through the blinds and found its way to my face. I pulled the comforter over my head, but the air got hot and stale, so I got up to call my parents.

"Miles!" my mom said before I even said hello. "We just got caller identification."

"Does it magically know it's me calling from the pay phone?"

She laughed. "No, it just says 'pay phone' and the area code. So I deduced. How are you?" she asked, a warm concern in her voice.

"I'm doing okay. I kinda screwed up some of my classes for a while, but I'm back to studying now, so it should be fine," I said, and that was mostly true.

"I know it's been hard on you, buddy," she said. "Oh! Guess who your dad and I saw at a party last night? Mrs. Forrester. Your fourth-grade teacher! Remember? She remembered you *perfectly*, and spoke very highly of you, and we just talked"—and while I was pleased to know that Mrs. Forrester held my fourth-grade self in high regard, I only half listened as I read the scribbled notes

on the white-painted pine wall on either side of the phone, looking for any new ones I might be able to decode (*Lacy's—Friday, 10* were the when and where of a Weekday Warrior party, I figured)—“and we had dinner with the Johnstons last night and I'm afraid that Dad had too much wine. We played charades and he was just *awful*.” She laughed, and I felt so tired, but someone had dragged the bench away from the pay phone, so I sat my bony butt down on the hard concrete, pulling the silver cord of the phone taut and preparing for a serious soliloquy from my mom, and then down below all the other notes and scribbles, I saw a drawing of a flower. Twelve oblong petals around a filled-in circle against the daisy-white paint, and daisies, white daisies, and I could hear her saying, *What do you see, Pudge? Look*, and I could see her sitting drunk on the phone with Jake talking about nothing and *What are you doing?* and she says, *Nothing, just doodling, just doodling*. And then, *Oh God*.

“Miles?”

“Yeah, sorry, Mom. Sorry. Chip's here. We gotta go study. I gotta go.”

“Will you call us later, then? I'm sure Dad wants to talk to you.”

“Yeah, Mom; yeah, of course. I love you, okay? Okay, I gotta go.”

“I think I found something!” I shouted at the Colonel, invisible beneath his blanket, but the urgency in my voice and the promise of something, anything, found, woke the Colonel up instantly, and he jumped from his bunk to the linoleum. Before I could say anything, he grabbed yesterday's jeans and sweatshirt from the floor, pulled them on, and followed me outside.

“Look.” I pointed, and he squatted down beside the phone and said, “Yeah. She drew that. She was always doodling those flowers.”

“And ‘just doodling,’ remember? Jake asked her what she was doing and she said ‘just doodling,’ and *then* she said ‘Oh God’ and freaked out. She looked at the doodle and remembered something.”

“Good memory, Pudge,” he acknowledged, and I wondered why the Colonel wouldn't just get excited about it.

“And then she freaked out,” I repeated, “and went and got the tulips while we were getting the fireworks. She saw the doodle, remembered whatever she'd forgotten, and then freaked out.”

“Maybe,” he said, still staring at the flower, trying perhaps to see it as she had. He stood up finally and said, “It's a solid theory, Pudge,” and reached up and patted my shoulder, like a coach complimenting a player. “But we still don't know what she forgot.”

sixty-nine days after

A WEEK AFTER THE DISCOVERY of the doodled flower, I'd resigned myself to its insignificance—I wasn't Banzan in the meat market after all—and as the maples around campus began to hint of resurrection and the maintenance crew began mowing the grass in the dorm circle again, it seemed to me we had finally lost her.

The Colonel and I walked into the woods down by the lake that afternoon and smoked a cigarette in the precise spot where the Eagle had caught us so many months before. We'd just come from a town meeting, where the Eagle announced the school was going to build a playground by the lake in memory of Alaska. She did like swings, I guess, but a *playground*? Lara stood up at the meeting—surely a first for her—and said they should do something funnier, something Alaska herself would have done.

Now, by the lake, sitting on a mossy, half-rotten log, the Colonel said to me, “Lara was right. We should do something for her. A prank. Something she would have loved.”

“Like, a memorial prank?”

“Exactly. The Alaska Young Memorial Prank. We can make it an annual event. Anyway, she came up with this idea last year. But she wanted to save it to be our senior prank. But it's good. It's really good. It's historic.”

“Are you going to tell me?” I asked, thinking back to the time when he and Alaska had left me out of prank planning for Barn Night.

“Sure,” he said. “The prank is entitled ‘Subverting the Patriarchal Paradigm.’” And he told me, and I have to say, Alaska left us with the crown jewel of pranks, the *Mona Lisa* of high-school hilarity, the culmination of generations of Culver Creek pranking. And if the Colonel could pull it off, it would be etched in the memory of everyone at the Creek, and Alaska deserved nothing less. Best of all, it did not, technically, involve any expellable offenses.

The Colonel got up and dusted the dirt and moss off his pants. “I think we owe her that.”

And I agreed, but still, she owed us an explanation. If she was up there, down there, out there, somewhere, maybe she would laugh. And maybe—just maybe—she would give us the clue we needed.

eighty-three days after

TWO WEEKS LATER, the Colonel returned from spring break with two notebooks

filled with the minutiae of prank planning, sketches of various locations, and a forty-page, two-column list of problems that might crop up and their solutions. He calculated all times to a tenth of a second, and all distances to the inch, and then he recalculated, as if he could not bear the thought of failing her again. And then on that Sunday, the Colonel woke up late and rolled over. I was reading *The Sound and the Fury*, which I was supposed to have read in mid-February, and I looked up as I heard the rustling in the bed, and the Colonel said, “Let’s get the band back together.” And so I ventured out into the overcast spring and woke up Lara and Takumi, then brought them back to Room 43. The Barn Night crew was intact—or as close as it ever would be—for the Alaska Young Memorial Prank.

The three of us sat on the couch while the Colonel stood in front of us, outlining the plan and our parts in it with an excitement I hadn’t seen in him since Before. When he finished, he asked, “Any questions?”

“Yeah,” Takumi said. “Is that seriously going to work?”

“Well, first we gotta find a stripper. And second Pudge has to work some magic with his dad.”

“All right, then,” Takumi said. “Let’s get to work.”

eighty-four days after

EVERY SPRING, Culver Creek took one Friday afternoon off from classes, and all the students, faculty, and staff were required to go to the gym for Speaker Day. Speaker Day featured two speakers—usually small-time celebrities or small-time politicians or small-time academics, the kind of people who would come and speak at a school for the measly three hundred bucks the school budgeted. The junior class picked the first speaker and the seniors the second, and anyone who had ever attended a Speaker Day agreed that they were torturously boring. We planned to shake Speaker Day up a bit.

All we needed to do was convince the Eagle to let “Dr. William Morse,” a “friend of my dad’s” and a “preeminent scholar of deviant sexuality in adolescents,” be the junior class’s speaker.

So I called my dad at work, and his secretary, Paul, asked me if everything was all right, and I wondered why everyone, *everyone*, asked me if everything was all right when I called at any time other than Sunday morning.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

My dad picked up. “Hey, Miles. Is everything all right?”

I laughed and spoke quietly into the phone, since people were milling about.

“Yeah, Dad. Everything is fine. Hey, remember when you stole the school bell and buried it in the cemetery?”

“Greatest Culver Creek prank ever,” he responded proudly.

“It was, Dad. It *was*. So listen, I wonder if you’d help out with the new greatest Culver Creek prank ever.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Miles. I don’t want you getting in any trouble.”

“Well, I won’t. The whole junior class is planning it. And it’s not like anyone is going to get hurt or anything. Because, well, remember Speaker Day?”

“*God* that was boring. That was almost worse than class.”

“Yeah, well, I need you to pretend to be our speaker. Dr. William Morse, a professor of psychology at the University of Central Florida and an expert in adolescent understandings of sexuality.”

He was quiet for a long time, and I looked down at Alaska’s last daisy and waited for him to ask what the prank was, and I would have told him, but I just heard him breathe slowly into the phone, and then he said, “I won’t even ask. *Hmm.*” He sighed. “Swear to God you’ll never tell your mother.”

“I swear to God.” I paused. It took me a second to remember the Eagle’s real name. “Mr. Starnes is going to call you in about ten minutes.”

“Okay, my name is Dr. William Morse, and I’m a psychology professor, and—adolescent sexuality?”

“Yup. You’re the best, Dad.”

“I just want to see if you can top me,” he said, laughing.

Although it killed the Colonel to do it, the prank could not work without the assistance of the Weekday Warriors—specifically junior-class president Longwell Chase, who by now had grown his silly surfer mop back. But the Warriors loved the idea, so I met Longwell in his room and said, “Let’s go.”

Longwell Chase and I had nothing to talk about and no desire to pretend otherwise, so we walked silently to the Eagle’s house. The Eagle came to the door before we even knocked. He cocked his head a little when he saw us, looking confused—and, indeed, we made an odd couple, with Longwell’s pressed and pleated khaki pants and my I-keep-meaning-to-do-laundry blue jeans.

“The speaker we picked is a friend of Miles’s dad,” Longwell said. “Dr. William Morse. He’s a professor at a university down in Florida, and he studies adolescent sexuality.”

“Aiming for controversy, are we?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I’ve met Dr. Morse. He’s interesting, but he’s not controversial. He just studies the, uh, the way that adolescents’ understanding of sex is still changing and growing. I mean, he’s opposed to premarital sex.”

“Well. What’s his phone number?” I gave the Eagle a piece of paper, and he walked to a phone on the wall and dialed. “Yes, hello. I’m calling to speak with Dr. Morse?...Okay, thanks...Hello, Dr. Morse. I have Miles Halter here in my home, and he tells me...great, wonderful...Well, I was wondering”—the Eagle paused, twisting the cord around his finger—“wondering, I guess, whether you—just so long as you understand that these are impressionable young people. We wouldn’t want *explicit* discussions....Excellent. Excellent. I’m glad you understand....You, too, sir. See you soon!” The Eagle hung up the phone, smiling, and said, “Good choice! He seems like a very interesting man.”

“Oh yeah,” Longwell said very seriously. “I think he will be extraordinarily interesting.”

one hundred two days after

MY FATHER PLAYED Dr. William Morse on the phone, but the man playing him in real life went by the name of Maxx with two x’s, except that his name was actually Stan, except on Speaker Day his name was, obviously, Dr. William Morse. He was a veritable existential identity crisis, a male stripper with more aliases than a covert CIA agent.

The first four “agencies” the Colonel called turned us down. It wasn’t until we got to the *B*’s in the “Entertainment” section of the Yellow Pages that we found Bachelorette Parties R Us. The owner of the aforementioned establishment liked the idea a great deal, but, he said, “Maxx is gonna love that. But no nudity. Not in front of the kids.” We agreed—with some reluctance.

To ensure that none of us would get expelled, Takumi and I collected five dollars from every junior at Culver Creek to cover “Dr. William Morse’s” appearance fee, since we doubted the Eagle would be keen on paying him after witnessing the, uh, speech. I paid the Colonel’s five bucks. “I feel that I have earned your charity,” he said, gesturing to the spiral notebooks he’d filled with plans.

As I sat through my classes that morning, I could think of nothing else. Every junior in the school had known for two weeks, and so far not even the faintest rumor had leaked out. But the Creek was rife with gossips—particularly the Weekday Warriors, and if just one person told one friend who told one friend who told one friend who told the Eagle, everything would fall apart.

The Creek’s don’t-rat ethos withstood the test nicely, but when Maxx/Stan/Dr. Morse didn’t show up by 11:50 that morning, I thought the Colonel would lose

his shit. He sat on the bumper of a car in the student parking lot, his head bowed, his hands running through his thick mop of dark hair over and over again, as if he were trying to find something in there. Maxx had promised to arrive by 11:40, twenty minutes before the official start of Speaker Day, giving him time to learn the speech and everything. I stood next to the Colonel, worried but quiet, waiting. We'd sent Takumi to call "the agency" and learn the whereabouts of "the performer."

"Of all the things I thought could go wrong, this was not one of them. We have no solution for this."

Takumi ran up, careful not to speak to us until he was near. Kids were starting to file into the gym. Late late late late. We asked so little of our performer, really. We had written his speech. We had planned everything for him. All Maxx had to do was show up with his outfit on. And yet...

"The agency," said Takumi, "says the performer is on his way."

"On his way?" the Colonel said, clawing at his hair with a new vigor. "On his way? He's *already* late."

"They said he should be—" and then suddenly our worries disappeared as a blue minivan rounded the corner toward the parking lot, and I saw a man inside wearing a suit.

"That'd better be Maxx," the Colonel said as the car parked. He jogged up to the front door.

"I'm Maxx," the guy said upon opening the door.

"I am a nameless and faceless representative of the junior class," the Colonel answered, shaking Maxx's hand. He was thirtyish, tan and wide-shouldered, with a strong jaw and a dark, close-cropped goatee.

We gave Maxx a copy of his speech, and he read through it quickly.

"Any questions?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah. Given the nature of this event, I think y'all should pay me in advance."

He struck me as very articulate, even professorial, and I felt a supreme confidence, as if Alaska had found the best male stripper in central Alabama and led us right to him.

Takumi popped the trunk of his SUV and grabbed a paper grocery bag with \$320 in it. "Here you go, Maxx," he said. "Okay, Pudge here is going to sit down there with you, because you are friends with Pudge's dad. That's in the speech. But, uh, we're hoping that if you get interrogated when this is all over, you can find it in your heart to say that the whole junior class called on a conference call to hire you, because we wouldn't want Pudge here to get in any trouble."

He laughed. “Sounds good to me. I took this gig because I thought it was hilarious. Wish *I’d* thought of this in high school.”

As I walked into the gym, Maxx/Dr. William Morse at my side, Takumi and the Colonel trailing a good bit behind me, I knew I was more likely to get busted than anyone else. But I’d been reading the Culver Creek Handbook pretty closely the last couple weeks, and I reminded myself of my two-pronged defense, in the event I got in trouble: 1. There is not, technically, a rule against paying a stripper to dance in front of the school. 2. It cannot be proven that I was responsible for the incident. It can only be proven that I brought a person onto campus who I presumed to be an expert on sexual deviancy in adolescence and who turned out to be an actual sexual deviant.

I sat down with Dr. William Morse in the middle of the front row of bleachers. Some ninth graders sat behind me, but when the Colonel walked up with Lara a moment later, he politely told them, “Thanks for holding our seats,” and ushered them away. As per the plan, Takumi was in the supply room on the second floor, connecting his stereo equipment to the gym’s loudspeakers. I turned to Dr. Morse and said, “We should look at each other with great interest and talk like you’re friends with my parents.”

He smiled and nodded his head. “He is a great man, your father. And your mother—so beautiful.” I rolled my eyes, a bit disgusted. Still, I liked this stripper fellow. The Eagle came in at noon on the nose, greeted the senior-class speaker—a former Alabama state attorney general—and then came over to Dr. Morse, who stood with great aplomb and half bowed as he shook the Eagle’s hand—maybe *too* formal—and the Eagle said, “We’re certainly very glad to have you here,” and Maxx replied, “Thank you. I hope I don’t disappoint.”

I wasn’t worried about getting expelled. I wasn’t even worried about getting the Colonel expelled, although maybe I should have been. I was worried that it wouldn’t work because Alaska hadn’t planned it. Maybe no prank worthy of her could be pulled off without her.

The Eagle stood behind the podium.

“This is a day of historic significance at Culver Creek. It was the vision of our founder Phillip Garden that you, as students and we, as faculty, might take one afternoon a year to benefit from the wisdom of voices outside the school, and so we meet here annually to learn from them, to see the world as others see it. Today, our junior-class speaker is Dr. William Morse, a professor of psychology at the University of Central Florida and a widely respected scholar. He is here today to talk about teenagers and sexuality, a topic I’m sure you’ll

find considerably interesting. So please help me welcome Dr. Morse to the podium.”

We applauded. My heart beat in my chest like it wanted to applaud, too. As Maxx walked up to the podium, Lara leaned down to me and whispered, “He *ees* really hot.”

“Thank you, Mr. Starnes.” Maxx smiled and nodded to the Eagle, then straightened his papers and placed them on the podium. Even *I* almost believed he was a professor of psychology. I wondered if maybe he was an actor supplementing his income.

He read directly from the speech without looking up, but he read with the confident, airy tone of a slightly snooty academic. “I’m here today to talk with you about the fascinating subject of teenage sexuality. My research is in the field of sexual linguistics, specifically the way that young people discuss sex and related questions. So, for instance, I’m interested in why my saying the word *arm* might not make you laugh, but my saying the word *vagina* might.” And, indeed, there were some nervous twitters from the audience. “The way young people speak about one another’s bodies says a great deal about our society. In today’s world, boys are much more likely to objectify girls’ bodies than the other way around. Boys will say amongst themselves that so-and-so has a nice rack, while girls will more likely say that a boy is cute, a term that describes both physical and emotional characteristics. This has the effect of turning girls into mere objects, while boys are seen by girls as whole people—”

And then Lara stood up, and in her delicate, innocent accent, cut Dr. William Morse off. “You’re so hot! I weesh you’d shut up and take off your clothes.”

The students laughed, but all of the teachers turned around and looked at her, stunned silent. She sat down.

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Lara,” she said.

“Now, Lara,” Maxx said, looking down at his paper to remember the line, “what we have here is a very interesting case study—a female objectifying me, a male. It’s so unusual that I can only assume you’re making an attempt at humor.”

Lara stood up again and shouted, “I’m not keeding! Take off your clothes.”

He nervously looked down at the paper, and then looked up at all of us, smiling. “Well, it is certainly important to subvert the patriarchal paradigm, and I suppose this is a way. All right, then,” he said, stepping to the left of the podium. And then he shouted, loud enough that Takumi could hear him upstairs, “This one’s for Alaska Young.”

As the fast, pumping bass of Prince’s “Get Off” started from the

loudspeakers, Dr. William Morse grabbed the leg of his pants with one hand and the lapel of his coat with the other, and the Velcro parted and his stage costume came apart, revealing Maxx with two x's, a stunningly muscular man with an eight-pack in his stomach and bulging pec muscles, and Maxx stood before us, smiling, wearing only briefs that were surely tighty, but not whitey—black leather.

His feet in place, Maxx swayed his arms to the music, and the crowd erupted with laughter and deafening, sustained applause—the largest ovation by a good measure in Speaker Day history. The Eagle was up in a flash, and as soon as he stood, Maxx stopped dancing, but he flexed his pec muscles so that they jumped up and down quickly in time to the music before the Eagle, not smiling but sucking his lips in as if not smiling required effort, indicated with a thumb that Maxx should go on home, and Maxx did.

My eyes followed Maxx out the door, and I saw Takumi standing in the doorway, fists raised in the air in triumph, before he ran back upstairs to cut the music. I was glad he'd gotten to see at least a bit of the show.

Takumi had plenty of time to get his equipment out, because the laughing and talking went on for several minutes while the Eagle kept repeating, "Okay. Okay. Let's settle down now. Settle down, y'all. Let's settle down."

The senior-class speaker spoke next. He blew. And as we left the gym, nonjuniors crowded around us, asking, "Was it you?" and I just smiled and said no, for it had not been me, or the Colonel or Takumi or Lara or Longwell Chase or anyone else in that gym. It had been Alaska's prank through and through. The hardest part about pranking, Alaska told me once, is not being able to confess. But I could confess on her behalf now. And as I slowly made my way out of the gym, I told anyone who would listen, "No. It wasn't us. It was Alaska."

The four of us returned to Room 43, aglow in the success of it, convinced that the Creek would never again see such a prank, and it didn't even occur to me that I might get in trouble until the Eagle opened the door to our room and stood above us, and shook his head disdainfully.

"I know it was y'all," said the Eagle.

We looked at him silently. He often bluffed. Maybe he was bluffing.

"Don't ever do anything like that again," he said. "But, Lord, 'subverting the patriarchal paradigm'—it's like she wrote the speech." He smiled and closed the door.

one hundred fourteen days after

A WEEK AND A HALF LATER, I walked back from my afternoon classes, the sun bearing down on my skin in a constant reminder that spring in Alabama had come and gone in a matter of hours, and now, early May, summer had returned for a six-month visit, and I felt the sweat dribble down my back and longed for the bitter winds of January. When I got to my room, I found Takumi sitting on the couch, reading my biography of Tolstoy.

“Uh, hi,” I said.

He closed the book and placed it beside him and said, “January 10.”

“What?” I asked.

“January 10. That date ring a bell?”

“Yeah, it’s the day Alaska died.” Technically, she died three hours into January 11, but it was still, to us anyway, Monday night, January 10.

“Yeah, but something else, Pudge. January 9. Alaska’s mom took her to the zoo.”

“Wait. No. How do you know that?”

“She told us at Barn Night. Remember?”

Of course I didn’t remember. If I could remember numbers, I wouldn’t be struggling toward a C-plus in precalc.

“Holy shit,” I said as the Colonel walked in.

“What?” the Colonel asked.

“January 9, 1997,” I told him. “Alaska liked the bears. Her mom liked the monkeys.” The Colonel looked at me blankly for a moment and then took his backpack off and slung it across the room in a single motion.

“Holy shit,” he said. “WHY THE HELL DIDN’T I THINK OF THAT!”

Within a minute, the Colonel had the best solution either of us would ever come up with. “Okay. She’s sleeping. Jake calls, and she talks to him, and she’s doodling, and she looks at her white flower, and ‘Oh God my mom liked white flowers and put them in my hair when I was little,’ and then she flips out. She comes back into her room and starts screaming at us that she forgot—forgot about her mom, of course—so she takes the flowers, drives off campus, on her way to—what?” He looked at me. “What? Her mom’s grave?”

And I said, “Yeah, probably. Yeah. So she gets into the car, and she just wants to get to her mom’s grave, but there’s this jackknifed truck and the cops there, and she’s drunk and pissed off and she’s in a hurry, so she thinks she can squeeze past the cop car, and she’s not even thinking straight, but she has to get to her mom, and she thinks she can get past it somehow and *POOF*.”

Takumi nods slowly, thinking, and then says, “Or, she gets into the car with the flowers. But she’s already missed the anniversary. She’s probably thinking that she screwed things up with her mom again—first she doesn’t call 911, and

now she can't even remember the freaking anniversary. And she's furious and she hates herself, and she decides, 'That's it, I'm doing it,' and she sees the cop car and there's her chance and she just floors it."

The Colonel reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, tapping it upside down against the COFFEE TABLE. "Well," he said. "That clears things up nicely."

one hundred eighteen days after

SO WE GAVE UP. I'd finally had enough of chasing after a ghost who did not want to be discovered. We'd failed, maybe, but some mysteries aren't meant to be solved. I still did not know her as I wanted to, but I never could. She made it impossible for me. And the *accide*, the *sudent*, would never be anything else, and I was left to ask, *Did I help you toward a fate you didn't want, Alaska, or did I just assist in your willful self-destruction?* Because they are different crimes, and I didn't know whether to feel angry at her for making me part of her suicide or just to feel angry at myself for letting her go.

But we knew what could be found out, and in finding it out, she had made us closer—the Colonel and Takumi and me, anyway. And that was it. She didn't leave me enough to discover her, but she left me enough to rediscover the Great Perhaps.

"There's one more thing we should do," the Colonel said as we played a video game together with the sound on—just the two of us, like in the first days of the Investigation.

"There's nothing more we can do."

"I want to drive through it," he said. "Like she did."

We couldn't risk leaving campus in the middle of the night like she had, so we left about twelve hours earlier, at 3:00 in the afternoon, with the Colonel behind the wheel of Takumi's SUV. We asked Lara and Takumi to come along, but they were tired of chasing ghosts, and besides, finals were coming.

It was a bright afternoon, and the sun bore down on the asphalt so that the ribbon of road before us quivered with heat. We drove a mile down Highway 119 and then merged onto I-65 northbound, heading toward the accident scene and Vine Station.

The Colonel drove fast, and we were quiet, staring straight ahead. I tried to imagine what she might have been thinking, trying again to see through time and space, to get inside her head just for a moment. An ambulance, lights and sirens

blaring, sped past us, going in the opposite direction, toward school, and for an instant, I felt a nervous excitement and thought, *It could be someone I know*. I almost wished it was someone I knew, to give new form and depth to the sadness I still felt.

The silence broke: “Sometimes I liked it,” I said. “Sometimes I liked it that she was dead.”

“You mean it felt good?”

“No. I don’t know. It felt...pure.”

“Yeah,” he said, dropping his usual eloquence. “Yeah. I know. Me, too. It’s natural. I mean, it must be natural.”

It always shocked me when I realized that I wasn’t the only person in the world who thought and felt such strange and awful things.

Five miles north of school, the Colonel moved into the left lane of the interstate and began to accelerate. I gritted my teeth, and then before us, broken glass glittered in the glare of the sun like the road was wearing jewelry, and that spot must be the spot. He was still accelerating.

I thought: *This would not be a bad way to go.*

I thought: *Straight and fast. Maybe she just decided at the last second.*

And *POOF* we are through the moment of her death. We are driving through the place that she could not drive through, passing onto asphalt she never saw, and we are not dead. We are not dead! We are breathing and we are crying and now slowing down and moving back into the right lane.

We got off at the next exit, quietly, and, switching drivers, we walked in front of the car. We met and I held him, my hands balled into tight fists around his shoulders, and he wrapped his short arms around me and squeezed tight, so that I felt the heaves of his chest as we realized over and over again that we were still alive. I realized it in waves and we held on to each other crying and I thought, *God we must look so lame*, but it doesn’t much matter when you have just now realized, all the time later, that you are still alive.

one hundred nineteen days after

THE COLONEL AND I threw ourselves into school once we gave up, knowing that we’d both need to ace our finals to achieve our GPA goals (I wanted a 3.0 and the Colonel wouldn’t settle for even a 3.98). Our room became Study Central for

the four of us, with Takumi and Lara over till all hours of the night talking about *The Sound and the Fury* and meiosis and the Battle of the Bulge. The Colonel taught us a semester's worth of precalc, although he was too good at math to teach it very well—"Of course it makes sense. Just trust me. Christ, it's not that hard"—and I missed Alaska.

And when I could not catch up, I cheated. Takumi and I shared copies of Cliffs Notes for *Things Fall Apart* and *A Farewell to Arms* ("These things are just too damned *long!*" he exclaimed at one point).

We didn't talk much. But we didn't need to.

one hundred twenty-two days after

A COOL BREEZE had beaten back the onslaught of summer, and on the morning the Old Man gave us our final exams, he suggested we have class outside. I wondered why we could have *an entire class* outside when I'd been kicked out of class last semester for merely *glancing* outside, but the Old Man wanted to have class outside, so we did. The Old Man sat in a chair that Kevin Richman carried out for him, and we sat on the grass, my notebook at first perched awkwardly in my lap and then against the thick green grass, and the bumpy ground did not lend itself to writing, and the gnats hovered. We were too close to the lake for comfortable sitting, really, but the Old Man seemed happy.

"I have here your final exam. Last semester, I gave you nearly two months to complete your final paper. This time, you get two weeks." He paused. "Well, nothing to be done about that, I guess." He laughed. "To be honest, I just decided once and for all to use this paper topic last night. It rather goes against my nature. Anyway, pass these around." When the pile came to me, I read the question:

How will you—you personally—ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering? Now that you've wrestled with three major religious traditions, apply your newly enlightened mind to Alaska's question.

After the exams had been passed out, the Old Man said, "You need not specifically discuss the perspectives of different religions in your essay, so no research is necessary. Your knowledge, or lack thereof, has been established in the quizzes you've taken this semester. I am interested in how you are able to fit the uncontested fact of suffering into your understanding of the world, and how you hope to navigate through life in spite of it.

“Next year, assuming my lungs hold out, we’ll study Taoism, Hinduism, and Judaism together—” The Old Man coughed and then started to laugh, which caused him to cough again. “Lord, maybe I *won’t* last. But about the three traditions we’ve studied this year, I’d like to say one thing. Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism each have founder figures—Muhammad, Jesus, and the Buddha, respectively. And in thinking about these founder figures, I believe we must finally conclude that each brought a message of radical hope. To seventh-century Arabia, Muhammad brought the promise that anyone could find fulfillment and everlasting life through allegiance to the one true God. The Buddha held out hope that suffering could be transcended. Jesus brought the message that the last shall be first, that even the tax collectors and lepers—the outcasts—had cause for hope. And so that is the question I leave you with in this final: What is your cause for hope?”

Back at Room 43, the Colonel was smoking in the room. Even though I still had one evening left of washing dishes in the cafeteria to work off my smoking conviction, we didn’t much fear the Eagle. We had fifteen days left, and if we got caught, we’d just have to start senior year with some work hours. “So how will we ever get out of this labyrinth, Colonel?” I asked.

“If only I knew,” he said.

“That’s probably not gonna get you an A.”

“Also it doesn’t do much to put my soul to rest.”

“Or hers,” I said.

“Right. I’d forgotten about her.” He shook his head. “That keeps happening.”

“Well, you have to write *something*,” I argued.

“After all this time, it still seems to me like straight and fast is the only way out—but I choose the labyrinth. The labyrinth blows, but I choose it.”

one hundred thirty-six days after

TWO WEEKS LATER, I still hadn’t finished my final for the Old Man, and the semester was just twenty-four hours from ending. I was walking home from my final test, a difficult but ultimately (I hoped) successful battle with precalculus that would win me the B-minus I so richly desired. It was genuinely hot out again, warm like she was. And I felt okay. Tomorrow, my parents would come and load up my stuff, and we’d watch graduation and then go back to Florida. The Colonel was going home to his mother to spend the summer watching the soybeans grow, but I could call him long-distance, so we’d be in touch plenty.

Takumi was going to Japan for the summer, and Lara was again to be driven home via green limo. I was just thinking that it was all right not to know quite where Alaska was and quite where she was going that night, when I opened the door to my room and noticed a folded slip of paper on the linoleum floor. It was a single piece of lime green stationery. At the top, it read in calligraphy:

From the Desk of...Takumi Hikohito
Pudge/Colonel:

I am sorry that I have not talked to you before. I am not staying for graduation. I leave for Japan tomorrow morning. For a long time, I was mad at you. The way you cut me out of everything hurt me, and so I kept what I knew to myself. But then even after I wasn't mad anymore, I still didn't say anything, and I don't even really know why. Pudge had that kiss, I guess. And I had this secret.

You've mostly figured this out, but the truth is that I saw her that night. I'd stayed up late with Lara and some people, and then I was falling asleep and I heard her crying outside my back window. It was like 3:15 that morning, maybe, and I walked out there and saw her walking through the soccer field. I tried to talk to her, but she was in a hurry. She told me that her mother was dead eight years that day, and that she always put flowers on her mother's grave on the anniversary, but she forgot that year. She was out there looking for flowers, but it was too early—too wintry. That's how I knew about January 10. I still have no idea whether it was suicide.

She was so sad, and I didn't know what to say or do. I think she counted on me to be the one person who would always say and do the right things to help her, but I couldn't. I just thought she was looking for flowers. I didn't know she was going to go. She was drunk, just trashed drunk, and I really didn't think she would drive or anything. I thought she would just cry herself to sleep and then drive to visit her mom the next day or something. She walked away, and then I heard a car start. I don't know what I was thinking.

So I let her go, too. And I'm sorry. I know you loved her. It was hard not to.

Takumi

I ran out of the room, like I'd never smoked a cigarette, like I ran with Takumi on Barn Night, across the dorm circle to his room, but Takumi was gone. His bunk was bare vinyl; his desk empty; an outline of dust where his

stereo had been. He was gone, and I did not have time to tell him what I had just now realized: that I forgave him, and that she forgave us, and that we had to forgive to survive in the labyrinth. There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day. Things that did not go right, things that seemed okay at the time because we could not see the future. If only we could see the endless string of consequences that result from our smallest actions. But we can't know better until knowing better is useless.

And as I walked back to give Takumi's note to the Colonel, I saw that I would never know. I would never know her well enough to know her thoughts in those last minutes, would never know if she left us on purpose. But the not-knowing would not keep me from caring, and I would always love Alaska Young, my crooked neighbor, with all my crooked heart.

I got back to Room 43, but the Colonel wasn't home yet, so I left the note on the top bunk and sat down at the computer, and I wrote my way out of the labyrinth:

Before I got here, I thought for a long time that the way out of the labyrinth was to pretend that it did not exist, to build a small, self-sufficient world in a back corner of the endless maze and to pretend that I was not lost, but home. But that only led to a lonely life accompanied only by the last words of the already-dead, so I came here looking for a Great Perhaps, for real friends and a more-than-minor life. And then I screwed up and the Colonel screwed up and Takumi screwed up and she slipped through our fingers. And there's no sugarcoating it: She deserved better friends.

When she fucked up, all those years ago, just a little girl terrified into paralysis, she collapsed into the enigma of herself. And I could have done that, but I saw where it led for her. So I still believe in the Great Perhaps, and I can believe in it in spite of having lost her.

Because I will forget her, yes. That which came together will fall apart imperceptibly slowly, and I will forget, but she will forgive my forgetting, just as I forgive her for forgetting me and the Colonel and everyone but herself and her mom in those last moments she spent as a person. I know now that she forgives me for being dumb and scared and doing the dumb and scared thing. I know she forgives me, just as her mother forgives her. And here's how I know:

I thought at first that she was just dead. Just darkness. Just a body being eaten by bugs. I thought about her a lot like that, as something's meal. What was her—green eyes, half a smirk, the soft curves of her legs

—would soon be nothing, just the bones I never saw. I thought about the slow process of becoming bone and then fossil and then coal that will, in millions of years, be mined by humans of the future, and how they would heat their homes with her, and then she would be smoke billowing out of a smokestack, coating the atmosphere. I still think that, sometimes, think that maybe “the afterlife” is just something we made up to ease the pain of loss, to make our time in the labyrinth bearable. Maybe she was just matter, and matter gets recycled.

But ultimately I do not believe that she was only matter. The rest of her must be recycled, too. I believe now that we are greater than the sum of our parts. If you take Alaska’s genetic code and you add her life experiences and the relationships she had with people, and then you take the size and shape of her body, you do not get her. There is something else entirely. There is a part of her greater than the sum of her knowable parts. And that part has to go somewhere, because it cannot be destroyed.

Although no one will ever accuse me of being much of a science student, one thing I learned from science classes is that energy is never created and never destroyed. And if Alaska took her own life, that is the hope I wish I could have given her. Forgetting her mother, failing her mother and her friends and herself—those are awful things, but she did not need to fold into herself and self-destruct. Those awful things are survivable, because we *are* as indestructible as we believe ourselves to be. When adults say, “Teenagers think they are invincible” with that sly, stupid smile on their faces, they don’t know how right they are. We need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken. We think that we are invincible because we *are*. We cannot be born, and we cannot die. Like all energy, we can only change shapes and sizes and manifestations. They forget that when they get old. They get scared of losing and failing. But that part of us greater than the sum of our parts cannot begin and cannot end, and so it cannot fail.

So I know she forgives me, just as I forgive her. Thomas Edison’s last words were: “It’s very beautiful over there.” I don’t know where there is, but I believe it’s somewhere, and I hope it’s beautiful.

some last words on last words

LIKE PUDGE HALTER, I am fascinated by last words. For me, it began when I was twelve years old. Reading a history textbook, I came across the dying words of President John Adams: “Thomas Jefferson still survives.” (Incidentally, he didn’t. Jefferson had died earlier that same day, July 4, 1826; Jefferson’s last words were “This is the Fourth?”)

I can’t say for sure why I remain interested in last words or why I’ve never stopped looking for them. It is true that I really loved John Adams’s last words when I was twelve. But I also really loved this girl named Whitney. Most loves don’t last. (Whitney sure didn’t. I can’t even remember her last name.) But some do.

Another thing that I can’t say for sure is that all of the last words quoted in this book are definitive. Almost by definition, last words are difficult to verify. Witnesses are emotional, time gets conflated, and the speaker isn’t around to clear up any controversy. I have tried to be accurate, but it is not surprising that there is debate over the two central quotes in *Looking for Alaska*.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

“How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!”

In reality, “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!” were probably not Simón Bolívar’s last words (although he did, historically, say them). His last words may have been “José! Bring the luggage. They do not want us here.” The significant source for “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!” is also Alaska’s source, Gabriel García Márquez’s *The General in His Labyrinth*.

FRANÇOIS RABELAIS

“I go to seek a Great Perhaps.”

François Rabelais is credited with four alternate sets of last words. *The Oxford Book of Death* cites his last words as: (a) “I go to seek a Great Perhaps”; (b) (after receiving extreme unction) “I am greasing my boots for the last journey” (c) “Ring down the curtain; the farce is played out”; (d) (wrapping himself in his domino, or hooded cloak) “*Beati qui in Domino moriuntur.*” The last one,

incidentally, is a pun,^{*} but because the pun is in Latin, it is now rarely quoted. Anyway, I dismiss (d) because it's hard to imagine a dying François Rabelais having the energy to make a physically demanding pun, *in Latin*. (c) is the most common citation, because it's funny, and everyone's a sucker for funny last words.

I still maintain that Rabelais' last words were "I go to seek a Great Perhaps," partly because Laura Ward's nearly authoritative book *Famous Last Words* agrees with me, and partly because I believe in them. I was born into Bolívar's labyrinth, and so I must believe in the hope of Rabelais' Great Perhaps.

For more information and source notes on the other quotes in the book, please visit my Web site: www.johngreenbooks.com.

^{*}It means both "Blessed are they who die in the Lord" and "Blessed are they who die wearing a cloak."

**Turn the page for a
new and updated reader's guide to**

**looking for
alaska**

Hi. I'm John Green, the author of the book you just read. Well, perhaps you *haven't* read it, and you're just skipping ahead to uncover spoilers, in which case I insist that you return to your page immediately.

Now that it's just those of us who've finished reading the book: Thanks for reading *Looking for Alaska*. Books are a weird collaboration between author and reader: You trust me to tell a good story, and I trust you to bring it to good life in your mind. I can only hope I held up my end of the bargain.

In the spirit of that collaboration, I thought I might answer some questions from readers and then offer up some questions for you about the novel and your response to it. So first, here are some real questions submitted by readers via Twitter and Tumblr:

IS *LOOKING FOR ALASKA* AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?

Yes. No. Kinda. Certainly, the physical campus of Culver Creek is very similar to the boarding school I attended, Indian Springs School. And many of the characters are amalgams of people I knew in high school. Indian Springs is a great school—a place unlike any other I've ever come across—and I could never have written this story if I hadn't spent three years there. That said, *Alaska* is a novel. It is well and truly made up. (And the basketball coach there would like me to note that their basketball program is really quite good.)

I'M READING *LOOKING FOR ALASKA* FOR SCHOOL AND I WAS WONDERING WHAT WERE TWO MAJOR SYMBOLS IN THE BOOK AND WHO WAS THE ENEMY.

I'm very grateful that *Looking for Alaska* is now taught in so many English classes, but it seems to me that books do not require either symbols or enemies to be worth reading. That said, in my opinion, there are symbols and enemies in *Alaska*. But my opinion doesn't really matter much. Books belong to their readers, and any symbols (or enemies) you find in the story can be just as interesting and important as any I could tell you about.

In short, I'm not gonna do your homework, dude.

DID YOU KNOW WHETHER OR NOT [SPOILER REDACTED BECAUSE I KNOW PEOPLE WILL READ THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE BEFORE THEY'VE READ THE BOOK, EVEN THOUGH I JUST FORBADE YOU TO DO SO LIKE SIX PARAGRAPHS AGO] WAS INTENTIONAL WHILE YOU WERE WRITING IT?

I still don't know whether [spoiler redacted] was intentional. When I started writing the book, I knew that neither I as a writer nor you as a reader would ever

get inside Blue Citrus that night. I wrote the book that way because at the time I had a lot of questions—big questions about suffering and loss and faith and despair—that could not be answered. And I wanted to know whether it is possible to live a hopeful life in a world riddled with ambiguity, whether we can find a way to go on even when we don't get answers to questions that haunt us.

DID YOU LISTEN TO ANY MUSIC WHILE WRITING *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*?

I listened to a lot of old country and bluegrass music: Hank Williams, Bill Monroe, and Doc Watson. I also listened to Neutral Milk Hotel and The Mountain Goats. (These days, I often listen to songs ABOUT *Looking for Alaska* while writing. This book, astonishingly, has inspired a lot of beautiful music.)

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE NAME ALASKA?

For the first couple years I was working on *Looking for Alaska*, it had no title and I used a placeholder name instead of Alaska. One day, my friend Levin and I watched the movie *The Royal Tenenbaums*, which includes in its soundtrack a cover of the great Velvet Underground song “Stephanie Says,” which refers to a girl called Alaska. I loved that song in high school, and I loved the name, but it wasn't until I went home and looked up the original meaning of Alyeska, “that which the sea breaks against,” that I realized it would be Alaska's name.

HAVE YOU BEEN AT ALL SURPRISED ABOUT THE SUCCESS OF *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*?

I have been entirely surprised. *Alaska* has been published all over the world, from Japan to Mexico to Lithuania, and it has enjoyed an uncommonly generous reception from readers. It has won awards that I never dared to hope for, and most importantly, people still read it and like it enough to share it with their friends. Honestly, I never thought this book would even still be in print seven years after its publication, let alone that I would be answering questions about it in a New and Expanded Discussion Guide.

ARE THERE ANY LAST WORDS YOU LIKED THAT DIDN'T MAKE THE BOOK?

Tons! I love Emily Dickinson's last words: “I must go in. The fog is rising.” Winston Churchill said, “I'm bored with it all.” British MP Lady Astor awoke from a stupor to find her family surrounding her and asked, “Am I dying or is it my birthday?” (It wasn't her birthday.) The Irish playwright Brendan Behan turned to a nun who was drawing his blood and said, “Bless you, Sister. May all

your sons be bishops.” And the great short story writer O. Henry, who knew a thing or two about endings, said, “Turn up the lights. I don’t want to go home in the dark.”

SOME INTENTIONALLY VAGUE AND BROAD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is forgiveness universal? I mean, is forgiveness really available to all people, no matter the circumstances? Is it, for instance, possible for the dead to forgive the living, and for the living to forgive the dead?
2. I would argue that both in fiction and in real life, teenage smoking is a symbolic action. What do you think it’s intended to symbolize, and what does it actually end up symbolizing? To phrase this question differently: Why would anyone ever pay money in exchange for the opportunity to acquire lung cancer and/or emphysema?
3. Do you like Alaska? Do you think it’s important to like people you read about?
4. By the end of this novel, Pudge has a lot to say about immortality and what the point of being alive is (if there is a point). To what extent do your thoughts on mortality shape your understanding of life’s meaning?
5. How would you answer the old man’s final question for his students? What would your version of Pudge’s essay look like?

p.s. The great and terrible beauty of the Internet now makes it possible for us to continue the strange conversation between reader and writer indefinitely. Here are some of the places you can catch me online:

My Web site: <http://www.johngreenbooks.com>

The video channel I built with my brother:

<http://www.youtube.com/vlogbrothers>

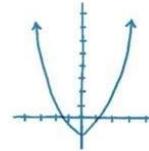
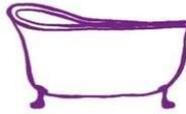
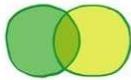
My tumblr: <http://fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com>

(that url is a very long story)

My twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/realjohngreen>

JOHN GREEN¹

¹ AUTHOR OF THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER
THE FAULT IN OUR STARS



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recent high school graduate and former child prodigy Colin sets off on a road trip
with his best friend to try to find some new direction in life.

[1. Interpersonal relations—Fiction. 2. Self-perception—Fiction. 3. Graphic methods—Fiction.]

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electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted
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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

Version_1

To my wife, Sarah Urist Green, anagrammatically:

Her great Russian
Grin has treasure—
A great risen rush.
She is a rut-ranger;
Anguish arrester;
Sister; haranguer;
Treasure-sharing,
Heart-reassuring
Signature Sharer
Easing rare hurts.

“But the pleasure isn’t owning the person. The pleasure is this. Having
another contender in the room with you.”

—Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*

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Q & A

(one)

The morning after noted child prodigy Colin Singleton graduated from high school and got dumped for the nineteenth time by a girl named Katherine, he took a bath. Colin had always preferred baths; one of his general policies in life was never to do anything standing up that could just as easily be done lying down. He climbed into the tub as soon as the water got hot, and he sat and watched with a curiously blank look on his face as the water overtook him. The water inched up his legs, which were crossed and folded into the tub. He did recognize, albeit faintly, that he was too long, and too big, for this bathtub—he looked like a mostly grown person playing at being a kid.

As the water began to splash over his skinny but unmuscled stomach, he thought of Archimedes. When Colin was about four, he read a book about Archimedes, the Greek philosopher who'd discovered that volume could be measured by water displacement when he sat down in the bathtub. Upon making this discovery, Archimedes supposedly shouted "Eureka!"¹ and then ran naked through the streets. The book said that many important discoveries contained a "Eureka moment." And even then, Colin very much wanted to have some important discoveries, so he asked his mom about it when she got home that evening.

"Mommy, am I ever going to have a Eureka moment?"

"Oh, sweetie," she said, taking his hand. "What's wrong?"

"I wanna have a *Eureka moment*," he said, the way another kid might have expressed longing for a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

She pressed the back of her hand to his cheek and smiled, her face so close to his that he could smell coffee and makeup. "Of course, Colin baby. Of course you will."

But mothers lie. It's in the job description.

• • •

Colin took a deep breath and slid down, immersing his head. *I am crying*, he thought, opening his eyes to stare through the soapy, stinging water. *I feel like crying, so I must be crying, but it's impossible to tell because I'm underwater.* But he wasn't crying. Curiously, he felt too depressed to cry. Too hurt. It felt as if she'd taken the part of him that cried.

He opened the drain in the tub, stood up, toweled off, and got dressed. When he exited the bathroom, his parents were sitting together on his bed. It was never a good sign when both his parents were in his room at the same time. Over the years it had meant:

1. Your grandmother/grandfather/Aunt-Suzie-whom-you-never-met-but-trust-me-she-was-nice-and-it's-a-shame is dead.
2. You're letting a girl named Katherine distract you from your studies.
3. Babies are made through an act that you will eventually find intriguing but for right now will just sort of horrify you, and also sometimes people do stuff that involves baby-making parts that does not actually involve making babies, like for instance kiss each other in places that are not on the face.

It never meant:

4. A girl named Katherine called while you were in the bathtub. She's sorry. She still loves you and has made a terrible mistake and is waiting for you downstairs.

But even so, Colin couldn't help but hope that his parents were in the room to provide news of the Number 4 variety. He was a generally pessimistic person, but he seemed to make an exception for Katherines: he always felt they would come back to him. The feeling of loving her and being loved by her welled up in him, and he could taste the adrenaline in the back of his throat, and maybe it wasn't over, and maybe he could feel her hand in his again and hear her loud, brash voice contort itself into a whisper to say *I-love-you* in the very quick and quiet way that she had always said it. She said *I love you* as if it were a secret, and an immense one.

His dad stood up and stepped toward him. "Katherine called my cell," he said. "She's worried about you." Colin felt his dad's hand on his shoulder, and then they both moved forward, and then they were hugging.

"We're very concerned," his mom said. She was a small woman with curly brown hair that had one single shock of white toward the front. "And stunned,"

she added. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Colin said softly into his dad’s shoulder. “She’s just—she’d had enough of me. She got tired. That’s what she said.” And then his mom got up and there was a lot of hugging, arms everywhere, and his mom was crying. Colin extricated himself from the hugs and sat down on his bed. He felt a tremendous need to get them out of his room immediately, like if they didn’t leave he would blow up. Literally. Guts on the walls; his prodigious brain emptied out onto his bedspread.

“Well, at some point we need to sit down and assess your options,” his dad said. His dad was big on assessing. “Not to look for silver linings, but it seems like you’ll now have some free time this summer. A summer class at Northwestern, maybe?”

“I really need to be alone, just for today,” Colin answered, trying to convey a sense of calm so that they would leave and he wouldn’t blow up. “So can we assess tomorrow?”

“Of course, sweetie,” his mom said. “We’ll be here all day. You just come down whenever you want and we love you and you’re so so special, Colin, and you can’t possibly let this girl make you think otherwise because you are the most magnificent, brilliant boy—” And right then, the most special, magnificent, brilliant boy bolted into his bathroom and puked his guts out. An explosion, sort of.

“Oh, Colin!” shouted his mom.

“I just need to be alone,” Colin insisted from the bathroom. “Please.”

When he came out, they were gone.

For the next fourteen hours without pausing to eat or drink or throw up again, Colin read and reread his yearbook, which he had received just four days before. Aside from the usual yearbook crap, it contained seventy-two signatures. Twelve were just signatures, fifty-six cited his intelligence, twenty-five said they wished they’d known him better, eleven said it was fun to have him in English class, seven included the words “pupillary sphincter,”² and a stunning *seventeen* ended, “Stay Cool!” Colin Singleton could no more *stay* cool than a blue whale could *stay* skinny or Bangladesh could *stay* rich. Presumably, those seventeen people were kidding. He mulled this over—and considered how twenty-five of his classmates, some of whom he’d been attending school with for twelve years, could possibly have wanted to “know him better.” As if they hadn’t had a chance.

But mostly for those fourteen hours, he read and reread Katherine XIX’s inscription:

Col,

Here's to all the places we went. And all the places we'll go. And here's me, whispering again and again and again and again: iloveyou.

yrs forever, K-a-t-h-e-r-i-n-e

Eventually, he found the bed too comfortable for his state of mind, so he lay down on his back, his legs sprawled across the carpet. He anagrammed “yrs forever” until he found one he liked: *sorry fever*. And then he lay there in his fever of sorry and repeated the now memorized note in his head and wanted to cry, but instead he only felt this aching behind his solar plexus. Crying *adds* something: crying is you, plus tears. But the feeling Colin had was some horrible opposite of crying. It was you, minus something. He kept thinking about one word—*forever*—and felt the burning ache just beneath his rib cage.

It hurt like the worst ass-kicking he'd ever gotten. And he'd gotten plenty.

¹ Greek: “I have found it.”

² More on that later.

(two)

It hurt like this until shortly before 10 P.M. when a rather fat, hirsute guy of Lebanese descent burst into Colin's room without knocking. Colin turned his head and squinted up at him.

"What the hell is this?" asked Hassan, almost shouting.

"She dumped me," answered Colin.

"So I heard. Listen, *sitzpinkler*,³ I'd love to comfort you, but I could put out a house fire with the contents of my bladder right now." Hassan breezed past the bed and opened the door to the bathroom. "God, Singleton, what'd you eat? It smells like—AHHH! PUKE! PUKE! AIIIIIEEE!" And as Hassan screamed, Colin thought, *Oh. Right. The toilet. Should have flushed.*

"Forgive me if I missed," Hassan said upon returning. He sat down on the edge of the bed and softly kicked Colin's prostrate body. "I had to hold my nose with both fugging hands, so Thunderstick was swinging freely. A mighty pendulum, that fuggger." Colin didn't laugh. "God, you must be in some state, because (a) Thunderstick jokes are my best material, and (b) who forgets to flush their own hurl?"

"I just want to crawl into a hole and die." Colin spoke into the cream carpet with no audible emotion.

"Oh, boy," Hassan said, exhaling slowly.

"All I ever wanted was for her to love me and to do something meaningful with my life. And look. I mean, look," he said.

"I am looking. And I'll grant you, *kafir*,⁴ that I don't like what I'm seeing. Or what I'm smelling, for that matter." Hassan lay back on the bed and let Colin's misery hang in the air for a moment.

"I'm just—I'm just a failure. What if this is it? What if ten years from now I'm sitting in a fugging cubicle crunching numbers and memorizing baseball statistics so I can kick ass in my fantasy league and I don't have her and I never do anything significant and I'm just a complete waste?"

Hassan sat up, his hands on his knees. “See, this is why you need to believe in God. Because I don’t even expect to have a *cube*, and I’m happier than a pig in a pile of shit.”

Colin sighed. Although Hassan himself was not *that* religious, he often jokingly tried to convert Colin. “Right. Faith in God. That’s a good idea. I’d also like to believe that I could fly into outer space on the fluffy backs of giant penguins and screw Katherine XIX in zero gravity.”

“Singleton, you need to believe in God worse than anyone I ever met.”

“Well, *you* need to go to college,” Colin muttered. Hassan groaned. A year ahead of Colin in school, Hassan had “taken a year off” even though he’d been admitted to Loyola University in Chicago. Since he hadn’t enrolled in classes for the coming fall, it seemed his one year off would soon turn into two.

“Don’t make this about me,” Hassan said through a smile. “I’m not the one who’s too fugged up to get off the carpet or flush my own puke, dude. And you know why? I got me some God.”

“Stop trying to convert me,” Colin moaned, unamused. Hassan jumped up and straddled Colin on the floor and pinned his arms down and started shouting, “There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet! Say it with me, *sitzpinkler! La ilaha illa-llah!*”⁵ Colin started laughing breathlessly beneath Hassan’s weight, and Hassan laughed, too. “I’m trying to save your sorry ass from hell!”

“Get off or I’m going there quite soon,” Colin wheezed.

Hassan stood up and abruptly moved to serious mode. “So, what’s the problem exactly?”

“The problem exactly is that she *dumped* me. That I’m alone. Oh my God, I’m alone again. And not only that, but I’m a total failure in case you haven’t noticed. I’m washed up, I’m *former*. Formerly the boyfriend of Katherine XIX. Formerly a prodigy. Formerly full of potential. Currently full of shit.” As Colin had explained to Hassan countless times, there’s a stark difference between the words *prodigy* and *genius*.

Prodigies can very quickly learn what other people have already figured out; geniuses discover that which no one has ever previously discovered. Prodigies learn; geniuses do. The vast majority of child prodigies don’t become adult geniuses. Colin was almost certain that he was among that unfortunate majority.

Hassan sat down on the bed and tugged at his stubbly second chin. “Is the real problem here the genius thing or the Katherine thing?”

“I just love her so much,” was Colin’s answer. But the truth was that, in Colin’s mind, the problems were related. The problem was that this most special, magnificent, brilliant boy was—well, not. The Problem itself was that *He* didn’t

matter. Colin Singleton, noted child prodigy, noted veteran of Katherine Conflicts, noted nerd and *sitzpinkler*, didn't matter to Katherine XIX, and he didn't matter to the world. All of a sudden, he wasn't anyone's boyfriend or anyone's genius. And that—to use the kind of complex word you'd expect from a prodigy—blew.

“Because the genius thing,” Hassan went on as if Colin hasn't just professed his love, “is nothing. That's just about wanting to be famous.”

“No, it's not. I want to *matter*,” he said.

“Right. Like I said, you want fame. Famous is the new popular. And you're not going to be America's fugging Next Top Model, that's for goddamned sure. So you want to be America's Next Top Genius and now you're—and don't take this personally—whining that it hasn't happened yet.”

“You're not helping,” Colin muttered into the carpet. Colin turned his face to look up at Hassan.

“Get up,” Hassan said, reaching a hand down. Colin grabbed it, pulled himself up, and then tried to let go of Hassan's hand. But Hassan gripped tighter. “*Kafir*, you have a very complicated problem with a very simple solution.”

³ A German word, slang for “wimp,” that literally means “a man who sits to pee.” Those wacky Germans—they've got a word for everything.

⁴ “Kafir” is a not-nice Arabic word meaning “non-Muslim” that is usually translated as “infidel.”

⁵ The Islamic statement of faith, in transliterated Arabic: there is no God but God.

(three)

“**A road trip,**” Colin said. He had an overstuffed duffel bag at his feet and a backpack stretched taut, which contained only books. He and Hassan were sitting on a black leather couch. Colin’s parents sat across from them on an identical couch.

Colin’s mother shook her head rhythmically, like a disapproving metronome. “To *where?*” she asked. “And *why?*”

“No offense, Mrs. Singleton,” Hassan said, putting his feet up on the coffee table (which you were not allowed to do), “but you’re sort of missing the point. There is no where or why.”

“Think of all you could *do* this summer, Colin. You could learn Sanskrit,” said his dad. “I know how you’ve been wanting to learn Sanskrit.⁶ Will you really be happy just driving around aimlessly? That doesn’t seem like you. Frankly, it seems like *quitting.*”

“Quitting what, Dad?”

His dad paused. He always paused after a question, and then when he did speak, it was in complete sentences without ums or likes or uhs—as if he’d memorized his response. “It pains me to say this, Colin, but if you wish to continue to grow intellectually, you need to work harder right now than you ever have before. Otherwise, you risk wasting your potential.”

“Technically,” Colin answered, “I think I might have already wasted it.”

• • •

Maybe it was because Colin had never once in his life disappointed his parents: he did not drink or do drugs or smoke cigarettes or wear black eyeliner or stay out late or get bad grades or pierce his tongue or have the words “KATHERINE LUVA 4 LIFE” tattooed across his back. Or maybe they felt guilty, like somehow they’d failed him and brought him to this place. Or maybe they just

wanted a few weeks alone to rekindle the romance. But five minutes after acknowledging his wasted potential, Colin Singleton was behind the wheel of his lengthy gray Oldsmobile known as Satan's Hearse.

Inside the car, Hassan said, "Okay, now all we have to do is go to my house, pick up some clothes, and miraculously convince my parents to let me go on a road trip."

"You could say you have a summer job. At, like, a camp or something," Colin offered.

"Right, except I'm not going to lie to my mom, because what kind of bastard lies to his own mother?"

"Hmm."

"Well, although, *someone else* could lie to her. I could live with that."

"Fine," said Colin. Five minutes later, they double-parked on a street in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood, and jumped out of the car together. Hassan burst into the house with Colin trailing. In the well-appointed living room, Hassan's mom sat in an easy chair, sleeping.

"Hey, Mama," said Hassan. "Wake up." She jolted awake, smiled, and greeted both of the boys in Arabic. Colin answered in Arabic, saying, "My girlfriend dumped me and I'm really depressed, and so Hassan and I are going to go on a, a, uh, vacation where you drive. I don't know the word in Arabic."

Mrs. Harbish shook her head and pursed her lips. "Don't I tell you," she said in accented English, "not to mess with girls? Hassan is a good boy, doesn't do this 'dating.' And look how happy he is. You should learn from him."

"That's what he's going to teach me on this trip," Colin said, although nothing could have been further from the truth. Hassan barreled back into the room carrying a half-zipped duffel bag overflowing with clothes. "*Ohiboke*,⁷ Mama," he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

Suddenly a pajama-clad Mr. Harbish entered the living room and in English said, "You're not going anywhere."

"Oh, Dad. We *have* to. Look at him. He's all screwed up." Colin stared up at Mr. Harbish and tried to look as screwed up as he possibly could. "He's going with or without me, but with me at least I can watch out for him."

"Colin is a good boy," Mrs. Harbish said to her husband.

"I'll call you every day," Hassan added. "We won't even be gone long. Just until he gets better."

Colin, now completely improvising, had an idea. "I'm going to get Hassan a job," he said to Mr. Harbish. "I think we both need to learn the value of hard work."

Mr. Harbish grunted in agreement, then turned to Hassan. "You need to learn

the value of not watching that awful Judge Judy, for starters. If you call me in a week and have a job, you can stay wherever you want as long as you want, as far as I'm concerned."

Hassan seemed not to notice the insults, only meekly mumbling, "Thanks, Dad." He kissed his mother on both cheeks and hurried out the door.

"What a dick," Hassan said once they were safely inside the Hearse. "It's one thing to accuse me of laziness. But to malign the good name of America's greatest television judge—that's below the belt."

Hassan fell asleep around one in the morning and Colin, half-drunk on well-creamed gas station coffee and the exhilarating loneliness of a freeway at nighttime, drove south on I-65 through Indianapolis. It was a warm night for early June, and since the AC in Satan's Hearse hadn't worked in this millennium, the windows were cracked open. And the beautiful thing about driving was that it stole just enough of his attention—*car parked on the side, maybe a cop, slow to speed limit, time to pass this sixteen-wheeler, turn signal, check rearview, crane neck to check blind spot and yes, okay, left lane*—to distract from the gnawing hole in his belly.

To keep his mind occupied, he thought of other holes in other stomachs. He thought of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, assassinated in 1914. As he looked down at the bloody hole in his middle, the Archduke had said, "It is nothing." He was mistaken. There's no doubt that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand mattered, although he was neither a prodigy nor a genius: his assassination sparked World War I—so his death led to 8,528,831 others.

Colin missed her. Missing her kept him awake more than the coffee, and when Hassan had asked to drive an hour back, Colin had said no, because the driving kept him going—*stay under seventy; God, my heart racing; I hate the taste of coffee; so wired though; okay, and clear of the truck; okay yes; right lane; and now just my own headlights against the darkness*. It kept the loneliness of crushlessness from being entirely crushing. Driving was a kind of thinking, the only kind he could then tolerate. But still, the thought lurked out there, just beyond the reach of his headlights: he'd been dumped. By a girl named Katherine. For the nineteenth time.

• • •

When it comes to girls (and in Colin's case, it so often did), everyone has a type. Colin Singleton's type was not physical but linguistic: he liked Katherines. And not Katies or Kats or Kitties or Cathys or Rynns or Trinas or Kays or Kates or, God forbid, Catherines. K-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E. He had dated nineteen girls. All of

them had been named Katherine. And all of them—every single solitary one—had dumped him.

Colin believed that the world contained exactly two kinds of people: Dumpers and Dumpees. A lot of people will claim to be both, but those people miss the point entirely: You are predisposed to either one fate or the other. Dumpers may not *always* be the heartbreakers, and the Dumpees may not always be the heartbroken. But everyone has a tendency.⁸

Perhaps, then, Colin ought to have grown accustomed to it, to the rise and fall of relationships. Dating, after all, only ends one way: poorly. If you think about it, and Colin often did, all romantic relationships end in either (1) breakup, (2) divorce, or (3) death. But Katherine XIX had been different—or had seemed different, anyway. She had loved him, and he had loved her back, ferociously. And he still did—he found himself working the words through his mind as he drove: I love you, Katherine. The name sounded different in his mouth when spoken to her; it became not the name with which he had been so long obsessed, but a word that described only her, a word that smelled like lilacs, that captured the blue of her eyes and the length of her eyelashes.

As the wind rushed in through the cracked windows, Colin thought of Dumpers and Dumpees and of the Archduke. In the back Hassan grunted and sniffled as if he were dreaming he was a German shepherd, and Colin felt the ceaseless burning in his gut, thinking, *This is all so CHILDISH. PATHETIC. YOU'RE EMBARRASSING. GET OVER IT GET OVER IT GET OVER IT.* But he did not quite know what “it” was.

Katherine I: The Beginning (of the Beginning)

Colin's parents never considered him to be anything but normal until one June morning. Twenty-five-month-old Colin sat in a high chair, eating a breakfast of indeterminate vegetative origin while his father read the *Chicago Tribune* across their small kitchen table. Colin was skinny for his age, but tall, with tight brown curls that erupted from his head with an Einsteinian unpredictability.

"Three deed on West Side," Colin said after swallowing a bite. "No want more greenies," he added, referring to his food.

"What'd ya say, bud?"

"Three deed on West Side. I want french fries please thank you." ⁹

Colin's dad flipped the paper around and stared at the large headline above the fold on the front page. This was Colin's first memory: his dad slowly lowering the paper and smiling at him. His dad's eyes were wide with surprise and pleasure, and his smile was uncontainable. "CINDY! THE BOY IS READING THE PAPER!" he shouted.

His parents were the sort of parents who really, really enjoyed reading. His mom taught French at the prestigious and expensive Kalman School downtown, and his dad was a sociology professor at Northwestern University, just north of the city. So after three died on the West Side, Colin's parents began to read with him, everywhere and always—primarily in English but also from French-language picture books.

Four months later, Colin's parents sent him to a preschool for gifted children. The preschool said that Colin was too advanced for their school and anyway, they didn't accept children who weren't yet fully potty-trained. They sent Colin to a psychologist at the University of Chicago.

And so the periodically incontinent prodigy ended up in a small, windowless office on the South Side, talking to a woman with horn-rimmed glasses, who asked Colin to find patterns in strings of letters and numbers. She asked him to flip polygons. She asked him which picture did not fit with the rest of the pictures. She asked him an endless string of wonderful questions, and Colin loved her for it. Up until that time, most of the questions Colin had been asked centered around whether or not he had pissed himself, or whether he could please eat one more bite of the miserable greenies.

After an hour of questions, the woman said, "I want to thank you for your extraordinary patience, Colin. You're a very special person."

You're a very special person. Colin would hear this a lot, and yet—somehow

—he could never hear it enough.

The horn-rimmed-glasses woman brought his mom into the office. As the professor told Mrs. Singleton that Colin was brilliant, was a very special boy, Colin played with wooden alphabet blocks. He gave himself a splinter rearranging p-o-t-s into s-t-o-p—the first anagram he remembered making.

The professor told Mrs. Singleton that Colin’s gifts must be encouraged but not pushed, and she warned, “You shouldn’t have unreasonable expectations. Children like Colin process information very quickly. They show a remarkable ability to focus on tasks. But he’s no more likely to win a Nobel Prize than any other reasonably intelligent child.”

• • •

That night at home his father brought him a new book—*The Missing Piece* by Shel Silverstein. Colin sat down on the couch beside his dad and his small hands flipped through the big pages as he read it quickly, pausing only to ask whether “lookin” was the same as “looking.” Colin emphatically pushed the book cover shut when he finished reading.

“Did you like it?” his dad asked.

“Yup,” Colin said. He liked all books, because he liked the mere act of reading, the magic of turning scratches on a page into words inside his head.

“What was it about?” his dad asked.

Colin placed the book in his dad’s lap and said, “This circle is missing a piece. The missing piece is shaped like a pizza.”

“Like a pizza or a pizza *slice*?” Smiling, his dad placed his big hands on top of Colin’s head.

“Right, Daddy. A slice. So the circle goes looking for his piece. He finds a lot of wrong pieces. Then he finds the right piece. But then he leaves it behind. Then it ends.”

“Do you sometimes feel like a circle missing a piece?” his dad wondered.

“Daddy, I am not a circle. I am a boy.”

And his dad’s smile faded just a bit—the prodigy could read, but he could not see. And if only Colin had known that he was missing a piece, that his inability to see himself in the story of a circle was an unfixable problem, he might have known that the rest of the world would catch up with him as time passed. To borrow from another story he memorized but didn’t really get: if only he’d known that the story of the tortoise and the hare is about more than a tortoise and a hare, he might have saved himself considerable trouble.

Three years later, he enrolled in first grade—for free, because his mom taught

there—at the Kalman School, merely one year younger than most of his classmates. His dad pushed him to study more and harder, but he wasn't the kind of prodigy who goes to college at eleven. Both Colin's parents believed in keeping him on a semi-normal educational track for the sake of what they referred to as his "sociological well-being."

But his sociological being was never all that well. Colin didn't excel at making friends. He and his classmates just didn't enjoy similar activities. His favorite thing to do during recess, for instance, was to pretend to be a robot. He'd walk up to Robert Caseman with a knees-locked gait, his arms swinging stiffly. In a monotone voice, Colin would say, "I AM A ROBOT. I CAN ANSWER ANY QUESTION. DO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHO THE FOURTEENTH PRESIDENT WAS?"

"Okay," said Robert. "My question is, Why are you such a tard, Colon Cancer?" Even though Colin's name was pronounced like *call in*, Robert Caseman's favorite game in first grade was calling Colin "Colon Cancer" until Colin cried, which usually didn't take very long, because Colin was what his mother called "sensitive." He just wanted to play robot, for God's sake. Was that so wrong?

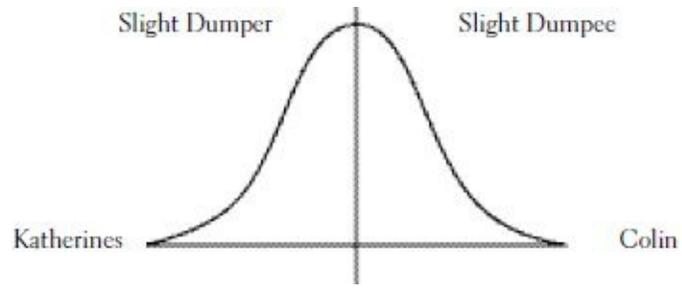
In second grade, Robert Caseman and his ilk matured a bit. Finally recognizing that words can never hurt, but sticks and stones can sure break bones, they invented the Abdominal Snowman.¹⁰ They would order him to lie on the ground (and for some reason he'd agree), and then four guys would take a limb apiece and pull. It was a kind of drawing-and-quartering, but with seven-year-olds tugging it wasn't fatal, just embarrassing and dumb. It made him feel like no one liked him, which, in fact, no one did. His single consolation was that one day, he would matter. He'd be famous. And none of them ever would. That's why, his mom said, they made fun of him in the first place. "They're just *jealous*," she said. But Colin knew better. They weren't jealous. He just wasn't likable. Sometimes it's that simple.

And so both Colin and his parents were utterly pleased and relieved when, just after the start of third grade, Colin Singleton proved his sociological well-being by (briefly) winning the heart of the prettiest eight-year-old girl in all Chicago.

⁶ Which, pathetically enough, was true. Colin really *had* been wanting to learn Sanskrit. It's sort of the Mount Everest of dead languages.

⁷ Arabic: "I love you."

⁸ It might be helpful to think about this graphically. Colin saw the Dumper/Dumpee dichotomy on a bell curve. The majority of people are lumped somewhere in the middle; i.e., they're either slight Dumpees or slight Dumpers. But then you have your Katherines and your Colins:



⁹ Like a smart monkey, Colin possessed an extensive vocabulary, but very little grammar. Also, he didn't know "dead" was pronounced *ded*. Forgive him. He was two.

¹⁰ Which, for the record, *Colin* actually named. The others called it "The Stretch," but then one time when they were about to do it to him, Colin shouted, "Don't give me an abdominal snowman!" And the name was so clever that it stuck.

(four)

Colin pulled into a rest stop near Paducah, Kentucky, around three in the morning, leaned his seat back until it pressed against Hassan's legs in the backseat, and slept. Some four hours later, he awoke—Hassan was kicking him through the seat.

“*Kafir*—I'm paralyzed back here. Lean that shit forward. I gotta pray.”

He'd been dreaming his memories of Katherine. Colin reached down and pulled the lever, his seat snapping forward.

“Fug,” Hassan said. “Did something die in my throat last night?”

“Um, I'm sleeping.”

“Because my mouth tastes like an open grave. Did you pack any toothpaste?”

“There's a word for that, actually. *Fetor hepaticus*. It happens during late st
__”

“Not interesting,” said Hassan, which is what he said whenever Colin started going off on a random tangent. “Toothpaste?”

“Toiletry kit in the duffel in the trunk,” Colin answered.¹¹

Hassan slammed the door behind him, then slammed the trunk shut a few moments later, and as Colin wiped the sleep from his eyes, he figured he might as well wake up. While Hassan knelt on the concrete outside, facing Mecca, Colin went to the bathroom (there graffiti in the stall read: CALL DANA FOR BLOW. Colin wondered whether Dana provided fellatio or cocaine, and then, for the first time since he'd been lying motionless on the carpet of his bedroom, he indulged his greatest passion. He anagrammed: Call Dana for blow; Ballad for a clown).

He walked out into the warmth of Kentucky and sat down at a picnic table across from Hassan, who seemed to be attacking the table with the pocketknife attached to his key chain.

“What are you doing?” Colin folded his arms on the table and then put his head down.

“Well, while you were in the bathroom, I sat down at this picnic table here in

Bumblefug, Kentucky, and noticed that someone had carved that GOD HATES FAG, which, aside from being a grammatical nightmare, is absolutely ridiculous. So I'm changing it to 'God Hates Baguettes.' It's tough to disagree with that. *Everybody hates baguettes.*"

"*J'aime les baguettes,*" Colin muttered.

"You *aime* lots of stupid crap."

While Hassan worked to make God hates baguettes, Colin's mind raced like this: (1) baguettes (2) Katherine XIX (3) the ruby necklace he'd bought her five months and seventeen days before (4) most rubies come from India, which (5) used to be under control of the United Kingdom, of which (6) Winston Churchill was the prime minister, and (7) isn't it interesting how a lot of good politicians, like Churchill and also Gandhi, were bald while (8) a lot of evil dictators, like Hitler and Stalin and Saddam Hussein, were mustachioed? But (9) Mussolini only wore a mustache sometimes, and (10) lots of good scientists had mustaches, like the Italian Ruggero Oddi, who (11) discovered (and named for himself) the intestinal tract's sphincter of Oddi, which is just one of several lesser-known sphincters like (12) the pupillary sphincter.

And speaking of which: when Hassan Harbish showed up at the Kalman School in tenth grade after a decade of home-schooling, he was plenty smart, albeit not prodigiously so. That fall, he was in Calculus I with Colin, who was a ninth-grader. But they never spoke, because Colin had given up on pursuing friendships with individuals not named Katherine. He hated almost all the students at Kalman, which was just as well, since by and large they hated him back.

About two weeks into class, Colin raised his hand and Ms. Sorenstein said, "Yes, Colin?" Colin was holding his hand underneath his glasses, against his left eye, in obvious discomfort.

"May I be excused for a moment?" he asked.

"Is it important?"

"I think I have an eyelash in my pupillary sphincter," replied Colin, and the class erupted into laughter. Ms. Sorenstein sent him on his way, and then Colin went into the bathroom and, staring in the mirror, plucked the eyelash from his eye, where the pupillary sphincter is located.

After class, Hassan found Colin eating a peanut butter and no jelly sandwich on the wide stone staircase at the school's back entrance.

"Look," Hassan said. "This is my ninth day at a school in my entire life, and yet somehow I have already grasped what you can and cannot say. And you cannot say anything about your own sphincter."

"It's part of your eye," Colin said defensively. "I was being clever."

“Listen, dude. You gotta know your audience. That bit would kill at an ophthalmologist convention, but in calculus class, everybody’s just wondering how the hell you got an eyelash *there*.”

And so they were friends.

• • •

“I’ve gotta say, I don’t think much of Kentucky,” Hassan said. Colin tilted his head up, resting his chin on his arms. He scanned the rest-stop parking lot for a moment. His missing piece was nowhere to be found.

“Everything here reminds me of her, too. We used to talk about going to Paris. I mean, I don’t even want to go to Paris, but I just keep imagining how excited she’d be at the Louvre. We’d go to great restaurants and maybe drink red wine. We even looked for hotels on the Web. We could have done that on the *KranialKidz* money.”¹²

“Dude, if Kentucky is going to remind you of Paris, we’re in a hell of a pickle.”

Colin sat up and looked across the poorly kept lawn of the rest stop. And then he looked down at Hassan’s clever handiwork. “*Baguettes*,” Colin explained.

“Oh, my God. Give me the keys.” Colin reached into his pocket and tossed the keys lazily across the picnic table. Hassan snatched them as he stood, then made his way to Satan’s Hearse. Colin followed, forlorn.

Forty miles down the road, still in Kentucky, Colin had curled up against the passenger window and was starting to fall asleep when Hassan announced, “World’s Largest Wooden Crucifix—Next Exit!”

“We’re not stopping to see the World’s Largest Wooden Crucifix.”

“We shitsure are,” Hassan said. “It must be huge!”

“Hass, why would we stop and see the World’s Largest Wooden Crucifix?”

“It’s a *road trip*! It’s about *adventure*!” Hassan pounded on the steering wheel to emphasize his excitement. “It’s not like we have somewhere to *go*. Do you really want to die having never seen the World’s Largest Wooden Crucifix?”

Colin thought it over. “Yes. First off, neither of us is Christian. Second off, spending the summer chasing after idiotic roadside attractions is not going to fix anything. Third off, crucifixes remind me of her.”

“Of who?”

“Of *her*.”

“*Kafir*, she was an *atheist*!”

“Not always,” Colin said softly. “She used to wear one a long time ago. Before we dated.” He stared out the window, pine trees rushing past. His

immaculate memory called forth the silver crucifix.

“Your sitzpinkling disgusts me,” Hassan said, but he gave the Hearse some extra gas and shot past the exit.

¹¹ But anyway, it’s called *fetor hepaticus*, and it’s a symptom of late-stage liver failure. Basically, what happens is that your breath literally smells like a rotting corpse.

¹² More on that later, but basically: about a year before, Colin had come into some cash.

(five)

Two hours after passing the World's Largest Wooden Crucifix, Hassan brought it back up.

"Did you already know that the World's Largest Wooden Crucifix was in Kentucky?" he shouted, his window down and his left hand waving through the fast-passing air.

"Not before today," Colin answered. "But I did know that the world's largest wooden *church* is in Finland."

"Not interesting," Hassan said. Hassan's not-interestings had helped Colin figure out what other people did and did not enjoy hearing about. Colin had never gotten that before Hassan, because everyone else either humored or ignored him. Or, in the case of Katherines, humored then ignored. Thanks to Colin's collected list of things that weren't interesting,¹³ he could hold a halfway normal conversation.

Two hundred miles and one pit stop later, safely removed from Kentucky, they were midway between Nashville and Memphis. The wind through the open windows dried their sweat without actually cooling them much, and Colin was wondering how they could get to a place with air-conditioning when he noticed the hand-painted billboard towering above a field of cotton or corn or soybeans or something.¹⁴ EXIT 212—SEE THE GRAVE OF ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND—THE CORPSE THAT STARTED WORLD WAR I.

"That just doesn't seem plausible," Colin noted quietly.

"I'm just saying that I think we should go *somewhere*," Hassan said, not hearing him. "I mean, I like this interstate as much as the next guy, but the farther south we go, the hotter it gets, and I'm already sweating like a whore in church."

Colin rubbed his sore neck, thinking he would never spend another night in the car when he had plenty of money to pay for hotels. "Did you see that sign?" he asked.

“What sign?”

“The one about the grave of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.”

With little regard for the road, Hassan turned to Colin, smiled broadly, and punched him softly on the shoulder. “Excellent. *Excellent*. And anyway, it’s lunchtime.”

• • •

As Colin climbed out of the passenger’s seat in the Hardee’s parking lot at Exit 212 in Carver County, Tennessee, he called his mom.

“Hey, we’re in Tennessee.”

“How are you feeling, buddy?”

“Better, I guess. I don’t know. It’s hot. Did, um, did anyone call?”

His mom paused, and he could just *feel* her wretched pity. “Sorry, love. I’ll tell, uh, anyone, to call your cell.”

“Thanks, Mom. I gotta go eat lunch at Hardee’s.”

“Sounds delightful. Wear your seat belt! I love you!”

“You too.”

• • •

After a relentlessly greasy Monster Thickburger in the empty restaurant, Colin asked the woman behind the cash register, whose body seemed to have suffered from perhaps a few too many meals at her place of employment, how to get to Franz Ferdinand’s grave.

“Who?” she asked.

“The Archduke Franz Ferdinand.”

The woman stared at him blankly for a moment, and then her eyes lit up. “Oh y’all are looking for Gutshot. Boy, you’re headed for the sticks, aren’t you?”

“Gutshot?”

“Yes. Now what you want to do is you pull out of the parking lot and you turn right—away from the highway I mean, and then in about two miles, the road’s gonna T. There’s a closed-down Citgo there. You take a right onto that road and then you’re gonna drive past a whole lot of nothing for ten or fifteen miles. You’ll go up a bit of a hill and then that’s Gutshot.”

“Gutshot?”

“Gutshot, Tennessee. That’s where they got the Archduke.”

“So a right and then a right.”

“Yup. Y’all have fun now, y’hear?”

“Gutshot,” Colin repeated to himself. “Okay, thanks.”

• • •

Since its last paving, the ten- or fifteen-mile-long road in question seemed to have been at the epicenter of an earthquake. Colin drove cautiously, but still, the worn shocks of the Hearse creaked and groaned at the endless potholes and waving undulations of pavement.

“Maybe we don’t need to see the Archduke,” said Hassan.

“We’re on a *road trip*. It’s about *adventure*,” Colin mimicked.

“Do you think the people of Gutshot, Tennessee, have ever seen an actual, living Arab?”

“Oh, don’t be so paranoid.”

“Or for that matter do you think they’ve ever seen a Jew-fro?”

Colin thought that over for a moment, and then said, “Well, the woman at Hardee’s was nice to us.”

“Right, but the woman at Hardee’s called Gutshot ‘the sticks,’” Hassan said, imitating the woman’s accent. “I mean, if Hardee’s is urban, I’m not sure I want to see rural.” Hassan rolled on with his diatribe, and Colin laughed and smiled at all the right places, but he just kept driving, calculating the odds that the Archduke, who died in Sarajevo more than ninety years before, and who’d randomly popped into Colin’s brain the previous night, would end up between Colin and wherever he was heading. It was irrational, and Colin hated thinking irrationally, but he couldn’t help but wonder whether perhaps being in the presence of the Archduke might reveal something to Colin about his missing piece. But of course the universe does not conspire to put you in one place rather than another, Colin knew. He thought of Democritus: “Everywhere man blames nature and fate, yet his fate is mostly but the echo of his character and passions, his mistakes and weaknesses.”¹⁵

And so it was not fate, but Colin Singleton’s character and passions, his mistakes and weaknesses, that finally brought him to Gutshot, Tennessee —POPULATION 864, as the roadside sign read. At first, Gutshot looked like everything that came before it, only with a better-paved road. On each side of the Hearse, fields of squat, luminously green plants stretched out into a gray forever, broken up only by the occasional horse pasture, barn, or stand of trees. Eventually, Colin saw before him on the side of the road a two-story cinder-block building painted a ghastly pink.

“I think that’s Gutshot,” he said, nodding toward the building.

On the side of the building, a hand-painted sign read THE KINGDOM OF

GUTSHOT—ETERNAL RESTING PLACE OF THE ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND / ICE-COLD BEER / SODA / BAIT.

Colin pulled into the store's gravel driveway. Unbuckling his seat belt, he said to Hassan, "I wonder if they keep the Archduke with the soda or the bait."

Hassan's deep laugh filled the car. "Shit, Colin made a funny. This place is like magic for you. Shame about how we're gonna die here, though. I mean, seriously. An Arab and a half-Jew enter a store in Tennessee. It's the beginning of a joke, and the punch line is 'sodomy.'" Nonetheless, Colin heard Hassan shuffling his feet on the gravel parking lot behind him.

They walked through a screen door into the Gutshot General Store. From behind the counter, a girl with a long, straight nose and brown eyes the size of some lesser planets looked up from an issue of *Celebrity Living* magazine and said, "How y'all doing?"

"We're okay. Yourself?" Hassan asked while Colin was trying to think whether a worthwhile soul in all of human history had ever read a single copy of *Celebrity Living*.¹⁶

"Just fine," said the girl.

For a while, they walked around the store, pacing the dusty, varnished two-by-fours that comprised a floor, pretending to consider various snacks, drinks, and minnows swimming in bait tanks. Half-crouched behind a chest-high rack of potato chips, Colin tugged on Hassan's T-shirt, cupped his hand over Hassan's ear, and whispered, "*Talk to her.*" Except in point of fact Colin did not whisper, because he had never quite mastered the art of whispering—he just sort of talked in a slightly softer voice directly into Hassan's eardrum.

Hassan winced and shook his head. "What's the total area, in square miles, of the state of Kansas?" he whispered.

"Um, around 82,200; why?"

"I just find it amusing that you know that but can't figure out a way to speak without using your vocal cords." Colin started to explain that even whispering involves the *use* of the vocal cords, but Hassan just rolled his eyes. So Colin brought his hand to his face and nibbled on the inside of his thumb while staring at Hassan hopefully, but Hassan had turned his attention to the potato chips and so finally it fell to Colin. He walked to the desk and said, "Hi, we're wondering about the Archduke."

The *Celebrity Living* reader smiled at him. Her puffy cheeks and too-long nose disappeared. She had the sort of broad and guileful smile in which you couldn't help but believe—you just wanted to make her happy so you could keep seeing it. But it passed in a flash. "Tours start every hour on the hour, cost eleven dollars, and frankly aren't worth it," she answered in a monotone.

“We’ll pay,” Hassan said, suddenly behind him. “The kid needs to see the Archduke.” And then Hassan leaned forward and stage-whispered, “He’s having a nervous breakdown.” Hassan placed twenty-two dollars on the counter, which the girl promptly slid into a pocket of her shorts, flagrantly disregarding the cash register before her.

The girl blew a lock of mahogany hair from her face and sighed. “Sure is hot out,” she noted.

“Is this, like, a guided tour?” Colin asked.

“Yeah. And much to my ever-loving chagrin, I am your tour guide.” She stepped out from behind the counter. Short. Skinny. Her face not pretty so much as interesting-looking.

“I’m Colin Singleton,” he said to the tour guide/grocery store clerk.

“Lindsey Lee Wells,” she answered, reaching out a small hand, the fingernails a chipped metallic pink. He shook, and then Lindsey turned to Hassan.

“Hassan Harbish. Sunni Muslim. Not a terrorist.”

“Lindsey Lee Wells. Methodist. Me, neither.” The girl smiled again. Colin wasn’t thinking about anything but himself and K-19 and the piece of his gut he’d misplaced—but there was no denying her smile. That smile could end wars and cure cancer.

. . .

For a long time, they walked silently through knee-high grass behind the store, which irritated the sensitive skin of Colin’s exposed calves, and he thought to mention it and ask whether maybe there was some kind of recently mowed patch through which they might walk, but he knew Hassan would think that “sitzpinklery,” so he stayed quiet as the grass tickled at his skin. He thought of Chicago, where you can go days without ever once stepping on a single patch of actual earth. That well-paved world appealed to him, and he missed it as his feet fell on uneven clumps of hardened dirt that threatened to twist his ankles.

As Lindsey Lee Wells walked ahead of them (typical *Celebrity Living*—reader crap; avoiding talking to them), Hassan just padded along next to Colin, and even though he hadn’t technically called Colin a *sitzpinkler* for being allergic to grass, Colin knew that he *would* have, which annoyed him. And so Colin again brought up Hassan’s least favorite subject.

“Have I mentioned today that you should go to college?” Colin asked.

Hassan rolled his eyes. “Right, I know. I mean, just look where academic excellence got you.”

Colin couldn’t think of a comeback. “Well, but you should this year. You

can't just not go forever. You don't even have to register until July fifteenth.” (Colin had looked this up.)

“I actually *can* not go forever. I've said it before and I'll say it again: I like sitting around on my ass, watching TV, and getting fatter. It's my life's work, Singleton. That's why I love road trips, dude. It's like doing something without actually doing anything. Anyway, my dad didn't go to college, and he's rich as balls.”

Colin wondered just how rich balls were, but only said, “Right, but your dad doesn't sit on his ass, either. He works, like, a hundred hours a week.”

“True. True. And it's all thanks to him that I don't have to go to work *or* college.”

Colin had no response to that. But he just didn't get Hassan's apathy. What is the point of being alive if you don't at least try to do something remarkable? How very odd, to believe God gave you life, and yet not think that life asks more of you than watching TV.

Although then again, when you have just gone on a road trip to escape the memory of your nineteenth Katherine and are traipsing through south-central Tennessee on your way to see the grave of a dead Austro-Hungarian Archduke, maybe you don't have a right to go and think anything odd.

And he was busy anagramming *anything odd*—*any odd night, handy dog tin, doing thy DNA*—when Colin did his DNA proud: he stumbled on a molehill and fell. He became so disoriented by the fast-approaching ground that he didn't even reach his hands out to break the fall. He just fell forward like he'd been shot in the back. The very first thing to hit the ground were his glasses. They were closely followed by his forehead, which hit a small jagged rock.

Colin rolled over onto his back. “I fell,” he noted quite loudly.

“Shit!” Hassan shouted, and when Colin opened his eyes, he saw fuzzily that Hassan and Lindsey Lee Wells were kneeling, peering down at him. She smelled strongly of a fruity perfume, which Colin believed to be called Curve. He'd purchased it once, for Katherine XVII, but she hadn't liked it.¹⁷

“I'm bleeding, aren't I?” Colin asked.

“Like a stuck pig,” she said. “Don't move.” She turned to Hassan and said, “Give me your T-shirt,” and Hassan promptly said no, which Colin figured had something to do with Hassan's man-boobs. “We need to apply pressure,” Lindsey explained to Hassan, and then Hassan calmly said no again, and then Lindsey said, “Jesus Christ—fine,” and took off her shirt.

Colin squinted through his glassesless fuzziness but couldn't see much. “We should probably save this for the second date,” Colin said.

“Right, perv,” she responded, but he could hear her smiling. As she wiped at

his forehead and cheek softly with the T-shirt, then pressed hard on a tender spot above his right eyebrow, she kept talking. “Some friend you’ve got, by the way. Stop moving your neck. The two concerns we’ve got here are some kind of vertebral injury or a subdural hematoma. I mean, slight-slight-slight chances, but you’ve gotta be cautious, ’cause the nearest hospital’s an hour away.” He closed his eyes and tried not to wince as she pressed hard against the cut. Lindsey told Hassan, “Apply pressure with the shirt here. I’ll be back in eight minutes.”

“We should call a doctor or something,” Hassan said.

“I’m a paramedic,” Lindsey answered as she turned away.

“How the hell old are you?” he asked.

“Seventeen. Okay. Fine. A paramedic *in training*. Eight minutes. I swear.”

She ran off. It was not the way Curve smelled that Colin liked—not exactly. It was the way the air smelled just as Lindsey began to jog away from him. The smell the perfume left behind. There’s not a word for that in English, but Colin knew the French word: *sillage*. What Colin liked about Curve was not its smell on the skin but its *sillage*, the fruity sweet smell of its leaving.

• • •

Hassan sat down beside him in the tall grass, pushing hard at the cut. “Sorry I wouldn’t take off my shirt.”

“Man-boobs?” asked Colin.

“Yeah, well. I just feel like I should know a girl a little before I trot out the man-tits. Where are your glasses?”

“I was just asking myself that very question when the girl took her shirt off,” Colin said.

“So you couldn’t see her?”

“I couldn’t see her. Just that her bra was purple.”

“Was it ever,” Hassan replied.

And Colin thought of K-19 sitting over him on his bed wearing her purple bra as she dumped him. And he thought of Katherine XIV, who wore a black bra and also a black everything else. And he thought of Katherine XII, the first who wore a bra, and all the Katherines whose bras he’d seen (four, unless you count straps, in which case seven). People thought he was a glutton for punishment, that he liked getting dumped. But it wasn’t like that. He could just never see anything coming, and as he lay on the solid, uneven ground with Hassan pressing too hard on his forehead, Colin Singleton’s distance from his glasses made him realize the problem: myopia. He was nearsighted. The future lay before him, inevitable but invisible.

“I found ’em,” Hassan said, and awkwardly tried to place the glasses on Colin’s face. But it’s hard to put glasses on someone else’s head, and finally Colin reached up and nudged them up the bridge of his own nose, and he could see.

“*Eureka*,” he said softly.

Katherine XIX: The End (of the End)

She dumped him on the eighth day of the twelfth month, just twenty-two days shy of their one-year anniversary. They'd both graduated that morning, although from different schools, so Colin's and Katherine's parents, who were old friends, took them out to a celebratory lunch. But that evening was for them alone. Colin prepared by shaving and wearing that Wild Rain deodorant she liked so much that she'd nestle up against his chest to catch its scent.

He'd picked her up in Satan's Hearse and they drove south down Lake Shore Drive, the windows down so they could hear, over the rumble of the engine, the waves of Lake Michigan beating against the rocky shore. Before them, the skyline towered. Colin had always loved Chicago's skyline. Although he was not a religious person, seeing the skyline made him feel what is called in Latin the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—that stomach-flipping mix of awestruck fear and entrancing fascination.

They drove downtown, winding through the soaring buildings of Chicago's Loop, and they were already late, because Katherine was always late to everything, and so after ten minutes spent searching for a parking meter, Colin paid eighteen dollars for a garage spot, which annoyed Katherine.

"I'm just saying we could have found a spot on the street," she said as she pressed the elevator button in the parking garage.

"Well, I've got the money. And we're late."

"You shouldn't spend money you don't need to spend."

"I'm about to spend fifty bucks on sushi," he answered. "For *you*." The doors opened. Exasperated, he leaned against the wood paneling of the elevator and sighed. They hardly spoke until they were inside the restaurant, seated at a tiny table near the bathroom.

"To graduating, and to a wonderful dinner," she said, raising her glass of Coke.

"To the end of life as we've known it," Colin replied, and they clinked glasses.

"Jesus, Colin, it's not the end of the world."

"It's the end of *a* world," he pointed out.

"Worried you won't be the smartest boy at Northwestern?" She smiled and then sighed. He felt a sudden twinge in his gut—in retrospect, it was the first hint that some piece of him might soon go missing.

"Why are you sighing?" he asked.

The waitress came then, interrupting with a rectangular plate of California *maki* and smoked salmon *negiri*. Katherine pulled apart her chopsticks, and Colin grabbed his fork. He knew a little conversational Japanese, but chopsticks eluded him.

“Why did you sigh?” he asked again.

“Jesus, no reason.”

“No, just tell me why,” he said.

“You’re just—you spend all your time worrying about losing your edge or getting dumped or whatever and you’re never for a second grateful. You’re the valedictorian. You’re going to a great school next year, for free. So maybe you’re not a child prodigy. That’s *good*. At least you’re not a *child* anymore. Or, you’re not supposed to be, anyway.”

Colin chewed. He liked the seaweed wrapped around the sushi roll: how tough it was to chew, the subtleness of the ocean water. “You don’t understand,” he said.

Katherine placed her chopsticks against the saucer containing her soy sauce and stared at him with something beyond frustration. “Why do you always have to say that?”

“It’s true,” he said simply, and she *didn’t* understand. She was still beautiful, still funny, still adept with chopsticks. Prodigy was what Colin had, the way language has words.

With all the nasty back-and-forth, Colin fought the urge to ask Katherine whether she still loved him, because the only thing she hated more than his saying she didn’t understand was his asking whether she still loved him. He fought the urge and fought it and fought it. For seven seconds.

“Do you still love me?”

“Oh my God, Colin. Please. We graduated. We’re happy. Celebrate!”

“What, are you afraid to say it?”

“I love you.”

She would never—not ever—tell him those words in that order ever again.

“Can sushi be anagrammed?” she asked.

“Uh, sis,” he answered immediately.

“Sis is three letters; sushi is five,” she said.

“No. ‘Uh, sis.’ The uh and the sis. There are others, but they don’t make grammatical sense.”

She smiled. “Do you ever get tired of me asking?”

“No. No. I never get tired of anything you do,” he said, and then he wanted to say he was sorry, but just that sometimes he felt un-understandable and sometimes he worried when they bickered and she went a while without saying

she loved him, but he restrained himself. “Anyway, I like that sushi becomes ‘uh, sis.’ Imagine a situation.”

“Imagine a situation” was a game she’d invented where Colin found the anagrams and then Katherine imagined an anagrammatic situation.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. So a guy goes out fishing on the pier, and he catches a carp, and of course it’s all riddled with pesticides and sewage and all the nasty Lake Michigan shit, but he takes it home anyway because he figures if you fry a carp long enough, it won’t matter. He cleans it, fillets it, and then the phone rings, so he leaves it on the kitchen counter. He talks on the phone for a bit, and then he comes back into the kitchen and sees that his little sister has a big hunk of raw Lake Michigan carp in her hand, and she’s chewing, and she looks up at her brother and says, ‘Sushi!’ And he says, ‘Uh, sis’”

They laughed. He had never loved her so much as he did then.

• • •

Later, after they tiptoed into the apartment and Colin walked upstairs to tell his mom he was home, leaving out the possibly relevant information that he wasn’t alone, and after they’d climbed into bed downstairs, and after she pulled off his shirt and he hers, and after they kissed until his lips were numb except for tingling, she said, “Do you really feel sad about graduating?”

“I don’t know. If I’d done it differently—if I’d gone to college at ten or whatever—there’s no way of knowing if my life would be better. We probably wouldn’t be together. I wouldn’t have known Hassan. And a lot of prodigies who push and push and push and end up even more fugged up than me. But a few of them end up like John Locke¹⁸ or Mozart or whatever. And my chances at Mozartdom are done.”

“Col, you’re *seventeen*.” She sighed again. She sighed a lot, but nothing could be wrong, because it felt so good to have her nestled up against him, her head on his shoulder, his hand brushing the soft blond hair from her face. He looked down and could see the strap of her purple bra.

“It’s the tortoise and the hare, though, K.¹⁹ I learn faster than other people, but they keep learning. I’ve slowed down, and now they’re coming. I know I’m seventeen. But I’m past my prime.” She laughed. “Seriously. There are studies about this shit. Prodigies tend to hit their peak at, like twelve or thirteen. What have I done? I won a fugging game show a year ago? That’s my indelible mark on human history?”

She sat up, looking down at him. He thought of her other sighs, the better and different ones of his body moving against hers. For a long time she stared at him,

and then she bit her lower lip and said, “Colin, maybe the problem is us.”

“Oh. Shit,” he said. And so it began.

The end occurred mostly in her whispers and his silence—because he couldn’t whisper and they didn’t want to wake Colin’s parents. They succeeded in staying quiet, in part because it felt like the air had been shocked out of him.

Paradoxically, he felt as if his getting dumped was the only thing happening on the entire dark and silent planet, and also as if it weren’t happening at all. He felt himself drifting away from the one-sided whispered conversation, wondering if maybe everything big and heartbreaking and incomprehensible is a paradox.

He was a dying man staring down on the surgeons trying to save him. With an almost comfortable distance from the thing itself as it really was, Colin thought about the dork mantra: sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. What a dirty lie. This, right here, was the true abdominal snowman: it felt like something freezing in his stomach.

“I love you so much and I just want you to love me like I love you,” he said as softly as he could.

“You don’t need a girlfriend, Colin. You need a robot who says nothing but ‘I love you.’” And it felt like being stoned and sticked from the inside, a fluttering and then a sharp pain in his lower rib cage, and then he felt for the first time that a piece of his gut had been wrenched out of him.

She tried to get out as quickly and painlessly as possible, but after she begged curfew, he began to cry. She held his head against her collarbone. And even though he felt pitiful and ridiculous, he didn’t want it to end, because he knew the absence of her would hurt more than any breakup ever could.

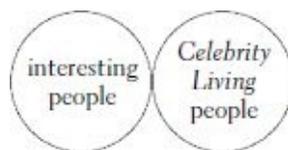
But she left anyway, and he was alone in his room, searching out anagrams for *mymissingpiece* in a vain attempt to fall asleep.

¹³ Among many, many others, the following things were definitely not interesting: the pupillary sphincter, mitosis, baroque architecture, jokes that have physics equations as punch lines, the British monarchy, Russian grammar, and the significant role that salt has played in human history.

¹⁴ Crop identification not being among Colin’s talents.

¹⁵ The original Greek, for the curious: Ὅπου το άτομο κατηγορεῖται φύση και τη μοίρα, όμως η μοίρα του είναι συνήθως αλλά η ηχώ του χαρακτήρα και των παθών του, των λαθών και των αδυναμιών του.

¹⁶ To put it Venn Diagrammatically, Colin would have argued that the world looked like this:



¹⁷ “It smells like I rubbed chewed raspberry Bubblicious on my neck,” she said, but it didn’t, exactly. It

smelled like raspberry Bubblicious-flavored *perfume*, which actually smelled very good.

¹⁸ A British philosopher and political scientist who could read and write in Latin and Greek before the rest of us can tie our shoes.

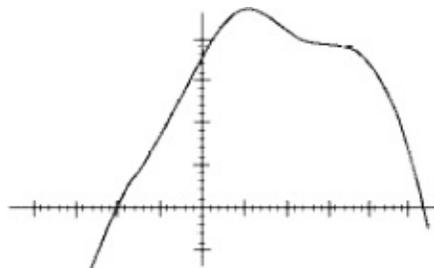
¹⁹ Although you'll no doubt notice that Colin still doesn't *quite* get what the tortoise and the hare story is about, he had figured out by now that it was about more than a turtle and a rabbit.

It always happened like this: he would look and look for the keys to Satan's Hearse and then finally he'd just give up and say, "*Fine. I'll take the fugging bus,*" and on his way out the door, he'd see the keys. Keys show up when you reconcile yourself to the bus; Katherines appear when you start to disbelieve the world contains another Katherine; and, sure enough, the Eureka moment arrived just as he began to accept it would never come.

He felt the thrill of it surge through him, his eyes blinking fast as he fought to remember the idea in its completeness. Lying there on his back in the sticky, thick air, the Eureka moment felt like a thousand orgasms all at once, except not as messy.

"Eureka?" Hassan asked, the excitement evident in his voice. He'd been waiting for it, too.

"I need to write this down," Colin said. He sat up. His head hurt like hell, but he reached into his pocket and pulled out the little notebook he kept at all times, and a #2 pencil, which was broken in the middle from his fall, but still wrote okay. He sketched:



Where x = time, and y = happiness, $y = 0$ beginning of relationship and breakup, y negative = breakup by m , and y positive = breakup by f : my relationship with K-19.

He was still sketching when he heard Lindsey Lee Wells coming and opened his eyes to see her wearing a fresh T-shirt (it read GUTSHOT!) and toting a first-aid

box with an honest-to-God red cross on it.

She knelt beside him and pulled the T-shirt off his head slowly, and then she said, “This is going to sting,” and dug into the cut with a long Q-tip soaked in what seemed to be cayenne pepper sauce.

“FUG!” shouted Colin, wincing, and he looked up and saw her round, brown eyes blinking away sweat as she worked.

“I know. I’m sorry. Okay, done. You don’t need stitches, but you’re going to have a little scar, I bet. Is that okay?”

“What’s another scar?” he said absentmindedly as she pulled a wide gauze bandage taut against his forehead. “I feel like someone punched me in the brain.”

“Possible concussion,” Lindsey noted. “What day is it? Where are you?”

“It’s Tuesday, and I’m in Tennessee.”

“Who was the junior senator from New Hampshire in 1873?” asked Hassan.

“Bainbridge Wadleigh,” answered Colin. “I don’t think I have a concussion.”

“Is that for real?” asked Lindsey. “I mean, did you really know that?”

Colin nodded slowly. “Yeah,” he said. “I know all the senators. Also, that’s an easy one to remember—because I always think about how much your parents have to fugging hate you to name you Bainbridge Wadleigh.”

“Seriously,” said Hassan. “I mean, you’ve already got the last name Wadleigh. That’s a bad sitch, just to be a Wadleigh. But then you take that Wadleigh and you raise it to the power of Bainbridge—no wonder the poor bastard never became president.”

Lindsey added, “Well but then again, a guy named Millard Fillmore became president. No loving mother would ever make a Fillmore a Millard, either.” She fell into conversation with them so quickly and so naturally that Colin was already revising his *Celebrity Living* theorem. He’d always thought people in Nowhere, Tennessee, would be, well, *dumber* than Lindsey Lee Wells.

Hassan sat down next to Colin and grabbed the notebook from him. He held it above his head to block the sun, which had darted out from behind a cloud to further bake the cracked orange dirt.

Hassan only glanced at the paper before saying, “You just got me all riled up and your big revelation is that you like getting dumped? Shit, Colin, I could have told you that. In fact, I have.”

“Love is graphable!” Colin said defensively.

“Wait.” Hassan looked down at the paper again, and then back to Colin.

“Universally? You’re claiming this will work for anyone?”

“Right. Because relationships are so predictable, right? Well, I’m finding a way to predict them. Take any two people, and even if they’ve never met each

other, the formula will show who's going to break up with whom if they ever date, and approximately how long the relationship will last."

"Impossible," Hassan said.

"No, it's not, because you can see into the future if you have a basic understanding of how people are likely to act."

Hassan's long and slow exhalation broke into a whisper. "Yeah. Okay. That's interesting." Hassan could give Colin no higher compliment.

Lindsey Lee Wells reached down and grabbed the notebook from Hassan. She read it slowly. Finally, she said, "What the hell is K-19?"

Colin put a hand down in the caked-dry earth and pushed himself up. "The what's a who," he answered. "Katherine XIX. I've dated nineteen girls named Katherine."

Lindsey Lee Wells and Colin stared at each other dead in the eye for a very long time, until finally her smile collapsed into a gentle laugh. "What?" Colin asked.

She shook her head but couldn't stop laughing. "Nothin'," she said. "Let's go see the Archduke."

"No, tell me," he said insistently. He didn't like secrets kept from him. Being on the outside of something annoyed him—more than it should have, really.

"It's nothing. Just—I've only dated one boy."

"Why's that funny?" Colin asked.

"It's funny," she explained, "because his name is Colin."

The Middle (of the Beginning)

By third grade, his failure to achieve “sociological well-being” had become so obvious to everyone that Colin attended regular school at Kalman only three hours a day. The rest of his day was spent with his lifelong tutor, Keith Carter, who drove a Volvo with the license plate KRAZZZY. Keith was one of those guys who never grew out of his ponytail. He also maintained (or, as the case was, failed to maintain) a thick, broad mustache that extended to his lower lip when his mouth was closed, which was very rarely the case. Keith enjoyed talking, and his favorite audience was Colin Singleton.

Keith was a friend of Colin’s dad and a psychology professor. His interest in Colin wasn’t exactly unselfish—over the years, Keith would publish a number of articles about Colin’s prodigy. Colin liked being so special that scholars would take note of him. And also, Krazy Keith was the closest thing Colin had to a best friend. Every day, Keith drove down into the city and he and Colin went to a broom-closet-of-an-office on the third floor of the Kalman School. Colin pretty much got to read whatever he wanted in silence for the next four hours, with Keith occasionally breaking in to discuss something, and then on Fridays they’d spend the day talking about what Colin had learned. Colin liked it a great deal better than regular school. For one thing, Keith never gave him an Abdominal Snowman.

Krazy Keith had a daughter, Katherine, who was Colin’s year in school but eight months older in actual life. She went to a school north of the city, but every so often Colin’s parents would have Krazy Keith and his wife and Katherine over to dinner to discuss Colin’s “progress” and the like. And then after those dinners, the parents would sit in the living room laughing louder as time passed, Keith shouting that he couldn’t *possibly* drive home, that he needed a cup of coffee after all that wine—*your home is an Alamo for oenophiles*, he’d cry.

• • •

One night in November of his third-grade year, after it got cold but before his mom put up the holiday decorations, Katherine came over. After a dinner of lemon chicken and brown rice, Colin and Katherine went into the living room, where Colin lay across the couch and studied Latin. He had just recently learned that President Garfield, who was not even particularly noted for his intelligence, had been able to write simultaneously in Latin and Greek—Latin with his left

hand and Greek with his right. Colin intended to match this feat.²⁰ Katherine, a tiny blond with both her father's ponytail and his fascination with prodigies, sat watching him quietly. Colin was aware of her, but it did not distract him, because people often watched him when he studied, like there was some secret in his approach to academia. The secret, in truth, was that he just spent more time studying, and paid more attention, than everyone else.

"How come you learned Latin already?"

"I study hard," he answered.

"Why?" she asked, coming over to sit by his feet on the couch.

"I like it."

"Why?" she asked.

He paused for a moment. Unfamiliar with the "why game," he took her questions seriously. "I like it because it makes me different and better. And because I'm quite good at it."

"Why?" she asked, her voice singing the monosyllable, almost smiling.

"Your dad says it's because I remember things better than other people on account of how I pay very close attention and care very much."

"Why?"

"Because it is important to know things. For an example, I just recently learned that Roman Emperor Vitellius once ate one thousand oysters in one day, which is a very impressive act of *abliguration*,"²¹ he said, using a word he felt sure Katherine wouldn't know. "And also it is important to know things because it makes you special and you can read books that normal people cannot read, such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which is in Latin."

"Why?"

"Because he lived in Rome when they spoke and wrote Latin."

"Why?"

And that one tripped him up. Why *had* Ovid lived in Ancient Rome in 20 BCE²² and not Chicago in 2006 CE? Would Ovid still have been Ovid if he had lived in America? No, he wouldn't have been, because he would have been a Native American or possibly an American Indian or a First Person or an Indigenous Person, and they did not have Latin or any other kind of written language then. So did Ovid matter because he was Ovid or because he lived in Ancient Rome? "That," Colin said, "is a very good question and I will try to find out the answer for you," he said, which is what Krazy Keith said when Krazy Keith did not know an answer.

"Do you want to be my *boyfriend*?" Katherine asked.

Colin sat up quickly and looked at her, her bright blue eyes staring down into her lap. He would come, eventually, to call her The Great One. Katherine I.

Katherine the Magnificent. Even seated, she was noticeably shorter than he, and she looked quite serious and nervous, her lips pulled in tight as she looked down. Something surged through him. The nerve endings exploded into shivers on his skin. His diaphragm fluttered. And of course it couldn't have been lust or love and it didn't feel like *like*, so it must have been what the kids at school called *like-like*. And he said, "Yes, yes, I do." She turned to him, her face round and her cheeks full and freckled and she leaned toward him, her lips pursed, and she kissed him on the cheek. It was his first kiss, and her lips felt like the coming winter—cold and dry and chapped—and it occurred to Colin that the kiss didn't feel nearly as good as the sound of her asking if she could be his girlfriend.

²⁰ But never did, because try as he might, he just wasn't ambidextrous.

²¹ An actual, if very obscure, English word, which means "the spending of too much money on food."

²² One no longer says AD or BC. It's just not hip anymore. These days, one says either CE (for Common Era) or BCE (for Before Common Era).

(seven)

Quite out of nowhere, just over the crest of a tiny slope, the grassy field broke out into a graveyard. It contained perhaps forty gravestones and was surrounded by a knee-high stone wall covered in slippery moss. “This would be the last and final resting place of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand,” Lindsey Lee Wells said, her voice suddenly affected with a new cadence, that of the bored tour guide who long ago memorized her speech. Colin and Hassan followed her to a six-foot-tall obelisk—a kind of miniature Washington Monument—before which lay a plethora of not-new pink silk roses. Though obviously fake, the flowers still seemed wilted.

Lindsey sat down on the mossy wall. “Ah, screw the speech. You probably already know this anyway,” she said, nodding toward Colin. “But I’ll tell the story: the Archduke was born in December 1863 in Austria. His uncle was the emperor Francis Joseph, but being the Austro-Hungarian emperor’s nephew don’t matter much. *Unless*, say, the emperor’s only son, Rudolph, happens to shoot himself in the head—which is what, in fact, happened in 1889. All of a sudden, Franz Ferdinand was next in line for the throne.”

“They called Franz ‘the loneliest man in Vienna,’” Colin said to Hassan.

“Yeah, well no one liked him because he was a total nerd,” Lindsey said, “except he was one of those nerds who isn’t even very smart. Your average inbred ninety-six-pound weakling type. His family thought he was a liberal wuss; Viennese society thought he was an idiot—like an actual tongue-hanging-out-of-your-mouth idiot. And then he went and made matters worse by marrying for love. He married this girl named Sophie in 1900, and everyone thought she was just totally low-rent. But, you know, in the guy’s defense, he really loved her. That’s what I never tell in the tour, but from everything I’ve read about Franzy, he and Sophie had about the happiest marriage in the whole history of royalty. It’s sort of a cute story, except for how on their fourteenth wedding anniversary—June twenty-eighth, 1914—they were both shot dead in Sarajevo.

The emperor had them buried outside of Vienna. He didn't even bother to attend the funeral. But he cared enough about his nephew to go ahead and start World War I, which he did by declaring war on Serbia a month later." She stood up. "Thus ends the tour." She smiled. "Tips are appreciated."

Colin and Hassan clapped politely, and then Colin walked over to the obelisk, which read only: ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND. 1863–1914. LIE LIGHTLY UPON HIM EARTH, THO' HE / LAID MANY A HEAVY BURDEN UPON THEE.

Heavy burdens, indeed—millions of them. Colin reached out and felt the granite, cool despite the hot sun. And what had the Archduke Franz Ferdinand done that he might have done differently? If he hadn't obsessed over love, hadn't been so tactless, so whiny, so nerdy—maybe if he hadn't been, Colin thought, so much like *me*. . .

In the end, the Archduke had two problems: no one gave a shit about him (at least not till his corpse started a war), and one day he got a piece taken out of his middle.

But now Colin would fill his own hole *and* make people stand up and take notice of him. He would stay special, use his talent to do something more interesting and important than anagramming and translating Latin. And yes, again the Eureka washed over him, the yes-yes-yes of it. He would use his past—and the Archduke's past, and the whole endless past—to inform the future. He would impress Katherine XIX—she had always loved the idea of him being a genius—and he would make the world safer for Dumpees everywhere. He would matter.

From which reverie he was awoken by Hassan asking, "So how the fug did a perfectly good Austrian Archduke end up in Shitsberg, Tennessee?"

"We bought him," Lindsey Lee Wells said. "Around 1921. The owner of the castle where he was buried needed money and put him up for sale. And we bought him."

"How much did a dead Archduke cost in those days?" Hassan wondered.

"'Bout thirty-five hundred bucks, they say."

"That's a lot of money," Colin said, his hand still on the granite obelisk. "The dollar rose by a factor of more than ten between 1920 and now, so that's more than thirty-five thousand dollars in today's dollars. A lot of tours at eleven bucks apiece."

Lindsey Lee Wells rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay—I am sufficiently impressed. Enough already. You know, we got these things down here—I don't know if you have 'em where you're from, but they're called calculators, and they can do all that work for you."

"I wasn't trying to impress anyone," Colin insisted defensively.

And then Lindsey's eyes lit up and she cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted, "Hey!" Three guys and one girl were trudging up the slope, just their heads visible. "Kids from school," Lindsey explained. "And my boyfriend." Lindsey Lee Wells took off running toward them. Hassan and Colin stood still, and began chatting quickly back and forth.

Hassan said, "I'm a Kuwaiti exchange student; my dad's an oil baron."

Colin shook his head. "Too obvious. I'm a Spaniard. A refugee. My parents were murdered by Basque separatists."

"I don't know if Basque is a thing or a person and neither will they, so no. Okay, I just got to America from Honduras. My name is Miguel. My parents made a fortune in bananas, and you are my bodyguard, because the banana-workers' union wants me dead."

Colin shot back, "That's good, but you don't speak Spanish. Okay, I was abducted by Eskimos in the Yukon Terr—no, that's crap. We're cousins from France visiting the United States for the first time. It's our high-school graduation trip."

"That's boring, but we're out of time. I'm the English speaker?" asked Hassan.

"Yeah, fine." By now, Colin could hear the group chatting, and see Lindsey Lee Wells's eyes staring up at a tall, muscular boy wearing a Tennessee Titans jersey. The boy was a hulking mass of muscle with spiked hair and a smile that was all top teeth and gums. The success of the game depended on Lindsey having not talked about Colin and Hassan, but Colin figured it was a safe bet, as she seemed pretty enthralled with the boy.

"Okay, they're coming," said Hassan. "What's your name?"

"Pierre."

"Okay. I'm Salinger, pronounced SalinZHAY."

"Y'all here for the tour, are ya," Lindsey's boyfriend said.

"Yes. I am Salinzhay," Hassan said, his accent passable if not magnificent. "This is my cousin Pierre. We visit your country for the first time, and we wish to see the Archduke, who started our—how you say—first Earth war." Colin glanced at Lindsey Lee Wells, who suppressed a smile as she smacked orange gum.

"I'm Colin," the boyfriend said, his hand extended. Hassan leaned over to Pierre/Colin and whispered, "His name is 'The Other Colin.'" Hassan then said, "My cousin, he speak very little English. I am his man of translate." The Other Colin laughed, as did the two other boys, who quickly introduced themselves as Chase and Fulton. ("We will call Chase, Jeans Are Too Tight, and Fulton shall be Short One Chewing Tobacco," Hassan whispered to Colin.)

“*Je m’appelle Pierre,*” Colin blurted out after the boys had introduced themselves. “*Quand je vais dans le métro, je fais aussi de la musique de prouts.*”²³

“We get a lot of foreign tourists here,” said the only girl besides Lindsey, who was tall and thoroughly Abercrombified in her tight tank top. The girl also had—how to put this politely—gigantic gazoombas. She was incredibly hot—in that popular-girl-with-bleached-teeth-and-anorexia kind of way, which was Colin’s least favorite way of being hot. “I’m Katrina, by the way.” *Close*, Colin thought, *but no cigar.*

“*Amour aime aimer amour!*”²⁴ Colin announced quite loudly.

“Pierre,” said Hassan. “He has the disease with the talking. The, uh, with the bad words. In France, we say it the *Toorettes*. I do not know how you say in English.”

“He has Tourette’s?” asked Katrina.

“*MERDE!*”²⁵ shouted Colin.

“Yes,” said Hassan excitedly. “Same word both language, like hemorrhoid. That one we learned yesterday because Pierre had the fire in his bottom. He has the *Toorettes*. And the hemorrhoid. But, is good boy.”

“*Ne dis pas que j’ai des hémorroïdes! Je n’ai pas d’hémorroïde,*”²⁶ Colin shouted, at once trying to continue the game and get Hassan on to a different topic.

Hassan looked at Colin, nodded knowingly, and then told Katrina, “He just said that your face, it is beautiful like the hemorrhoid.” At which point Lindsey Lee Wells burst out laughing and said, “Okay. Okay. Enough.”

Colin turned to Hassan and said, “Why’d it have to be hemorrhoids? How the hell did that idea pop into your mind?” And then The Other Colin (TOC) and Jeans Are Too Tight (JATT) and Short One Chewing Tobacco (SOCT) and Katrina were all abuzz, talking and laughing and asking Lindsey questions.

“My dad went to France last year, dude,” explained Hassan, “and he told this story about getting a hemorrhoid and having to point at his butt and say the French word for fire over and over again until it came out that the word was hemorrhoid in both languages. And I didn’t know any other fugging French words. Plus that’s some funny shit, you having Tourette’s *and* hemorrhoids.”

“Whatever,” Colin said, his face flushed. And then he overheard TOC saying, “That’s awful funny. Hollis would love them, huh?” And Lindsey laughed and reached up on her tiptoes to kiss him and then said, “I got you good, baby,” and he said, “Well, *they* got me,” and Lindsey faked like she was pouting, and TOC leaned down to kiss her forehead, and she brightened. The same scene had played out in Colin’s own life frequently—although he’d usually been the fake

pouter.

They trudged back through the field as a group, Colin's sweat-soaked T-shirt sticky and tight against his back, his eye still throbbing. *The Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability*, he thought. Even the name rang true. He had waited so long for his breakthrough, despaired so many times, and he just wanted to be alone for a little while with a pencil and some paper and a calculator and no talking. In the car would work. Colin tugged softly on Hassan's shirt and gave him a meaningful look.

"I just need some Gatorade," Hassan responded. "Then we'll go."

"I'll need to open up the store for ya, then," Lindsey said. She turned to TOC. "Come with me, baby." The gooey softness of her voice reminded Colin of K-19.

"I would," TOC said, "cept Hollis is sitting out on the steps. Me and Chase is supposed to be at work, but we skipped out." TOC picked her off her feet and squeezed her tight, his biceps flexing. She squirmed a little but kissed him hard, her mouth open. Then he dropped her down, winked, and trudged off with his entourage toward a red pickup truck.

When Lindsey, Hassan, and Colin arrived back at the Gutshot General Store, a large woman wearing a pink floral dress was sitting on the steps talking to a man with a bushy brown beard. As they approached, Colin could hear the woman telling a story.

"So Starnes is out there to mow the lawn," she was saying. "And he turns off the mower and looks up and appraises the situation for a bit and then calls out to me, 'Hollis! What the hell is wrong with that dog?' and I says to him that the dog's got inflamed anal sacs that I just drained, and Starnes chews that one over for a while and then finally he says, 'I reckon you could go ahead and shoot that dog and git you another one with regular anal sacs and wouldn't nobody be the wiser.' And I tell him, 'Starnes, this town ain't got any men worth loving, so I might as well love my dog.'" The bearded guy bent over in laughter, and then the storyteller looked over at Lindsey.

"You were on a tour?" Hollis asked. When Lindsey nodded, Hollis went on. "Well, you sure-God took your time."

"Sorry," mumbled Lindsey. Nodding to the guys, she said, "Hollis, this is Hassan and Colin. Boys, this is Hollis."

"Also known as Lindsey's mother," Hollis explained.

"Christ, Hollis. Don't go bragging about it," Lindsey said. She walked past her mom, unlocked the store, and everyone walked into the sweet air-conditioning. As Colin passed, Hollis put a hand on his shoulder, spun him around, and stared at his face.

“I know you,” she said.

“I don’t know you,” Colin responded, and then added, by way of explanation, “I don’t forget many faces.” Hollis Wells continued to stare at him, but he was sure they had never met.

“He means that literally,” Hassan added, peering up from behind a rack of comic books. “Do you guys get newspapers here?” From behind the counter, Lindsey Lee Wells produced a *USA Today*. Hassan paged through the front section and finally folded the paper carefully to reveal only a small black-and-white picture of a thick-haired bespectacled white male. “Do you know this guy?” Hassan asked.

Colin squinted at the paper and thought for a moment. “I don’t personally know him, but his name is Gil Stabel and he is the CEO of a company called Fortiscom.”

“Good work. Except he’s not the CEO of Fortiscom.”

“Yes, he is,” Colin said, quite confident.

“No, he’s not. He’s not the CEO of anything. He’s dead.” Hassan unfolded the paper, and Colin leaned in to read the caption: FORTISCOM CEO DIES IN PLANE CRASH.

“*KranialKidz!*” Hollis shouted triumphantly.

Colin looked up at her, wide-eyed. He sighed. *No one* watched that show. Its Nielsen share was 0.0. The show had been on for one season and not a single soul among Chicago’s three million residents had ever recognized him. And yet, here in Gutshot, Tennessee . . .

“Oh my God!” Hollis shouted. “What are you doing *here?*”

Colin, flushed for a moment with a feeling of famousness, thought about it. “I cracked up; then we went on a road trip; then we saw the sign for the Archduke; then I cut my head; then I had a Eureka moment; then we met her friends; now we’re going back to the car, but we haven’t left yet.”

Hollis stepped forward and examined his bandage. She smiled, and with one hand reached up for his Jew-fro and mussed his hair like she was his aunt and he was a seven-year-old who’d just done something exceedingly cute. “You’re not leaving yet, either,” she said, “because I’m going to cook you dinner.”

Hassan clapped his hands together. “I *am* hungry.”

“Close her down, Linds.” Lindsey rolled her eyes and walked slowly out from behind the register. “You drive with Colin in case he gets lost,” Hollis told Lindsey. “I’ll take—what did you say your name was?”

“I’m not a terrorist,” Hassan said by way of answering.

“Well. That’s a relief.” Hollis smiled.

• • •

Hollis drove a new and impressively pink pickup truck, and Colin followed in the Hearse with Lindsey riding shotgun. “Nice car,” she said sarcastically.

Colin didn’t respond. He liked Lindsey Lee Wells, but sometimes it felt like she was trying to get his goat.²⁷ He had the same problem with Hassan. “Thanks for not saying anything when I was Pierre and Hassan was Salinger.”

“Yeah, well. It was pretty funny. And plus Colin was being sort of a dick and needed to be taken down a peg.”

“I see,” said Colin, which is what he had learned to say when he had nothing to say.

“So,” she said. “You’re a genius?”

“I’m a washed-up child prodigy,” Colin said.

“What are you good at, other than just already knowing everything?”

“Um, languages. Word games. Trivia. Nothing useful.”

He felt her glance at him. “Languages are useful. What do you speak?”

“I’m pretty good in eleven. German, French, Latin, Greek, Dutch, Arabic, Spanish, Russian—”

“I get the picture,” she said, cutting him off. “I think that *meine Mutter denkt, daß sie gut für mich sind*”²⁸ she said. “That’s why we’re in this car together.”

“*Warum denkt sie das?*”²⁹

“Okay, we’ve both proven we speak German. She’s been on my ass like crazy to go to college and become, I don’t know, a doctor or something. Only I’m not going. I’m staying here. I already made up my mind about that. So I’m thinking maybe she wants you to inspire me or something.”

“Doctors make more money than paramedics-in-training,” Colin pointed out.

“Right, but I don’t need money.” She paused, and the car rumbled beneath them. Finally, he glanced over at her. “I need my life,” she explained, “which is good and which is here. Anyway, I might go to the community college in Bradford to shut Hollis up, but that’s it.” The road took a sharp, banked turn to the right and, past a stand of trees, a town emerged. Small but well-kept houses lined the road. They all had porches, it seemed, and a lot of people were sitting out on them, even though it was hotter than hell in summertime. On the main road, Colin noted a newish combination gas station and Taco Bell, a hair salon, and the Gutshot, TN, Post Office, which appeared from the road to be the size of a spacious walk-in closet. Lindsey pointed out Colin’s window. “Out there’s the factory,” she said, and in the middle distance Colin saw a complex of low-lying buildings. It didn’t look much like a factory—no towering steel silos or smokestacks billowing carbon monoxide, just a few buildings that vaguely

reminded him of airplane hangars.

“What does it make?” Colin asked.

“It makes jobs. It makes all the good jobs this town has. My great-grandfather started the plant in 1917.” Colin slowed down, pulling to the shoulder so that a speeding SUV could pass him while he looked out at the factory with Lindsey.

“Right, but what gets *made* there?” he asked.

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t laugh.”

“Swear not to laugh,” she said.

“I swear.”

“It’s a textile mill. These days we mostly make, uh, tampon strings.”

Colin did not laugh. Instead, he thought, *Tampons have strings? Why?* Of all the major human mysteries—God, the nature of the universe, etc.—he knew the least about tampons. To Colin, tampons were a little bit like grizzly bears: he was aware of their existence, but he’d never seen one in the wild, and didn’t really care to.

In lieu of Colin’s laugh came a period of unbreachable silence. He followed Hollis’s pink truck down a newly paved side street that sloped up precipitously, causing the Hearse’s worn-out engine to rev for its very life. As they climbed the hill, it became clear that the street was actually a long driveway, which dead-ended into the largest single-family residence that Colin had ever personally laid eyes upon. Also, it was glaringly, bubble-gummingly, Pepto-Bismolly pink. He pulled into the driveway. Colin was staring at it somewhat slack-jawed when Lindsey poked him softly on the arm. Lindsey shrugged, as if embarrassed. “It ain’t much,” she said. “But it’s home.”

A broad staircase led up to a heavily columned front porch. Hollis opened the door and Colin and Hassan walked into a cavernous living room outfitted with a couch long enough for both of them to lie down without touching. “Y’all make yourselves at home. Lindsey and I are going to get dinner ready.”

“You can probably handle that on your own,” Lindsey said, leaning against the front door.

“I probably could, but I ain’t gonna.”

Hassan sat down on the couch. “That Hollis is a riot, man. On the way over here she was telling me that she owns a factory that makes tampon strings.” Colin still did not find this fact particularly hilarious.

“You know,” Colin said, “the movie star Jayne Mansfield lived in a pink mansion.” He walked around the living room, reading the spines of Hollis’s books and looking at framed photographs. A picture on the mantel above their fireplace caught Colin’s eye, and he walked over to it. A slightly younger,

slightly thinner Hollis was standing in front of Niagara Falls. Beside her stood a girl who looked a little like Lindsey Lee Wells, except the girl wore a black trench coat over a ratty old Blink-182 T-shirt. Her eyeliner was thick and stretched back toward her temples, her black jeans tight and tapered, her Doc Martens well-polished. “Does she have a sister?” asked Colin.

“What?”

“Lindsey,” Colin elaborated. “Come here and look at this.”

Hassan came over and briefly appraised the picture before saying, “That’s the most pathetic attempt I’ve ever seen to be goth. Goth kids don’t like Blink-182. God, even I know that.”

“Um, do you like green beans?” Lindsey asked, and Colin suddenly realized she was behind them.

“Is this your sister?” asked Colin.

“Uh, no,” she said to Colin. “I’m an only child. Can’t you tell by how adorably self-involved I am?”

“He was too busy being adorably self-involved to notice,” Hassan interjected.

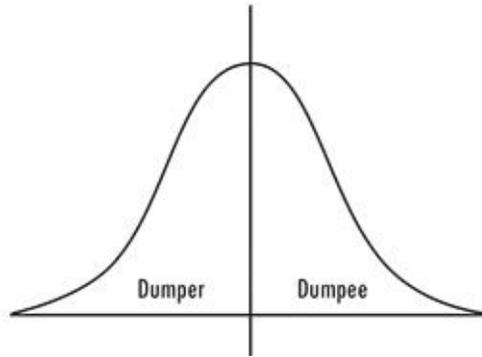
“So who is this?” Colin asked Lindsey.

“It’s me in eighth grade.”

“Oh,” said Colin and Hassan simultaneously, both embarrassed. “Yeah, I like green beans,” Hassan said, trying to change the subject as quickly as possible. Lindsey pulled shut the kitchen door behind her, and Hassan shrugged toward Colin and smirked, then returned to the couch.

“I need to work,” Colin said. He found his way down a pink-wallpapered hallway and into a room with a huge wooden desk that looked like the kind of place where a president might sign a bill into law. Colin sat down, pulled from his pocket his broken #2 pencil and omnipresent notebook, and began to scribble.

The Theorem rests upon the validity of my long-standing argument that the world contains precisely two kinds of people: Dumpers and Dumpees. Everyone is predisposed to being either one or the other, but of course not all people are COMPLETE Dumpers or Dumpees. Hence the bell curve:



The majority of people fall somewhere close to the vertical dividing line with the occasional statistical outlier (e.g., me) representing a tiny percentage of overall individuals. The numerical expression of the graph can be something like 5 being extreme Dumper, and 0 being me. Ergo, if the Great One was a 4 and I am a 0, total size of the Dumper/Dumpee differential = -4. (Assuming negative numbers if the guy is more of a Dumpee; positive if the girl is.)

And then he sought a graphable equation that would express his relationship with the Great One (the simplest of all his romances) as it actually was: nasty, brutish, and short.

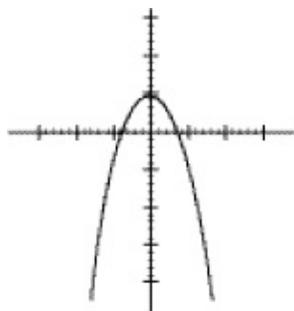
For some reason, as he discarded equations left and right, the room seemed to grow warmer. Sweat pooled in the gauze bandage over his eyes, so he tore it off. He removed his shirt, wiping still-trickling blood from his face. Naked from the waist up, his vertebrae extruded from his skinny back as he hunched over the desk, working. He felt as he had never felt before—that he was close to an original concept. Plenty of people, Colin included, had noted the Dumper/Dumpee dichotomy before. But no one had ever used it to show the arc of romantic relationships. He doubted anyone had ever even imagined that a single formula could predict the rise and fall of romances universally. He knew it wouldn't be easy. For one thing, turning concepts into numbers was a sort of anagramming to which he was unaccustomed. But he had confidence. He'd never been all that good at math,³⁰ but he was a goddamned world-famous expert in getting dumped.

He kept at the formula, haunted by the feeling that his head was just about to wrap around something big and important. And when he proved he mattered, she would miss him, he knew. She would see him as she had in the beginning: as a genius.

Within an hour, he had an equation:

$$f(x) = D^3x^2 - D$$

which made Katherine I look like this:



That was nearly perfect—an uncomplicated graphical representation of an uncomplicated relationship. It even captured the relationship’s brevity. The graphs didn’t need to represent time accurately; they merely needed to give an idea of length *by comparison*, i.e., she’ll date me longer than K-14 but not as long as K-19.³¹

But Katherine II came out all wrong—only touching the x-axis once. Clearly, it wasn’t refined enough yet to send out a notice to *The Annals of Mathematics* or anything, but Colin felt good enough to slink back into his shirt. Happier than he’d been in, well, at least two days, Colin hurried down the hallway and burst into the coolness of the living room, where he saw through a doorway that Lindsey and Hassan and Hollis were seated in the dining room. He walked in and sat down before a plate of rice, green beans, and what appeared to be very small chickens.

Hassan was laughing about something, and so were both the Wellses. Already, they seemed to love him. People just liked Hassan, the way people like fast food and celebrities. It was a gift Colin found amazing.

The moment Colin sat down, Hollis asked Hassan, “Would you like to say grace?”

“Sure thing.” Hassan cleared his throat. “*Bismillah.*” Then he picked up his fork.

“That’s it?” Hollis wondered.

“That’s it. We are a terse people. Terse, and also hungry.”

The Arabic seemed to render everyone uncomfortable or something, because no one talked for a few minutes except Hassan, who kept saying that the quail (it was quail, not tiny chicken) was *excellent*. And it *was* good, Colin supposed, if you happened to enjoy searching through an endless labyrinth of bones and cartilage for the occasional sliver of meat. He hunted around with his fork and knife for the edible parts and finally located one entire bite of meat. He chewed slowly so as to relish it, chewing and chewing and *ouch*. *Christ. What the hell was that?* Chew. Chew. Chew. And *again*. *Fug. Is that a bone?* “Ow,” he said softly.

“Birdshot,” Lindsey told him.

“Birdshot?”

“Birdshot,” Hollis agreed.

“The bird was shot?” Colin asked, spitting out a tiny metal pellet.

“Yup.”

“And I’m eating the *bullets*?”

Lindsey smiled. “Nope. You’re spitting them out.”

And so it was that Colin dined that evening primarily on rice and green beans. After everyone had finished, Hollis asked, “So how did it feel to win *KranialKidz*? I remember on the show you didn’t seem that, uh, excited.”

“I felt really bad about the other kid losing. She was really nice. The kid I played against—she took it kind of hard.”

“I was happy enough for the both of us,” said Hassan. “I was the only member of the studio audience dancing a jig. Singleton beat that little fugger like she’d stole something.”³²

KranialKidz reminded Colin of Katherine XIX, and he stared straight ahead and tried hard to think of as little as possible. When Hollis spoke, it seemed to break a long quiet, the way alarm clocks do. “I think y’all should work for me this summer in Gutshot. I’m starting a project, and you’d be perfect for it.”

Over the years, people had occasionally sought to employ Colin in a manner befitting his talents. But (a) summers were for smart-kid camp so that he could further his learning and (b) a real job would distract him from his real work, which was becoming an ever-larger repository of knowledge, and (c) Colin didn’t really have any marketable skills. One rarely comes across, for instance, the following want ad:

Prodigy

*Huge, megalithic corporation seeks a talented, ambitious prodigy to join our exciting, dynamic Prodigy Division for summer job. Requirements include at least fourteen years’ experience as a certified child prodigy, ability to anagram adeptly (and alliterate agilely), fluency in eleven languages. Job duties include reading, remembering encyclopedias, novels, and poetry; and memorizing the first ninety-nine digits of pi.*³³

And so every summer Colin went to smart-kid camp and with each passing year it became increasingly clear to him that he wasn’t qualified to do *anything*, which is what he told Hollis Wells.

“I just need you to be reasonably smart and not from Gutshot, and you both fit the bill. Five hundred dollars a week for both y’all, plus free room and board.

You're hired! Welcome to the Gutshot Textiles family!"

Colin shot a glance at his friend, who held a quail daintily in his hands, his teeth gnawing at the bone in a vain search for a half-decent meal. Hassan placed the quail carefully back on the plate and looked back at Colin.

Hassan nodded subtly; Colin's lips pursed; Hassan rubbed at his five-o'clock shadow; Colin bit at the inside of his thumb; Hassan smiled; Colin nodded.

"Okay," said Colin finally. They had decided to stay. *Like it or not*, Colin thought, *road trips have destinations*. Or at least his kind of road trip always would. And this seemed a fair end point—sweet, if ceaselessly pink, accommodations; reasonably nice people, one of whom made him feel slightly famous; and the home of his first-ever Eureka. Colin didn't need the money, but he knew how much Hassan hated begging spending money off his parents. And also, they could both use a job. Neither of them, it occurred to Colin, had ever, technically, worked for money before. Colin's only worry was the Theorem.

Hassan said, "*La ureed an uz'ij rihlatik—wa lakin min ajl khamsu ma'at doolar amreeki fil usbu', sawfa afa'al.*"³⁴

"*La ureed an akhsar kulla waktu min ajl watheefa. Yajib an ashtaghil ala mas'alat al-riyadiah.*"³⁵

"Can we just make sure Singleton has time to doodle?" asked Hassan in English.

"Is that some kind of gibberish?" Lindsey interrupted, incredulous.

Colin ignored her, responding in English to Hassan. "It's not doodling, which you'd know if you—"

"Went to college, right. God, so predictable," Hassan said. Then he turned to Lindsey and said, "We are not speaking *gibberish*. We're speaking the sacred language of the *Qur'an*, the language of great *calipha* and Saladin, the most beautiful and intricate of all human tongues."

"Well, it sounds like a raccoon clearing its throat," Lindsey noted. Colin stopped for a moment to ponder that.

"I need time to do my work," Colin said, and Hollis just nodded.

"Splendid," Lindsey said, seemingly genuine. "Splendid. But you can't have my room."

His mouth half-full of rice, Hassan said, "I think we'll be able to find a place to hunker down somewhere in this house."

After awhile Hollis announced, "We should play Scrabble." Lindsey groaned.

"I've never played," Colin said.

"A genius who's never played Scrabble?" Lindsey asked.

"I'm not a genius."

"Okay. A *smartypants*?"

Colin laughed. It suited him. No longer a prodigy, not yet a genius—but still a smartypants. “I don’t play games,” Colin said. “I don’t really *play* much.”

“Well, you should. Playing is fun. Although Scrabble isn’t really the A#1 way of doing it,” Lindsey said.

Final Score:

Hollis: 158

Colin: 521

Lindsey: 293

Hassan: 0³⁶

• • •

After he called his parents and told them he was in a town called Gutshot but failed to mention he was boarding with strangers, Colin stayed up late working on the Theorem in his new bedroom on the second floor, which featured a nice oak desk with empty drawers. Colin, for whatever reason, had always loved desks with empty drawers. But the Theorem didn’t go well; he was beginning to worry that he might lack the math expertise for the job when he glanced up to see the bedroom door opening. Lindsey Lee Wells was wearing paisley pajamas.

“How’s the head?” she asked, sitting down on his bed.

He closed his right eye, then opened it, and then pressed a finger against his cut. “It hurts,” he responded. “Thanks for your treatment, though.”

She folded her legs beneath her, smiled, and sang, “That’s what friends are for.” But then she turned serious, almost shy. “Listen, I wonder if I can just tell you something.” She bit at the inside of her thumb.

“HeyIDoThat,” Colin said, pointing.

“Oh, weird. It’s like the poor man’s thumb sucking, isn’t it? Anyway, I only do it in private,” Lindsey said, and it occurred to Colin that being around him was not really “private,” but he didn’t pursue it. “Right so anyway. This will sound retarded, but can I just tell you about that picture so you don’t think I’m an absolute asshole? Because I’ve been lying in bed thinking about what an asshole you probably think I am, and how you and Hassan are probably talking about what an asshole I am and everything.”

“Um, okay,” he said, although frankly he and Hassan had plenty of other things to talk about.

“So I was ugly. I was never fat, really, and I never wore headgear or had zits or anything. But I was ugly. I don’t even know how ugly and pretty get decided—maybe there’s like a secret cabal of boys who meet in the locker room and decide who’s ugly and who’s hot, because as far as I can remember, there was

no such thing as a hot fourth-grader.”

“Clearly, you never met Katherine I,” interrupted Colin.

“Rule 1 of stories: no interrupting. But, ha ha. Perv. Anyway, I was ugly. I got picked on a lot. I’m not going to bore you with stories about how bad it was, but it was pretty bad. I was miserable. And so in eighth grade I went all alternative. Hollis and I drove to Memphis and bought me a whole new wardrobe, and I got me a Zelda haircut and dyed it black and stopped going outside in the sun, and I was like half-emo and half-goth and half-punk and half-nerd chic. Basically, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing, but it didn’t matter because the middle school in Milan, Tennessee, had never seen emo or goth or punk or nerd chic. I was *different*, that was all. And I hated all of them, and they hated all of me for an entire year. And then high school started, and I decided to make them like me. I just decided. It was so easy, dude. It was so, so easy. I just became it. If it walks like a cool kid and talks like a cool kid and dresses like a cool kid and has the right mix of naughtyandnastyandnice like a cool kid, it becomes a cool kid. But I’m not an asshole to people. There’s not even really *popularity* at my school.”

“That,” Colin said emphatically, “is a sentence that has only ever been spoken by popular people.”

“Well, okay. But I’m not just some former ugly girl who sold her soul to date hotties and go to the finest keg parties the Greater Gutshot Area has to offer.” She repeated it, almost defensively. “I didn’t sell my soul.”

“Um, okay. I wouldn’t care if you did,” Colin acknowledged. “Nerds always say they don’t give a shit about popularity; but—not having friends sucks. I never liked quote unquote cool kids, personally—I thought they were all dumb little shits. But I’m probably like them in some ways. Like, the other day, I told Hassan I wanted to *matter*—like, be remembered. And he said, ‘famous is the new popular.’ Maybe he’s right, and maybe I just want to be famous. I was thinking about this tonight, actually, that maybe I want strangers to think I’m cool since people who actually know me don’t. I was at the zoo once when I was ten on a class trip and I really needed to pee, right? I actually had repeated urges to urinate that day, probably due to overhydration. Incidentally, did you know that the whole eight glasses a day thing is complete bullshit and has no scientific basis? So many things are like that. Everyone just assumes they’re true, because people are basically lazy and incurious, which incidentally is one of those words that sounds like it wouldn’t be a word but is.”³⁷

“It’s very weird to watch your brain work,” Lindsey said, and Colin sighed. He knew he couldn’t tell stories, that he always included extraneous details and tangents that interested only him. “Anyway, the end of that story is that I came

relatively close to having a lion bite off my penis. And my point was that shit like that never happens to popular people. Ever.”

Lindsey laughed. “That sounds like a hell of a good story if only you knew how to tell it.” She bit at her thumb again. Her private habit. From behind her hand she said, “Well, I think you’re cool, and I want you to think I’m cool, and that’s all popular is.”

The End (of the Beginning)

After their first kiss, Colin and Katherine I sat in silence for perhaps two minutes. Katherine watched Colin carefully, and he tried to continue translating Ovid. But he found himself with an unprecedented problem. Colin couldn't focus. He kept glancing up at her. Her big blue eyes, too big for her young face really, stared unceasingly at him. He figured he was in love. Finally, she spoke.

"Colin," she said.

"Yes, Katherine?"

"I'm breaking up with you."

At the time, of course, Colin did not fully understand the significance of the moment. He immersed himself in Ovid, grieving his loss in silence, and she continued to watch him for the next half hour until her parents came into the living room to take her home. But it only took a few more Katherines for him to look back nostalgically upon The Great One as the perfect spokesperson for the Katherine Phenomenon. Their three-minute relationship was the thing itself in its most unadulterated form. It was the immutable tango between the Dumper and the Dumpee: the coming and the seeing and the conquering and the returning home.

²³ "My name is Pierre. When I go to the metro, I also make fart music."

²⁴ "Love loves to love love." A quote, translated into French, from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

²⁵ "Shit!"

²⁶ "Don't say I have hemorrhoids! I don't have hemorrhoids."

²⁷ Which is what Colin's mom always called teasing, even though it never made a lick of sense to Colin.

²⁸ "My mother thinks that you are good for me."

²⁹ "Why would she think that?"

³⁰ Although of course he was certainly better than most people.

³¹ A fuller explanation of the math involved here would be really boring and also really long. There is a part of books specifically designed for the very long and the very boring, and that part is called "The Appendix," which is precisely where one can find a semi-exhaustive explanation of the math invoked herein. As for the actual story itself: there will be no more math. None. Promise.

³² Stolen something, Colin wanted to say. But grammar isn't interesting.

³³ Which Colin did when he was ten, by making up a 99-word sentence in which the first letter of each word corresponded to the digit of pi (a = 1, b = 2, etc.; j = 0). The sentence, if you're curious: Catfish always drink alcoholic ether if begged, for every catfish enjoys heightened intoxication; gross indulgence can be calamitous, however; duly, garfish babysit for dirty catfish children, helping catfish babies get instructional education just because garfish get delight assisting infants' growth and famously inspire confidence in immature catfish, giving experience (and joy even); however, blowfish jeer insightful garfish, disparaging inappropriately, doing damage, even insulting benevolent, charming, jovial garfish, hurting and frustrating deeply; joy fades but hurt feelings bring just grief; inevitable irritation hastens feeling blue; however, jovial children declare happiness, blowfishes' evil causes dejection, blues; accordingly, always

glorify jolly, friendly garfish!

³⁴ “I don’t want to ruin your road trip—but for five hundred American dollars a week, I will.”

³⁵ “The road trip has kind of sucked anyway, but I don’t want the job to take my time. I need to do the Theorem.”

³⁶ “I’m not playing *Scrabble* against *Singleton*. God, if I want to be reminded of how dumb I am, I’ll just consult my verbal SAT scores, thanks.”

³⁷ That’s absolutely true, about the eight glasses a day. There’s no reason whatsoever to drink eight glasses of water a day unless you, for whatever reason, particularly like the taste of water. Most experts agree that unless there’s something horribly wrong with you, you should just drink water whenever you’re—get this—thirsty.

(eight)

When you spend your entire life in and around the city of Chicago, as it turns out, you fail to fully apprehend certain facets of rural life. Take, for example, the troubling case of the rooster. To Colin's mind, the rooster crowing at dawn was nothing more than a literary and cinematic trope. When an author wanted a character to be awoken at dawn, Colin figured the author just used the literary tradition of the crowing rooster to make it happen. It was, he thought, just like how authors always wrote things in ways other than how they actually happened. Authors never included the whole story; they just got to the point. Colin thought the truth should matter as much as the point, and he figured that was why he couldn't tell good stories.

That morning, he learned that roosters really *don't* start crowing at dawn. They start well *before* dawn—around 5 A.M. Colin rolled over in the foreign bed, and for a few slow seconds, as he squinted into the darkness, he felt good. Tired, and annoyed with the rooster. But good. And then he remembered that she'd dumped him, and he thought of her in her big fluffy bed asleep, not dreaming of him. He rolled over and looked at his cell phone. No missed calls.

The rooster crowed again. "Cock-a-doodle-don't, motherfugger," Colin mumbled. But the rooster cock-a-doodle-did, and by dawn, the crowing created a kind of weird dissonant symphony when mingled with the muffled sounds of a Muslim's morning prayers. Those hours of unsleepthroughable loudness allowed him ample time to wonder about everything from when Katherine last thought of him to the number of grammatically correct anagrams of *rooster*.³⁸

Around 7 A.M., as the rooster (or perhaps there was more than one—perhaps they crowed in shifts) entered its third hour of shrieking cries, Colin stumbled into the bathroom, which also connected to Hassan's bedroom. Hassan was already in the shower. For all its luxury, their bathroom contained no bathtub.

"Morning, Hass."

"Hey." Hassan shouted over the water. "Dude, Hollis is asleep in the living

room watching the Home Shopping Network. She's got a billion-dollar house and she sleeps on the couch."

"Bees feefle are weird," Colin said, pulling out his toothbrush mid-sentence.

"Whatever—Hollis loves me. She thinks I hung the moon. And that you're a genius. And at five hundred dollars a week, I'll never have to work again. Five hundred dollars can last me five months at home, dude. I can survive on this summer till I'm, like, thirty."

"Your lack of ambition is truly remarkable."

Hassan's hand reached out from behind the shower and grabbed a towel monogrammed HLW. He emerged moments later, and walked into Colin's room, towel around his sizable waist.

"Listen, *kafir*. Seriously. Lay off about me going to school. Let me be happy; I'll let you be happy. Giving each other shit is fine, but there comes a point."

"Sorry. I didn't know the point had come." Colin sat down on the bed, pulling on a *KranialKidz* T-shirt he'd been given.

"Well, you've brought it up like 284 consecutive days."

"Maybe we should have a word," Colin said. "For when it's gone too far. Like, just a random word and then we'll know to back off."

Standing there in his towel, Hassan looked up at the ceiling and finally said, "Dingleberries."

"Dingleberries." Colin agreed, anagramming in his head. Dingleberries was an anagrammatic jackpot.³⁹

"You're anagramming, aren't you, motherfucker?" asked Hassan.

"Yeah," Colin said.

"Maybe that's why she dumped you. Always anagramming, never listening."

"Dingleberries," said Colin.

"Just wanted to give you a chance to use it. Okay, let's go eat. I'm hungrier than a kid on his third day of fat camp." As they made their way down a hall to a spiral staircase that led to the living room, Colin asked—as close to a whisper as he could muster—"So why do you think Hollis wants to give us jobs, really?"

Hassan stopped on the staircase, and Colin with him. "She wants to make me happy. We fatties have a bond, dude. It's like a Secret Society. We've got all kinds of shit you don't know about. Handshakes, special fat people dances—we got these secret fugging lairs in the center of the earth and we go down there in the middle of the night when all the skinny kids are sleeping and eat cake and fried chicken and shit. Why d'you think Hollis is still sleeping, *kafir*? Because we were up all night in the secret lair injecting butter frosting into our veins. She's giving us jobs because a fatty always trusts another fatty."

"You're not fat. You're pudgy."

“Dude, you *just* saw my man-tits when I got out of the shower.”

“They’re not that bad,” said Colin.

“Oh, that’s it! You asked for it!” Hassan pulled his T-shirt up to his collarbone and Colin glanced over at Hass’s hairy chest, which featured—okay, there’s no denying it—minor breasts. An A cup, but still. Hassan smiled with great satisfaction, pulled down his shirt, and headed down the stairs.

• • •

It took an hour for Hollis to get ready, during which time Hassan and Lindsey chatted and watched *The Today Show* while Colin sat at the far edge of the couch and read one of the books he’d stuffed in his backpack—a Lord Byron anthology including the poems *Lara* and *Don Juan*. He liked it pretty well. When Lindsey interrupted him, he’d just come to a line in *Lara* he liked quite a lot: “Eternity bids thee to forget.”

“Whatcha reading there, smartypants?” asked Lindsey. Colin held up the cover. “Don Juan,” she said, pronouncing the *Juan* like *Wan*. “Trying to learn how to avoid getting dumped?”

“*Jew-un*,” Colin corrected. “It’s pronounced *Don Jew-un*,” he said.⁴⁰

“Not interesting,” Hassan pointed out. But Lindsey seemed to find it more aggravating than not-interesting. She rolled her eyes and picked up the breakfast plates from the coffee table. Hollis Wells came downstairs, wrapped in what looked, for all the world, like a flowery toga.

“What we’re doing,” she spoke quickly, “is we’re putting together an oral history of Gutshot, for future generations. I’ve been pulling people off the line to do interviews for a couple of weeks, but I ain’t gotta now that you’re here. Anyway, the downfall of this whole operation so far has been gossip—everybody chattering ’bout what everyone else says or doesn’t say. But y’all don’t have a reason in the world to talk about whether or not Ellie Mae liked her husband when she married him in 1937. So—it’s you two. And Linds, who everybody trusts—”

“I’m very honest,” Lindsey explained, cutting off her mom.

“To a fault, dear. But yes. So, you get these people talking and they won’t shut up, I assure you. I want six hours of new tape turned in to me every day. But steer them toward real *history*, if you can. I’m doing this for my grandkids, not for a gossip fest.”

Lindsey coughed, mumbled, “Bullshit,” and then coughed again.

Hollis’s eyes grew wide. “Lindsey Lee Wells, you put a quarter in the swear jar right this minute!”

“Shit,” Lindsey said. “Dick. Craptastic.” She glided over to the fireplace mantel, and placed a dollar bill in a glass Mason jar. “Don’t have any change, Hollis,” she said. Colin couldn’t help but laugh; Hollis glowered.

“Well,” she said, “y’all should head out. Six hours of tape, and be back by supper.”

“Wait, who’s gonna open up the store?” asked Lindsey.

“I’ll just send Colin out there for a while.”

“I’m supposed to be tape recording strangers,” Colin pointed out.

“The other Colin,” Hollis said. “Lindsey’s,” and then she sighed, “boyfriend. He hasn’t been showing up at work half the time, anyway. Now, y’all git.”

In the Hearse, with Hassan driving down the exceedingly long driveway away from the Pink Mansion, Lindsey said, “Lindsey’s, sigh, boyfriend. It’s always Lindsey’s, sigh, boyfriend. Jesus Christ. Anyway, listen, just drop me off at the store.”

Hassan looked up and spoke to Lindsey through the rearview mirror. “No fugging way. That’s how horror movies start. We drop you off, walk into some stranger’s house, and five minutes later some psycho’s lobbing off my nuts with a machete while his schizophrenic wife makes Colin do push-ups on a bed of hot coals. You’re coming with us.”

“No offense to y’all, but I haven’t seen Colin since yesterday.”

“No offense to that fuggger,” Hassan responded, “but *Colin* is sitting in the passenger seat reading Don JEW-UN. You’re dating *The Other Colin*, aka TOC.”

Colin wasn’t reading anymore; he was listening to Hassan defend him. Or at least he thought Hassan was defending him. You could never quite tell with Hassan. “I mean, my boy over here is clearly the Primary Colin. There’s no one like him. Colin, say ‘unique’ in as many languages as you can.”

Colin brought them forth quickly. This was a word he knew. “Um, único,⁴¹ unico,⁴² einzigartig,⁴³ unique,⁴⁴ уникальнйй,⁴⁵ μοναδικός,⁴⁶ singularis,⁴⁷ farid.”⁴⁸

Hassan was good at his job, no doubt—Colin felt a rush of affection toward him, and the recitation of the words caused something to wash over the omnipresent hole in his gut. It felt, just for a moment, like medicine.

Lindsey smiled at Colin through the rearview mirror. “Lord, my cup of Colins runneth over.” She smiled. “One to teach me French, one to French me.” She laughed at her own joke, then said, “Well, okay. I’ll go. I wouldn’t want to see Colin get his nuts chopped off, after all. Either Colin, really. But you gotta take me to the store after.” Hassan agreed, and then Lindsey led them down past what she called the “Taco Hell” to a little side street lined with small, single-story

houses. They pulled into a driveway. “Most people’re at work,” she explained. “But Starnes should be home.”

He greeted them at the door. Starnes’s lower jaw was missing; he appeared to have a kind of duck bill covered in skin instead of a chin or jaw or teeth. And yet he still tried to smile for Lindsey. “Sugar,” he said, “how are you?”

“I’m always good when I get to see you, Starnes,” she said, hugging him. His eyes lit up, and then Lindsey introduced him to Colin and Hassan. When the old man noticed Colin staring, Starnes explained, “Cancer. Now, y’all come in and sit.”

The house smelled like musty old couches and unfinished wood. It smelled, Colin thought, like cobwebs or hazy memories. It smelled like K-19’s basement. And the smell brought him back so viscerally, to a time when she loved him—or he at least felt like she did—that his gut ached anew. He closed his eyes tight for a second and waited for the feeling to pass, but it wouldn’t. For Colin, nothing ever passed.

The Beginning (of the End)

Katherine XIX wasn't quite yet the XIX when they hung out alone together for the third time. Although the signs seemed positive, he couldn't bring himself to ask her if she wanted to date him, and he certainly couldn't just lean in and kiss her. Colin frequently faltered when it came to the step of actual kissing. He had a theory on this subject, actually, entitled the Rejection Minimization Theorem (RMT):

The act of leaning in to kiss someone, or asking to kiss them, is fraught with the possibility of rejection, so the person least likely to get rejected should do the leaning in or the asking. And that person, at least in high-school heterosexual relationships, is *definitely the girl*. Think about it: boys, basically, want to kiss girls. Guys want to make out. Always. Hassan aside, there's rarely a time when a boy is thinking, "Eh, I think I'd rather not kiss a girl today." Maybe if a guy is actually, literally on fire, he won't be thinking about hooking up. But that's about it. Whereas girls are very fickle about the business of kissing. Sometimes they want to make out; sometimes they don't. They're an impenetrable fortress of unknowability, really.

Ergo: girls should always make the first move, because (a) they are, on the whole, less likely to be rejected than guys, and (b) that way, girls will never get kissed unless they want to be kissed.

Unfortunately for Colin, there is nothing logical about kissing, and so his theory never worked. But because he always waited so incredibly long to kiss a girl, he rarely faced rejection.

He called the future Katherine XIX that Friday after school and asked her out for coffee the next day, and she said yes. It was the same coffee shop where they'd had their first two meetings—perfectly pleasant events filled with so much sexual tension that he couldn't help but get a little bit turned on just from her casually touching his hand. He would put his hands up on the table, in fact, because he wanted them within her reach.

The coffee shop was a few miles from Katherine's house and four buildings down from Colin's. Called *Café Sel Marie*, it served some of the best coffee in Chicago, which didn't matter at all to Colin, because Colin didn't like coffee. He liked the *idea* of coffee quite a lot—a warm drink that gave you energy and had been for centuries associated with sophisticates and intellectuals. But coffee itself tasted to him like caffeinated stomach bile. So he did an end-around on the unfortunate taste by drowning his java in cream, for which Katherine gently

teased him that afternoon. It rather goes without saying that Katherine drank her coffee black. Katherines do, generally. They like their coffee like they like their ex-boyfriends: bitter.

Hours later, after four cups of coffee between them, she wanted to show him a movie. “It’s called *The Royal Tenenbaums*,” she said. “It’s about a family of prodigies.”

Colin and Katherine took the Brown Line southeast toward Wrigleyville, and then walked five blocks to her house, a narrow, two-story building. Katherine led him down to her basement. Floored with wavy linoleum tiles, the damp, dank place featured an old couch, no windows, and very low ceilings (they were 6'3" to Colin’s 6'1"). It made for a poor living area, but it was an awesome theater. It was so dark that you could sink into the couch and disappear into the movie.

Colin liked the movie pretty well; he laughed a lot, anyway, and he found comfort in a world where all the characters who had been smart children grew up to be really fascinating, unique adults (even if they were all screwed up). When it was over, Katherine and Colin sat in the dark together. The basement was the only genuinely dark place Colin had ever seen in Chicago—day and night, orange-gray light seeped through any place with windows.

“I just love the sound track,” Katherine said. “It has such a cool feel.”

“Yeah,” Colin said. “And I liked the characters. I even liked the horrible dad a little.”

“Right, me too,” Katherine said. He could see her blond hair and the outline of her face but little else. His hand, which had been holding hers since about thirty minutes into the movie, was cramped and sweaty, but he didn’t want to be the one to pull away. She went on, “I mean, he’s selfish, but everyone is selfish.”

“Right,” Colin said.

“So is that what it’s like? To be a, uh, prodigy or whatever?”

“Um, not really. All the prodigies in that movie were really hot, for instance,” he joked, and she laughed and said, “So are all the ones I know,” and then he exhaled sharply and looked up at her and almost—but no. He wasn’t sure and couldn’t handle the thought of rejection. “Anyway, plus in that movie it’s like they are all just born talented. I’m not like that, you know. I mean, I’ve worked at least ten hours a day, every day, since I was three,” he said, with no small measure of pride. He *did* think of it as work—the reading and the practicing of languages and pronunciation, the recitation of facts, the careful examination of every text laid before him.

“So what are you good at, exactly, anyway? I mean, I know you’re good at everything, but what are you so good at besides languages?”

“I’m good with codes and stuff. And I’m good at, like, linguistic tricks like

anagramming. That's my favorite thing, really. I can anagram anything." He'd never before told a Katherine about his anagramming. He'd always figured it would bore them.

"Anything?"

"Night, nay," he answered quickly, and she laughed and then said, "Katherine Carter."

He wanted so much to put his hand around the nape of her neck and pull her into him and taste her mouth, full and soft in the darkness. But not yet. He wasn't sure. His heart pounded. "Um, okay. Her karate cretin—um, oh. I like this one: their arcane trek."

She laughed and pulled her hand away and placed it flat against his knee. Her fingers were soft. He could suddenly smell her over the dank basement. She smelled like lilacs, and then he knew that it was almost time. But he didn't dare look at her, not yet. He just watched the blank TV screen. He wanted to draw out the moment before the moment—because as good as kissing feels, nothing feels as good as the anticipation of it.

"How do you *do* that?" she asked.

"Practice, mostly. I've been doing it a long time. I see the letters and pull out a good word first—like, karate, or arcane—and then I try to use the remaining letters to make—oh God, this is boring," he said, hoping it wasn't.

"No it's not."

"I just try to make grammatical sense with the remaining letters. Anyway, it's just a trick."

"Okay, so anagrams. That's one. Got any other charming talents?" she asked, and now he felt confident.

Finally, Colin turned to her, gathering in his gut the slim measure of courage available to him, and said, "Well, I'm a fair kisser."

³⁸ He found forty, of which he only really liked two: "rose rot" and "to err so."

³⁹ See inbred girl; lie breeds grin; leering debris; greed be nil, sir; be idle re. rings; ringside rebel; residing rebel; etc.

⁴⁰ That's true. Much of the meter in *Don Juan* only works if you read *Juan* as bi-syllabic.

⁴¹ Spanish.

⁴² Italian.

⁴³ German.

⁴⁴ French and English.

⁴⁵ Russian.

⁴⁶ Greek.

⁴⁷ Latin.

⁴⁸ Arabic.

(nine)

“Y’all make yourselves at home. Hollis said you might’n come over here to interview me and find out about my fascinating life,” Starnes said, and Colin sat down on a musty couch not unlike the one on which he and K-19 had shared their first kiss. Lindsey introduced Colin and Hassan, and then Colin started asking questions. The room was not air-conditioned, and as Colin pressed the record button of the digital mini-recorder and placed it on Starnes’s coffee table, he felt the first bead of sweat form on his neck. It would be a long day.

“When did you come to Gutshot?” Lindsey asked.

“I was born in the country⁴⁹ nineteen hundred and twenty. Born here, raised up here, always lived here, and gonna die here, I’m sure,” he said, and then winked at Lindsey.

“Aww, Starnes, don’t say that,” Lindsey said. “What the hell would I do ’round here without you?”

“Prob’ly run around with that Lyford boy,” Starnes answered. Starnes turned to the boys and then said, “I don’t think too highly of that boy’s daddy.”

“You just want me all to yourself,” Lindsey said, laughing. “Tell us about the factory, Starnes. These boys ain’t ever been.” Around Starnes, for some reason, Lindsey spoke with a thick accent.

“The factory opened up three years ’fore I was born, and I worked there from when I was fourteen. I suppose if I hadn’t, I would have farmed—that’s what my father did until the factory came along. We made everything back then; T-shirts and handkerchiefs and bandannas, and it was hard work. But your family was always fair—first Dr. Dinzanfar and then his son-in-law Corville Wells. Then there was that sumbitch Alex, who I know was your daddy, Lindsey, so you’ll have to forgive me. And then Hollis, who took good care of us every one. I worked in that factory sixty years to the day. I have the world record. They named the break room after me, because that’s where I spent most of my time.” His upper lip smiled, but Starnes’s jawless chin couldn’t follow suit.

Already, the house felt like a hot tub without the water and bubbles. *This is a hard way to make a hundred dollars*, Colin thought.

“Y’all want some tea?” Starnes asked. Without waiting for an answer, he stood up and walked into the kitchen.

At once sweet and bitter, it tasted a little like lemonade, except somehow more grown-up. Colin loved it—it was everything he’d hoped coffee would be—and helped himself to several glasses while Starnes talked, pausing only to take his medication (once) and go to the bathroom (four times; old people do that—they seem to love bathrooms).

“Well, the first thing that you have to understand is that in the country we weren’t ever poor. Even in the Depression, I wasn’t ever hungry, because when Dr. Dinzanfar had to lay people off, he never fired more than one person from a family.”

Something about Dr. Dinzanfar led Starnes elsewhere. “You know they’ve been calling the country Gutshot for a long-ass time, and Lindsey, I bet you don’t even know why.” Lindsey shook her head politely, and Starnes leaned forward out of his La-Z-Boy and said, “Aw, see. Now y’all haven’t heard a damn thing about the place then! Back in the old days, so old that even this old man weren’t born yet, prizefighting was illegal. And if you wanted to break the law, Gutshot was a fine place to do it.

“Always has been, really. I saw the inside of the Carver County Jail a few times myself, you know. I was drunk in public in 1948; I was a public nuisance in 1956; and then I was in jail for two days on illegal discharging of a firearm when I killed Caroline Clayton’s rat snake in 1974. Mary wouldn’t bail me out after I kilt that God-forsaken snake, you know. But how on earth am I supposed to tell it’s a pet? I go into Caroline Clayton’s house looking for the hammer she borrowed from me six months before, and there’s a by-God rat snake slitherin’ across the kitchen. What would you do, son?” he asked Colin.

Colin mulled the situation over. “You went into someone else’s house without knocking?” he asked.

“No, I knocked, but she wa’n’t home.”

“That’s a crime also,” Colin pointed out. “Trespassing.”

“Well thank the Lord *you* didn’t arrest me, boy,” Starnes said. “Anyway, you see a snake, you kill it. That’s just how I was raised up. So I shot it. Split it right in two. And that evening Caroline Clayton come over to my house—she’s passed on now, bless her heart—and she’s screaming and crying that I killed Jake, and I told her that someone else musta killed Jake, whoever the hell he was, ’cause all I did was shoot up a goddamned rat snake. But then turns out that Jake *was* the snake, and that she loved it like the child she never had. She never

married, of course. Uglier than sin, bless her heart.”

“The snake probably didn’t care that she was ugly,” Colin pointed out. “They have very poor eyesight.”

Starnes look over at Lindsey Lee Wells. “Your friend here is a regular fountain of knowledge.”

“He sure God is,” she said, drawling.

“What was I talking about?” asked Starnes.

“Gutshot. Boxing. The old days,” Colin answered quickly.

“Right, yes, well. It was a town for trouble back then before the factory brought in families. Just a rough sharecropper town. My mama told me the town didn’t have no name. But then they started bringing in boxers. Boys from all over the country would come here and they’d fight for five or ten dollars, winner take all, and make extra money betting on themselves. But to get around the prizefighting laws, they had this rule: you couldn’t hit below the belt or above the shoulders. Gutshot boxing. The town became famous for it, and that’s what we got called.”

Colin wiped the back of his sweaty palm against his sweaty forehead, spreading the moisture around rather than truly dealing with it, and took several gulps of tea.

“Mary and I got married in 1944,” Starnes went on, “when I was supposed to go off to the war.” And Colin thought that Starnes might benefit from a lesson from his eleventh-grade English teacher Mr. Holtsclaw, who taught them about *transitions*. Colin couldn’t tell a story to save his life, admittedly, but at least he’d *heard* of transitions. Still, it was fun to listen to Starnes. “Anyway, I didn’t go off to the war because I shot off two of my toes because I’m a coward. I’m an old man so I can tell you that frankly. I wasn’t afraid of war, you know. War never scared me. I just didn’t want to go all the way-hell over there to fight one. I had a reputation after that—I pretended I shot myself by accident, but everyone knew. I never did lose that reputation, but now most everyone is dead, and y’all ain’t got any stories from them, so you have to believe mine by default: They were cowards, too. Everyone is.

“But we got married and oh Lord we sure loved each other. Always did till the very end. She never liked me much, but she sure loved me, if you know what I’m saying.” Colin glanced at Hassan, who glanced back, his eyes wide in horror. They both feared they knew *exactly* what Starnes was saying. “She died in 1997. Heart attack. She was nothing but good and I was nothing but bad, but then she died, and I didn’t.”

He showed them pictures then; they crowded around his La-Z-Boy as his wrinkled hands flipped slowly through a photo album thick with memories. The

oldest pictures were faded and yellowing, and Colin thought about how even in pictures of their youth, old people look old. He watched as the pictures moved to a crisp black-and-white and then to the bland color of Polaroids, watched as children were born and then grew up, as hair fell out and was replaced by wrinkles. And all the while Starnes and Mary stayed in the pictures together, from their wedding to their fiftieth anniversary. *I will have that*, Colin thought. *I will have it. I will. With Katherine. But I won't be only that*, he resolved. *I will leave behind something more than one photo album where I always look old.*

Later, Colin knew their six hours were up when Lindsey Lee Wells stood up and said, "Well we gotta get going, Starnes."

"All right," he said. "Good to have you. And Lindsey, you just look perfect."

"You need an air conditioner, bud? It's awful hot in here, and Hollis could get you one no problem," Lindsey said.

"I get by all right. She's done good by me." Starnes stood up and walked them to the door. Colin shook the old man's shaky hand.

• • •

In the Hearse Colin drove as fast as the roads would permit, with the windows down to try to cool off.

Hassan said, "I think I just lost sixty pounds in sweat."

"Then you could stand to stay out in the heat a while longer," Lindsey said. "That was the easiest hundred dollars anyone ever made in Gutshot. Hey, no, don't turn. I need you to take me to the store."

"So we can all hang out with The Other Colin in the sweet, sweet air-conditioning?"

Lindsey shook her head. "Uh-uh. You get to drop me off and then you make yourselves scarce till you pick me up in two hours and then we tell Hollis that we spent the afternoon running around the country."

"Well," said Hassan, sounding somewhat annoyed, "we will certainly miss your abundant charm and bubbly personality."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just kidding around. Anyway, I like you, Hassan; it's the Smartypants I find unbearable." Colin glanced through the rearview into the backseat. She was smiling at him with her lips closed. He knew she was kidding, or thought she was, but he still felt anger rise up in his throat, and he knew the hurt was betrayed in his eyes. "Jesus, Singleton, I'm just kidding."

"You've got to remember that usually when he hears a girl call him unbearable, it's the last words of a Katherine," explained Hassan, talking like

Colin wasn't behind the wheel. "He's pretty touchy on the whole subject of his being unbearable."

"Dingleberries," said Colin.

"Gotcha."

• • •

After dropping off Lindsey, they ended up back at Hardee's, eating a mid-afternoon snack of double cheeseburgers and fries limp with the weight of their own grease. Colin read from Byron for the first thirty minutes while Hassan repeatedly sighed and said, "God, you're boring," until finally Colin put the book down.

They still had an hour to kill when the meal was over. Standing in the parking lot with the heat radiating in waves off the pavement, Hassan wiped his forehead and said, "I think we should stop by the Gutshot General Store."

They pulled into the store's dirt parking lot fifty minutes early and strode up the staircase and into a blast of air-conditioning. Behind the counter, Lindsey Lee Wells was sitting on what appeared to be a boy, who had an arm draped across her lap.

"Hello," said Colin. TOC peeked out from behind Lindsey. He nodded at Colin without smiling or blinking or in any way moving any of the muscles in his strong, round face.

"What's up," said TOC.

"Not much," said Colin.

"You're a lucky couple a guys, to get to live with Lindsey." Lindsey let loose a chirpy laugh and contorted herself to kiss her boyfriend sweetly on the neck. "Oh, we'll live together one day," she said.

"If you touch her," TOC said out of the blue, "I'll kill you."

"That's a little clickéd," Hassan called out from the candy aisle. "And if we *touch* her? I mean, what if I brush up against her as we walk through a hallway?"

TOC glowered. "Well," he said, "this has been fun. But Lindsey and I were in the middle of a very important talk, so if you wouldn't mind . . ."

To defuse the tension, Colin said, "Oh, sorry. Yeah, we'll just, uh, take a walk or something."

"Here," Lindsey said, and tossed them a set of keys. "Colin's truck has AC."

"Don't take that truck out of park," TOC said gruffly.

As they walked out the door, Colin heard TOC ask Lindsey, "Who's the genius—the fat one or the skinny one?" But he didn't hang around to hear Lindsey's response. As they walked across the dirt parking lot toward TOC's

SUV, Hassan said, “God, he’s built like a brick shithouse, isn’t he? Listen, The Fat One’s gonna take a piss in the field.”

“The Skinny One will wait for The Fat One in the truck,” Colin said. Colin climbed in, turned the key, and put the AC on full-blast, although at first it only pumped out hot air.

Hassan opened the passenger door and immediately started talking. “She’s so bubbly around him, but then around us she’s just one of the guys, just slinging shit, and then around Starnes she was all y’allin’ it up and talking Southern.”

“Do you have a crush on her or something?” asked Colin suddenly.

“No. I was just thinking aloud. For the last time, I’m not interested in dating a girl I’m not gonna marry. Dating Lindsey would be *haram*.⁵⁰ Also, she’s got a big nose. I don’t go in for noses.”

“Well, not to start an argument, but you do all kinds of shit that is *haram*.”

Hassan nodded. “Yeah, but the *haram* shit I do is, like, having a dog. It’s not like smoking crack or talking behind people’s backs or stealing or lying to my mom or fugging girls.”

“Moral relativism,” Colin said.

“No it’s not. I don’t think God gives a shit if we have a dog or if a woman wears shorts. I think He gives a shit about whether you’re a good person.”

The words “good person” made Colin immediately think about Katherine XIX. She would be leaving Chicago soon for a camp in Wisconsin where she worked every summer as a counselor. The camp was for kids with physical disabilities. They taught them how to ride horses. She was such a good person, and he missed her all over his body. He missed her like crazycakes.⁵¹ But he felt, in the throbbing missing piece inside him, that she didn’t long for him like that. She was probably relieved. If she were thinking of him, she’d call. *Unless*. . .

“I think I’m going to call her.”

“That’s the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Hassan replied immediately. “The. Worst. Idea. Ever.”

“No, it’s not, because what if she’s just waiting for me to call like I’m waiting for her to call?”

“Right, but you’re the Dumpee. Dumpees don’t call. You know that, *kafir*. Dumpees must never, never call. There’s no exception to that rule. None. Never call. Never. You can’t call.” Colin reached into his pocket. “Don’t do it, dude. You’re pulling the pin on a grenade. You’re covered in gasoline and the phone is a lit match.”

Colin flipped open the phone. “Dingleberries,” he said.

Hassan threw up his hands. “You can’t dingleberry that! That’s a flagrant misuse of the dingleberry! I dingleberry you calling her!”

Colin closed the phone and mulled it over. Pensive, he bit at the inside of his thumb. “Okay,” he said, sliding the phone back into his pocket. “I won’t.”

Hassan sighed heavily. “That was a close one. Thank goodness for the Double Reverse Dingleberry.”

They sat in silence for a moment and then Colin said, “I want to go home.”
“To Chicago?”

“No, to Lindsey’s. But we still have forty minutes to kill.”

Hassan stared out through the windshield and nodded his head slowly. After a few quiet moments, he said, “Okay. Okay. Fat kid asthma attack. It’s an oldie, but it’s a goodie.”

“What?”

Hassan rolled his eyes. “What, are you deaf? Fat kid asthma attack. It’s the oldest trick in the whole fat kid book. Just follow my lead.”

They got out of the car and Hassan started wheezing very loudly. His every inhalation sounded like the cry of a dying duck. *HEEEEEENH*; exhale; *HEEEENH*; exhale. He placed his hand against his chest, and ran into the Gutshot General Store.

“What’s wrong with him?” Lindsey asked Colin. Before he could answer, Hassan started talking amid his wheezes.

“*HEEEEEENH*. Asthma. *HEEEENH*. Attack. *HEEEENH*. Bad one. *HEEEENH*.”

“Oh shit,” said Lindsey. She hopped off TOC’s lap, turned around, grabbed her first-aid box, and started looking through it in vain for asthma meds. The Other Colin sat silently on the stool, no doubt displeased by the interruption.

“He’ll be fine,” Colin said. “It happens. I just need to get him home to his inhaler.”

“Hollis doesn’t like it when people show up when she’s working,” Lindsey said.

“Well, she’ll make an exception,” said Colin.

Hassan kept up his wheezing for the drive home, and as he raced up the Pink Mansion’s stairs toward his room. Colin sat with Lindsey in the living room. They could both hear Hollis in the kitchen saying, “This is an American product. It’s made with American labor. That’s a selling point. That’s a marketable, promotable facet of our product. People buy American. I’ve got a study here . . .” Colin had wondered whether maybe Hollis just watched the Home Shopping Network all day and left other people to run the business, but obviously she *did* work.

Hollis came out then and the first thing she said was, “Please don’t interrupt me during working hours,” and then Lindsey said Hassan had an asthma attack

and forgot his inhaler, and then Hollis took off running up the stairs. Colin followed quickly, shouting, “I hope you’re okay, Hassan!” so that Hassan would know she was coming, and when they all got to his room, he was lying peacefully on the bed.

“Sorry I forgot my inhaler,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”

• • •

They ate a dinner of hamburgers and steamed asparagus in the Wells family backyard. Colin’s backyard in Chicago measured twelve feet by ten feet; this backyard went on for football fields. To their left, a hill rose to its peak, the forest broken up only by a few rocky outcroppings. To their right, a well-kept lawn stretched on down the hill toward a soybean field (he’d found out from Starnes that they were soybeans). As the sun set behind them, a citronella candle burned in a bucket in the center of the table to ward off mosquitoes. Colin liked how Gutshot felt wide open and endless.

When he finished eating, Colin’s mind returned to Katherine XIX. He glanced at his phone to see if she’d called and noticed it was time to call his parents.

For whatever reason, Colin could never get reception in his house in the third-largest city in America but had all five bars in Gutshot, Tennessee. His father picked up.

“I’m still in the same town as yesterday. Gutshot, Tennessee,” Colin began. “I’m staying with a woman named Hollis Wells.”

“Thank you for calling on time. Should that name be familiar to me?” asked his dad.

“No, but she’s listed in the phone book. I checked. She owns a factory here. I think we’re going to stay here a few days,” Colin said, fibbing. “Inexplicably, Hassan loves it here, and also we seem to have gotten jobs.”

“You can’t just *stay with strangers*, Colin.”

Colin considered lying. Staying in a hotel. Working in a restaurant here. Getting my bearings. But he told the truth. “She’s nice. I trust her.”

“You trust everyone.”

“Dad, I survived seventeen years in Chicago without ever getting mugged or stabbed or kidnapped or falling onto the third rail or get—”

“Talk to your mother,” he said, which is what his dad always said. After a few moments (Colin could just see them talking while his dad held his hand over the receiver), his mom picked up. “Well, are you happy?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Happier?” his mom tried.

“Marginally,” he allowed. “I’m not lying facedown on the carpet.”

“Let me talk to this woman,” his mom said. So Colin walked inside, found Hollis on the couch, and handed the phone to her.

And after talking to Hollis, it was decided: he could stay. He knew that his mom wanted him to have an adventure. She’d always wished he could be a normal kid. Colin suspected she’d be secretly pleased if he came home one night at three in the morning reeking of booze, because that would be *normal*. Normal kids come home late; normal kids drink warm forties of malt liquor in alleys with their friends (normal kids have more than one friend). His father wanted Colin to transcend all that stuff, but maybe even he was starting to see the unlikelihood of Colin ever becoming extraordinary.

Colin walked up to Hassan’s room to tell him his parents were cool with him staying, but Hassan wasn’t home. He hunted around the cavernous house, eventually making his way downstairs, where he found a closed door with Lindsey’s voice emanating from behind it. He stood in front of the thin door and listened.

“Right, but how does he *do* it? Does he just *memorize* everything?” Lindsey was saying.

“No it’s not like that. It’s like, if you or me sat down and read a book about, say, the presidents, and we read that William Howard Taft was the fattest president and one time he got stuck in a bathtub,⁵² that might click in our brains as interesting, and we’d remember it, right?” Lindsey laughed. “You and me will read a book and find like three interesting things that we remember. But Colin finds *everything* intriguing. He reads a book about presidents and he remembers more of it because everything he reads clicks in his head as fugging interesting. Honestly, I’ve seen him do it with the phone book. He’ll be like, ‘Oh, there are twenty-four listings for Tischler. How *fascinating*.’”

Colin felt an odd mix of feelings, like his talent was at once being inflated and ridiculed. It was true, he guessed. But it wasn’t just that he found things fascinating in and of themselves and could memorize the whole phone book because it made for such excellent literature. He found stuff fascinating for a *reason*. Like, take for example the Tischler thing, which happened to be true (and Hassan remembered it correctly). “Tischler” was the German word for carpenter, and when he was looking in the phone book that day with Hassan, Colin thought, *How strange that there would be exactly twenty-four German carpenters in Chicago when the all-night manicure place on the corner of Oakley and Lawrence is called “24/7 Nails.”* And then he got to wondering whether there were exactly seven carpenters of some other language in the Chicago phone book, and it turned out that there were precisely seven

Carpinteros. So it wasn't just that things interested him because he didn't know from boring—it was the connection his brain made, connections he couldn't help but seek out.

“But that doesn't explain why he's good at, like, Scrabble,” Lindsey pointed out.

“Right, well, he's good at that because he's ridiculously good at anagramming. But anything he takes up, he just works insanely hard. Like, typing. He didn't learn to type until ninth grade, when we were friends. Our English teacher required typewritten papers, so over like two weeks, Singleton taught himself to type. And he didn't do it by typing his English papers, because then he wouldn't have been *good* enough at typing. What he did is he sat down at his computer every day after school and retyped Shakespeare's plays. All of them. Literally. And then he retyped *The Catcher in the Rye*. And he kept retyping and retyping until he could fugging type like a genius.”

Colin backed away from the door then. It occurred to him that he'd never done anything else in his whole life. Anagramming; spitting back facts he'd learned in books; memorizing ninety-nine digits of an already known number; falling in love with the same nine letters over and over again: retyping and retyping and retyping and retyping. His only hope for originality was the Theorem.

Colin opened the door and found Hassan and Lindsey sitting on opposite sides of a green leather couch in a room dominated by a pool table with pink felt. They were watching poker on a huge, flat-screen TV hanging on the wall. Hassan turned around to face Colin. “Dude,” he said, “you can see all their zits.”

Colin sat down between them. Lindsey and Hassan talked about poker and zits and HD and DVR while Colin graphed his past. By the end of the night, a slightly tweaked formula had worked for two more K's: IX and XIV. He barely registered the change when they turned off the TV and started playing pool. He just kept scribbling. He loved the scratching of pencil against paper when he was this focused: it meant something was happening.

When the clock read midnight, Colin put his pencil down. He looked up at Lindsey, who was standing on one foot, bent over the pool table at an absurdly awkward angle. Hassan seemed to have left the room. “Hey,” said Colin.

“Oh, you're out of the Twilight Zone,” she said. “How's the Theorem?”

“Okay. I don't really know if it will work yet. Where's Hassan?”

“He went to bed. I asked you if you wanted to play, but I don't think you heard me, so I figured I'd just play against myself for a while. I'm beating me pretty handily.”

Colin stood up and sniffed. “I think I'm allergic to this house.”

“It could be Princess,” Lindsey said. “This is actually Princess’s room. *Shh*. She’s sleeping.” Colin followed Lindsey to the pool table and knelt down beside her. Beneath the table, a large sphere that initially seemed to be a ball of shaggy carpet grew and then shrunk rhythmically, breathing. “She’s always sleeping.”

“I’m allergic to pet dander,” Colin announced.

She smirked. “Yeah, well, Princess lived here first.” She sat back down with him, her legs tucked beneath her so that she seemed taller than Colin. “Hassan told me you’re good at anagramming,” she said.

“Yeah,” Colin answered. “Good at anagramming—dragon maggot mania.”

Lindsey’s hand (she’d painted her fingernails an electric blue since yesterday) was suddenly against his forearm, and Colin tensed up from surprise. When he turned his head to look at her, she placed her hand back in her lap. “So,” she went on, “you’re a genius at making words out of other words, but you can’t make new words out of thin air.”

And yes, again, that was it exactly. A retyper and not a writer. A prodigy and not a genius. It was so quiet then that he could hear Princess breathing, and he felt the missing piece inside him. “I just want to do something that matters. Or *be* something that matters. I just want to matter.”

Lindsey didn’t answer right away, but she leaned in toward Colin and he could smell her fruity perfume, and then she lay down next to him on her back, the crown of her head just brushing against his shorts. “I think we’re opposites, you and me,” she said finally. “Because personally I think mattering is a piss-poor idea. I just want to fly under the radar, because when you start to make yourself into a big deal, that’s when you get shot down. The bigger a deal you are, the worse your life is. Look at, like, the miserable lives of famous people.”

“Is that why you read *Celebrity Living*?”

Lindsey nodded. “Yeah. Totally—there’s a word in German for it. God, it’s on the tip of—a . . .”

“Schadenfreude,” Colin said. Finding pleasure in others’ pain.

“Right! So, anyway,” Lindsey went on, “take staying here. Hollis always tells me that nothing really good will ever happen to me if I stay in Gutshot; and maybe that’s true. But nothing really bad will ever happen, either, and I’ll take that bargain any day.”

Colin didn’t answer, but he was thinking that Lindsey Lee Wells, for all her coolness and whatever, was a bit of a wimp. But before he could figure a way to say so, Lindsey sat up, animated by a new topic.

“Okay,” she said. “Here’s the thing about storytelling: you need a beginning, and a middle, and an end. Your stories have no plots. They’re like, here’s something I was thinking and then the next thing I was thinking and then et

cetera. You can't get away with rambling. You're Colin Singleton, Beginning Storyteller, so you've got to stick to a straight plot.

"And you need a good, strong moral. Or a theme or whatever. And the other thing is romance and adventure. You've got to put some of those in. If it's a story about peeing into a lion cage, give yourself a girlfriend who notices how gigantic your winky is and then saves you from the lion at the last second by tackling you, because she's desperate to save that gorgeous, ginormous winky." Colin blushed, but Lindsey kept going. "In the beginning, you need to pee; in the middle, you do; in the end, through romance and adventure, your winky is saved from the jaws of a hungry lion by the pluck of a young girl motivated by her abiding love for giant winkies. And the moral of the story is that a heroic girlfriend, combined with a giant winky, will save you from even the most desperate situations."

When Colin finished laughing, he placed his hand on top of Lindsey's. It stayed there for a moment, and he could feel the worn place on her thumb where she nibbled at it. He pulled his hand away after a moment and said, "My Theorem will tell the story. Each graph with a beginning and a middle and an end."

"There's no romance in geometry," Lindsey answered.

"Just you wait."

The Beginning (of the Middle)

He never thought much about Katherine I. He only felt upset about the breakup because that's what you're *supposed* to feel. Little kids play house; they play war; they play relationships. I want to go with you; you dumped me; I'm sad. But none of it was really real.

Because Katherine's dad was Colin's tutor, Colin and Katherine continued to see each other periodically over the next several years. They got along well—but it's not like he burned with longing for her. He didn't miss her enough to become obsessed with her name, to date her namesakes over and over and over and over⁵³ again.

And yet, that's what happened. It didn't seem willful at first—it was just a series of odd coincidences. It just kept happening: he'd meet a Katherine, and like her. She'd like him back. And then it would end. And then, after it ceased being mere coincidence, it just became two streaks—one (dating Katherines) he wished to keep, and one (getting dumped by them) he wished to break. But it proved impossible to divorce one cycle from the other. It just kept happening to him, and after a while it felt almost routine. Each time, he'd cycle through feelings of anger, regret, longing, hope, despair, longing, anger, regret. The thing about getting dumped generally, and getting dumped by Katherines in particular, was how utterly *monotonous* it was.

That's why people grow weary of listening to Dumpees obsess over their troubles: getting dumped is predictable, repetitive, and boring. They want to stay friends; they feel smothered; it's always them and it's never you; and afterward, you're devastated and they're relieved; it's over for them and just starting for you. And to Colin's mind, at least, there was a deeper repetition: each time, Katherines dumped him because they just didn't *like* him. They each came to precisely the same conclusion about him. He wasn't cool enough or good-looking enough or as smart as they'd hoped—in short, he didn't matter enough. And so it happened to him again and again, until it was boring. But monotony doesn't make for painlessness. In the first century CE, Roman authorities punished St. Apollonia by crushing her teeth one by one with pliers. Colin often thought about this in relationship to the monotony of dumping: we have thirty-two teeth. After a while, having each tooth individually destroyed probably gets repetitive, even dull. But it never stops hurting.

⁴⁹ It eventually became clear to Colin that Starnes did not mean “the United States of America” but rather “this general area of south-central Tennessee.”

(ten)

The next morning, Colin felt tired enough to sleep through the rooster’s squawking until eight. When he made his way downstairs, he found Hollis wearing a hot pink muumuu, passed out on the couch with papers strewn across her chest and the floor. Colin walked softly past her, and thought to add “muumuu” to his mental list of unanagrammable words.

Hassan sat in the kitchen, eating oatmeal and scrambled eggs. Without speaking, he handed Colin a note written on stationery embossed with the words
HOLLIS P. WELLS / CEO & PRESIDENT, GUTSHOT TEXTILE:

Boys,

I’m probably sleeping, but hopefully y’all got up on time. You need to be down at the factory by 9. Ask for Zeke. I listened to your interview with Starnes—it’s good work, but I’ve changed my mind about some things. At six hours per person, we’ll never get through the whole town. I’d like you only to ask the following four questions: Where would you live if you could live anywhere? What would you do for a living if you didn’t work for the factory? When did your people come to the country? and What do you think makes Gutshot special? I think that’ll move things along nicely. They’re expecting you at the factory. Lindsey will accompany you.

See you tonight. Hollis.

PS. I’m writing this note at 5:30 A.M., so don’t wake me up.

“Nice bedhead, by the way, *kafir*. You look like you stuck a fork in a light socket.”

“Did you know that in 1887, Nikola Tesla’s hair stood on end for an entire week after he passed fifty thousand volts through his body to prove that elec—”

“*Kafir*,” Hassan said, putting his fork down on his plate. “Absolutely, completely not interesting. Now if Nikola Tesla, whoever the hell that is, had a

long-term love affair with a one-legged chicken, and his chicken-lust made his hair stand on end—then, yes, by all means, share with me this bounty of hilarious history. But not electricity, *kafir*. You know better.”⁵⁴

Colin searched through a labyrinth of cabinets for a plate, a cup, and some silverware. He scooped eggs from the frying pan onto a plate and poured himself water through the fancy push-this-lever-and-water-comes-out refrigerator.

“How are the eggs?” asked Hassan.

“Good, dude. Good. You’re a good cook.”

“No shit. That’s how Daddy got so fat. By the way, I’ve decided to start referring to myself exclusively as ‘Daddy.’ Every time Daddy would otherwise say ‘I’ or ‘Me,’ Daddy is now going to say ‘Daddy.’ You like?”

“Oh, yes. I love.”

“Love what?” asked Lindsey Lee Wells as she came into the living room wearing her paisley pajamas, her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Colin noticed she looked different, but not quite how, and then he saw it. No makeup. She looked prettier than she ever had before—Colin always preferred girls without makeup.

Colin sneezed, and then noticed that Princess was following in Lindsey’s wake. XIX had a dog, too—a miniature dachshund named Fireball Roberts.

No one looked more beautiful without makeup than Katherine. She never wore it, and never needed to. God, her blond hair in her face when the wind blew as they walked by the lake after school; the corners of her eyes crinkling when he first said “I love you”; the speed and assured softness with which she had replied, “And I love you.” All roads led to her. She was the nexus of all the connections his brain made—the wheel’s hub.

When Colin looked up, Lindsey was reading the note from Hollis. “Christ, I guess I better get some pants on, then,” she said.

They piled into the Hearse after Lindsey successfully called shotgun. At the front door of Gutshot Textiles, they were met by a large man with a beard like Santa Claus’s but browner.

He hugged Lindsey with one arm, saying, “How’s my girl?” and she said, “I’m a’ight. How’s my Zeke?” He laughed. He shook Hassan’s hand, then Colin’s. Zeke walked them past a very loud room where machines seemed to smack against each other and into a room with a small brown plastic sign that read, THE STARNES WILSON BREAK ROOM.

Colin put the tape recorder down on a coffee table. The room seemed to have been furnished with stuff that employees could no longer bear to keep in their homes: a stomach-bile-yellow corduroy couch, a couple of black leather chairs with foam peeking out from innumerable cracks, and a Formica dining room

table with six chairs. Above two vending machines hung a portrait of Elvis Presley that had been painted on velvet. Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan took the couch and Zeke sat in one of the leather chairs. Before they could even start asking their questions from Hollis, Zeke started talking.

“Hezekiah Wilson Jones, aged forty-two, divorced, two sons aged eleven and nine, Cody and Cobi, both on the honor roll. I was raised up in Bradford and moved here when I was thirteen on account of how my dad lost his gas station in a poker game—which is the kinda shit that happened to my old man regularly. He took a job at the factory. Started working here myself in the summers during high school and went full-time the day after I graduated. Worked here ever since. I’ve worked the line; I’ve worked quality control; and now I’m the day shift plant manager. What we do here, boys, is we take cotton—usually from Alabama or Tennessee.” He stopped then and reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out an aluminum square. He unwrapped it, popped a square piece of chewing gum in his mouth and started talking again. “I quit smoking eleven years ago and still chew this Nicorette, which tastes like shit and ain’t cheap either. Don’t smoke. Now, the plant.” For the next twenty minutes, Zeke walked them through the process of how cotton becomes string, and how those strings are then cut by a machine to a length of exactly two and one-eighth inches, and then how those strings are shipped off. A quarter of them, he said, get shipped directly to their biggest client, STASURE Tampons, and the rest go to a warehouse in Memphis and from there head out into the world of tamponery.

“Now, I got to get back to work, but what I’m going to do is I’m going to send in some people for twenty minutes, for their break, and you can ask them questions. You got any questions for me, by the way?”

“Yes, actually,” said Hassan. “Where would you live if you could live anywhere; what would you do for a living if you didn’t work for the factory; when did your people come to the country—wait you already answered that; and what do you think makes Gutshot special?”

Zeke pulled his bottom lip tight against his teeth, sucking on the Nicorette. “I’d live here,” he said. “If I didn’t work for the factory, I’d work for another one, probably. But maybe I’d start a tree-trimming business. My ex-brother-in-law’s got one, and he does right well. And what makes it special? Well, shit. For starters, our Coke machine is free. Just push the button, and Coke comes out. They ain’t got that at most jobs. Plus we got ourselves the lovely Miss Lindsey Lee, which most every town does not. All right, y’all. I’ve gotta get to work.”

The moment Zeke left, Lindsey stood up. “This has been a blast, boys, but I’m going to walk to the store and go stare dreamily into the eyes of my boyfriend. Pick me up at five-thirty, okay?” And then she was gone. For a girl who’d be in

deep shit if Colin or Hassan ratted her out to Hollis, Lindsey seemed quite confident. *And that*, Colin found himself thinking, *must mean that we are friends*. Almost by accident, and in just two days, Colin had made his second-ever friend.

Over the course of the next seven hours, Colin and Hassan interviewed twenty-six people, asking them all the same four questions. Colin listened to people who wanted to make a living with chain-saw sculpture or teaching elementary school. He found it mildly interesting that almost all of the interviewees said that of all the places in the world, they—just like Lindsey Lee Wells—would want to stay in Gutshot. But since Hassan asked most of the questions, Colin was free to focus in on his Theorem.

He remained convinced that romantic behavior was basically monotonous and predictable, and that therefore one could write a fairly straightforward formula that would predict the collision course of any two people. But he was worried that he might not be enough of a genius to make the connections. He just couldn't imagine a way to correctly predict the other Katherines without screwing up the ones he'd already gotten down pat. And for some reason, his feared lack of genius made him miss K-19 more than he had since his face was pressed flat against his bedroom carpet. The missing piece in his stomach hurt so much—and eventually he stopped thinking about the Theorem and wondered only how something that isn't there can hurt you.

• • •

At four-thirty, a woman walked in and announced she was the last uninterviewed employee of Gutshot Textiles currently at work. She removed a pair of thick gloves, blew her bangs up into the air with a puff of breath, and said, "They say one of you is a genius."

"I'm not a genius," Colin said dispassionately.

"Well, you're the closest thing I've got and I've got a question. How come the shower curtain always blows in when the water should be blowing it out?"

"That," Hassan acknowledged, "is one of the great unsolved mysteries of the human condition."

"Actually," Colin said, "I know." Colin smiled. It felt good to be useful again.

"No!" Hassan said. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. What happens is the water spray creates a vortex, kind of like a hurricane. And the center of the vortex—the eye of the hurricane—is a low-pressure area, which sucks the shower curtain in and up. This guy did a study on it. Honestly."

“Now, *that*,” Hassan said, “is *really* interesting. It’s like there’s a little hurricane in every shower?”

“Exactly.”

“Wow,” said the woman. “I’ve been wondering that my whole life. Well, okay. So my name’s Katherine Layne. I’m twenty-two, been working here ten months.”

“Wait, how do you spell that?” Hassan asked.

“K-a-t-h-e-r-i-n-e L-a-y-n-e.”

“Uh-oh,” mumbled Hassan. She was quite attractive now that Colin took a look at her. But no. Colin didn’t like Katherine Layne. And it wasn’t the age gap. It was K-19. Colin knew the situation was dire, indeed, when he could sit across from a perfectly nice and attractive (and sexily older!) Katherine without feeling even the smallest hint of enchantment.

• • •

They left after interviewing Katherine Layne. They drove around in Satan’s Hearse for a while, getting good and lost with the windows rolled down, driving down a two-lane highway toward absolutely nothing. They listened to a country radio station turned up so loud that the twangs of steel guitars were distorted in the Hearse’s old speakers. When they could catch on to the chorus, they sang loud and off-key and didn’t give a shit. And it felt so good to sing with those trumped-up, hound-dog country accents. Colin felt sad, but it was an exhilarating and infinite sadness, like it connected him to Hassan and to the ridiculous songs and mostly to her, and Colin was shouting, “Like Strawwwwberry Wine,” when all of a sudden he turned to Hassan and said, “Wait, stop here.” Hassan pulled over on the gravel shoulder of the road and Colin hopped out and pulled out his telephone.

“What are you doing?” asked Hassan from the driver’s seat.

“I’m going to walk out into that field until I get cell reception and I’m going to call her.”

Hassan began pounding his head rhythmically against the steering wheel. Colin turned away. As he walked out into the field, he heard Hassan shout, “Dingleberries!” But Colin kept walking. “Daddy is leaving you here if you take one more step!” Colin took one more step, and behind him, he heard the car start. He didn’t turn around. He heard the tires spinning in the gravel, and then they caught onto the asphalt, and Colin heard the rumble of the eternally struggling engine grow distant. After five minutes of walking, he found a spot where he had okay reception. It was awfully quiet. *Chicago only gets this quiet*

when it snows, he thought. And then he flipped open the phone, pressed the voice button, and said “Katherine.” He said it softly, reverently.

Five rings and then her voice mail. *Hey, it’s Katherine*, he heard, and in the background cars rushed by. They’d been walking home together from the RadioShack⁵⁵ when she recorded the message. *I’m not, uh*. And she uhed, he remembered, because he’d goosed her butt as she tried to talk. *Uh, at my cell phone, I guess. Leave me a message and I’ll call you back*. And he remembered everything about it, and also everything about everything else, and why couldn’t he forget and *beep*.

“Hey, it’s Col. I’m standing in a soybean field outside of Gutshot, Tennessee, which is a long story, and it’s hot, K. I’m standing here sweating like I had hyperhidrosis, that disease where you sweat a lot. Crap. That’s not interesting. But anyway, it’s hot, and so I’m thinking about cold to stay cool. And I was remembering walking through the snow coming back from that ridiculous movie. Do you remember that, K? We were on Giddings, and the snow made it so quiet, I couldn’t hear a thing in the world but you. And it was so cold then, and so silent, and I loved you so much. Now it’s hot, and dead quiet again, and I love you still.”

Five minutes later, he was trudging back when his phone began vibrating. He raced back to the spot with good reception and, breathless, answered.

“Did you listen to the message?” he asked immediately.

“I don’t think I need to,” she answered. “I’m sorry, Col. But I think we made a really good decision.” And he didn’t even care to point out that *they* hadn’t made a decision, because the sound of her voice felt so good—well, not good exactly. It felt like the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the fear and the fascination. The great and terrible awe.

“Did you tell your mom?” he asked, because her mom had loved him. All moms loved him.

“Yeah. She was sad. But she said you always wanted to be attached to my hip, which wasn’t healthy.”

“A better fate than this,” he said mostly to himself.

He could hear her eyes rolling as she said, “You are probably the only person I’ve ever known who *wants* to be a Siamese twin.”

“Conjoined twin,” Colin corrected. “Did you know that there is a word for a person who is not a conjoined twin?” he asked her.

“No. What is it? Normal person?”

“Singleton,” he said. “The word is Singleton.” And she said, “That’s funny, Col. Listen, I really have to go. I’ve got to pack for camp. Maybe we shouldn’t talk till I get back. Just some time away from it would be good for you, I think.”

And even though he wanted to say, *We're supposed to be FRIENDS, remember? And What is it? New boyfriend? And I love you entirely*, he just mumbled, "Just please listen to the message," and then she said, "Okay. Bye," and he didn't say anything because he wasn't going to be the person who ended the conversation or hung up, and then he heard the deadness in his ear and it was over. Colin lay down on the dry, orange dirt and let the tall grass swallow him up, making him invisible. The sweat pouring down his face was indistinguishable from his tears. He was finally—finally—crying. He remembered their arms entangled, their stupid little inside jokes, the way he felt when he would come over to her house after school and see her reading through the window. He missed it all. He thought of being with her in college, having the freedom to sleep over whenever they wanted, both of them at Northwestern together. He missed that, too, and it hadn't even happened. He missed his imagined future.

You can love someone so much, he thought. *But you can never love people as much as you can miss them.*

• • •

He waited on the side of the road for twenty minutes before Hassan came by, with Lindsey riding shotgun.

"You were right," Colin said. "Not a good idea."

"Daddy's sorry," Hassan said. "It's a shitty situation. Maybe you had to call her."

Lindsey turned around in her seat. "You really love this girl, huh?"

And then Colin started crying again, and Lindsey crawled into the backseat and put her arm around him, and Colin's head was up against the side of her head. He tried not to sob much, because the plain fact of the matter is that boy-sobbing is exceedingly unattractive. Lindsey said, "Let it out, let it out," and then Colin said, "But I can't, because if I let it out it'll sound like a bullfrog's mating call," and everyone, including Colin, laughed.

• • •

He worked on the Theorem from the time they got home until 11 P.M. Lindsey brought him some kind of chicken taco salad from Taco Hell, but Colin only ate a few bites. Generally, he didn't think all that highly of eating, particularly when he was working. But his work that night came to naught. He couldn't make the Theorem work, and he realized that his Eureka moment had been a false alarm. Imagining the Theorem only required a prodigy, but actually *completing* it

would take a genius. Proving the Theorem, in short, required more mattering than Colin brought to the table.

“I’m going to burn you,” he said out loud to the notebook. “I’m going to throw you in the fire.” Which was a fine idea—only there was no fire. There don’t tend to be a lot of crackling fireplaces during the Tennessee summer, and Colin didn’t smoke, so no matches were on hand. He roused about the empty drawers of his adopted desk for matches or a lighter, but he could find nothing. He was hell-bent on burning that goddamned notebook with all his Theoremizing, though. So he walked through the bathroom and cracked open the door to Hassan’s darkened room.

“Dude, do you have a match?” Colin asked, failing at whispering.

“Your daddy is sleeping.”

“I know, but do you have a lighter or a match or something?”

“Daddy is trying really fugging hard to think of a not-terrifying reason why you’d wake Daddy up in the middle of the night to ask that fugging question. But no. No. Daddy does not have a match or a lighter. And, okay, enough of the Daddy shit. Anyway, you’ll just have to wait till morning to douse yourself in gasoline and self-annihilate.”

“Self-immolate,” Colin corrected, and then pulled the door shut.

He walked downstairs and shuffled past Hollis Wells, who was too distracted by all the papers around her and the blaring Home Shopping Network to notice him. Down a hallway, he came to what he believed to be Lindsey’s room. He’d never technically seen it, but he’d seen her enter the living room from this approximate side of the house. Also, a light was on. He knocked softly.

“Yeah,” she said. Lindsey was seated in a plush armchair beneath a giant wall-length bulletin board, on which she’d thumbtacked pictures of herself and Katrina, herself and TOC, herself in camouflage. It was like every single picture of Lindsey Lee Wells ever taken—except Colin noticed immediately that they were all from the last couple of years. No baby pictures, no kid pictures, and no emo-alternative-gothy-screamo-punk synthesis pictures. A four-poster queen-size bed jutted up against the wall opposite the bulletin board. Notably, the room lacked pink.

“It’s not so pink in here,” Colin commented.

“It’s the only refuge in the entire house,” she said.

“Do you have a match?”

“Sure, I got a shitload of ’em,” Lindsey answered without looking up. “Why?”

“I want to burn this,” he said, holding it up. “I can’t finish my Theorem, and so I want to burn it.”

Lindsey stood up, darted toward Colin, and snatched the notebook from his

hand. She paged through it for a while. “Can’t you just throw it away?”

Colin sighed. Clearly, she didn’t get it. “Well, yeah, I *could*. But look, if I can’t *be* a genius—and clearly I can’t be—I can at least burn my work like one. Look at all the geniuses who either successfully or unsuccessfully tried to burn their papers.”

“Yes,” Lindsey said absentmindedly, still reading from the notebook. “Just look at all of them.”

“Carlyle, Kafka, Virgil. It’s hard to imagine better company, really.”

“Yes. Hey, explain this to me,” she said, sitting down on the bed and motioning for him to sit next to her. She was reading from a page with an early version of the formula and several inaccurate graphs.

“The idea is that you take two people and figure out if they’re Dumpers or Dumpees. You use a scale that goes from -5 for a strong Dumpee to +5 for a strong Dumper. The difference between those numbers gives you the variable, D, and then by putting D into the formula, you get a graph that predicts the relationship. Only—” he paused, trying to think of a way to put his failure poetically. “Uh, it doesn’t really work.”

She didn’t look up at him; just closed the notebook. “You can burn it,” she said, “but not tonight. I want it for a couple days.”

“Uh, okay,” Colin said, and then he waited for Lindsey to say something more. Finally, she added, “It’s just a cool-ass way to tell stories. I mean, I hate math. But this is cool.”

“Okay. But soon, we burn it!” Colin said, his finger in the air, mock emphatic.

“For sure, yo. Now go to bed before your day gets any worse.”

⁵⁴ The odd thing about that is that Nikola Tesla actually *did* love birds, but not one-legged chickens. Tesla, who did at least as much for electricity as Thomas Edison, had a quasi-romantic fascination with pigeons. He really fell for one particular white pigeon. Of her, he wrote, “I loved that pigeon. I loved her as a man loves a woman.”

⁵⁵ A roach disk.

On their fifth night in Gutshot, Hassan and Colin split up. Hassan went out with Lindsey to go “cruising,” an activity that apparently involved driving in Hollis’s pink truck from the Gutshot General Store to the gas station/Taco Hell and then back to the General Store, and then back to the gas station/Taco Hell, ad infinitum.

“You should come out,” Hassan told him. He was standing beside Lindsey in the living room. She wore dangly blue earrings and quite a bit of rouge, which made her look flushed.

“I’m behind on my reading,” Colin explained.

“Behind on your reading? All you *do* is read,” Lindsey said.

“I’ve been way behind because I’ve worked so hard on the Theorem and because of oral historianing. I try to read four hundred pages a day—ever since I was seven.”

“Even on weekends?”

“*Particularly* on weekends, because then I can really focus on pleasure reading.”

Hassan shook his head. “Dude, you’re such a geek. And that’s coming from an overweight *Star Trek* fan who scored a 5 on the AP Calculus test. So you know your condition is grave.” He rubbed Colin’s Jew-fro as if for luck, and then turned away.

“You should go; keep them out of trouble,” Hollis yelled from the couch.

Without a word, Colin grabbed his book (a biography of Thomas Edison)⁵⁶ and headed upstairs to his room, where he lay on his bed and read in peace. Over the next five hours, he finished that book and started one he found on the bookshelf in his room called *Foxfire*. *Foxfire* discussed how people did things in the old days of Appalachia.

The reading quieted his brain a little. Without Katherine and without the Theorem and without his hopes of mattering, he had very little. But he always

had books. Books are the ultimate Dumpees: put them down and they'll wait for you forever; pay attention to them and they always love you back.

Foxfire had just taught Colin how to skin a raccoon and cure it into a hide when Hassan burst into his room, laughing loudly, with the slow-moving gray furball known as Princess sauntering after him.

"I'm not going to lie, *kafir*. I drank half a beer."

Colin scrunched his nose and sniffled. "See, drinking is *haram*. I told you, you do *haram* shit all the time."

"Yeah, well, when in Gutshot, do as the Gutshotians do."

"Your religious commitment is an inspiration to us all," Colin dead-panned.

"Come on. Don't make me feel guilty. I split a beer with Lindsey. I didn't feel anything. It's really *getting drunk* that's *haram*, not *drinking half a beer*. Anyway, cruising is fun. It's amazingly fun. I got to sit in a pickup truck with TOC and JATT and SOCT for about an hour and a half, and they're really not bad. I think I made them all like me. Plus Katrina, as it turns out, is very nice. And when I say nice, I mean gorgeous. Although it is ridiculous the way everyone hangs on TOC like he's God's gift to Gutshot. I guess he's the quarterback or cornerback or something on the football team, except he just graduated, so I don't think he's anything anymore, but apparently being quarterback or cornerback is like being a Marine: it's a once/always thing. Also when Lindsey is not around, TOC talks about her ass constantly. He has no other topic of conversation. Apparently he spends a lot of his free time grabbing her ass, so that's a nice image. I never even noticed her ass."

"Me neither," Colin said. He never really thought to notice butts, unless they were unusually massive.

"Anyway," Hassan went on, "so there's this hunt camp in the woods, and we're going hunting with them and Lindsey and some guy from the factory. *Hunting*. With guns! *For pigs!*"

Colin had no desire to shoot pigs—or anything else, for that matter. "Um," Colin said. "I don't even know how to shoot a gun."

"Yeah, me neither, but how hard can it be? Complete fugging idiots shoot guns all the time. That's why there are so many dead people."

"Maybe, instead, you and I could just, like, go out in the woods that weekend and hang out. Like build a fire or something and go camping."

"Are you shitting me?"

"No, it could be fun. Reading by firelight and cooking our own food on the fire and stuff. I know how to build a fire even without a match. I read about it in this book," Colin said, gesturing to *Foxfire*.

"Do I *look* like an eighth-grade Boy Scout, *sitzpinkler*? We'll go out. We'll

have fun. We'll get up early and drink coffee and hunt pigs and everyone will be drunk and hilarious except for us."

"You can't *make* me go with you," Colin shot back.

Hassan took a step toward the doorway. "That's true, *sitzpinkler*. You don't have to come. I won't begrudge you sitting on your ass. God knows I have always loved it. I just feel like a little adventure lately."

Colin felt vaguely like he'd been dumped. He'd tried to come up with a compromise. He *did* want to hang out with Hassan, but not with those oh-so-cool guys. "I don't get it," Colin said. "Do you want to make out with Lindsey or something?"

Hassan stood up, petting the fluff ball, releasing her pet dander into the air for Colin to sneeze at. "Again with that? No. God. I don't want to date *anyone*. I see what it's done to you. As you well know, I believe in saving Thunderstick for one very special lady."

"Also, you believe in not drinking."

"*Touché, mon ami*. Too fugging shay."

The Middle (of the Middle)

The biggest study of highly gifted children ever undertaken was the brainchild (as it were) of one Lewis Terman, a psychologist in California. With the help of teachers around the state, Terman chose some seven thousand gifted children, who have now been followed for almost sixty years. Not all the kids were *prodigies*, of course—their IQs ranged from 145 to 190, and Colin, by comparison, had an IQ that sometimes measured above 200—but they represented many of the best and brightest children of that generation of Americans. The results were somewhat startling: the highly gifted kids in the study weren't much more likely to become prominent intellectuals than normal kids. Most of the children in the study became successful enough—bankers and doctors and lawyers and college professors—but almost none of them turned out to be real *geniuses*, and there was little correlation between a really high IQ and making a significant contribution to the world. Terman's gifted children, in short, rarely ended up being as special as they initially promised to be.

Take, for instance, the curious case of George Hodel. With one of the highest IQs in the study, one might have expected Hodel to discover the structure of DNA or something. Instead, he was a fairly successful doctor in California who later lived in Asia. He never became a genius, but Hodel did manage to become infamous: he was quite probably a serial killer.⁵⁷ So much for the benefits of prodigy.

• • •

As a sociologist, Colin's dad studied people, and he had a theory on how to transform a prodigy into a grown-up genius. He believed Colin's development ought to involve a delicate interplay between what he called "active, results-oriented parenting" and Colin's natural predisposition to studying. This basically meant letting Colin study and setting "markers," which were exactly like goals except they were called markers. Colin's father believed that this kind of prodigy—born and then made smarter by the right environment and education—could become a considerable genius, remembered forever. He told Colin this sometimes, when Colin would come home from school sullen, tired of the Abdominal Snowman, tired of pretending that his abject friendlessness didn't bother him.

"But you'll win," his dad would say. "You have to imagine that, Colin, that

one day they will all look back on their lives and wish they'd been you. You'll have what everyone else wants in the end."

• • •

But it did not take until the end. It took until *KranialKidz*.

At the tail end of Christmas break his junior year, Colin received a call from a cable station he'd never heard of called CreaTVity. He didn't watch much TV, but it wouldn't have mattered, because *no one* had heard of CreaTVity. They'd gotten his number from Krazy Keith, who they'd contacted because of his scholarly articles about prodigy. They wanted Colin on their game show. His parents disapproved, but their "active, results-oriented" parenting meant that they gave Colin a measure of freedom to make his own decisions. And he wanted to go on the show, because (a) the ten-thousand-dollar first prize was a lot of money, and (b) he would be on television, and (c) 10K is a *lot* of money.

They gave Colin a makeover when he arrived for the first taping, turning him into the cool, snide, troublemaking prodigy. They bought him glasses with rectangular wire rims and caked his hair with endless product so that he had a kind of curly, mussy 'do like the coolest kids at school. They gave him five outfits—including a pair of designer jeans, which hugged his ass like they were a needy boyfriend, and a T-shirt that read, in a handprinted scrawl: SLACKER. And then they taped all six preliminary rounds of the show in one day, pausing to change the prodigies into new outfits. Colin won all six rounds, leaving him ready for the finals. His opponent there was Karen Aronson, a towheaded twelve-year-old kid studying for her PhD in math. Karen had been cast as the adorable one. In the week between the first tapings and the final, Colin wore his new trendy kid button-downs and his designer jeans to school, and people asked him, *Are you really going to be on TV?* And then a cool kid named Herbie⁵⁸ told Hassan that this girl Marie Caravolli liked Colin. And since Colin had, not too long before, been dumped by Katherine XVIII, Colin asked Marie out on a date, because Marie, a perennially tan Italian beauty who would have won Homecoming Queen if the Kalman School did that kind of thing, was the hottest girl he had ever, or would ever, come across. Let alone talk to. Let alone date. He'd wanted to keep his Katherine streak alive, of course. But Marie Caravolli was the kind of girl you break streaks for.

And that's when the funny thing happened. He got off the train after school on the day of his date; everything was perfectly planned. He had just enough time to walk home, clean all the fast-food wrappers and soda cans out of the Hearse, take a shower, buy some flowers from the White Hen, and pick up Marie. But

when he turned onto his street, he saw Katherine I sitting on the steps outside his house. As he squinted at her, watching her pull her knees up almost to her chin, he realized he'd never seen Katherine without Krazy Keith.

"Is everything okay?" Colin asked as he approached.

"Oh yeah," she said. "I'm sorry to drop by unannounced. It's just I've got this French test?" she said as if it were a question. "Tomorrow? And I don't want my dad to know what a dumbass I am in French and so I thought maybe—I tried to call, but I don't have your cell number. So anyway, I figured that since I know a world-famous TV quiz show star, I could maybe get tutoring from him." She smiled.

"Um," Colin said. And in the next few seconds, he tried to work out what it would really be like to date Marie. Colin had always been jealous of people, like Hassan, who just know how to make friends. But the risk of being able to win over anyone, he found himself thinking, was that you might pick the wrong people.

He imagined the best possible scenario: Marie actually, improbably, ends up *liking* him, whereupon Colin and Hassan vault up the social ladder and get to eat lunch at a different table, and get invited to some parties. Now, Colin had seen enough movies to know what happens when dorks go to cool-kid parties: generally, the dorks either get thrown into the pool⁵⁹ or they become drunk, vacuous cool kids themselves. Neither seemed like a good option. Also there was the fact that Colin did not, technically, *like* Marie. He didn't even know her.

"Hold on," he told Katherine I. And then he called Marie. She'd given him the number earlier that very day, during their second-ever conversation,⁶⁰ a remarkable fact considering they'd attended the same school together for nearly a decade. "I'm really sorry," he said. "But I've got a family emergency. . . . Yeah, no, my uncle is in the hospital, and we have to go see him. . . . Well, yeah, I'm sure he'll be fine. . . . Okay. Cool. Sorry, again."

And so it came to pass that the only time Colin came anywhere close to ever dumping anyone, it was Marie Caravolli, who everyone agreed was the most attractive individual in American history. Instead, he tutored Katherine I. And one session turned into one each week, and then into two each week, and by the next month, she came over to his house with Krazy Keith to watch, with Colin's parents and Hassan, as Colin annihilated a poor sap named Sanjiv Reddy in the first episode of *KranialKidz*. Later that night, after Hassan had gone home, while Krazy Keith and Colin's parents were drinking red wine, Colin and Katherine Carter snuck out of the house to have a cup of coffee at *Café Sel Marie*.

⁵⁶ Who was not a child prodigy but did end up being something of a genius. Although a lot of Edison's

discoveries were not actually made by Edison. Like the lightbulb, for instance, was technically invented by Sir Humphrey Davy in 1811, but his lightbulb sort of sucked and burned out all the time. Edison improved upon the idea. Edison also stole ideas from Nikola Tesla, the aforementioned pigeon lover.

⁵⁷ Hodel was likely guilty of the 1947 “Black Dahlia” murder, one of the most famous and long-unsolved murder cases in California history. (He was apparently pretty *good* at serial killing, as one might expect of a prodigy, since he never got caught and indeed probably no one would have ever known about Hodel except his son—true story—became a homicide detective in California, and through a series of amazing coincidences and some pretty solid police work, became convinced that his dad was a murderer.)

⁵⁸ How does a kid named Herbie manage to be cool? This is one of life’s enduring mysteries, how guys named Herbie or Dilworth or Vagina or whatever so easily overcome the burden of their names to achieve a kind of legendary status, but Colin is forever linked with Colon.

⁵⁹ Although there are admittedly not a lot of pools in Chicago.

⁶⁰ The first being the date-asking itself.

(twelve)

The following Thursday, Colin woke up to the sounds of the rooster mixing with Hassan's prayers. Colin rolled out of bed, pulled on a T-shirt, peed, and then entered Hassan's room through the bathroom. Hassan was back in bed, his eyes closed.

"Is there a way you could pray *less loudly*? I mean, shouldn't God be able to hear you even if you whisper?" he asked.

"I'm calling in sick," Hassan said without opening his eyes. "I think I have a sinus infection, and also I need a day off. Jesus. This working business is all right, but I need to sit in my boxers and watch *Judge Judy*. Do you realize that I haven't seen *Judge Judy* in, like, twelve days? Imagine if *you* were separated from the love of *your* life for twelve days." With his lips pursed, Colin stared at Hassan silently. Hassan blinked open his eyes. "Oh. Right. Sorry."

"You can't call in sick. Your boss works here. In the house. She'll know you're not sick."

"She spends Thursdays at the factory, dumbass. You need to pay better attention. It's the *perfect* day to call in sick. I just need to charge the emotional batteries."

"You've been charging the batteries all year! You haven't done anything in twelve months!"

Hassan smirked. "Don't you have to go to work or something?"

"At least call your mom and tell her to send a deposit to Loyola. The deposit deadline is in four weeks. I looked online for you."

Hassan didn't open his eyes. "I'm trying to think of a word. God, it's right on the tip of my tongue. Duh—doo—dii. Oh. Right. Dingleberries, motherfucker. Dingle. Berries."

When Colin got downstairs, he saw that Hollis was up already—or maybe she'd just stayed up all night—and dressed in a pink pantsuit.

"Beautiful day in the country," she said. "High's only 83 today. But Lord, I

sure am glad Thursday only comes around once a week.”

When Colin sat down beside her at the dining room table, he asked, “What do you do on Thursdays?”

“Oh, I just like to go in to the factory and check on things in the morning. And then around noon I drive to Memphis and visit our warehouse.”

“Why is the warehouse in Memphis instead of Gutshot?” asked Colin.

“Lord, you ask a lot of questions,” Hollis answered. “So listen. Y’all have interviewed most everyone who works at the factory now. So I’m gonna start sending you out to the other folks in Gutshot, factory retirees, and that sort of thing. I still just need you to ask the four questions, but you might want to stay a bit longer, just to look polite and all.”

Colin nodded. After a bit of silence, he said, “Hassan is sick. He has a sinus infection.”

“Poor thing. Okay, you’ll go out with Lindsey. It’s a bit of a drive today. You’re going to see the oldsters.”

“The oldsters?”

“That’s what Lindsey calls them. The folks at the nursing home in Bradford—a lot of them live off pensions from Gutshot Textiles. Lindsey used to visit those folks all the time before she started,” Hollis sighed, “dating that,” Hollis sighed again, “boy.” Hollis craned her neck around and shouted down the hall, “LINDSSSEEEY! GET YOUR LAZY ASS OUT OF BED!”

And even though the sound of Hollis’s thick voice had to carry down the hallway and through two closed doors to reach Lindsey, Lindsey shouted back moments later, “PUT A QUARTER IN THE GODDAMNED SWEAR JAR, HOLLIS. I’M ABOUT TO TAKE A SHOWER.”

Hollis got up, put a quarter in the swear jar on the mantel, walked back to Colin, mussed his Jew-fro, and said, “Listen, I’ll be late. Long drive back from Memphis. I’ll have my cell on. Y’all be safe.”

• • •

By the time Lindsey got downstairs, wearing khaki shorts and a tight-fitting black GUTSHOT! T-shirt, Hassan was on the couch, watching reruns of *Saturday Night Live*.

“Who are our victims today?” asked Lindsey.

“The oldsters.”

“That’s cool, actually. I’m a veteran of that joint. Okay, off the couch, Hass.”

“Sorry, Linds. I called in sick,” he said. *I’ve never called her “Linds,”* Colin thought. Hassan laughed at some joke on the TV Lindsey blew hair out of her

face and then she grabbed Colin by his upper arm and led him out to the Hearse.

“I can’t believe he’s calling in sick,” said Colin, but he started the car. “I’m fugging exhausted from staying up half the night reading a fugging book about the invention of the television,⁶¹ and *he* gets to fugging call in sick?”

“Hey, why the fuck do you and Hassan say fug all the time?”

Colin exhaled slowly, his cheeks puffing out. “Have you ever read *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer?”

“I don’t even know who that is.”

“American novelist. Born in 1923. I was reading him when I first met Hassan. And then later Hassan ended up reading it because it’s all about war, and Hassan likes actiony books. Anyway, it’s 872 pages, and it uses the word *fug* or *fugging* or *fugger* or whatever about thirty-seven thousand times. Every other word is a fug, pretty much. So anyway, after I read a novel, I like to read some literary criticism of it.”

“Color me surprised,” she said.

“Right. Well, when Mailer wrote the book, he didn’t use ‘fug.’ But then he sent it to the publisher and they were like, ‘This is a really excellent book you’ve written, Mr. Mailer. But no one here in 1948 is going to buy it, because it contains even more F-bombs than it does Regular Bombs.’ So Norman Mailer, as a kind of fug-you to the publisher, went through his 872-page book and changed every last F-word to ‘fug.’ So I told Hassan the story while he was reading the book and then he decided to start saying fug as an homage to Mailer—and because you can say it in class without getting in trouble.”

“That’s a good story. See? You can tell a story,” she said, her smile like bright white firecrackers in a starless sky. “It doesn’t have a moral, and it doesn’t contain any romance or adventure, but—it’s a story at least, and you didn’t share any meditations on hydration.” In his peripheral vision, Colin could see her smiling at him. “Turn left. We go down this fugging road forever and then—oh wait, wait, slow down that’s Chase’s car.”

A two-toned Chevy Bronco approached from the other direction. Reluctantly, Colin brought the Hearse to a stop. TOC was behind the wheel. Colin rolled down the window as TOC rolled down his. Lindsey leaned across Colin to look up at her boyfriend. “Hey, Lass,” TOC said.

“Not funny,” Lindsey said emphatically, as Chase, riding shotgun, howled with laughter.

“Listen, Chase and me are gonna meet Fulton tonight at the Camp. See you there?”

“I think I’m gonna stay home tonight,” she said, and then turned her head to Colin and said, “Go.”

“Aww, Linds. I was just screwing with you.”

“Go,” she said again, and Colin hit the gas and shot off.

Colin was about to ask for an explanation of the scene when Lindsey turned to him and said very calmly, “It’s nothing—just an inside joke. So anyway, I read your notebook. I don’t really understand it all, but I at least *looked* at everything.”

Colin quickly forgot about the weirdness with TOC and asked, “What’d you think?”

“Well, first, it kept making me think about what we talked about when you first got here. When I told you I thought it was a bad idea to matter. I think I gotta take that back, because looking at your notes, I kept wanting to find a way to improve on your Theorem. I had this total hard-on for fixing it and proving to you that relationships *could* be seen as a pattern. I mean, it ought to work. People are so damned predictable. And then the Theorem wouldn’t be yours, it’d be ours, and I could—okay, this sounds retarded. But anyway, I guess I do want to matter a little—to be known outside Gutshot, or I wouldn’t have thought so much about it. Maybe I just want to be big-time without leaving here.”

Colin slowed as he approached a stop sign and then looked at her. “Sorry,” he said.

“Why sorry?”

“Because you couldn’t fix it.”

“Oh, but I did,” she said.

Colin brought the car to a full stop twenty feet in front of the stop sign and said, “Are you sure?” And she just kept smiling. “Well, *tell* me,” he pleaded.

“Okay, well I didn’t FIX it, but I have an idea. I suck at math—like really, really suck, so tell me if I have this wrong, but it seems like the only factor that goes into the formula is where each person fits on the Dumper/Dumpee scale, right?”

“Right. That’s what the formula’s about. It’s about getting dumped.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the only factor in a relationship. There’s, like, age. When you’re nine, your relationships tend to be shorter and less serious and more random than when you’re forty-one and desperate to get married before your flow-o’-eggs dries up, right?”

Colin turned away from Lindsey and looked at the intersecting roads before him, both utterly abandoned. He thought it through for a while. It seemed so obvious now—many discoveries do. “More variables,” he announced enthusiastically.

“Right. Like I said—age, for starters. But a lot of things go into it. I’m sorry, but attractiveness matters. There’s this guy who just joined the Marines, but last

year he was a senior. He was like 210 pounds of chiseled muscle, and I love Colin and everything, but this guy was dead sexy and also really sweet and nice, and he drove a tricked-out Montero.”

“I hate that guy,” Colin said.

Lindsey laughed. “Right, you totally would. But anyway, total Dumper. Self-professed proponent of the 4 Fs: find ’em, feel ’em, fug ’em, and forget ’em. Only he made the mistake of dating the only person hotter than him in Middle Tennessee—Katrina. And he became the clingiest, neediest, whimperingest little puppy dog and finally Katrina had to ditch him.”

“But it’s not just physical attraction,” Colin said, reaching into his pocket for his pencil and notepad. “It’s how attractive you find the person and how attractive they find you. Like, say there’s this girl who’s very pretty, but as it happens, I have a weird fetish and only like girls with thirteen toes. Well, I might be the Dumper if she happens to be ten-toed and only gets turned on by skinny guys with glasses and Jew-fros.”

“And really green eyes,” Lindsey added nonchalantly.

“What?”

“I was complimenting you,” she said.

“Oh. Mine. Green. Right.” *Smooth, Singleton. Smooth.*

“Anyway, I think it needs to be way more complicated. It needs to be so complicated that a math tard like me won’t understand it in the *least*.”

A car pulled up behind them and honked, so Colin returned to driving, and by the time they were in the cavernous parking lot of the nursing home, they had settled on five variables:

Age (A)⁶²

Popularity Differential (C)⁶³

Attractiveness Differential (H)⁶⁴

Dumper/Dumpee Differential (D)⁶⁵

Introvert/Extrovert Differential (P)⁶⁶

They sat in the car together with the windows down, the air warm and sticky but not stifling. Colin sketched possible new concepts and explained the math to Lindsey, who made suggestions and watched his sketching. Within thirty minutes, he was cranking out the basic she-broke-up-with-him frowny-face graph⁶⁷ for several Katherines. But he couldn’t get the timing right. Katherine XVIII, who cost him months of his life, didn’t look like she lasted any longer, or mattered any more, than the 3.5 days he spent in the arms of Katherine V. He was creating too simple a formula. And he was still trying to do it completely

randomly. *What if I square the attractiveness variable? What if I put a sine wave here or a fraction there?* He needed to see the formula not as math, which he hated, but as language, which he loved.

So he started thinking of the formula as an attempt to communicate something. He started creating fractions within the variables so that they'd be easier to work with in a graph. He began to see before even inputting the variables how different formulas would render the Katherines, and as he did so the formula grew increasingly complicated, until it began to seem almost—how to put this not so dorkily—well, beautiful. After an hour parked in the car, the formula looked like this:

$$-D^7x^8 + D^2x^3 - \frac{x^4}{A^5} - Cx^2 - Px + \frac{1}{A} + 13P + \frac{\sin(2x)}{2} \left[1 + (-1)^{H+1} \frac{\left(x + \frac{11\pi}{2}\right)^H}{\left|x + \frac{11\pi}{2}\right|^H} \right]^{68}$$

“I think that’s close,” he said finally.

“And I sure as shit don’t understand it at all, so you’ve succeeded in my eyes!” She laughed. “Okay, let’s go hang with the oldsters.”

• • •

Colin had only been in a nursing home once. He and his dad drove to Peoria, Illinois, one weekend when Colin was eleven to visit Colin’s great-great-aunt Esther, who was in a coma at the time and therefore not very good company.

So he was pleasantly stunned by Sunset Acres. At a picnic table on the lawn outside, four old women, all wearing broad, straw hats, were playing a card game. “Is that Lindsey Lee Wells?” one of the women asked, and then Lindsey brightened and hastened over to the table. The women laid down their cards to hug Lindsey and pat her puffy cheeks. Lindsey knew them all by name—Jolene, Gladys, Karen, and Mona—and introduced Colin to them, whereupon Jolene took off her hat, fanned her face, and said, “My, Lindsey, you *do* have a nice-looking boyfriend, don’t you? No wonder you don’t come ’round to visit us no more.”

“Aw, Jolene, he ain’t my boyfriend. I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much. I been so busy with school, and Hollis works me like a dog down at the store.”

And then they took to discussing Hollis. It took fifteen minutes before Colin could even get his tape recorder started to ask the four questions they’d come there to ask, but he didn’t mind, first because Jolene thought he was “nice-looking,” and second because they were such a relaxed bunch of old people. For example, Mona, a woman with liver spots and a gauze patch over her left eye,

answered the question, “What’s special about Gutshot?” by saying, “Well for starters that mill has got a right-good pension plan. I been retired for thirty years and Hollis Wells *still* buys my diapers. That’s right, I use ’em! I pee myself when I laugh,” she said gleefully, and then laughed disturbingly hard.

And Lindsey, it seemed to Colin, was some kind of rock star among the oldsters. As word filtered through the building that she’d arrived, more and more of them made their way to the picnic tables outside and hovered around Lindsey. Colin went from person to person, recording their answers to the questions. Eventually, he just sat down and let Lindsey throw people his way.

His favorite interview was with a man named Roy Walker. “Well I can’t imagine,” Roy said, “why on earth anyone would want to hear from me. But I’m happy to chat.” Roy was starting to tell Colin about his former job as night-shift plant manager of Gutshot Textiles, but then he stopped suddenly and said, “Look how they’re all loving on little Lindsey. We all raised that girl up. I used to see her once a week or more—we knew her when she was a baby and we knew her when you couldn’t tell her from a boy and we knew her when she had blue hair. She used to sneak me in one Budweiser beer every Saturday, bless her heart. Son, if there’s one thing I know,” and Colin thought about how old people always like to tell you the one thing they know, “it’s that there’s some people in this world who you can just love and love and love no matter what.”

Colin followed Roy over to Lindsey then. Lindsey was twisting a lock of her hair casually, but staring intently at Jolene.

“Jolene, what’d you just say?”

“I was telling Helen that your mama is selling two hundred acres of land up Bishops Hill to my boy Marcus.”

“Hollis is selling land on Bishops Hill?”

“That’s right. To Marcus. I think Marcus wants to build himself some houses up there, build a little—I don’t remember what he calls it.”

Lindsey half-closed her eyes and sighed. “A subdivision?” she asked.

“That’s right. Subdivision. Up there on the hill, I guess. Nice views, anyway.”

Lindsey became quiet after that, her big eyes staring off into the distance at the fields behind the nursing home. Colin sat there and listened to the old folks talking, and then finally Lindsey grabbed his arm just above the elbow and said, “We should get going.”

As soon as the Hearse’s doors were shut, Lindsey mumbled as if to herself, “Mom would never sell land. Never. Why is she doing that?” It occurred to Colin that he’d never before heard Lindsey refer to Hollis as Mom. “Why would she sell land to that guy?”

“Maybe she needs money,” Colin offered.

“She needs money like I need a goddamned hole in my head. My great-grandfather *built* that factory. Dr. Fred N. Dinzanfar. We aren’t hurting for money, I promise you.”

“Was he Arab?”

“What?”

“Dinzanfar.”

“No, he wasn’t Arab. He was from Germany or something. Anyway, he spoke German—so does Hollis, that’s how I know it. Why do you always ask such ridiculous questions?”

“Jeez. Sorry.”

“Oh, whatever, I’m just confused. Who cares. On to other things. It’s fun hanging out with the oldsters, isn’t it? You wouldn’t think it, but they’re cool as hell. I used to visit those people at their houses—most of them weren’t in the Home then—almost every day. I’d just go from house to house, getting fed and getting hugged on. Those were the pre-friend days.”

“They certainly seemed to adore you,” Colin said.

“Me? The ladies couldn’t talk about anything but how hot you were. You’re missing a whole demographic of Katherines by not chasing the over-eighty market.”

“It’s funny how they thought we were dating,” Colin said, glancing over at her.

“How’s that funny?” she asked, holding his gaze.

“Um,” he said. Distracted from the road, Colin watched as she gave him the slightest version of her inimitable smile.

⁶¹ Television was invented by a kid. In 1920, the memorably named Philo T. Farnsworth conceived the cathode ray vacuum tube used in most all twentieth-century TV sets. He was fourteen. Farnsworth built the first one when he was just twenty-one. (And shortly thereafter went on to a long and distinguished career of chronic alcoholism.)

⁶² To get this variable, Colin took the two people’s average age and subtracted five. By the way, all the footnotes on this page have math in them and are therefore *strictly optional*.

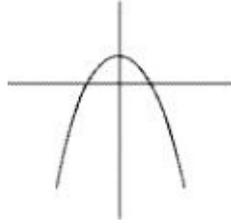
⁶³ Which Colin arrived at by calculating the popularity difference between Person A and Person B on a scale of 1 to 1,000 (you can approximate) and then dividing by 75—positive numbers if the girl is more popular; negative if the guy is.

⁶⁴ Which is calculated as a number between 0 and 5 based on the difference in attraction to each other. Positive numbers if the boy is more attracted to the girl; negative if vice versa.

⁶⁵ Between 0 and 1, the relative distance between the two people on the Dumper/Dumpee range. A negative number if the boy is more of a Dumper; positive number if the girl is.

⁶⁶ In the Theorem, this is the difference in outgoingness between two people calculated on a scale that goes from 0 to 5. Positive numbers if the girl is more outgoing; negative if the guy is.

⁶⁷



⁶⁸ That does not count as math, because one does not have to understand how it works or what it means in order to think that it looks sort of beautiful.

(thirteen)

That Sunday, Hassan went “cruising” with Lindsey and Katrina and TOC and JATT and SOCT. The next night, he went cruising again, and came home after midnight to find Colin working on his Theorem, which now worked seventeen of nineteen times. He still couldn’t get it to work for either Katherine III or, more importantly, Katherine XIX.

“Sup?” asked Hassan.

“Sup is not a word,” answered Colin without looking up.

“You’re like sunshine on a cloudy day, Singleton. When it’s cold outside, you’re the month of May.”

“I’m working,” Colin said. He couldn’t quite pinpoint when Hassan had started to become like everyone else on the planet, but it was clearly happening, and it was clearly annoying.

“I kissed Katrina,” Hassan said. And then Colin put his pencil down and turned around in his chair and said, “You whated who?”

“Whated isn’t a word,” mimicked Hassan.

“On the lips?”

“No, dumbass, on her pupillary sphincter. Yes, on the lips.”

“Why?”

“We were sitting in the back of Colin’s truck and we were spinning this beer bottle, but it was bumpy as hell because we were riding up to this place in the woods. And so someone would spin the beer bottle, and it’d fly way the hell up and land on the other side of the truck bed, so no one was kissing anyone. So I figured it was safe to play, right? But then I spin the bottle and I swear to God it just spun in the tightest little circle even though we were still going over these bumps—I mean, only God could have kept that bottle from jumping up into the air—and then it stopped right in front of Katrina, and she said, ‘Lucky me,’ and she wasn’t even being sarcastic, *kafir!* She was serious. And she leaned across the truck and we hit a bump and she just sort of landed in my arms, and then she

made a beeline for my mouth and, I swear to God, her tongue was like *licking my teeth*.” Colin just stared, incredulous. He wondered whether Hassan was making it up. “It was, uh, weird and wet and messy—but fun, I guess. The best part was having my hand on her face, and looking down at her and seeing her eyes closed. I guess she’s a chubby chaser or something. Anyway, I’m taking her to the Taco Hell tomorrow night. She’s picking me up. That’s how I roll, baby.” Hassan smirked. “The ladies come to Big Daddy, ’cause Big Daddy ain’t got no car.”

“You’re serious,” said Colin.

“I’m serious.”

“Wait, you think the bottle staying still in the truck was a miracle?” Hassan nodded. Colin tapped his pencil eraser against the desk, and then stood up. “And God wouldn’t lead you to kiss a girl unless you were supposed to marry her, so *God* wants you to marry the girl who believed I was a Frenchman suffering from hemorrhoidal Tourette’s?”

“Don’t be an asshole,” said Hassan, almost threateningly.

“I’m just surprised that Mr. High and Mighty Religious is fugging around with girls in the back of a pickup truck, that’s all. You were probably drinking shitty beer and wearing a football jersey.”

“What the fug, dude? I kissed a girl. Finally. A *really hot, really sweet* girl. Dingleberries. Stop pushing it.”

Colin didn’t know why, but he felt compelled to keep pushing it. “Whatever. I just can’t believe you made out with *Katrina*. Is she just not as dumb and ditzy as she seemed that day?”

And then Hassan reached out and grabbed a handful of Colin’s Jew-fro. He pulled Colin across the room by the hair, and then pushed him up against the wall. Hassan’s jaw was clenched tight as he pressed into Colin’s solar plexus, the precise location of the hole in Colin’s gut. “I said dingle-berries, *kafir*. You will respect the goddamned dingleberries. Now I’m going to bed before we get into a fight. And you want to know why I don’t want to fight you? Because I’d lose.” *Still joking*, Colin thought. *He’s always joking, even when he’s furious*. And as Hassan made his way through the bathroom toward his room, and Colin sat back down to work at the Theorem, Colin’s face was bright and wet, the tears coming from frustration. Colin hated not being able to accomplish his “markers.” He’d hated it since he was four and his dad set learning the Latin conjugations for twenty-five irregular verbs as a “daily marker,” but by the end of the day, Colin only knew twenty-three. His dad didn’t chastise him, but Colin knew he’d failed. And now the markers were more complicated, maybe, but they were still pretty simple: he wanted a best friend, a Katherine, and a Theorem.

And after almost three weeks in Gutshot, it seemed he was becoming worse off than when he'd started.

• • •

Hassan and Colin managed not to speak the next morning—not once, and it was clear to Colin that Hassan still felt just as pissed off as Colin did. Colin watched in a lock-jawed silence as Hassan furiously stabbed at his breakfast, and later as Hassan slammed the mini-recorder down on the coffee table of some factory retiree who was old-but-not-old-enough-for-the-nursing home. Colin could hear the annoyance in Hassan's voice as he asked, in the monotone of the aggressively bored, what life had been like in Gutshot when the oldster was a kid. By now, it seemed, they'd run through the best storytellers and were left with people who took five minutes deciding whether they visited Asheville, North Carolina, in June or July of 1961. Colin still paid attention—it was, after all, what he did—but much of his brainpower was elsewhere. Mostly, he cataloged all the times Hassan had been an ass to him, all the times he'd been the butt of Hassan's jokes, all the snide little comments Hassan had made about his Katherining. And now that Hassan was Katrining, he'd become the kind of guy who cruises, leaving Colin behind.

Lindsey skipped that day to hang out with TOC at the store. So it was just Colin and Hassan and one single oldster who monopolized their entire day. Although the old man talked for seven hours almost without ceasing, Colin's world felt eerily quiet until he finally gave in as they left the old man's house to go pick up Lindsey.

“This sounds trite, but I just think you've changed,” Colin said as they walked down the oldster's driveway. “And I'm tired of you hanging out with me only so you can make fun of me.” Hassan said nothing in response, just climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. Colin got in and started the car, and *then* Hassan lost it.

“Has it ever crossed your mind, you ungrateful asshole, that when I was mopping up after all your breakups, when I was picking your sorry ass off the floor of your bedroom, when I was listening to your endless rantings and ravings about every fugging girl who ever gave you the time of day, that maybe I was actually doing it for you and not because I'm oh-so desperate to learn of the newest dumping in your life? What problems have you listened to of mine, dillhole? Have you ever sat with me for hours and listened to me whine about being a fat fegger whose best friend ditches him every time a Katherine comes along? Has it ever occurred to you even for the briefest goddamn moment that

my life might be as bad as yours? Imagine if you weren't a fugging genius *and* you were lonely *and* nobody ever listened to you. So yeah. Kill me. I kissed a girl. And I came home with that story psyched to tell you because I've finally got a story of my own after four years of listening to yours. And you're such a self-involved asshole that you can't for one fugging second realize that my life doesn't spin around the star of Colin Singleton." Hassan paused for breath, and Colin mentioned the thing that had been bugging him most all day.

"You called him Colin," said Colin.

"Do you know what your problem is?" Hassan went on, not listening. "You can't live with the idea that someone might leave. So instead of being *happy* for me, like any normal person, you're pissed off because ooh, oh no, Hassan doesn't like me anymore. You're such a *sitzpinkler*. You're so goddamned scared of the idea that someone might dump you that your whole fugging life is built around not getting left behind. Well, it doesn't work, *kafir*. It just—it's not just dumb, it's ineffective. Because then you're not being a good friend or a good boyfriend or whatever, because you're only thinking they-might-not-like-me-they-might-not-like-me, and guess what? When you act like that, no one likes you. There's your goddamned Theorem."

"You called him Colin," repeated Colin, his voice catching now.

"Called who Colin?"

"TOC."

"No."

Colin nodded.

"Did I?"

Colin nodded.

"You're sure? Right, of course you're sure. Huh. Well, I'm sorry. That was an asshole move on my part."

Colin turned into the store's parking lot and stopped the car, but made no move to get out. "I know you're right. I mean, about me being a self-centered asshole."

"Well, it's only sometimes. But still. Just stop."

"I don't really know how," he said. "How do you just stop being terrified of getting left behind and ending up by yourself forever and not meaning anything to the world?"

"You're pretty fugging smart," Hassan answered. "I'm sure you can figure something out."

"It's great," Colin said after a while. "About Katrina, I mean. You fugging kissed a girl. A *girl*. I mean, I always sort of thought you were gay," Colin acknowledged.

“I might be gay if I had a better-looking best friend,” said Hassan.

“And I might be gay if I could locate your penis under the fat rolls.”

“Bitch, I could gain five hundred pounds and you could still see Thunderstick hanging to my knees.”

Colin smiled. “She’s a lucky girl.”

“Too bad she’ll never know just how lucky unless we get married.”

And then Colin was back on the subject. “You *are* sort of a dick to me sometimes. It would be easier if you acted like you actually didn’t hate me.”

“Dude. Do you want me to sit here and say that you’re my best friend and I love you and you’re such a genius that I just want to cuddle up to you at night? Because I’m just not going to. That’s *sitzpinklery*. But I do think you’re a genius. No shit. I honestly do. I think you can do whatever the fuck you want to do in your life, and that’s a pretty sweet gig.”

“Thanks,” said Colin, and then they got out of the car, and they met in front of the hood, and Colin held his arms out a little, and Hassan shoved him playfully, and then they hustled into the store.

TOC was restocking some beef jerky sticks while Lindsey sat on the stool behind the counter reading a celebrity magazine, her bare feet up on the counter beside the cash register.

“Hey,” TOC said. “Heard you got a date tonight, big guy.”

“Yeah, and it’s all thanks to your excellent driving. If you’d missed that pothole, she never would have ended up in my arms.”

“Well, you’re welcome. She’s a hottie, ain’t she?”

“Hey!” said Lindsey without looking up from her magazine. “I’m the hottie!”

“Oh, baby, hush,” TOC said.

“So, Colin,” said TOC. “Hass says you aren’t much for cruising, but you gotta come out hunting with us next weekend.”

“That’s nice of you to offer,” Colin said. And it *was* sorta nice. No quarterback or cornerback or anyone else in any way associated with football had ever invited him to do anything. But Colin thought immediately of the reason he chose Katherine XIX over Marie Caravolli. In this world, Colin figured, you’re best off staying with your kind. “I don’t know how to shoot, though.”

“Oh, I bet you’ll bag a hogzilla,” said TOC. Colin glanced over at Hassan, who opened his eyes wide and nodded subtly. For a split second, Colin thought of passing on the hog hunt, but he figured he owed it to Hassan. Part of not being a self-centered asshole, Colin reasoned, is doing things with your friends even when you don’t want to. Even if they could result in the death of a wild hog.

“Okay,” Colin said, looking not at TOC but at Hass.

And TOC said, “Sounds good. Listen, since y’all is here to look after the store till closing, I’m gonna head off. I gotta meet the boys down at the factory. We’re going bowling.”

Now Lindsey put down the magazine. “I like bowling,” she said.

“Boys night out, baby.”

Lindsey fake-pouted, then smiled, and stood up to kiss TOC good-bye. He leaned across the counter, pecked her on the mouth, and strode out.

• • •

They closed up the store early and went home, even though Hollis did not like to be interrupted before five-thirty. She was lying on the couch in the living room saying, “We need your help here. If you look at the price point—” and then she saw them walking in and said, “I need to call you back.” She hung up the phone. “Now I’ve told y’all—I work until five-thirty and I can’t be interrupted.”

“Hollis, why are you selling land to that guy Marcus?”

“That’s none of your business and I’ll thank you not to try and change the subject. Y’all stay out of the house until five-thirty. I’m paying you to *work*, remember. And Lindsey Lee Wells, I know you weren’t down at Mr. Jaffrey’s house today. Don’t think I don’t find these things out.”

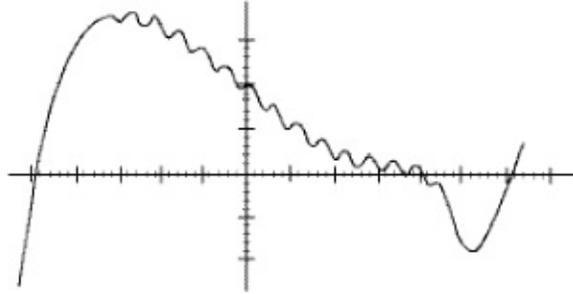
“I’ve got a date tonight, so I’ll be skipping dinner,” Hassan interjected.

“And I’m taking Colin to dinner,” Lindsey said. “This Colin,” she clarified, her extended pointer finger poking his bicep. Hollis beamed; Colin looked over at Lindsey with equal parts surprise and confusion.

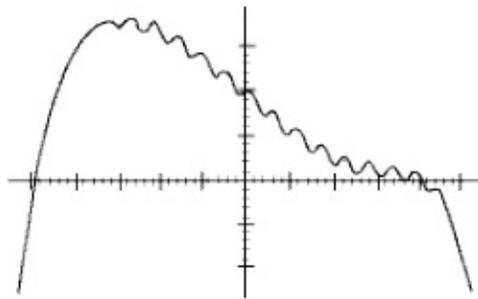
“Well, I guess I can do some work this evening with y’all out then,” Hollis said.

• • •

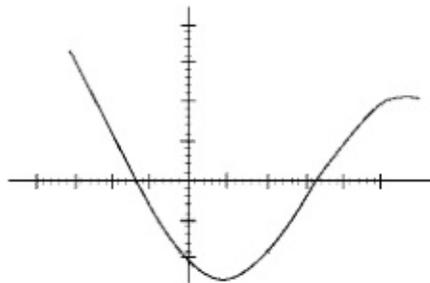
Colin spent his remaining pre-“date” hours working on the Theorem. Within thirty minutes, he’d nailed K-19. The problem, as it turned out, was not so much bad math as false hope: Colin had been trying to tweak the Theorem to make K-19’s graph look like:



In short, he had been counting upon a reunion. He'd been assuming that the Theorem could see into the future, when K-19 would return to him. But the Theorem, he decided, couldn't take into account its own influence. So then with the same formula he'd worked out before, in the car with Lindsey,⁶⁹ Colin managed to get it to reflect his relationship with Katherine XIX up until now:



By five o'clock, he was perilously close. He had captured the Katherine roller coaster eighteen times. But what he *hadn't* done was quite important—he hadn't gotten Katherine III on paper, and one cannot take an equation that predicts eighteen out of nineteen Katherines to the Nobel Prize Committee.⁷⁰ For the next two hours, he thought of every facet of Katherine III (given name: Katherine Mutsensberger) with the precision and clarity that made his brain so unusual. And yet he could not fix what he came to call the III Anomaly. The equation that correctly predicted the other eighteen came out looking like this:



The graph's smiley-facedness indicated that Colin had not been dumped by III but had dumped her, which was ludicrous. He could remember *everything* about

Katherine III, and the rest of them, too, of course—he remembered everything about everything—and yet something about Katherine III clearly eluded him.

As he worked on the Theorem, Colin was so focused that the world outside his notebook seemed not to exist, so he jolted upright in surprise when he heard, from behind him, Lindsey say, “Time for dinner, dude.” He turned around to see her head peeking through the open door. She wore a blue cotton tank top with tight blue jeans, Converse All Stars, and—as if she knew what he liked—no makeup. She looked, well, pretty—even not smiling. Colin glanced down at his jeans and yellow *KranialKidz* T-shirt. “Don’t dress up on account of me,” Lindsey said, smiling. “We gotta get going, anyway.”

They came downstairs just in time to look through the screen door and see Hassan get into Katrina’s SUV. Hassan handed her a sagging pink rose he’d plucked from the mansion’s garden. She smiled, and then they kissed. *Lord*. Colin had seen it with his own eyes: Hassan kissing a girl who *had* to have been Homecoming Queen.

“Was Katrina Homecoming Queen?”

“No I was,” Lindsey responded immediately.

“Really?”

Lindsey pursed her lips. “Well, no, but you don’t have to sound so surprised about it! Katrina was on the Court, though.” She stopped and shouted toward the kitchen, “Hey, Hollis! We’re leaving. We might be back late. Hot sex and all!”

“Have fun!” replied Hollis. “Call if you’ll be out past twelve!”

They drove downtown, to the gas station/Taco Hell, where they ordered at the drive-thru. They both peered through the accordion window, Lindsey leaning over Colin to catch a glimpse of Hassan and Katrina eating.

“She seems to really like him,” Lindsey said. “I mean, I really like him, too. I don’t want to sound mean. I’m just surprised. She usually goes for, um, the dumb, hot ones.”

“So she’s like you.”

“Watch it. I’m paying for your dinner, after all.”

They took their chicken soft tacos and drove off, and finally Colin decided to ask what was going on.

“Um, why are we going out for dinner together?”

“Well, three reasons. First, because I’ve been thinking about our Theorem and I have a question. How does it work if you’re gay?”

“Huh?”

“Well it’s all graph-going-up means boy dumps girl and graph-going-down means girl dumps boy, right? But what if they’re both boys?”

“It doesn’t matter. You just assign a position to each person. Instead of being

‘b’ and ‘g,’ it could just as easily be ‘b1’ and ‘b2.’ That’s how algebra works.”

“Which would explain my C-minus. Okay. Thank God. I was really worried that it would only help the straights, and that’s not much of a Theorem. Reason two is I’m trying to get Hollis to like me, and she likes you, so if I like you, she’ll like me.” Colin was looking at her, confused. “C-minus in algebra; A-plus in coolology. See, popularity is complicated, yo. You have to spend a lot of time thinking about liking; you have to really like being liked, and also sorta like being disliked.” Colin listened intently, nibbling the inside of his thumb. Listening to Lindsey talk about popularity made him feel a little bit of the *mysterium tremendum*. “Anyway,” she went on, “I need to find out what’s going on with her selling land. That guy Marcus built this cookie-cutter house subdivision south of Bradford. I mean, it’s vomitous. Hollis would never stand for that shit.”

“Oh, okay,” Colin said, feeling a bit like a pawn.

“And reason three,” Lindsey said, “is I gotta teach you how to shoot so you don’t embarrass yourself.”

“Shoot a gun?”

“A *shotgun*. I put one in your trunk this afternoon.” Colin nervously glanced toward the back. “It won’t *bite*,” Lindsey said.

“Where did you get a gun?”

“Where did I *get* it? Smartypants, getting a gun in Gutshot, Tennessee, is easier than getting chlamydia from a hooker.”

• • •

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting in a grassy field on the edge of a thick forested area that, Lindsey said, belonged to Hollis but would soon belong to Marcus. The field, overgrown with wildflowers and the occasional tree sapling, was nonetheless fenced in by an interweaving series of chopped logs.

“Why is there a fence?”

“Used to be we had a horse named Hobbit that grazed here, but then he died.”

“He was your horse?”

“Yup. Well, Hollis’s, too. Hollis got him from my father as a wedding present, and then when I was born—six months later—Hollis gave him to me. He was the gentlest horse, Hobbit. I could ride him from the time I was three.”

“So are your parents divorced?”

“No, not officially. But you know what they say about Gutshot: the population never goes up and never goes down, because every time a woman gets pregnant, a man leaves town.” Colin laughed. “He left when I was one. He calls a couple

times a year, but Hollis never makes me talk to him. I don't know the guy, and I don't really care to. How 'bout you?"

"My parents are still married. I have to call them at the same time every night—in thirty minutes, actually. They're overprotective, I guess, but normal. We're really boring."

"You're not boring. You've got to stop saying that, or people will start believing you. Now, about the gun." Lindsey jumped up and ran back across the field and hurdled the fence. Colin followed her at a more sustainable pace. He did not, as a rule, believe in running. "Pop the trunk," Lindsey shouted.

Colin unlocked the trunk and found a long, double-barreled shotgun with a stained wooden handle. Lindsey picked up the gun, handed it to Colin, and said, "Point it at the sky." She grabbed a square paper box, and then they marched back, over the fence and across the field.

Looking like an expert, Lindsey cracked open the gun, pulled two cylindrical shells from the paper box, and inserted them. "When this shit is loaded, you don't point it at me, hear?" She snapped the gun shut, held it up to her shoulder, and then carefully handed it over to Colin.

She moved behind him and helped him hold the gun against his shoulder. He could feel her breasts against his shoulder blades, her feet by his feet, her stomach against his back. "Tuck it tight against your shoulder," she said, and he did. "The safety's here," she said, reaching up and guiding his hand to a steel switch on the side of the gun. He'd never held a gun before. It felt simultaneously exciting and deeply wrong.

"Now when you shoot it," she said, her breath against the nape of his neck, "you don't *pull* the trigger. You just reach in there and you *squeeze* it. Just squeeze it softly. I'm going to take a step back and then you just squeeze, okay?"

"What should I aim at?"

"You couldn't hit the broadside of a barn, so just aim straight ahead." Colin felt the absence of Lindsey on his back, and then he—ever so softly—squeezed the trigger.

The blast hit his ears at the same moment it hit his right shoulder, and the force of the gun caused his arm to pull up and his legs to fall out from under him and he found himself sitting on his ass in a field of wildflowers with the gun pointing to the sky. "Well," he said. "That was fun."

Lindsey was laughing. "See, that's why we're here, so you don't fall on your ass in front of Colin and Chase and everybody. You've got to learn to prepare for that kick."

And so over the course of the next hour, Colin shot the holy living hell out of the oak trees before him, pausing only to reload the gun and call his parents. He

shot forty-four shells into the forest, and then, when his right arm was numb and he felt like he'd been punched repeatedly in the shoulder by a champion boxer, he said, "Why don't you try?" Lindsey shook her head and sat down on the grass. Colin followed her down.

"Oh, I don't shoot guns. I'm terrified of them," she said.

"Are you shitting me?"

"No. Plus that's a ten-gauge. I wouldn't shoot a ten-gauge for a thousand dollars. They kick like a goddamned mule."

"Then why did—"

"Like I said, I don't want you to look like a pussy."

Colin wanted to continue the conversation but didn't quite know how, so he lay back and rubbed his sore shoulder. On the whole, Gutshot had been physically unkind to him: a puffy scar above his eye, forty-four distinct shoulder bruises, and of course a still-painful gaping hole in his gut. And yet, somehow, he liked the place.

He noticed that she was lying next to him, her arms crossed beneath her head. She kicked at his shin playfully to get his attention. "What?" he asked.

"I was thinking about this girl you love so much," she said. "And this place I love so much. And how that happens. How you can just fall into it. This land Hollis is selling, the thing about it is—well, I'm partly mad because I don't want there to be some bullshit McMansion subdivision up there, but also partly because my secret hideout is up there."

"Your what?"

"My secret hideout. My super, incredibly top secret location that no one on earth knows about." Lindsey paused and turned her head away from the starstruck sky and toward Colin. "You wanna see it?"

The End (of the Middle)

“I don’t want to flatter myself,” said Katherine I in between sips of coffee at *Café Sel Marie*, “but it does feel a little special, that it all began with me.”

“Well,” said Colin, who was drinking milk with a shot of coffee in it, “there’s three ways to look at it. Either (1) it’s a massive coincidence that all the girls I ever liked happen to share the same nine letters, or (2) I just happen to think it a particularly beautiful name, or (3) I never got over our two-and-a-half-minute relationship.”

“You were very cute then, you know,” she said. She blew on the coffee through pursed lips. “I remember thinking that. You were dork chic before dork chic was chic.”

“I’m leaning toward explanation 3 at the moment.” He smiled. Dishes clattered around them. The place was crowded. He could see into the kitchen, where their waiter was smoking a long, thin cigarette.

“I think maybe you try to be odd on purpose. I think you like that. It makes you *you* and not someone else.”

“You sound like your father,” he said, referencing Krazy Keith.

“I’ve found you insanely attractive since I saw you when I was freaking out about my French test,” she answered. She didn’t blink, didn’t let go of his stare. Those eyes as blue as the sky ought to be. And then she smiled. “Do I sound like my father now?”

“Yeah, weirdly enough. He also sucks at French.” She laughed. Colin saw the waiter put out his cigarette, and then he came over to their table and asked if they wanted anything more. Katherine I said no, and then she turned to Colin and said, “Do you know anything about Pythagoras?”

And Colin said, “I know his Theorem.”

And she said, “No, I mean the guy. He was weird. He thought everything could be expressed numerically, that—like—math could unlock the world. I mean, *everything*.”

“What, like, even love?” Colin asked, only vaguely annoyed that she knew something he didn’t.

“Particularly love,” Katherine I said. “And you’ve taught me enough French for me to say: 10-5 space 16-5-14-19-5 space 17-21-5 space 10-5 space 20-1-9-13-5.” For a long moment Colin stared at her wordlessly. He cracked the code pretty quickly, but he stayed silent, trying to figure out when she’d come up with it, when she’d memorized it. Even he couldn’t have translated French letters to

Arabic numerals that quickly. *Je pense que je t'aime*, she'd said numerically—"I think that I like you." Or, "I think that I love you." The French verb *aimer* has two meanings. And that's why he liked her, and loved her. She spoke to him in a language that, no matter how hard you studied it, could not be completely understood.

He stayed quiet until he had a fully formulated response, one that would keep her interest alive without quite satiating it. Colin Singleton, let it be said, couldn't play the ninth inning of a relationship to save his life, but he could damn well score in the first.

"You're just saying that because I'm on a TV show that no one watches," he said.

"Maybe."

"Or maybe," he said, "you're saying it because you're flattered I've spent eight years of my life chasing after the nine letters in your name."

"Maybe," she allowed. And then Colin's phone rang. His mom. Their sneak-out was over. But by then it was too late. In his mind, Katherine I was already becoming Katherine XIX. She would soon retake the throne that, all along, had rightfully been hers.

⁶⁹ The pretty one, with all the letters.

⁷⁰ Although there is not a Nobel Prize in Mathematics, he might have had an outside chance at the Peace Prize.

(fourteen)

“The thing about your stories,” Lindsey was saying in the darkness as they approached the forest in front of them, “is that they still don’t have any morals, and you can’t do a good girl voice, and you don’t really talk enough about *everyone else*—the story’s still about you. But anyway, I can imagine this Katherine now, a little bit. She’s clever. And she’s just a little mean to you. I think you get off on that. Most guys do. That’s how I got Colin, really. Katrina was hotter and wanted him worse. They’d been dating for a while when he fell for me. But she was too easy. I know she’s my friend and possibly Hassan’s girlfriend and whatever, but Katrina’s easier than a four-piece jigsaw puzzle.”

Colin laughed, and Lindsey went on talking. “Getting people to like you is so easy, really. It’s a wonder more people don’t do it.”

“It’s not so easy for me.”

“Whatever, *I* like you, and I never *really* like anybody. Hassan likes you, and I can tell that he never really likes anybody, either. You just need more people who don’t like people.”

“You don’t ever really like anybody?”

They passed into the woods, following a narrow, periodically invisible trail. Lindsey motioned toward the trees and said, “You sure shot the holy hell out of this forest, Smartypants. Wouldn’t that be something if you bagged a hog.”

“I don’t really *want* to kill a pig,” Colin noted. He had read *Charlotte’s Web*, see. Then he repeated himself. “You don’t ever really like anybody?”

“Well, that’s an exaggeration, I guess,” she answered. “It’s just that I learned a while ago that the best way to get people to like you is not to like them too much.”

“Well, but you care about a lot of people. The oldsters?” Colin offered.

“Well, the oldsters are different,” she said, and then stopped walking and turned around to Colin, who was already out of breath as he struggled up the hill behind her. “The thing about the oldsters, I think, is that they never screwed with

me, so I don't worry about them. So yeah, oldsters and babies are the exceptions."

They walked in silence for a long time through dense, flat brush with thin trees rising straight and high all around them. The trail became increasingly steep, zigzagging up the hill, until they finally came to a rocky outcropping perhaps fifteen feet high, and Lindsey Lee Wells said, "Now comes the rock climbing."

Colin looked up at the craggy face of the stone. *There are probably people who can successfully negotiate their way up that rock*, he thought, *but I am not one of them*. "No way," he said. She turned back toward him, her cheeks flushed and glistening with sweat. "I'm kidding." She scampered up a wet, mossy boulder, and Colin followed. Immediately, he saw a narrow, chest-high crack covered over by a spiderweb. "See, I'm taking you here because you're the only guy I know who's skinny enough. Squeeze on through," she said.

Colin pushed the spiderweb aside—sorry, Charlotte. He turned sideways, crouched down, and inched away from the fading light outside. Soon he was completely blind, his knees and back and head all against the rock, and for a moment he panicked, thinking Lindsey had tricked him, and would leave him, wedged in here. But he kept shuffling his feet forward. Something glided against his back. He screamed.

"Relax. It's me," she said. Her hands found his shoulders, and she said, "Take one more step," and then he could no longer feel the rock pressing in on him. She turned him so that he was facing forward. "Keep walking," she said. "You can stand up straight now." And then her hands disappeared, and he heard her sweeping at the ground, and she said, "I keep a flashlight here, but I can't f—got it." She pressed the flashlight into his hands and he fumbled with it and then the world lit up.

"Wow," said Colin. Approximately square, the cave's only room was big enough to lie down comfortably in any direction, although the gray-brown ceiling sloped down toward the back, making it hard to stand in a lot of places. It contained a blanket, a sleeping bag, several old throw pillows, and one unmarked Mason jar filled with some sort of liquid. He nudged it with his foot. "Booze," Lindsey explained.

"Where'd you get it?"

"There's a guy out in Danville who makes corn whiskey moonshine. No shit. And he'll sell it to you if you've got ten dollars and are old enough to walk. Colin gave it to me. I told him I drank it, but really I brought it out here, 'cause it adds ambience." Colin moved the flashlight slowly around the cave's walls. "Sit down," Lindsey said. "And turn off the light."

And then it was the kind of dark your eyes never adjust to.

• • •

“How’d you find this place?”

“I was just hiking around. I used to love walking through Mom’s land with all the oldsters when I was little. I started coming by myself during middle school, and I just stumbled across it one day in eighth grade. I must’ve walked past this rock a hundred times without ever noticing anything. It’s weird talking to you; I can’t see you at all.”

“I can’t see you either.”

“We’re invisible. I’ve never been here with someone else. It’s different being invisible *with* someone.”

“So what do you *do* here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s too dark to read. I guess you could get a head lamp or something, but other than that—”

“No, I just sit here. When I was a nerd, I came here to be somewhere where no one would find me. And now—I dunno, I guess the same reason.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Do you want to drink it? The moonshine?”

“I never really drank before.”

“Color me surprised.”

“Also, moonshine can make you blind, and what I’ve seen of blindness so far hasn’t really impressed me.”

“Yeah that would suck for you if you couldn’t read anymore. But how often are you going to find yourself in a cave with moonshine? Live a little.”

“Says the girl who never wants to leave her hometown.”

“Oh, burn. Okay I got the bottle. Talk to me and I’ll come over to your voice.”

“Um, hello my name is Colin Singleton and it’s very dark and so you should come over here to my voice except the acoustics in this place are really w—oh that’s me. That’s my knee.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Ladies first.”

“All right. . . . Sweet holy shitstickers, it tastes like you’re washing down a bite of corn with a pint of lighter fluid.”

“Did it make you go blind?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Okay. Your turn.”

“ . . . AkhhhhEchhhAhhhh. Kahhh. Ehhhhhh. Wow. Wow. Man. It’s like French-kissing a dragon.”

“That’s the funniest thing you’ve ever said, Colin Singleton.”

“I used to be funnier. I kinda lost all my confidence.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Let me tell you a story.”

“Ooh, a Lindsey Lee Wells story. Does it star an Archduke?”

“No it stars a Lindsey, but it’s got all the elements of a top-notch story. Where are you? Oh, there. Hi. Hi, knee. Hi, calf. Okay. So we all went to Danville for elementary school and pretty much all the Gutshot kids stuck together because everyone else thought we were dirty and poor and spread lice. But then in about third grade—like I’ve said, I was ugly—Colin and all his friends started saying I was a dog.”

“I hate that. I hate kids like that so fugging much.”

“Rule Number One. No interrupting. But anyway, so they starting calling me Lass, short for Lassie.”

“Hey, he called you that just the other day on the way to the oldsters!”

“Yeah, I recall. Also, to repeat myself: Rule. Number. One. So it’s fourth grade, okay? And it’s Valentine’s Day. I really wanted to get some valentines. So I asked Hollis what I should do, and she said I should just make a valentine for everyone in the class and then people would respond. So Hollis bought a bunch of these Charlie Brown valentines, and I wrote one for every kid in the class even though my handwriting wasn’t very good and it took me a shit-long time. And then, predictably, I didn’t get any valentines.

“So then I went home and I was really upset but I didn’t want to tell Hollis about it so I just sat in the chair by the window in my room and felt so—just horrible—I don’t even want to think about it. And then I see Colin running up to my house with a little cardboard box. And he’s the cutest boy in school and the only one from Gutshot who’s popular. He puts the box on my doorstep and then rings the doorbell and runs off and I run down there and my heart’s beating like crazy and I’m so hopeful that he’s got this secret crush on me and I get down there and there’s this really elaborately decorated cardboard box with red-construction-paper hearts pasted all over it. . . . God, I hadn’t thought about this in so long till he called me Lass.”

“Wait, what was in the box?”

“Alpo. A can of Alpo. But I got him in the end, because now he dates that dog.”

“Wow. Jesus Christ.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just, you know, I thought *my* romantic relationships were fugged up.”

“Anyway, it became my life’s goal to get him. To kiss him. To marry him. I can’t explain it, but it did.”

“And you did it.”

“I did. And he’s different now. I mean, we were eight. We were little kids. He’s sweet now. Very protective and everything.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Do you ever wonder whether people would like you more or less if they could see inside you? I mean, I’ve always felt like the Katherines dump me right when they start to see what I look like from the inside—well, except K-19. But I always wonder about that. If people could see me the way I see myself—if they could live in my memories—would anyone, *anyone*, love me?”

“Well, he doesn’t love me now. We’ve been dating for two years and he’s never once said it. But he would *really* not love me if he could see inside. Because he’s so real about everything. I mean, you can say a lot of shit about Colin, but he is completely himself. He’s going to work in that factory his whole life, and he’s going to have the same friends, and he’s really happy with that, and he thinks it matters. But if he knew . . . ”

“What? Finish that sentence.”

“I’m full of shit. I’m never myself. I’ve got a Southern accent around the oldsters; I’m a nerd for graphs and deep thoughts around you; I’m Miss Bubbly Pretty Princess with Colin. I’m nothing. The thing about chameleoning your way through life is that it gets to where nothing is real. *Your* problem is—how did you say it—that you’re not significant?”

“Don’t matter. I don’t matter.”

“Right, matter. Well, but at least you can get to the part where *you* don’t matter. Things about you, and things about Colin, and things about Hassan and Katrina, are either true or they aren’t true. Katrina *is* bubbly. Hassan *is* hilarious. But I’m not like that. I’m what I need to be at any moment to stay above the ground but below the radar. The only sentence that begins with ‘I’ that’s true of me is *I’m full of shit.*”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Well, I like you. And you aren’t chameleoning in front of me. I just figured that out. Like, you bite your thumb in front of me, which is a private habit, but you do it in front of me, because I don’t count as public. I’m at your secret hiding place. You’re okay with me seeing inside you a little.”

“A little, maybe.”

“Because I pose no threat. I’m a dork.”

“No, you’re not. That’s—”

“No, I am. And that’s why.”

“Maybe. I never thought about it.”

“I don’t mean to sound judgmental about it, it’s just interesting. I’m not threatened by you either, because I never liked popular people before. But you’re not really like them. It’s more like you found a way to hijack their cool. That’s awe—”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“We shouldn’t.”

“Well, you started it.”

“Right, but I started it just so that I could say ‘we shouldn’t’ really dramatically.”

“Ha.”

“We should leave it at our foreheads touching and our noses touching and your hand on my leg and we shouldn’t, you know.”

“Your breath smells like booze.”

“Your breath smells like you just made out with a dragon.”

“Hey, that’s my joke.”

“Sorry. Had to defuse tension.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“What are you doing?”

“Biting my goddamned thumb. My private habit.”

. . .

They finally left the cave well after dark, but the moonlight was so bright, Colin found himself blinking it away. It was an awkward and largely quiet hike down the hill to the car. From there, they drove back to the Pink Mansion. They had just pulled into the driveway when Lindsey said, “I mean of course I like you and you’re great, but let’s just—it’s just not to be,” and he nodded, because he couldn’t have a girlfriend without a finished Theorem. And anyway, she was a

Lindsey.

They opened the door quietly, hoping not to disturb Hollis's work/QVC watching. The moment Colin closed the door, the phone rang.

"Hello," he heard Hollis say from inside the kitchen. Lindsey grabbed Colin then and pulled him over against the wall, where they could listen without being seen.

"Well, leave it out for the garbage men, then," Hollis said. "What a bunch of bullshit. . . . They can't charge you to pick up *trash*; that's why we pay taxes. . . . Well, I'm sorry, Roy, but that's bullshit. . . . No, we *can't* afford it, believe me. . . . No. Absolutely not. . . . Well, I don't know, Roy. . . . No, I *understand* the problem. . . . Hold on, I'm thinking. Christ, my daughter's gonna be home any second. . . . What about that field back there? We own that field, right? . . . Yeah, exactly. . . . All you need is a goddamned bulldozer and a forklift. . . . Well, I don't like it either, but unless you've got another idea. . . . Fine. I'll see you on Thursday." The phone clanked against the receiver.

"Hollis," Lindsey whispered, "owes a *shitload* of money to the swear jar." Then she led Colin through the hall and into the game room. "Out the window," she whispered. Colin raised the slim window facing the front yard as quietly as he could, and then motioned to the screen. He would have said something about the screen, but he knew he couldn't whisper.

"Christ, it's like you never snuck out of a house before," Lindsey whispered. She pressed at the corners of the screen and then lifted it up. She squirmed out headfirst, her skinny legs kicking slightly as she did a somersault onto the front lawn. Colin followed, feet first, trying a kind of limbo strategy that looked ridiculous.

Having successfully sneaked out of the house, Lindsey and Colin brushed themselves off, ambled to the front door, and opened it.

"Hollis," Lindsey called, "we're home!" Hollis was seated on the couch, a pile of papers in her lap. She turned to them and smiled.

"Hey," Hollis said, all trace of anger gone from her voice. "D'y'all have fun?"

Lindsey looked at Colin, and not at Hollis. "I've rarely had so much fun in my life," she said.

"I bet," said Hollis, who didn't seem to be listening.

. . .

"It was the warehouse." Colin spoke softly, conspiratorially, as they climbed the stairs. "She goes to the warehouse on Thursdays."

Lindsey smirked. "Yeah, I know. You've lived here three weeks; I've lived

here seventeen years. I don't know what's going on, but between that and selling land and always being in a furious phone conversation whenever we show up at the house, I'm starting to think a road trip might be in order," said Lindsey.

"They can solve a surprising number of problems, road trips," Colin acknowledged.

"Road trip? Did somebody say road trip?" Hassan stood at the top of the staircase. "Because I'm in. So is Katrina. She's a college student, you know. I'm dating a *college girl*."

"She's getting her clinical nursing assistant license at Danville Community," Lindsey said dismissively.

"That's college; that's all I'm saying! And to think, Singleton, you thought I'd never get a college girl unless I *went* to college."

"How was the date?" Colin asked.

"Sorry, dude. Can't talk about it. My lips are too numb from all the kissing. That girl kisses like she wants to suck out your soul."

• • •

Colin sneaked into Hassan's room immediately after Lindsey went downstairs to bed, and they discussed Hassan's situation (second base over the shirt), and then Colin told him about Lindsey, minus the secret hideout, because it seemed private.

"I mean," Colin said, "it was dark and our whole faces were touching except our lips. She just brought her head against mine all of a sudden."

"Well, do you like her?"

"Um, I don't know. At that moment I kinda did."

"Dude, think about it. If you could make your Theorem work, you could predict how it would go." Colin smiled at the thought. "Now more than ever, you have to finish."

The next few days were slightly awkward with Lindsey. She and Colin remained friendly, but it was all so superficial, and Colin felt like they ought to be talking about the big issues of mattering and love and capital-t Truth and Alpo, but they only talked about the mundane business of taking oral histories. The sly jokes were gone; Hassan complained repeatedly that “all of a sudden, I’ve got to pull all the funny-weight in this family.” But slowly, things returned to status quo: Lindsey had a boyfriend, and Colin had a broken heart and a Theorem to finish. Also, Hassan had a girlfriend and they were all preparing for a pig hunt—so, then again, things weren’t *entirely* normal.

• • •

The day before his inaugural Feral Hog Hunt, Colin Singleton prepared the only way Colin Singleton would: by reading. He scanned through ten volumes of *Foxfire* books for information about the habits and habitat of the feral hog. Then he Googled “feral pig,” from which he learned that wild pigs were so widely disliked that the state of Tennessee pretty much allowed you to shoot one whenever you came across it. The feral pig is considered a “pest animal,” and as such is not subject to protections afforded, say, a deer, or a person.

But it was in Hollis’s copy of a book called *Our Southern Highlands* that Colin found the most descriptive passage regarding the wild hog: “Anybody can see that when he⁷¹ is not rooting or sleeping, he is studying devilment. He shows remarkable understanding of human speech, especially profane speech, and even an uncanny gift of reading men’s thoughts, whenever those thoughts are directed against the peace and dignity of pigship.” This, clearly, was not an enemy to take lightly.

Not that Colin intended to take any action against the peace and dignity of pigship. In the extremely unlikely event that he even came across a hog, he

figured, he'd allow it to study devilment in peace. Which was how he justified not mentioning the hog hunt to his parents during their nightly phone conversation. He wasn't really going on a *hunt* anyway. He was going for a stroll through the woods. With a gun.

He awoke to his alarm the morning of the hunt at four-thirty. It was the first time since arriving in Gutshot that he'd beaten the rooster to waking. Immediately, he opened his bedroom window, pressed his face up against the screen, and shouted, "COCK-A-DOODLE DOO! HOW DO YOU LIKE IT FROM THE OTHER END, YOU LITTLE FUGGER?"

He brushed his teeth and then got in the shower. He kept the water coldish so as to wake up. Hassan came in to brush his teeth and shouted over the running water, "*Kafir*, I can say it with confidence: Today is a day that no pigs will die. I'm not even allowed to *eat* the motherfuggers;⁷² I'm sure not going to *kill* one."

"Amen," Colin answered.

• • •

They were in the Hearse, with Lindsey and Princess in the backseat, by five.

"Why the dog?" asked Hassan.

"Chase and Fulton like to use her when they're hunting. She doesn't do a lick of good—poor Princess cares more about her curls than tracking pigs—but they enjoy it."

They drove a couple of miles past the store and then turned off onto a gravel road that wound up a small hill through thick foliage. "Hollis hasn't sold *this* land," she complained, "because *everybody* likes it."

The road dead-ended into a long, narrow, one-story wooden house. Two pickup trucks and JATT's Blazer were already parked by the lodge. TOC and JATT, whose jeans were again too tight, sat on the tailgate of one pickup, their legs dangling. Across from them, a middle-aged man was seated in what appeared to be a plastic chair stolen from a third-grade classroom, examining the muzzle of his shotgun. They all wore camouflage pants, long-sleeved camouflage shirts, and bright orange vests.

As the man turned to speak to them, Colin recognized him as Townsend Lyford, one of the people they'd interviewed at the factory. "How are y'all?" he asked as they got out. He shook hands with Colin and Hassan, then hugged Lindsey. "Pretty day for hunting hogs," said Mr. Lyford.

"It's a little early," Colin said, but by then light was just reaching the hillside. The sky was clear, and it did promise to be pretty—if hot.

Katrina peeked her head out from the lodge's front door and said, "Breakfast

is on! Oh, hey cutie.” Hassan winked at her.

“You’re a smooth cat.” Colin grinned.

• • •

Once Colin and Hassan were inside the lodge, SOCT handed them each camouflage outfits complete with ridiculous bright orange vests. “Y’all change in the bathroom,” he said.

And by “bathroom,” SOCT meant “outhouse.” On the upside, the stench of the lodge’s outhouse masked the smell of the camouflage clothes, which reminded Colin of all the worst parts of the Kalman School’s gym. Still, he kicked off his shorts and slipped into the pants, the shirt, and the crossing-guard-orange vest. Before leaving the outhouse, Colin emptied out his pockets. Fortunately, the camo pants had huge cargo pockets—plenty of room for his wallet, his car keys, and the minirecorder, which he’d taken to carrying everywhere.

Once Hassan had changed, too, everyone settled down on one of the homemade benches and Mr. Lyford stood up. He spoke with a thick accent, and with authority. Mr. Lyford really seemed to *enjoy* placing *emphasis* on his words.

“The feral pig is an extremely *dangerous* creature. It is called the poor man’s *grizzly bear*, and *not* for nothing. Now I hunt *without* dogs, choosing instead to *stalk* my prey as the *Indians* did. But Chase and Fulton—they’re dog hunters, and that’s a’ight, too. Either way, though, we must remember this is a dangerous sport.” *Right*, Colin thought. *We have guns and the pigs have snouts. Dangerous, indeed.* “These pigs are *pests*—even the government says so—and they need to be *eradicated*. Now usually I would say you’re gonna have trouble rootin’ out a feral pig in the *daytime*, but it’s been a while since we hunted around here, so I think we have an *excellent* chance. Now I’m going to go out with *Colin* and *Hassan*,” which he pronounced HASS-in, “and we’re going to go down into the flat land and see if we can’t catch a trail. Y’all can split up as you wish. But *be safe* out there, and do not take the *dangers* of the *feral pig* lightly.”

“Can we shoot ’em in the nuts?” asked JATT.

“*No*, you can *not*. A feral boar will charge if shot in the *testes*,” answered Mr. Lyford.

“Jesus, Dad, he’s kidding. We know how to hunt,” said TOC. Before that, Colin didn’t realize TOC and Mr. Lyford were related.

“Well, boy, I reckon I’m nervous sending you out *alone* with a bunch of *yahoos*.”

Then he went over some boring stuff about guns, like which slugs to use in your shotgun and to always keep both barrels loaded. It turned out that Lindsey and TOC were going out together to a tree stand near a baited patch, whatever the hell that meant, and JATT and SOCT were going out in another direction with the adorably non-threatening labradoodle. Katrina would stay in camp, as she refused to hunt on moral grounds. She was, she told Colin as they sat at the cafeteria, a vegetarian. "I think it's right criminal," Katrina said of hog hunting. "Although those pigs *are* sort of horrible. But there wouldn't even *be* any wild hogs except we pen up so many pigs to eat."

"I've been thinking about going vegetarian," Hassan told her, his arm draped around her waist.

"Well just don't get *skinny*," Katrina answered, and then they kissed right in front of Colin, who still couldn't get his head around any of this.

• • •

"All right, boys," Mr. Lyford said, smacking Colin on the back rather too hard. "Ready for yer first *hunt*?"

Colin nodded with some reluctance, waved good-bye to Lindsey and the others, and headed out with Hassan, whose orange vest was not quite big enough to fit comfortably around his chest. They set off down the hill, not following a trail, just bushwacking. "We *begin* by looking for *rootings*," Mr. Lyford explained. "Places where a *hog* has been turning up the soil with his long *snout*." He talked to them like they were nine years old, and Colin was wondering if Mr. Lyford thought they were younger than they actually were when Mr. Lyford turned back to them with a can of chewing tobacco and offered them each a pinch. Colin and Hassan both politely declined.

Over the next hour, they hardly spoke, because "the *feral hog* may shy away from the *human* voice," Mr. Lyford said, as if the feral hog did not shy away from other voices, such as those of Martians. Instead they walked slowly through the woods, their eyes scanning the ground in search of rootings, their guns pointed down into the dirt, with one hand on the stock and the other sweating against the barrel. And then, finally, Hassan saw something.

"Uh, Mr. Lyford," Hassan whispered. He pointed to a patch of dirt that had been dug out haphazardly. Mr. Lyford knelt down and inspected it closely. He sniffed at the air. He dug his fingers into the dirt. "*This*," Mr. Lyford whispered, "is a rooting. And you, HASS-in, have found a *fresh* one. Yes, a hog has been here recently. Now, we *track* it."

Mr. Lyford doubled the pace then, and Hassan struggled to keep up. Mr.

Lyford found another rooting, and then another, and he felt sure he had the trail, so he took off in a kind of race-walk, his arms pumping so that the gun wiggled in the air like he was in color guard. After about five minutes of that, Hassan hustled up to Colin and said, "Please God, no more run-walking," and Colin said, "Seriously," and then they both together said, "Mr. Lyford?"

He turned around and walked several paces back to the boys. "What is it, boys? We're on the *trail* here. We've got a hog almost *in sight*, I can feel it."

"Can we slow down?" Hassan asked. "Or take a break? Or take a break and then slow down?"

Mr. Lyford sighed. "Boys, if you are not *serious* about hunting the *feral pig*, then I can just *leave* you here. We're on the trail of a hog," he whispered urgently. "This is no time for lollygaggin' or dillydallyin'."

"Well," suggested Colin, "maybe you should just leave us behind then. We can sort of protect your flank, in case the *feral pig* doubles back around."

Mr. Lyford looked extremely disappointed. He pursed his lips and shook his head sadly, as if he pitied the poor souls who were unwilling to push their bodies to the limit in search of the feral pig. "Very well, boys. I'll come back and get ya. And when I do, it'll be to get your help carryin' out a *gorgeous* hog." He started to walk off and then stopped and pulled out his can of chewing tobacco. "Here," he whispered, handing it to Colin. "I fear the *hog* will smell the *winter green*."

"Uh, thanks," said Colin, and Mr. Lyford ran off into the distance, weaving through the forest in search of more, fresher rootings.

"Well," Hassan said, squatting down to sit on a rotting fallen tree. "That was fun. Jesus, I didn't think hunting involved so much *walking*. We should have gotten the sweet gig Lindsey has, sitting in a tree and making out and waiting for a pig to walk by."

"Yeah," said Colin, absentmindedly.

"Hey, d'you bring the minirecorder?" asked Hassan.

"Yeah, why?"

"Gimme," he said. Colin pulled it out of his pocket and handed it over.

Hassan pressed record, and then started up with his best *Star Trek* voice. "Captain's log. Stardate 9326.5. Hog hunting is incredibly boring. I think I'll take a nap and trust in my brilliant Vulcan companion to let me know if any *extremely* dangerous *feral hogs* walk by." Hassan handed back the minirecorder and scooted over to lie down beside the fallen tree. Colin watched Hassan close his eyes. "Now *this*," Hassan said, "is *huntin'*."

Colin sat there for a while listening to the wind tease the trees as clouds moved in above them, and he let his mind wander. It went to a predictable place,

and he missed her. She was at camp still, and they didn't let her use a cell phone, at least not last year, but just to be sure he pulled his phone out of his camouflage pants pocket. He got reception, amazingly, but had no missed calls. He thought of calling but decided against it.

He would call when he completed the Theorem, which led him back to it and the seemingly intractable III Anomaly. Eighteen out of nineteen Katherines worked, but this utterly insignificant blip on the Katherinadar came out looking like a jacked-up smiley face every time. He remembered her again, thought back to whether he'd failed to account for some facet of her personality in his calculations. Admittedly, he'd only known her for twelve days, but the whole idea of the Theorem was that you didn't have to know someone intimately in order for it to work. Katherine III. Katherine III. Who would have thought that she, among the least important to him, would prove the Theorem's downfall?

Colin spent the next ninety minutes thinking, without ceasing, about a girl he'd known for less than two weeks. But eventually, even he grew tired. To pass the time, he anagrammed her sprawling name: Katherine Mutsensberger. He'd never anagrammed her before, and he was fascinated to find the word "eighteen" within her. "Me returns eighteen barks; eighteen errs makes burnt." His favorite: "Remark eighteen, snub rest." But that didn't really make sense, because Colin had certainly remarked all nineteen.

Hassan sniffled and his eyes shot open and he looked around. "Fug, are we still hunting? Big Daddy needs some lunch." Hassan stood up, reached into the cargo pockets of his pants, and pulled out two badly smushed sandwiches in Ziploc bags. "Sorry, dude. I fell asleep on lunch." Colin opened the canteen hooked to his belt buckle, and they sat down for turkey sandwiches and water. "How long did I sleep?"

"Almost two hours," Colin said between bites.

"What the fug d'you do?"

"I should have brought a book. I just tried to finish the Theorem. The only problem left is Katherine III."

"Oo vat?" Hassan asked, his mouth full of a too-mayonnaisy sandwich.

"Summer after fourth grade. From Chicago, but she was homeschooled. Katherine Mutsensberger. One brother. Lived in Lincoln Square on Leavitt just south of Lawrence, but I never visited her there because she dumped me on the third-to-last day of smart kid camp in Michigan. She had dirty blond hair that was a little curly and she bit her nails and her favorite song when she was ten was 'Stuck with You' by Huey Lewis and the News and her mother was a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art and when she grew up she wanted to be a veterinarian."

“How long d’you know her?” asked Hassan. His sandwich was finished, and he wiped the remnants of it on his pants.

“Twelve days.”

“Huh. You know what’s funny? I knew that girl.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Mutsensberger. We went to all these lame-o homeschooling events together. Like, bring your homeschooled kid to the park so she learns how to be less nerdy. And, take your homeschooled kid for a homeschool picnic so the Muslim kid can get his ass kicked by all the evangelical Christians.”

“Wait, you know her?”

“Well, I mean, we don’t keep in touch or anything. But yeah. I could pick her out of a lineup.”

“Well, was she quite introverted and a little dorky and she’d had one boyfriend when she was seven who dumped her?”

“Yup,” said Hassan. “Well, I don’t know about the boyfriend. She had a brother. He was a first-rate nutcase, actually. He was into spelling bees. Went to Nationals, I think.”

“Weird. Well, the formula doesn’t work for her.”

“Maybe you’re forgetting something. There can’t be that many goddamned Mutsensbergers in Chicago. Why don’t you call her and ask?” And the answer to that question—“because it literally has never occurred to me”—was so outrageously dumb that Colin just picked up the phone without another word and dialed 773.555.1212.

“What city?”

“Chicago,” he said.

“What listing?”

“Mutsensberger. M U T S E N S B E R G E R.”

“Hold.”

The computer voice recited the number, and Colin pressed 1 to be connected immediately free of charge, and on the third ring, a girl picked up.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi. This is Colin Singleton. Is—is, uh, Katherine there?”

“Speaking. What did you say your name was?”

“Colin Singleton.”

“That’s so familiar,” she said. “Do I know you?”

“When you were in fourth grade, I may have been your boyfriend for about two weeks at a summer program for gifted children.”

“Colin Singleton! Oh yeah! Wow. Of all people . . .”

“Um, this is going to sound weird, but on a scale of one to five, how popular

were you in fourth grade?”

“Uh, what?” she asked.

“And also do you have a brother who was into spelling bees?”

“Um, yeah, I do. Who is this?” she asked, suddenly sounding upset.

“This is Colin Singleton, I swear. I know it sounds weird.”

“I was, I don’t know. I mean, I had a few friends. We were kinda nerdy, I guess.”

“Okay. Thanks, Katherine.”

“Are you, like, writing a book?”

“No, I’m writing a mathematical formula that predicts which of two people will end a romantic relationship and when,” he said.

“Um,” she answered. “Where are you, anyway? Whatever happened to you?”

“What happened, indeed,” he answered, and hung up.

• • •

“Well,” said Hassan. “Boy. She must think that you’re STARK RAVING BONKERS!”

But Colin was lost in thought. If Katherine III was who she claimed to be, and whom he remembered her to be, then what if. What if the formula—was right? He called her again.

“Katherine Mutsensberger,” he said.

“Yes?”

“It’s Colin Singleton again.”

“Oh. Um, hi.”

“This is the last question I’ll ever ask you that sounds completely crazy, but did I by chance break up with you?”

“Um, uh-huh.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. We were at a campfire sing-along and you came over to me in front of all my friends and said you’d never done this before, but you had to break up with me because you just didn’t think it was going to work long-term. That’s what you said. Long-term. God, I was devastated, too. I thought you hung the moon.”

“I’m really sorry. I’m sorry I broke up with you,” Colin said.

She laughed. “Well, we were ten. I’ve dealt with it.”

“Yeah, but still. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

“Well, thank you, Colin Singleton.”

“No problem.”

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“I think that’s it.”

“Okay, well, you take care of yourself,” she said, the way you might say it to a schizophrenic homeless person to whom you’ve just given a dollar.

“You too, Katherine Mutsensberger.”

• • •

Hassan stared at Colin unblinkingly. “Well, dress me up in a tutu, put me on a unicycle, and call me Caroline the Dancing Bear. You’re a fugging Dumper.”

Colin leaned back against the rotten tree, his back arching over it until he was staring at the cloudy sky. Betrayed by his vaunted memory! He had, indeed, remarked eighteen and snubbed the rest. How could he remember everything about her and not remember that *he* dumped *her*? And for that matter, what kind of asshole was he to have dumped a perfectly nice girl like Katherine Mutsensberger? “I feel like I’ve only ever been two things,” he said softly. “I’m a child prodigy, and I’m dumped by Katherines. But now I’m—”

“Neither,” Hassan said. “And be grateful. You’re a Dumper and I’m making out with a ridiculously hot girl. The whole world is turned upside down. I love it. It’s like we’re in a snow globe and God decided he wanted to see a blizzard so he shook us all the fug up.”

Just as almost no true sentence beginning with *I* could be spoken by Lindsey, Colin was watching all the things he’d thought were true about himself, all his *I* sentences, fall away. Suddenly, there was not just one missing piece, but thousands of them.

Colin had to figure out what had gone wrong inside his brain, and fix it. He returned to the central question: how could he have completely forgotten dumping her? Or, almost completely, because Colin *had* experienced a dim flash of recognition when Katherine told him the story of his dumping her in front of her friends, a feeling vaguely like when a word is on the tip of your tongue and then someone says it.

Above him, the interweaving branches seemed to split the sky into a million little pieces. He felt like he had vertigo. The one facility he’d always trusted—memory—was a fraud. And he might have gone on thinking about it for hours, or at least until Mr. Lyford returned, except at that very moment he heard a weird grunting noise and simultaneously felt Hassan’s hand tap his knee.

“Dude,” said Hassan softly. “*Khanzeer*,”⁷³

Colin shot up. Perhaps fifty yards in front of them, a brown-gray creature was pushing his long snout into the ground and snorting like he had a sinus infection.

It looked like a cross between a vampire pig and a black bear—an absolutely massive animal with thick, matted fur and teeth that extended below its mouth.

“*Matha, al-khanazeer la yatakalamoon araby?*”⁷⁴ Colin asked.

“That’s no pig,” answered Hassan in English. “That’s a goddamned monster.” The pig stopped its rooting and looked up at them. “I mean, Wilbur is a fugging pig. Babe is a fugging pig. That thing was birthed from the loins of *Iblis*.”⁷⁵ It was clear now the pig could see them. Colin could see the black in its eyes.

“Stop cursing. The feral hog shows a remarkable understanding of human speech, especially profane speech,” he mumbled, quoting from the book.

“That’s a bunch of bullshit,” Hassan said, and then the pig took two lumbering steps toward them, and Hassan said, “Okay. Or not. Fine. No cursing. Listen, Satan Pig. We’re cool. We don’t want to shoot you. The guns are for show, dude.”

“Stand up so he knows we’re bigger than he is,” Colin said.

“Did you read that in the book?” Hassan asked as he stood.

“No, I read it in a book about grizzly bears.”

“We’re gonna get gored to death by a feral fugging hog and your best strategy is to pretend it’s a grizzly bear?”

Together, they stepped carefully backward, kicking their legs high to get over the fallen tree, which now offered their best protection against the hog. But Satan Pig didn’t seem to think much of their strategy, because right then it took off running at them. For a squat-legged beast that couldn’t have weighed less than four hundred pounds, the thing could run.

“Shoot it,” Colin said, quite calmly.

“I don’t know *how*,” Hassan pointed out.

“Fug,” said Colin. He leveled the gun, planted it tight against his exceedingly sore shoulder, turned off the safety, and took aim at the running pig. It was perhaps fifty feet away. He inhaled deeply and then slowly exhaled. And then he pointed the gun up and to the right, because he just couldn’t bring himself to shoot at the pig. Calmly, he squeezed the trigger, just as Lindsey had taught him. The kick of the gun against his well-bruised shoulder hurt so badly that tears welled up in his eyes, and in the shock of the pain he couldn’t tell what had happened at first. But, amazingly, the pig stopped dead in its tracks, turned ninety degrees, and ran.

“You sure shot the living hell out of that gray thing,” Hassan said.

“What gray thing?” asked Colin. Hassan pointed, and Colin followed the trajectory of his finger to an oak tree about fifteen feet away. Crooked between the trunk and a branch, a sort of gray paper cyclone contained a circular hole about an inch in diameter.

“What is that?” asked Hassan.

“Something’s coming out of it,” Colin said.

It doesn’t take long for a thought to get from your brain to your vocal cords and out of your mouth, but it does take a moment. And in that moment, between when Colin thought *Hornets!* and when he would have said “Hornets,” he felt a searing sting on the side of his neck. “Oh FUG!” shouted Colin, and then Hassan said, “AIEE! AH! AH! FU—FOOT—SHIT—HAND!” They took off running like a couple of spastic marathoners. Colin kicked his legs to the side with each step, like a heel-clicking leprechaun, trying to discourage the blood-thirsty hornets from attacking his legs. Simultaneously, he swatted around his face, which, as it happened, only indicated to the hornets that besides stinging his head and neck, they could also sting his hands. Waving his hands above his head crazily, Hassan ran considerably faster and with more agility than Colin had ever thought possible, weaving around trees and hurdling bushes in a vain attempt to discourage the hornets. They ran downhill, because that was easiest, but the hornets kept their pace, and Colin could hear their buzzing. For minutes, as they ran in random directions, the buzzing continued, Colin always following behind Hassan, because the only thing worse than getting stung to death in south-central Tennessee when your parents don’t even know you’re on a hog hunt is dying *alone*.

“*KAFIR* (breath) I’M (breath) *FADING*.”

“THEY’RE STILL ON ME. GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO,” Colin answered. But just after that, the buzzing stopped. Having chased them for the better part of ten minutes, the hornets began the winding journey back to their decimated nest.

Hassan fell face-first into a brambly bush and then slowly rolled over onto the forest floor. Colin bent over, hands on knees, sucking air. Hassan was hyperventilating. “Real (breath) fat (breath) kid (breath) asthma (breath) attack,” he finally said.

Colin pushed aside his fatigue and rushed up to his best friend. “No. No. Tell me you’re not allergic to bees. Oh, shit.” Colin pulled out his cell phone. He had reception, but what could he tell the 911 operator? “I’m somewhere in the woods. My friend’s trachea is closing. I don’t even have a knife to perform an emergency tracheotomy because stupid Mr. *Lyford* ran off with it into the woods to chase the same goddamned pig that started the whole fugging mess.” He desperately wished Lindsey were there; she could deal with this. She’d have her first-aid kit. But before he could even register the consequences of such thoughts, Hassan said, “I’m not allergic to (breath) bees, *sitzpinkler*. I’m just (breath) out of (breath) breath.”

“Ohhhhh. Thank God.”

“You don’t believe in God.”

“Thank luck and DNA,” Colin corrected himself quickly, and only then, with Hassan not-dying, did Colin begin to feel the stings. There were eight in all, each of them like a little fire burning just inside his skin. Four on his neck, three on his hands, and one on his left earlobe. “How many do you have?” he asked Hassan.

Hassan sat up and looked himself over. His hands were cut up from landing in the briar bush. He touched his stings, each in turn. “Three,” said Hassan.

“Three?! I really took one for the team by staying behind you,” he noted.

“Don’t give me that martyr shit,” said Hassan. “You shot the bees’ nest.”

“Hornets’ nest,” Colin corrected. “They were hornets, not bees. That’s the kind of stuff you learn in college, you know.”

“Dingleberries. Also, not interesting.”⁷⁶ Hassan paused for a moment, then started talking. “God, these stings HURT. You know what I hate? The outdoors. I mean, generally. I don’t like outside. I’m an inside person. I’m all about refrigeration and indoor plumbing and *Judge Judy*.”

Colin laughed as he reached into his left pocket. He pulled out Mr. Lyford’s can of chewing tobacco. He pinched a bit of tobacco, and pressed it against his own earlobe. It felt instantly, if only marginally, better. “It works,” Colin said, surprised. “Remember, Mae Goodey told us about it when we interviewed her.” Hassan said, “Really?” and Colin nodded, and then Hassan took the can of dip. Soon their stings were covered with blobs of wet tobacco dripping brown, wintergreen-flavored juice.

“Now see *that’s* interesting,” Hassan said. “You should focus less on who was prime minister of Canada in 1936⁷⁷ and focus more on shit that makes my life better.”

• • •

Their idea was to walk downhill. They knew the camp was uphill, but Colin hadn’t been paying attention to which way they ran, and while the cloudy sky made it bearable to walk around in long sleeves and an orange vest, he couldn’t navigate by the sun. So they walked downhill, because (a) it was easier, and (b) they knew the gravel road was down there somewhere, and since it was longer than the camp, they figured they had a better chance of finding it.

And maybe they did have a better chance of finding the road than the lodge, but they never found it, either. Instead, they walked through a forest that seemed endless, and their progress was slow, as they had to step through kudzu and over

trees and hop the occasional dribbling creek. “If we just keep walking in one direction,” Colin said, “we’ll find civilization.” Meanwhile, Hassan was singing a song entitled: “We’re on a Trail / a Trail of Tears / There’s Dip on My Chin / and We’re Gonna Die Here.”

Just after 6 P.M., tired and hornet-bitten and sweaty and generally in a poor mood, Colin spotted a house a short walk to their left. “I know that house,” Colin said.

“What, we interviewed someone there?”

“No, it’s one of the houses you can see when you walk to the grave of the Archduke,” Colin stated with great confidence. Colin gathered his last bit of energy and jogged up to the house. The place itself was windowless, weather-beaten, and abandoned. But from the front of the house, Colin could—yes—see the graveyard in the distance. In fact, there seemed to be some movement down there.

Hassan came up behind him and whistled. “*Wallahi*,⁷⁸ *kafir*, you’re lucky we’re unlost, because I was about ten minutes away from killing and eating you.”

They hustled down an easy slope and then fast-walked toward the store, ready to bypass the cemetery. But then Colin caught sight of movement in the graveyard again, turned his head, and stopped dead. Hassan seemed to notice it at precisely the same moment.

“Colin,” said Hassan.

“Yeah,” Colin answered calmly.

“Tell me if I’m mistaken, but isn’t that my girlfriend in the graveyard?”

“You are not mistaken.”

“And she’s straddling some guy.”

“That’s correct,” said Colin.

Hassan pursed his lips and nodded. “And—I just want to make sure we have our facts straight here—she’s naked.”

“She certainly is.”

⁷¹ That is, the hog.

⁷² Eating pork is *Haram* in Islam. It is also forbidden in Judaism, but (a) Colin was only half-Jewish, and (b) he wasn’t religious.

⁷³ Arabic: “Pig”

⁷⁴ Arabic: “What, pigs don’t speak Arabic?”

⁷⁵ Arabic: “Satan.”

⁷⁶ But there is an important difference, and that important difference was manifested in Colin’s throbbing pain. Bees sting people only once, and then die. Hornets, on the other hand, can sting repeatedly. Also, hornets, at least the way Colin figured it, are meaner. Bees just want to make honey. Hornets want to kill you.

⁷⁷ William Lyon Mackenzie King, who had enough names for two people (or four Madonnas) but was only one man.

⁷⁸ Arabic: "I swear to God."

She was facing away from them, her back arched, her butt bobbing in and out of visibility. Colin had never seen actual people having actual sex before. From his angle, it looked a little ridiculous, but he suspected it might appear different if he were in the guy's position.

Hassan laughed silently, and he seemed so amused by the situation that Colin felt okay laughing, too. "This is some fugging snow globe of a day," Hassan said. And then he raced forward about ten paces, cupped his hands over his mouth, and screamed, "I AM BREAKING UP WITH YOU!" Still, though, a goofy grin was on his face. *Hassan takes so little seriously*, Colin thought. As Katrina turned back toward them, her face shocked and scared, her arms crossed over her chest, Hassan turned away.

Hassan looked back at Colin, who finally tore his gaze away from the inarguably quite fetching naked girl before him. "Give her some privacy," Hassan said. And then he laughed again. This time, Colin didn't join in. "You gotta see the humor in it, baby. I'm bug-bit, hornet-stung, bramble-cut, covered in chaw, and wearing camouflage. A feral hog, some hornets, and a prodigy led me through the woods so that I might stumble upon the first girl I ever kissed riding TOC like he's a thoroughbred next to the grave of an Austro-Hungarian Archduke. That," Hassan said to Colin emphatically, "is funny."

"Wait, TOC?" Colin's head swiveled back to the Archduke's obelisk, where he saw—holy shit—TOC, his very self, slithering into some camo pants. "The. Rat. Bastard." For reasons that he didn't understand, Colin felt a pulsing rage, and he took off toward the graveyard. He didn't stop running until he got to the knee-high stone wall, and was staring TOC dead in the eye. And then he didn't quite know what to do.

"Is my dad with you?" TOC asked coolly. Colin shook his head, and TOC sighed. "Thank God," he said. "He'd have my ass in a sling. Have a seat." Colin stepped over the wall and sat down. Katrina was leaning against the obelisk,

dressed now, her hands shaking slightly as she smoked a cigarette. TOC started talking. “You’re not gonna say a word. Because this ain’t none of your business. Now your little Arab friend can have his words with Kat, and that’s fine, and they’ll keep it ’tween themselves. But I don’t reckon you want Lindsey to know anything.”

Colin stared at the Archduke’s obelisk. He was tired and thirsty and sort of needed to pee. “I think I have to tell her,” he said, a trace of the philosophical in his tone. “She’s my friend. And if I were in her position, I’d expect her to tell me. It’s just basic Golden Rule stuff, really.”

TOC stood up and walked over to Colin. He was a sizable presence. “Let me tell you both,” and only then did Colin realize Hassan was standing behind him, “why you aren’t going to say a word. If you do, I will beat your asses so bad, you’ll be the only guys in hell walking with a limp.”

Hassan mumbled, “*Sajill.*”⁷⁹ Colin quietly reached into his cargo pocket and fiddled with the device for a moment, then kept his hand in his pocket so it wouldn’t look suspicious. “I just want to know,” Hassan said to Katrina, “how long this has been going on.”

Katrina put her cigarette out against the Archduke’s obelisk, stood up, and walked over to stand next to TOC. “A long time,” she said. “I mean, we dated when we were sophomores and we’ve been hooking up occasionally ever since. But we came out here and I was going to end it. Honestly. And I’m sorry because I really do like you and I haven’t really liked anyone since him,” she said, glancing up at TOC, “and I wouldn’t have even done it this time except, I don’t know. It was, like a good-bye or something. But I’m really sorry.”

Hassan nodded. “We can still be friends,” he said, and it was the first time Colin had ever heard those words spoken sincerely. “No big whup, really.” Hassan looked at TOC then. “I mean,” Hassan said, “it’s not like we had agreed not to see other people.”

TOC shot back, “Look, she just said it’s over, okay? So that’s it. It’s over. I’m not cheating.”

“Well,” Colin pointed out, “you were cheating five minutes ago. That’s a pretty narrow definition of cheating.”

“Shut up before I knock your goddamned teeth in,” TOC said angrily. Colin glanced down at his muddy shoes. “Now listen,” TOC continued, “they’re all coming back here from Bradford in a little while. So we’re all just gonna sit here like a big happy family, and then when they show up, you’re going to make your retarded jokes and hunch over and look like the shitsucking pussy you are. And the same goes for you, Hass.”

This is what Colin thought in the long silence that followed: *would* he want to

know? *If* he were dating Katherine XIX, and *if* she'd cheated on him, and *if* Lindsey knew, and *if* Lindsey would get physically injured as a result of sharing the information. Then no, he would not want to know. So perhaps the Golden Rule indicated that he *should* stay mum, and the Golden Rule was really Colin's only Rule. It was because of the Golden Rule, actually, that he hated himself for Katherine III: he'd believed that Katherines did unto him as he would never have done unto them.

But there was more to consider than the Golden Rule: there was the small matter of liking Lindsey. That shouldn't factor in to an ethical decision, of course. But it did.

He hadn't quite made up his mind when Lindsey, trailed by SOCT and JATT, came running up with a six-pack of Natural Light beer in each hand. "When'd you get here?" she asked TOC.

"Oh, just a minute ago. Kat picked me up as I was walkin', and then we ran into them," TOC said, his head gesturing toward Colin and Hassan, who were seated together on the stone wall.

"There was some concern that you might be dead," Lindsey said to Hassan matter-of-factly.

"Believe me," Hassan answered, "you weren't the only one concerned." Lindsey leaned in toward Colin then, and he thought for a second she might kiss him on the cheek, and then she said, "Is that *dip*?"

He touched his ear. "It is," he acknowledged.

Lindsey laughed. "It ain't supposed to go in your ear, Colin."

"Hornet sting," Colin said morosely. He felt so horrible for her, cheery and smiling and holding beer she'd brought for her boyfriend. He just wanted to take her to her cave and tell her there, so she wouldn't have to go through it all in the light.

"Hey, by the way, did anyone kill a feral hog?" Hassan asked.

"Nope. Well, not unless you did," SOCT said. And then he laughed. "Me and Chase shot us a squirrel, though. Blew the damned thing to bits. Princess treed it for us."

"We didn't shoot it," JATT corrected. "I shot it."

"Well, whatever. I saw it first."

"They're like an old married couple," explained Lindsey. "Except instead of being in love with each other, they're both in love with Colin." TOC laughed heartily, while the two other boys repeatedly asserted their heterosexuality.

• • •

For a while, they drank. Even Colin stomached down the better part of a beer. Only Hassan abstained. "I'm back on the wagon," he said. By then the sun was sinking fast toward the horizon and the mosquitoes had come out. Colin, already sweaty and bloody, seemed to be their favorite target. Lindsey was cuddled up against TOC, her head nestled between his pec and shoulder, his arm around her waist. Hassan sat next to Katrina, chatting with her in whispers, but they did not touch. Colin was still thinking.

"You're not so talkative today," Lindsey said to Colin eventually. "Stings getting to you?"

"They burn like the fire of ten thousand suns," Colin said, deadpan.

"Pussy," TOC said, showing the grace and eloquence for which he was widely famous.

And maybe it was for the right reasons and maybe it wasn't. But right then, Colin pulled the minirecorder out of his pocket and rewound it. To Lindsey, he said, "I'm really, really sorry." And then he hit play.

... dated when we were sophomores and we've been hooking up occasionally ever since. But we came out here and I was going to end it."

Lindsey bolted upright, staring at Katrina with a gathering malice. TOC, strangely, was frozen. He'd never expected Colin Singleton, noted *sitzpinkler*, to say a word. Colin hit fast-forward, then play again.

... she just said it's over, okay? So that's it. It's over. I'm not cheating."

Lindsey raised her beer, chugging it, and then crumpled the can and dropped it. She stood up and stepped toward TOC, who was still leaning, in a state of apparent calm, against the obelisk. "Baby," he said, "you don't understand. I said I wasn't cheating and I'm *not*."

"Screw you," she said, and then she turned around and walked away. TOC caught her in his arms from behind, and she wrestled to get free of him. "Get off me right now," she shouted, but he held on tight, and then she sounded panicked, screaming, "GET OFF! GET HIM OFF ME."

"Let her go," Colin said softly. And then behind him, he heard JATT. "Yeah, Colin, get off her." Colin turned around, and saw JATT march up to TOC and grab him by the collar. "Calm the hell down," JATT said, and then TOC threw Lindsey to the ground. TOC hit JATT in the face with a right cross, and JATT fell to the ground like a dead man. As JATT lay there, unmoving, Colin wondered at the fact that *JATT* had gone after TOC; Colin had underestimated him. TOC quickly turned around and grabbed Lindsey by the ankle.

"Let her go," Colin said, standing now. "You *paardenlul*."⁸⁰

She was kicking against his grip, but he was persistent, holding her tighter, saying, "Baby, stop. You don't understand."

Hassan looked at Colin. Together, they ran toward TOC, Hassan aiming for a body slam in the midsection and Colin going for a crazed punch to the head. At the last moment, TOC reached one hand out and hit Colin in the jaw so hard that the hornet stings didn't sting anymore. And then with his leg, TOC swept Hassan's feet out from under him. They weren't much for damsel-in-distress saving, Colin and Hassan.

But then again, Lindsey wasn't much for being a damsel in distress. After Colin hit the ground, he opened his eyes and saw Lindsey reach up, grab TOC's nuts, squeeze, and turn. TOC fell to his knees, hunched over, and released Lindsey.

His head scrambled, Colin crawled to the Archduke's obelisk, the only geographical location in the world that wasn't currently spinning. He grabbed hold of the obelisk with both hands and clung to it. Opening his eyes, he saw JATT still facedown. Lindsey and Katrina were kneeling over him.

And then Colin felt angels lifting him by the armpits, pulling him toward their home in the sky, and he felt light and free. He turned to his left, and saw Hassan. He turned to his right, and saw SOCT.

"Hey," said SOCT, "you all right?"

"Yeah," Colin said. "That was nice of your friend to, uh, get hit like that."

"He's a good guy. This is f'ed up, man. We been dealin' with this Colin and Kat crap for two years. I love Colin, but this is ridiculous. Lindsey's good people."

TOC interrupted. He seemed to have recovered. "Stop talking to that little bitch."

"Aw, c'mon, Col. You screwed this one up, bro, not him."

"You're all such goddamned pussies!" TOC shouted, and then Hassan said, "It's three on one," and charged TOC.

And sure, it was three on one. But what a one. Hassan's run was met by a body punch that entered cartoonishly far into his gut. Hassan started to fall but couldn't, because TOC had his hand wrapped around Hass's neck. Colin rushed in then with an overhand right. The punch connected, but (1) Colin forgot to close his fist, so he was slapping not hitting, and (2) instead of slapping TOC, he ended up slapping Hassan flush across the cheek, whereupon Hassan finally succeeded in falling down.

SOCT jumped on TOC's back then, and for a brief moment, it seemed the fight might be a draw. Then TOC grabbed SOCT by one arm and threw him halfway across the graveyard, leaving Colin and TOC standing more or less toe to toe.

Colin began by employing a strategy he'd just invented called the "windmill,"

which involved windmilling his arms around to keep his attacker at bay. The strategy worked brilliantly, for about eight seconds, until TOC caught hold of his arms. And then TOC's square, reddened face was inches from Colin's. "I didn't want to do it, dude," explained TOC with a remarkable calm. "But, you know, you made me."

"Technically," Colin mumbled. "I kept my promise. *I* didn't say anyth—" but his thoughtful explanation was cut off by a fast-coming kick. In the moment before the strike, Colin felt it in his loins—phantom pain—and then TOC's knee came up into Colin's groin so hard that Colin briefly left the ground. *Flying*, he thought. *On the wings of a knee*. And then, before he'd even fallen, Colin vomited.

Which turned out to be a fairly good idea, since TOC ceased to pursue him. Colin fell to the ground, moaning, waves of pain radiating from his middle. It felt as if the Franz Ferdinandian hole in his gut had now torn, and the pain grew and grew from a bullet hole to a canyon until finally Colin himself was the hole. He'd become a wracking, all-over vacuum of pain.

"Oh God," Colin said finally. "Oh God, my balls."

Colin misspoke. In a better state, he would have recognized that it wasn't his *balls* that hurt, but rather his brain. Nerve impulses flew from his testes to his brain, where the brain's pain receptors were triggered, and the brain told Colin to feel pain in his balls, which Colin did, because the body always listens to the brain. Nuts, arms, stomachs—they never hurt. All hurt is brain hurt.

The pain made him dizzy and faint, and he lay on his side, crouched in the fetal position, his eyes closed. His head swam with the nauseating ache, and for a moment he fell asleep. But he had to get up, because he could hear Hassan grunting as he received blow after blow, so Colin crawled to the obelisk, and slowly dragged himself up, his hands walking up the Archduke's grave.

"I'm still here," Colin said feebly, his eyes shut as he held onto the obelisk for balance. "Come and get me." But when he opened his eyes, TOC was gone. Colin could hear the cicadas out in force, humming to a rhythm that matched his still-throbbing balls. Through the gray twilight, Colin saw Lindsey Lee Wells and her red-crossed first-aid kit tending to a seated Hassan, whose camouflage shirt and orange vest were covered with blood. SOCT and JATT were sitting together sharing a cigarette—there was a lump above JATT's eye that literally looked like his forehead was about to birth a chicken egg. Colin got dizzy, and then turned back around, hugging the obelisk. When he opened his eyes again, he realized his glasses were gone, and between the dizziness and his astigmatism, the letters before him started dancing. The Archduke *Franz Ferdinand*. He anagrammed to dull the pain. "Huh," he mumbled after a

moment. “That’s a hell of a coincidence.”

“The *kafir* has awoken,” Hassan noted. Lindsey rushed over to Colin, wiped the last flecks of chaw from his earlobe, and whispered into his ear. “*Mein held*,⁸¹ thanks for defending my honor. So where’d he get ya?”

“In the brain,” Colin said, getting it right this time.

⁷⁹ Arabic: “Record.”

⁸⁰ Dutch. Literally, “horse’s penis.”

⁸¹ German: My hero.

(seventeen)

The next morning, a Monday, was their twenty-second morning in Gutshot, and indubitably the worst. Aside from the residual tenderness in and around his nuts, Colin's entire body was sore from a day spent walking and running and shooting and getting hit. And his head hurt—each time he opened his eyes, beams of feverish, demonic pain shot through his brain. The night before, Paramedic (in Training) Lindsey Lee Wells had diagnosed him with moderate contusions and “sprained balls” after an exhaustive search of medical Web sites. She diagnosed TOC as suffering from “I’m-an-asshole-and-Lindsey’s-never-going-to-speak-to-me-again-itis.”

Keeping his eyes closed as much as possible, Colin stumbled toward the bathroom that morning, where he found Hassan staring at himself in the mirror. Hassan's lower lip was hideously busted—he looked like he was chewing a fat wad of tobacco—and his right eye was very nearly swollen shut.

“How ya doing?” asked Colin. Hassan turned to him and gave Colin the full view of his well-punched face, as if to answer the question.

“Yeah, sure,” Colin said, reaching in to turn on the shower. “But you should see the other guy.”

Hass managed a wan smile. “If I could do it all over again,” he said, his speech slow and vaguely mangled by his massive lower lip, “I'd just let myself be trampled to death by the Satan Pig.”

• • •

As Colin came down the stairs to breakfast, he saw Lindsey sitting at the oak table sipping a glass of orange juice. “I really don't want to talk about it,” Lindsey said, preemptively. “But I do hope your balls are okay.”

“Me too,” said Colin. He'd checked on them during his shower. They felt the same, only tenderer.

Their assignment that day—left in note form by Hollis—was to interview a woman named Mabel Bartrand. “Oh, man,” Lindsey said when Colin read the name to her. “She’s at the other home, the one for when you’re *really* old. I can’t take that today. I can’t—God. Let’s just skip. Let’s just all go back to sleep.”

“I’m for that,” Hassan mumbled through his meaty lips.

“She could probably use the company,” Colin said, trying to use his familiarity with loneliness for the powers of good.

“Lord, you do know how to lay on the guilt,” Lindsey said. “Let’s go.”

• • •

Mabel Bartrand lived in an assisted living facility about fifteen miles outside of Gutshot, one exit south of the Hardee’s. Lindsey knew the way, so she drove the Hearse. On the drive, no one talked. There was too much to discuss. And anyway, Colin’s whole body felt like pure, undiluted crap. But his life had finally calmed down enough to return to the troubling question of Katherine III, and the failure of his memory. His head, however, hurt too much to make any sense of it.

• • •

A male nurse met them at reception and guided them to Mabel’s room. This place was significantly more depressing than Sunset Acres. Here the only sound was the whirring of machines, and the halls were mostly empty of people. A TV blaring the Weather Channel in the common room went unwatched; the doors were mostly closed; the few people seated in the common room looked confused or blank or—worst of all—scared.

“*Ms. Mabel*,” the nurse said singsongily, condescendingly. “You have some visitors.” Colin turned on the minirecorder. He was using the same tape from the day before, taping over TOC’s confession.

“Hello,” Mabel said. She was seated in a leather recliner in what looked like a dorm room, with one twin bed, one chair, a long-ignored wooden desk, and a minifridge. Her thinning, curly white hair was styled into a kind of old lady Jewfro. She hunched forward, and she smelled old, vaguely like formaldehyde. Lindsey leaned forward, her arms around Ms. Mabel, and kissed her cheek. Colin and Hassan introduced themselves, and Ms. Mabel smiled but didn’t speak.

Belatedly, Mabel asked, “Is that Lindsey Wells?”

“Yes’m,” said Lindsey, sitting down next to her.

“Oh, Lindsey darling, I ain’t seen you in so long. It’s been *years*, hasn’t it? Oh, but Lord it’s good to see you.”

“You too, Mabel.”

“I’ve thought about you so much and wished on you visitin’, but you never did. Don’t you look so good and grown-up. No more blue hair for you, uh-uh. How’ve you been, baby?”

“I’ve been good, Mabel. How about yourself?”

“I’m ninety-four! How you think I’m doing?” Mabel laughed, and so did Colin. “What’s your name?” she asked Colin, and he told her.

“Hollis,” she said to Lindsey. “Is that Dr. Dinzanfar’s son-in-law?” Ms. Mabel leaned forward and pointed a finger that would not straighten in Hassan’s direction.

“No, Ms. Mabel. I’m Hollis’s daughter, Lindsey. Dr. Dinzanfar’s daughter, Grace, was my grandma, and Corville Wells was my grandpa. This is Hassan, a friend of mine who wants to talk to you about the old days in Gutshot.”

“Oh, well that’s fine,” Ms. Mabel said. “I get confused sometimes,” she explained.

“That’s okay,” said Lindsey. “It’s awful good to see you.”

“And you, Lindsey. I can’t get over how pretty you look. You right grew into that face, didn’t you?” Lindsey smiled, and now Colin noticed that Lindsey had tears in her eyes.

“Tell us a story about the old days in Gutshot,” Lindsey said, and it became clear to Colin that this was not an occasion to be asking Hollis’s four questions.

“I’ve been thinking on Dr. Dinzanfar. Before he started that tactilery, he owned the General Store. I was just a little thing, knee-high to a bird dog. And he’s only got one eye, you know. Fought in the first War. Well one day, we was at the store and daddy gave me one red penny and I ran up to the counter there and I said, ‘Doctor Dinzanfar, do you have any penny candy?’ And he looked down at me, and he said, ‘I’m sorry, Mabel. We don’t have any penny candy in Gutshot. All we got is *free* candy.’” Mabel closed her eyes as they all let the story sink in a bit. She seemed almost asleep, her breathing slow and rhythmic, but then her eyes snapped open and she said, “Lindsey, I sure missed seeing you. I missed holding this hand.”

And then Lindsey began crying in earnest. “Ms. Mabel, we gotta go, but I’m-a gonna come back later this week and see you again, I promise. I’m s—I’m sorry I haven’t visited in so long.”

“Well that’s fine, sweetie. Don’t you go gettin’ upset about it. Next time you come, show up ’tween twelve-thirty and one and I’ll give you my Jell-O. Sugar free, but it ain’t bad.” Mabel finally let go of Lindsey’s hand, and Lindsey blew

a kiss and left.

Colin and Hassan lingered behind to say good-bye, and when they got into the common room, they found Lindsey sobbing—death-cry-of-a-hyena sobbing. She disappeared into a bathroom, and Colin followed Hassan out the door. Hassan sat down on the curb. “I can’t handle that place,” he said. “We’re never going back in there.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s sad, and not in a funny way,” Hassan said. “It’s not the least bit fugging funny. And it’s really getting to me.”

“Why does everything have to be funny to you?” asked Colin. “So you don’t have to ever really care about anything?”

“Dingleberries, Dr. Freud. I’m actually just going to issue a blanket dingleberries on all attempts to psychoanalyze me.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n Funnypants.”

Lindsey showed up outside then, seeming to be fully recovered. “I’m fine and don’t need to talk about it,” she said, unprompted.

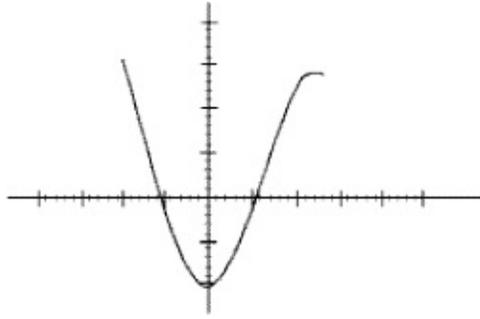
• • •

That night he finished the Theorem. It proved relatively easy, actually, because for the first time in several days, he had no distractions. Lindsey was locked in her room. Hollis was downstairs, so entranced in her work/TV that she never so much as said a word about Hassan’s blue-black eye or the fist-shaped bruise on Colin’s jaw. Hassan was off somewhere, too. A lot of people could lose themselves in the Pink Mansion, and that night, a lot of people did.

It proved almost unfairly easy to finish it—now that he knew about his time as a Dumper, the formula as he had it was very close to accurate. He needed only to tweak a radical to finalize the formula.

$$-D^7x^8 + D^2x^3 - \frac{x^2}{A^3} - Cx^2 - Px + \frac{1}{A} + 13P + \frac{\sin(2x)}{2} \left[1 + (-1)^{H+1} \frac{\left(x + \frac{11\pi}{2}\right)^H}{\left|x + \frac{11\pi}{2}\right|^H} \right]$$

Everyone came out looking correct, which is to say that Katherine Mutsensberger looked like so:



A perfect graph for a fourth-grade love story.

Upon putting down his pencil, he held up his hands, fists clenched tight. Like a marathoner winning a race. Like the hare, coming from behind and screwing up the story by beating the tortoise.

He went looking for Lindsey and Hassan, and eventually found them in the Game Room. “I finished our Theorem,” he told Lindsey, who was seated on the pink felt of the pool table, her brown eyes still puffy. Hassan was ensconced in the green leather couch.

“Really?” asked Lindsey.

“Yeah. It took like eight seconds. I actually almost finished it like two weeks ago; I just didn’t realize it worked.”

“*Kafir*,” said Hassan, “that is such good news that I almost want to get off the couch and shake your hand. But God, it’s comfortable. So now can you use it for, like, anything? Like for any two people?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Are you going to use it to predict the future?”

“Sure,” offered Colin. “Who are you looking to date?”

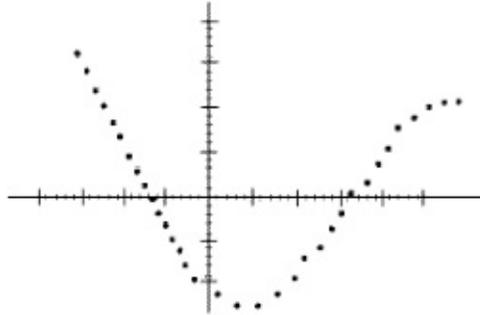
“Uh-uh, dude. I tried it your way with the dating and the girls and the kissing and the drama, and man, I didn’t like it. Plus, my best friend is a walking cautionary tale of what happens to you when romantic relationships don’t involve marriage. Like you always say, *kafir*, everything ends in breakup, divorce, or death. I want to narrow my misery options to divorce or death—that’s all. That said, you could do it for me and Lindsay Lohan. I wouldn’t mind converting her to Islam, if you catch my drift.”

Colin laughed but otherwise ignored the diatribe.

“Do me and Colin,” Lindsey said softly, her eyes staring down at her bare, tan knees. “The other Colin, I mean,” she added.

And so Colin did. He sat down and balanced a book on his knees, then pulled out his notebook and pencil. As he filled in the variables, he said, “Now just so you know, getting cheated on counts as getting dumped. I don’t want you to get pissed off about it; that’s just the way the Theorem works.”

“Fair,” Lindsey said curtly. Colin had played with the Theorem so much that he knew from the numbers what it would look like, but he still went through the motions of plotting each point.



When he showed it to her, she said, “Wait, what’s that?”

“That’s TOC dumping you,” answered Colin.

“So it works,” she said, her voice empty of emotion. “It’s weird—I feel sad, but not about him. All I feel about breaking up is—I’m just relieved.”

“Relief is a Dumper emotion,” Colin noted with some concern.

Lindsey hopped off the pool table and plopped down on the couch beside Colin. “I think I just realized that I don’t actually want to date an asshole I’m not even attracted to. Those are two separate revelations: I don’t want to date assholes, and I’m not actually turned on by big muscles. Although I did cry like a two-year-old in the nursing home, so the relief is possibly temporary.”

Hassan grabbed the notebook from Colin. “It really fugging seems to work.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, although, not to poop on your party, but you proved what I already knew—that guys who play football know how to play the mother-fugging field, and that Katherines dump Colins like Hassans eat Monster Thickburgers: voraciously, passionately, and often.”

“Well, the real test is whether it can *predict* the arc of a relationship,” Colin acknowledged.

“Oh, hey,” Lindsey said, seeming to remember something. “Ask Hassan what he was doing in the Game Room about twenty minutes before you showed up.”

“What were you doing in the Game Room about twenty min—”

“God, don’t take her so literally,” said Hassan. “I was on the Internet.”

“Why were you on the Internet?”

Hassan stood up, smiling through his busted lip. He rubbed the Jew-fro as he walked by, and then paused at the doorway and said, “Me and Thunderstick decided to take our show to college,” Hassan said, and Colin opened his mouth to talk, but Hassan said, “I only registered for two classes in the fall, so don’t

start creaming yourself. I've got to ease my way into it. Don't tell me how fugging happy you are. I know."⁸²

⁸² And sure enough, that September ninth, Hassan would sit down in a class called English Composition at ten in the morning, even though it directly conflicted with his beloved companion, friend, and possible fantasy lover, Judge Judy.

(eighteen)

Colin slept through the rooster that Thursday morning but not through Lindsey jumping onto his bed and saying, “Get up. We’re going to Memphis.”

She gracefully jumped down, her butt landing on the bed, and sang, “Memphis. Memphis. We’re skipping work and going to Memphis. To spy on Hollis and find out why she was filling the swear jar.”

“Mm-hmm,” Colin mumbled as if he were sleepy, but he wasn’t. Her presence made him shoot immediately awake.

• • •

When Colin got downstairs, Hassan was up and dressed and fed. With a few days of healing, his face had returned mostly to normal. He was searching through a mess of papers. “*Kafir*,” he said loudly, “help me find the warehouse’s address. I’m lost in a sea of spreadsheets.”

It took Colin about thirty seconds to find the address of the warehouse in Memphis. He found it at the top of a business letter addressed to Gutshot Textiles, Inc.

Hassan shouted, “MapQuest 2246 Trial Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee 37501,” and Lindsey Lee Wells shouted back, “Awesome! Good work, Hassan!”

“Well, technically, it was my work,” Colin noted.

“Let me take the credit. I’ve had a tough week.” Hassan said as he collapsed, dramatically, on the couch. “Hey, how do you like that, Singleton? You’re the only nonrecent Dumpee in this house.”

This was true. But Hassan seemed to get over Katrina immediately, and Lindsey had just burst into Colin’s room in song, so he still felt he could lay claim to the Household’s Most Devastated Dumpee, even if he had to admit that he didn’t exactly want K-19 back anymore. He wanted her to call; he wanted her to miss him; but as it turned out, he was okay. He’d never found single life so

interesting before.

• • •

Hassan called driving and Lindsey called shotgun, so even though it was his car, Colin was relegated to the backseat, where he curled up against the window and read J. D. Salinger's *Seymour: An Introduction*. He finished it just as the Memphis skyline came into view. It was no Chicago, but Colin had missed skyscrapers.

They drove through downtown and then got off the interstate in a part of the city that seemed to be comprised entirely of low-lying buildings with few windows and even fewer signs informing visitors of their function. A few blocks from the exit, Lindsey motioned to one, and Hassan pulled into a four-car parking lot, which was empty.

"You're sure this is it?"

"It's the address you found," Lindsey answered.

They walked into a small office with a receptionist's desk, which contained no receptionist, so then they left and made their way around the side of the warehouse.

It was a hot day but windy enough to feel mild. Colin heard a rumbling, looked up, and saw a bulldozer out in a dirt field behind the warehouse. The only two guys in sight were the guy driving the bulldozer and the fellow behind him, who was driving a forklift. The forklift contained three massive cardboard boxes. Colin frowned.

"D'you see Hollis anywhere?" Lindsey whispered.

"No."

"Go ask those guys if they've ever heard of Gutshot Textiles," Lindsey said. Colin didn't particularly enjoy talking to strangers driving forklifts, but he silently started to walk out into the field.

The bulldozer hauled up a final mound of dirt and then pattered away to make room for the forklift. And as it approached the hole, Colin did too. He was spitting distance⁸³ from the hole when the forklift came to a stop and the guy came around, reached up, and toppled the first box into the ground. It landed with a thud. Colin kept walking.

"How you?" asked the man, a short black guy with white hair at his temples.

"Okay," said Colin. "Do you work for Gutshot Textiles?"

"Yup."

"Whatcha throwing in the hole?"

"Don't know that it's any of your business, on account of how you don't own

the hole.”

Colin didn't really have a response to that—it *wasn't* his hole. The wind picked up then, and the dry dirt whipped up from the ground and passed over them in a cloud. Colin turned 180 degrees to put his back to the dust, and then he saw Hassan and Lindsey walking briskly toward him. Colin heard the crash of another box, but he didn't want to turn around. He didn't want that dust in his eyes.

But then he did turn, because it wasn't only dust flying. The second box had cracked open, and thousands of finely braided tampon strings were whipping past him, and past Hassan and Lindsey—blowing around and over them. And he looked up and watched the strings rush by as he became immersed in a cloud of them. They looked like garfish or brilliant white light. Colin thought of Einstein. A certifiable genius (who was definitely never a prodigy), Einstein had figured out that light can act, in a seeming paradox, both as a discreet particle and as a wave. Colin had never understood this before, but now thousands of strings were fluttering over and around and past him, and they were both tiny broken beams of light and endless, undulating waves.

He reached up to grab one and came down with several, and they kept coming, washing over him, floating all around him. Never have tampon strings seemed so beautiful as they rolled up and down with the wind, landing on the ground and then twirling and floating up again, falling and rising and falling and rising.

“Shit,” said the man. “Ain't that pretty, though?”

“It sure is,” said Lindsey, suddenly beside Colin, the back of her hand touching the back of his. A few straggling strings were still blowing up from the box, but most of the army of unleashed tampon strings were fading into the distance.

“You look just like your momma,” the man said to her.

“I wish you wouldn't say that,” said Lindsey. “Who are you, by the way?”

“I'm Roy,” he said. “I'm the director of operations for Gutshot Textiles. Your mom'll be here soon. Best let her talk to you. Y'all come in with me and get a drink.” They'd wanted to *spy* on Hollis, not beat her to the warehouse, but Colin figured the element of secrecy was now more or less totally lost.

Roy pushed the last box into the hole, and that one held together. Then he reached his thumb and finger into his mouth, issued a piercing whistle, and motioned to the bulldozer, which lumbered to life.

They walked back to the unair-conditioned warehouse. Roy told them to sit tight, and then returned to the field.

“She's gone nuts,” Lindsey said. “Her 'Director of Operations' is some guy

I've never seen and she's telling him to bury our damned product out behind the warehouse? She's bonkers. What does she want, to run the town into the ground?"

"I don't think so," said Colin. "I mean, I do think she's bonkers. But I don't think she wants to run the—"

"Baby," Colin heard from behind him, and he wheeled around and saw Hollis Wells in her trademark Thursday pink pantsuit. "What are you *doing* here?" Hollis asked, not sounding very angry.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Hollis? Have you gone nuts? Who the hell is Roy? And why are you *burying* everything?"

"Lindsey, baby, the company ain't doing so well."

"Jesus, Hollis, do you stay up all night every night trying to figure out how to ruin my life? Sell the land, put the factory out of business, and then the town will die and then I'll for sure have to leave?"

Hollis scrunched her face up. "What? Lindsey Lee Wells, no. No! There's no one to *buy* them, Lindsey. We have one client—StaSure, and they buy a quarter of what we can produce. We've lost everything else to companies overseas. Everything."

"Wait, what?" Lindsey asked quietly, although Colin figured she'd heard.

"They stacked up in the warehouse. Up and up and up. And it's just gotten worse and worse, until it came to this."

And then Lindsey understood. "You don't want to fire anyone."

"That's right, baby. If we cut production down to what we were selling, we'd lose most our people. It'd kill Gutshot."

"Wait, then why the heck did you hire *them* to do some little made-up job?" Lindsey asked, nodding toward Colin and Hassan. "If we're so broke, I mean."

"It's not made up. A generation from now there might not be a factory and I want your kids and their kids to know what it was like, what *we* were like. And I liked them. I thought they'd be good for you. The world ain't gonna stay like you imagine it, sweetheart."

Lindsey took a step toward her mother. "Now I know why you work at home," she said. "So no one will know what's going on. No one knows?"

"Just Roy," said Hollis. "And you can't tell anyone. We can go on like this for at least five more years, so that's what we're gonna do," Hollis said. "And between now and then I'm gonna work like hell to find new ways of making money."

Lindsey put her arms around her mom's waist and pressed her face against her chest. "Five years is a long time, Mom," she said.

"It is and it isn't," Hollis answered, stroking Lindsey's hair. "It is and it isn't."

But it's not your fight; it's mine. I'm sorry, sweetie. I know I've been busier than a mom ought to be."

And this, unlike TOC's cheating, was a secret best kept, Colin thought. People don't like to know that three quarters of their tampon strings are being buried, or that their paychecks have less to do with their company's profitability than its owner's compassion.

• • •

Hollis and Lindsey ended up riding home together, leaving Colin and Hassan alone in the Hearse. They weren't five miles outside of Memphis when Hassan said, "I had a, um, blinding light spiritual awakening."

Colin glanced at him. "Huh?"

"Watch the road, *kafir*. It started a few nights ago, actually, so I guess it wasn't that dramatic—at the old folks' home, when you said I was Mr. Funnypants because I wanted to avoid getting hurt."

"No doubt about it," Colin said.

"Yeah, well, that's bullshit, and I knew it was bullshit, but then I started wondering exactly why I am Mr. Funnypants, and I didn't have a very good answer. But then, back there, I started thinking about what Hollis is doing. I mean, she's giving up all her time and her money so people can keep jobs. She's *doing* something."

"Okay . . ." said Colin, not getting it.

"And I'm a not-doer. Like, I'm lazy, but I'm also good at not-doing things I'm not supposed to do. I never drank or did drugs or hooked up with girls or beat people up or stole or anything. I was always good at that, although not so much this particular summer. But then doing all that stuff here felt weird and wrong, so now I'm back to happily not-doing. But I've never been a *doer*. I never *did* anything that helped anybody. Even the religious things that involve doing, I don't do. I don't do *zakat*.⁸⁴ I don't do Ramadan. I'm a total non-doer. I'm just sucking food and water and money out of the world, and all I'm giving back is, 'Hey, I'm really good at not-doing. Look at all the bad things I'm not doing! Now I'm going to tell you some jokes!'"

Colin glanced over and saw Hassan sipping Mountain Dew. Feeling that he should say something, Colin said, "That's a good spiritual revelation."

"I'm not done yet, fugger. I was just drinking. So but anyway, being funny is a way of not-doing. Sit around and make jokes and be Mr. Funnypants and just make fun of everyone else's attempts to do something. Make fun of you when you get back up and try to love yourself another Katherine. Or make fun of

Hollis for falling asleep covered in her work every night. Or get on your case for shooting at the hornets' nest, when I didn't shoot at all. So that's it. I'm going to start doing." Hassan finished his can of Mountain Dew, crumpled it, and dropped it beneath his feet. "See, I just did something. Usually," he said, "I would have thrown that shit in the backseat, where I wouldn't have to look at it and you'd have to clean it up the next time you had a date with a Katherine. But I'm leaving it here, so I remember to pick it up when we get to the Pink Mansion. God, someone should give me a Congressional Medal of Honor for Doing."

Colin laughed. "You're still funny," Colin said. "And you have been doing stuff. You registered for college."

"Yeah, I'm getting there. Although—if I'm going to be an all-out, full-on doer," Hassan noted, faux morose, "I should probably register for *three* classes. It's a hard life, *kafir*."

⁸³ The world record for watermelon seed spitting is held by Jim Dietz, who in 1978 spit a watermelon seed 68 feet, 11 inches. Colin was closer to the hole than that for sure.

⁸⁴ Giving to the poor, one of the pillars of Islamic faith.

(nineteen)

Lindsey and Hollis beat them home, on account of how Colin and Hassan had to stop at the Hardee's for a Monster Thickburger. As they stood in the Pink Mansion's living room, Hollis said, "Lindsey went to spend the night at her friend Janet's. She was pretty broken up on the car ride home. It's about the boy, I guess."

Hassan nodded, and sat down on the sectional couch with her. Colin's brain started working. He had to find an unsuspecting way out of the Pink Mansion as soon as possible, he realized.

"Can I do anything to help you?" asked Hassan, and Hollis brightened and said, "Sure. Sure. You can sit here with me and brainstorm—all night, if you've got the time." And Hassan said, "Cool."

Colin sort of half-coughed, and started speaking rapidly. "I may go out for a while. I think I'm going to go camping. I'll probably *sitzpinkler* out and sleep in the car, but still—I'm gonna give it a try."

"What?" asked Hassan, incredulous.

"Camping," Colin said.

"With the pigs and the hornets and the TOCs and the whatnot?"

"Yes, camping," said Colin, and then he tried to give Hassan an extremely meaningful look.

After staring back quizzically for a moment, Hassan's eyes shot open, and he said, "Well, I'm not going with you. As we've learned, I'm an inside cat."

"Keep your phone on," Hollis said. "Do you have a tent?"

"No, but it's pretty out and I'll just take a sleeping bag if that's all right."

And then before Hollis could further object, he climbed the stairs two at a time, grabbed his supplies, and headed out.

• • •

It was early evening—the fields receding into a pink invisibility as they rose back into the horizon. Colin felt his heart slamming in his chest. He wondered if she even wanted to see him. He'd taken "sleeping over at Janet's" as a hint, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe she really *was* sleeping at Janet's, whoever that was—which would mean a lot of hiking for naught.

After five minutes of driving, he reached the fenced-in field that had once been home to Hobbit the horse. He climbed over the tri-logged fence and jogged across the field. Colin, of course, did not believe in running when walking would suffice—but here and now, walking would not. He slowed down, however, as he made his way up the hill, the flashlight a thin and shaky beam of yellow light against the darkening landscape. He kept it directly before him as he picked through bushes and vines and trees, the thick rotting floor of the forest crunching beneath his feet, reminding him of where we all go. To seed, to ground. And even then he couldn't help but anagram. To ground—Run, Godot; Donor Gut. And the magic through which "to ground" can become "donor gut," combined with his newfound feeling that he had at some recent point *received* a donor gut, kept his pace quick. Even as the darkness became so complete that trees and rocks became not objects but mere shadows, he climbed, until finally he reached the stone outcropping. He walked along the rock, his flashlight scanning up and down, until the light passed over the crack. He leaned his head in and said, "Lindsey?"

"Christ, I thought you were a bear."

"Quite the opposite. I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I'd drop by," he said. He heard her laugh echo through the cave. "But I don't want to impose."

"Come on in," she said, and he squeezed through the jagged crack and shuffled sideways until he reached the room. She turned on her flashlight; they were blinding each other. "I thought you might come," she said.

"Well you told your mom you were sleeping at Janet's."

"Yeah," she said. "It was kind of a code."

Lindsey pointed the light next to her, and then drew a line back to Colin, like she was bringing an airplane into the gate. He walked over, and she arranged a couple of pillows into a chair, and he sat beside her.

"Out, damn light," she said, and it was dark again.

• • •

"The most upsetting part of it is that I'm not even upset. About Colin, I mean. Because I—in the end I just didn't care. About him, about his liking me, about his screwing Katrina. I just—don't care. Hey, are you there?"

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here. Hi.”

“Oh, hi.”

“So go on.”

“Right. So, I don’t know. It was just so easy to dismiss. I keep thinking I’m going to get upset, but it’s been three days, and I just don’t even think about him. Remember when I told you that unlike me, he was *real*? I don’t think he is, actually. I think he’s just boring. I’m so pissed off about it, because—I mean, I wasted so much of my life with him and then he *cheats* on me and I’m not even particularly, like, *depressed* about it?”

“I would love to be like that.”

“Yeah, except you wouldn’t, I don’t think. People are *supposed* to care. It’s good that people mean something to you, that you miss people when they’re gone. I don’t miss Colin at all. I mean, literally. I only ever liked the *idea* of being his girlfriend—and that is just such a goddamned waste! That’s what I realized—*that’s* what I cried about the whole way home. Here’s Hollis, really doing something for people. I mean, she works all the goddamned time and now I know it’s not for herself; it’s for all these fugging people in Sunset Acres who get a pension that pays for their diapers. And it’s for everybody at the factory.”

“ . . . ”

“I used to be an okay person, you know. But now I. Never. Do. Anything. For anybody. Except retards I don’t even give a shit about.”

“But people still like you. All the oldsters, everybody at the factory . . . ”

“Right. Yeah. But they like me as they remember me, not as I am now. I mean, honestly, Colin, I’m the world’s most self-centered person.”

“ . . . ”

“Are you there?”

“It just occurred to me that in point of fact what you just said can’t be true because *I* am the world’s most self-centered person.”

“Huh?”

“Or maybe we’re tied. Because I’m the same, right? What did I ever do for anyone?”

“Didn’t you stay behind Hassan and let, like, a thousand hornets sting you?”

“Oh. Yeah. There was that. Okay, you’re the world’s most self-centered person after all. But I’m close!”

“Come here.”

“I am here.”

“More here.”

“Okay. There?”

“Yes. Better.”

“So what do you do about it? How do you fix it?”

“That’s what I was thinking about before you came. I was thinking about your mattering business. I feel like, like, how you matter is defined by the things that matter to you. You matter as much as the things that matter to you do. And I got so backwards, trying to make myself matter to him. All this time, there were real things to care about: real, good people who care about me, and this place. It’s so easy to get stuck. You just get caught in being something, being special or cool or whatever, to the point where you don’t even know why you need it; you just think you do.”

“You don’t even know why you need to be world-famous; you just think you do.”

“Yeah. Exactly. We’re in the same boat, Colin Singleton. But it didn’t really fix the problem, getting popular.”

“I don’t think you can ever fill the empty space with the thing you lost. Like getting TOC to date you doesn’t fix the Alpwo event. I don’t think your missing pieces ever fit inside you again once they go missing. Like Katherine. That’s what I realized: if I did get her back somehow, she wouldn’t fill the hole that losing her created.”

“Maybe no girl can fill it.”

“Right. Being a world-famous Theorem-creator wouldn’t, either. That’s what I’ve been thinking, that maybe life is not about accomplishing some bullshit markers. Wait, what’s funny?”

“Nothing it’s just, like—I was thinking that your realization is like if a heroin addict suddenly said, ‘You know, maybe instead of always doing *more* heroin, I should, like, *not* do heroin.’”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“I think I know who’s buried in the Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s tomb, and I don’t think it’s the Archduke.”

“I knew you’d figure it out! Yeah, I already know. My great-grandfather.”

“You knew?! Fred N. Dinzanfar, that anagramming bastard.”

“All the old-timers here know. He insisted on it in his will, supposedly. But then a couple years ago, Hollis had us put up the sign and start giving tours—now I realize it was probably for the money.”

“It’s funny, what people will do to be remembered.”

“Well, or to be forgotten, because someday no one will know who’s really buried there. Already a lot of kids at school and stuff think the Archduke is really buried here, and I like that. I like knowing one story and having everyone else know another. That’s why those tapes we made are going to be so great one day, because they’ll tell stories that time has swallowed up or distorted or whatever.”

“Where’d your hand go?”

“It’s sweaty.”

“I don’t mi—oh hi.”

“Hi.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“Did I tell you I dumped one of the Katherines?”

“You what? No.”

“I did, apparently. Katherine the Third. I just completely misremembered it. I mean, I always assumed that all the things I *did* remember were *true*.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Well, but it’s not as good a story if you dumped her. That’s how I remember things, anyway. I remember stories. I connect the dots and then out of that comes a story. And the dots that don’t fit into the story just slide away, maybe. Like when you spot a constellation. You look up and you don’t see all the stars. All the stars just look like the big fugging random mess that they are. But you want to see shapes; you want to see stories, so you pick them out of the sky. Hassan told me once you think like that, too—that you see connections everywhere—so you’re a natural born storyteller, it turns out.”

“I never thought about it like that. I—huh. It makes sense.”

“So tell me the story.”

“What? The whole thing?”

“Yeah. Romance, adventure, morals, everything.”

The Beginning, and the Middle, and the End

“Katherine I was the daughter of my tutor Krazy Keith, and she asked me to be her boyfriend one night at my house, and I said yes, and then about two minutes and thirty seconds later she dumped me, which seemed funny at the time, but now, in retrospect, it’s possible that those two minutes and thirty seconds were among the most significant time periods of my life.

“K-2 was a slightly pudgy eight-year-old from school, and she showed up at my house one day and said there was a dead rat in the alley and, being eight, I ran outside to see the dead rat, but instead I found only her best friend Amy, and Amy said, ‘Katherine likes you and will you be her boyfriend?’ and I said yes, and then eight days later Amy showed up at my door again to say that Katherine didn’t like me anymore and wouldn’t be going with me from there on out.

“Katherine III was a perfectly charming little brunette whom I met my first summer at smart-kid camp, which would in time come to be *the* place for child prodigies to pick up chicks, and since it makes a better story, I choose to remember that she dumped me one morning on the archery course after this math prodigy named Jerome ran in front of her bow and fell to the ground, claiming he’d been shot by Cupid’s arrow.

“Katherine IV, aka Katherine the Red, was a mousy redhead with red-plastic rimmed glasses whom I met in Suzuki violin lessons and she played beautifully and I played hardly at all because I could never be bothered to practice and so after four days she dumped me for a piano prodigy named Robert Vaughan who ended up playing a solo concert at Carnegie Hall when he was eleven, so I guess she made the right call there.

“In fifth grade, I went out with K-5, widely reputed to be the nastiest girl in school because she always seemed to be the one who started lice outbreaks, and she kissed me on the lips out of nowhere during recess one day while I was trying to read *Huck Finn* in the sandbox, and that was my first kiss, and later that day she dumped me because boys were gross.

“Then after a six-month dry spell, I met Katherine VI during my third year at smart-kid summer camp, and we went together for a record seventeen days and she was excellent at both pottery and pull-ups, two fields of endeavor at which I have never excelled, and although between us we could have made an unstoppable force of intelligence and upper-body strength and coffee mug-making, she dumped me anyway.

“And then came middle school and the severe unpopularity commenced in

earnest, but the nice thing about being on the near end of the cool curve is that periodically people will take pity on you, such as sixth grade's Katherine the Kind, a sweetheart who wore a frequently snapped training bra and whom everyone called pizza face due to an acne problem that wasn't even that bad, and who eventually broke up with me not because she realized I was damaging what minuscule social standing she had but because she felt that our month-long relationship had hurt my academic pursuits, which she believed to be very important.

"The Eighth wasn't quite so sweet, and maybe I should have known it since her name, Katherine Barker, anagrams into Heart Breaker, Ink, like she's a veritable CEO of Dumping, but anyway she asked me out on a date and then I said yes and then she called me a freak and said I didn't have any pubes and that she would never seriously go out with me—all of which, to be fair, was true.

"K-9 was in sixth grade when I was in seventh, and she was by far the best-looking Katherine to date with her cute chin and the dimples in her cheeks, and her skin perennially tan, not unlike you, and she thought that dating an older man might be good for her social status, but she was wrong.

"Katherine X—and yes by then I had realized certainly that this was an awfully odd statistical anomaly, but I wasn't actively pursuing Katherines so much as I was actively pursuing girlfriends—was a smart-kid-summer-camp conquer, and I won her heart by, you guessed it, running in front of her bow on the archery course and claiming I'd been shot by Cupid's arrow, and she was the first girl I ever French-kissed, and I didn't know what to do so I sort of kept darting my tongue out from behind closed lips like I was a snake, and it didn't take very much of that for her to want to be just friends.

"K-11 wasn't so much a dating thing as a going-to-the-movies-once-and-holding-hands-and-then-me-calling-and-her-mother-saying-she-wasn't-home-and-then-her-never-calling-me-back thing, but I'd argue it counts, due to hand-holding and also due to the fact that she called me a genius.

"At the start of the second semester of ninth grade, a new girl showed up from New York and she was as rich as they come, but she hated being rich and loved *The Catcher in the Rye*, and she said I reminded her of Holden Caulfield, presumably because we were both self-absorbed losers, and she liked me because I knew a lot of languages and had read a lot of books, and then she broke up with me after twenty-five days because she wanted a boyfriend who didn't spend so much time reading and learning languages.

"By then I had met Hassan, and for about ten years, I'd had an obsessive crush on this brunette with blue eyes from school whom I'd always called Katherine the Best and Hassan played like Cyrano and told me exactly how to woo her

because as we know from Katrina, Hassan is actually quite good at that stuff, and it worked and I loved her and she loved me and it lasted for three months, until November of tenth grade, when she finally broke up with me because she said, and I am quoting directly here, that I was both ‘too smart and too dumb’ for her, which marked the beginning of Katherines having ridiculous, idiotic, and frequently oxymoronic reasons for breaking up with me.

“A pattern that continued with the always-clad-in-black Katherine XIV, who I met that spring when she came up to me at a coffee shop and asked if I was reading Camus, which I was, and I said I was, and then she asked if I had ever read Kierkegaard, and I said I had because I had, and then by the time we left the coffee shop we were holding hands and her phone number was in my brand-new cell phone, and she liked to take me for walks on the lakeshore, where we’d watch the waves crashing against the rocks on the shoreline, and she said there was only one metaphor, and that the metaphor was water beating against rocks—because, she said, both the water and the rocks ended up worse off in the bargain, and then when she dumped me in the same coffee shop where we’d met three months before, she said she was the water and I was the rocks and we were just going to keep going at each other till there was nothing left of either of us—and when I pointed out that, really, water doesn’t suffer any negative effects whatsoever from slowly eroding the rocks on the lakeshore, she allowed as to how that was true but dumped me anyway.

“And then that summer at camp I met K-15, who had that kind of puppy-dog face with the big brown eyes and drooping eyelids that just sort of made you want to take care of her, only she didn’t want me to take care of her, because she was a very empowered feminist who liked me because she thought I was the great mind of my generation, but then she decided I would never be—and again I’m quoting—‘an artist,’ which was apparently cause for dismissal even though I had never claimed to be an artist—and in fact if you have listened closely you have already heard me freely admit that I suck at pottery.

“And then after a horrendous dry spell, I met Katherine XVI on the roof deck of a hotel in Newark, New Jersey, during an Academic Decathlon tournament in October of my junior year, and we had about as wild and torrid an affair as you can possibly have over the course of fourteen hours at an Academic Decathlon tournament, which is to say that at one point we had to kick her three roommates out of her hotel room so we could make out properly, but then even after I emerged from the tournament with nine gold medals—I sucked at Speech—she dumped me on account of how she had a boyfriend back home in Kansas and she didn’t want to dump *him*, so I was the next logical person to dump.

“Katherine XVII I met—I’m not going to lie about it—on the Internet the next

January, and she had a pierced nose with a ring in it and had this immensely impressive vocabulary with which she was able to talk about indie rock—one of the words she used that I didn't initially know the definition of was, in fact, 'indie'—and it was fun to listen to her talk about music and one time I helped her dye her hair, but then she broke up with me after three weeks because I was sort of 'emo nerd' and she was more looking for 'emo core.'

“While I generally don't like to use the word 'heart' unless I'm referring to the blood-pumping, beat-beat-beating organ, there's no question that Katherine XVIII broke my heart, because I loved her immensely from the very moment I saw her at a concert Hassan made me attend during Spring Break, and she was this short fiery woman who hated being called a girl, and she liked me and at first it seemed she shared my massive sense of insecurity, and so I just built up my hopes ridiculously and found myself writing her these extravagantly long and painfully philosophical e-mails, and then she dumped me over e-mail after only two actual dates and four actual kisses, whereupon I found myself writing her these extravagantly long and painfully pathetic e-mails.

“And just two weeks after that, Katherine I showed up on my doorstep and soon enough she became K-19, and she was a nice girl with a good heart who liked helping people, and none of them ever lit my heart—God, I can't stop it with that word now—on fire like she did, but I just needed her so much and it never felt like enough and she wasn't consistent and her inconsistency and my insecurity were this horrible match for each other, but I still loved her, because all of me was wrapped up in her, because I'd put all my eggs in someone else's basket, and in the end, after 343 days, I was left with an empty basket and this gnawing endless hole in my gut, but then now I find myself deciding to remember her as a good person with whom I had some good times until we, both of us, got ourselves into an ineradicably bad situation.

“And the moral of the story is that you don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened. And the second moral of the story, if a story can have multiple morals, is that Dumpers are not inherently worse than Dumpees—breaking up isn't something that gets done *to* you; it's something that happens *with* you.”

• • •

“And the other moral of the story is that you, Smartypants, just told an *amazing* story, proving that given enough time, and enough coaching, and enough hearing stories from current and former associates of Gutshot Textiles, anyone—*anyone*—can learn to tell a damned good story.”

“Something about telling that story made my gut grow back together.”
“What?”
“Oh, nothing. Thinking out loud.”
“That’s who you really like. The people you can think out loud in front of.”
“The people who’ve been in your secret hiding places.”
“The people you bite your thumb in front of.”
“Hi.”
“Hi.”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“Wow. My first Lindsey.”
“My second Colin.”
“That was fun. Let’s try it again.”
“Sold.”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”
“ . . . ”

• • •

They left the cave together very late that night, and drove home separately, Colin in the Hearse and Lindsey in the pink pickup. They kissed once more in the driveway—that kiss as good as her smile hinted it would be—and then snuck into the house for a few hours of sleep.

(epilogue, or the lindsey lee wells chapter)

Colin woke up, exhausted, to the rooster, and rolled around in bed for a solid hour before making his way downstairs. Hassan was already sitting at the oak table with a collection of papers in front of him. Colin noticed that Hollis was not asleep on the couch; maybe she actually had a bedroom somewhere.

“Profit/Loss Margins,” Hassan explained. “It’s actually really interesting stuff. Hollis explained it to me last night. So, d’you hook up with her or what?”

Colin smiled.

Hassan got up, grinning goofily, and smacked Colin on the back gleefully. “You’re such a vulture, Singleton. You just circle, baby. You circle, and you just slowly fly lower and lower, always circling, waiting for the moment when you can just land on the carcass of a relationship and fugging feast. It’s a beautiful thing to watch—particularly this time, because I like the girl.”

“Let’s go out to breakfast,” said Colin. “Hardee’s?”

“Hardee’s,” agreed Hassan excitedly. “Linds, get up we’re going to Hardee’s!”

“Gotta go visit Mabel this morning,” Lindsey called back. “Eat seven Monster Thickburgers for me, though.”

“Will do!” Hassan promised.

“So listen. When I got home last night, I plugged Lindsey and me into the formula,” Colin said. “She dumps me. The curve was longer than K-1 but shorter than K-4. That means she’s going to dump me within four days.”

“Could happen. It’s a crazy fugging snow globe of a world.”

• • •

Three days later, the day the Theorem indicated Lindsey and Colin would not survive together, Colin woke up to the rooster and rolled over groggily only to find a piece of notebook paper against his cheek. It was folded in the shape of an

envelope.

And, for once, Colin saw it coming. As he carefully unfolded the paper, he knew that the Theorem's prophecy had been fulfilled. And yet, knowing it was going to happen made it no less horrible. *Why? It's been so amazing. The best first four days ever. Am I crazy? I must be crazy.* As he opened the note, he was already debating whether to leave Gutshot immediately.

Colin,

I hate to fulfill the Theorem, but I don't think we should be involved romantically. The problem is that I am secretly in love with Hassan. I can't help myself. I hold your bony shoulder blades in my hands and think of his fleshy back. I kiss your stomach and I think of his awe-inspiring gut. I like you, Colin. I really do. But—I'm sorry. It's just not going to work. I hope we can still be friends.

Sincerely,

Lindsey Lee Wells

P.S. Just kidding.

Colin wanted to be all-the-way happy, he really did—because ever since he saw the steepness of the curve with Lindsey, he'd been hoping that it'd be wrong. But as he sat there on the bed, the note in his still-shaky hands, he couldn't help but feel that he would never be a genius. For as much as he believed Lindsey that what matters to you defines your mattering, he still wanted the Theorem to work, still wanted to be as special as everyone had always told him he was.

• • •

The next day, Colin was feverishly trying to fix the Theorem while Hassan and Lindsey played Hold 'Em poker for pennies in the Pink Mansion's screened-in porch. A ceiling fan blew the warm air around without really cooling it. Colin was half paying attention to the game while scribbling graphs, trying to make the Theorem account for the fact that Lindsey Lee Wells was, quite clearly, still his girlfriend. And then poker finally clarified the Theorem's unfixable flaw.

Hassan shouted, "She's all in for thirteen cents, Singleton! It's a huge bet. Should I call?"

"She does tend to bluff," Colin answered without looking up.

"You better be right, Singleton. I call. Okay, turn 'em over, kid! Gutshot Dolly has trip Queens! It's a hell of a hand, but will it beat—A FULL HOUSE?!" Lindsey groaned with disappointment as Hassan flipped over his

hand.

Colin knew nothing about poker except that it was a game of human behavior and probability, and therefore the kind of quasi-closed system in which a Theorem similar to the Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability ought to work. And when Hassan turned over his full house, Colin all of a sudden realized: you can make a Theorem that explains why you won or lost past poker hands, but you can never make one to predict *future* poker hands. The past, like Lindsey had told him, is a logical story. It's the sense of what happened. But since it is not yet remembered, the future need not make any fugging sense at all.

In that moment, the future—uncontainable by any Theorem mathematical or otherwise—stretched out before Colin: infinite and unknowable and beautiful. “*Eureka*,” Colin said, and only in saying it did he realize he had just successfully whispered.

“I figured something out,” he said aloud. “The future is unpredictable.”

Hassan said, “Sometimes the *kafir* likes to say massively obvious things in a really profound voice.”

Colin laughed as Hassan returned to counting the pennies of victory, but Colin's brain was spinning with the implications: *if the future is forever*, he thought, *then eventually it will swallow us all up*. Even Colin could only name a handful of people who lived, say, 2,400 years ago. In another 2,400 years, even Socrates, the most well-known genius of that century, might be forgotten. The future will erase everything—there's no level of fame or genius that allows you to transcend oblivion. The infinite future makes that kind of mattering impossible.

But there's another way. There are stories. Colin was looking at Lindsey, whose eyes were crinkling into a smile as Hassan loaned her nine cents so they could keep playing. Colin thought of Lindsey's storytelling lessons. The stories they'd told each other were so much a part of the how and why of his liking her. Okay. Loving. Four days in, and already, indisputably: loving. And he found himself thinking that maybe stories don't just make us matter to each other—maybe they're also the only way to the infinite mattering he'd been after for so long.

And Colin thought: *Because like say I tell someone about my feral hog hunt. Even if it's a dumb story, telling it changes other people just the slightest little bit, just as living the story changes me. An infinitesimal change. And that infinitesimal change ripples outward—ever smaller but everlasting. I will get forgotten, but the stories will last. And so we all matter—maybe less than a lot, but always more than none.*

And it wasn't only the remembered stories that mattered. That was the true

meaning of the K-3 anomaly: Having the correct graph from the start proved not that the Theorem was accurate, but that there's a place in the brain for knowing what cannot be remembered.

Almost without knowing it, he'd started writing. The graphs in his notebook had been replaced by words. Colin looked up then and wiped a single bead of sweat from his tanned, scarred forehead. Hassan turned around to Colin and said, "I realize the future is unpredictable, but I'm wondering if the future might possibly feature a Monster Thickburger."

"I predict it will," Lindsey said.

• • •

As they hustled out the door, Lindsey shouted, "Shotgun," and Colin said, "Driver," and Hassan said, "Crap," and then Lindsey ran past Colin, beating him to the door. She held it open for him, leaning up to peck his lips.

That brief walk—from the screened-in porch outside to the Hearse—was one of those moments he knew he'd remember and look back on, one of those moments that he'd try to capture in the stories he told. Nothing was happening, really, but the moment was thick with mattering. Lindsey laced her fingers in Colin's hand, and Hassan sang a song called, "I love the / Monster Thickburger at Ha-ar-dee's / For my stomach / It's a wonderful paar-ty," and they piled into the Hearse.

They'd just driven past the General Store when Hassan said, "We don't have to go to Hardee's, really. We could go anywhere."

"Oh good because I really don't want to go to Hardee's," Lindsey said. "It's sort of horrible. There's a Wendy's two exits down the interstate, in Milan. Wendy's is way better. They have, like, salads."

So Colin drove past the Hardee's and out onto the interstate headed north. As the staggered lines rushed past him, he thought about the space between what we remember and what happened, the space between what we predict and what will happen. And in that space, Colin thought, there was room enough to reinvent himself—room enough to make himself into something other than a prodigy, to remake his story better and different—room enough to be reborn again and again. A snake killer, an Archduke, a slayer of TOCs—a genius, even. There was room enough to be anyone—anyone except whom he'd already been, for if Colin had learned one thing from Gutshot, it's that you can't stop the future from coming. And for the first time in his life, he smiled thinking about the always-coming infinite future stretching out before him.

And they drove on. Lindsey turned to Colin and said, "You know, we could

just keep going. We don't have to stop." Hassan in the back leaned forward between the seats and said, "Yeah. Yeah. Let's just keep driving for a while." Colin pressed down hard on the accelerator, and he was thinking of all the places they might go, and all the days left in their summer. Beside him, Lindsey Lee Wells's fingers were on his forearm, and she was saying, "Yeah. God. We could, couldn't we? We could just keep going."

Colin's skin was alive with the feeling of connection to everyone in that car and everyone not in it. And he was feeling not-unique in the very best possible way.

(author's note)

The footnotes of the novel you just read (unless you haven't finished reading it and are skipping ahead, in which case you should go back and read everything in order and not try to find out what happens, you sneaky little sneakster) promise a math-laden appendix. And so here it is.

As it happens, I got a C-minus in pre calc despite the heroic efforts of my eleventh-grade math teacher, Mr. Lantrip, and then I went on to take something called "finite mathematics," because it was supposed to be easier than calculus. I picked the college I attended partly because it had no math requirement. But then shortly after college, I became—and I know this is weird—kind of *into* math. Unfortunately, I still suck at it. I'm into math the way my nine-year-old self was into skateboarding. I talk about it a lot, and I think about it a lot, but I can't actually, like, *do* it.

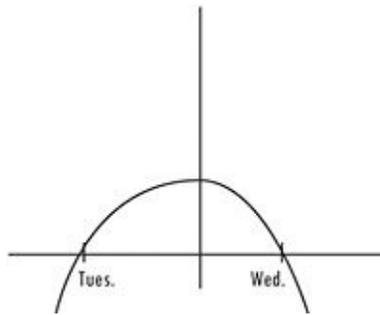
Fortunately, I am friends with this guy Daniel Biss, who happens to be one of the best young mathematicians in America. Daniel is world famous in the math world, partly because of a paper he published a few years ago that apparently proves that circles are basically fat, bloated triangles. He is also one of my dearest friends. Daniel is pretty much entirely responsible for the fact that the formula is real math that really works within the context of the book. I asked him to write an appendix about the math behind Colin's Theorem. This appendix, like all appendices, is strictly optional reading, of course. But boy, is it fascinating. Enjoy.

—John Green

(the appendix)

Colin's Eureka moment was made up of three ingredients.

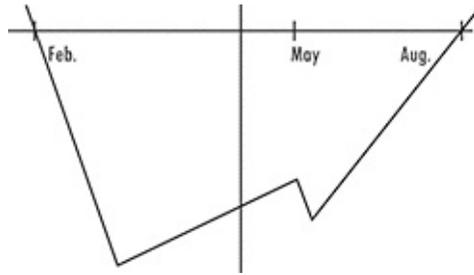
First of all, he noticed that a relationship is something you can draw a graph of; one such graph might look something like this:



According to Colin's thesis, the horizontal line (which we call the x -axis) represents time. The first time the curve crosses the x -axis corresponds to the beginning of the relationship, and the second crossing indicates the conclusion of the relationship. If the curve spends the intermediate time above the x -axis (as is the case in our example), then the girl dumps the boy; if, instead, the curve passes below the x -axis, that means that the boy dumps the girl. ("Boy" and "girl," for our purposes, contain no gender-specific meaning; for same-sex relationships, you could as easily call them "boy1" and "boy2" or "girl1" and "girl2.") So in our diagram, the couple's first kiss is on a Tuesday, and then the girl dumps the boy on Wednesday. (All in all, a fairly typical Colin-Katherine affair.)

Since the curve crosses the x -axis only at the beginning and end of the relationship, we should expect that at any point in time, the farther the curve strays from the x -axis, the farther the relationship is from breakup, or, put another way, the better the relationship seems to be going. Here's a more complicated example, the graph of my relationship with one of *my* ex-

girlfriends:

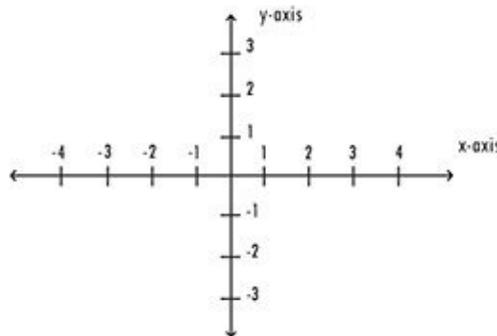


The initial burst came in February when, all in a matter of hours, we met, a blizzard started, and she totaled her car on an icy highway, breaking her wrist in the process. We suddenly found ourselves snowed in at my apartment, she an invalid doped up on painkillers, and me distracted and intoxicated by my new jobs as nurse and boyfriend. That phase ended abruptly when, two weeks later, the snow melted, her hand healed, and we had to leave my apartment and interact with the world, whereupon we immediately discovered that we led radically different lives and didn't have all that much in common. The next, smaller spike occurred when we went to Budapest for vacation. That ended, moments later, when we noticed that we were spending about twenty-three hours of each romantically Budapestian day bickering about absolutely everything. The curve finally crosses the x-axis somewhere in August, which is when I dumped her and she threw me out of her apartment and onto the streets of Berkeley, homeless and penniless, at midnight.

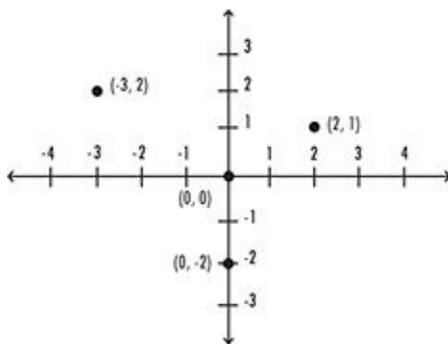
• • •

The second ingredient in Colin's Eureka moment is the fact that graphs (including graphs of romantic relationships) can be represented by functions. This one will take a bit of explaining; bear with me.

The first thing to say is that when we draw a diagram like this,



each point can be represented by numbers. That is, the horizontal line (the x -axis) has little numbers marked on it, as does the vertical line (the y -axis). Now, to specify a single point somewhere in the plane, it's enough to just list two numbers: one that tells us how far along the x -axis the point lies, and the other that tells us where it's situated along the y -axis. For example, the point $(2,1)$ should correspond to the spot marked "2" on the x -axis and the spot marked "1" on the y -axis. Equivalently, it's located two units to the right and one unit above the location where the x - and y -axes cross, which location is called $(0,0)$. Similarly, the point $(0,-2)$ is located on the y -axis two units below the crossing, and the point $(-3,2)$ is situated three units to the left and two units above the crossing.



Okay, so functions: a function is a kind of machine for turning one number into another. It's a rulebook for a very simple game: I give you any number I want and you always give me back some other number. For instance, a function might say, "Take the number and multiply it by itself (i.e., square it)." Then our conversation would go something like this:

ME: 1

YOU: 1

ME: 2

YOU: 4

ME: 3

YOU: 9

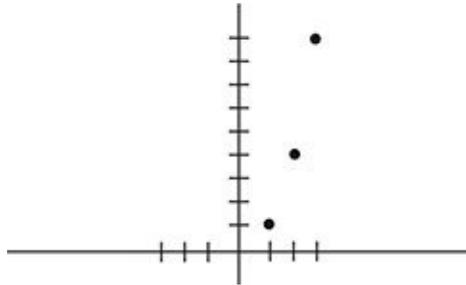
ME: 9,252,459,984

YOU: 85,608,015,755,521,280,256

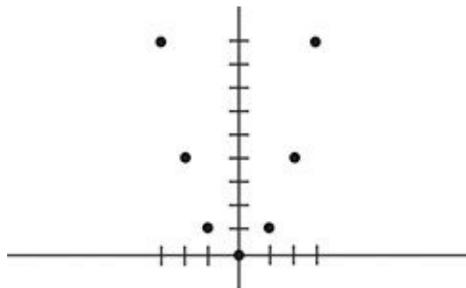
Now, many functions can be written using algebraic equations. For example, the function above would be written

$$f(x) = x^2$$

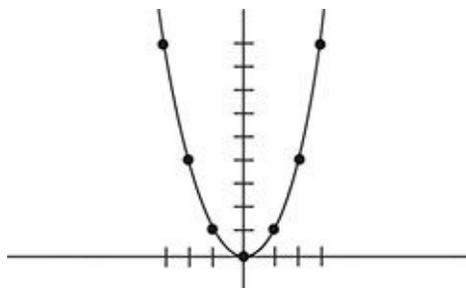
which means that when I give you the number x , the function instructs you to take x and multiply it by itself (i.e., to compute x^2) and return that new number to me. Using the function, we can plot *all* points of the form $(x, f(x))$. Those points together will form some kind of curve in the plane, and we call that curve the “graph of the function.” Consider the function $f(x) = x^2$. We can plot the points $(1,1)$, $(2,4)$, and $(3,9)$.



In this case, it might help to plot the additional points $(0,0)$, $(-1,1)$, $(-2,4)$, and $(-3,9)$. (Remember that if you take a negative number and multiply it by itself, you get a positive number.)

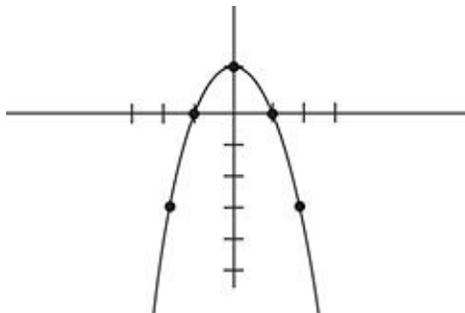


Now, you can probably guess that the graph will be a curve that looks something like this:



Unfortunately, you’ll notice that this graph doesn’t do a particularly good job of representing relationships. The graphs that Colin wants to use for his Theorem all need to cross the x -axis twice (once for when a couple starts dating, and once

for the dumping), whereas the graph we drew only touched it once. But this can easily be fixed by using slightly more complicated functions. Consider, for example, the function $f(x) = 1-x^2$.



This graph is quite familiar to Colin—it’s a graph of a short relationship in which he’s dumped by the girl (we know that the girl dumps Colin because the graph is above the x -axis between the first kiss and the dumping). It’s the graph that tells an outline of the story of Colin’s life. Now all we need to do is figure out how to modify it so as to flesh out some details.

One of the great themes of twentieth-century mathematics has been the drive to study everything in “families.” (When mathematicians use the word “family,” they mean “any collection of like or related objects.” E.g., a chair and a desk are both members of the “furniture family.”)

Here’s the idea: a line is nothing more than a collection (a “family”) of points; a plane is simply a family of lines, and so forth. This is supposed to convince you that if one object (like a point) is interesting, then it will be even more interesting to study a whole family of similar objects (like a line). This point of view has come to completely dominate mathematical research over the last sixty years.

This brings us to the third piece of Colin’s Eureka puzzle. Every Katherine is different, so each dumping that Colin receives at the hands of a new Katherine is different from all the previous ones. This means that no matter how carefully Colin crafts a *single* function, a *single* graph, he’ll only ever be learning about a *single* Katherine. What Colin really needs is to study all possible Katherines and their functions, all at once. What he needs, in other words, is to study the *family* of all Katherine functions.

And this, at last, was Colin’s complete insight: that relationships can be graphed, that graphs come from functions, and that it might be possible to study all such functions at once, with a single (very complicated) formula, in such a way that would enable him to predict when (and, more importantly, whether),

any prospective Katherine would dump him.⁸⁵

Let's give an example of what this might mean; in fact, we'll talk about the first example that Colin tried. The formula looks like this:

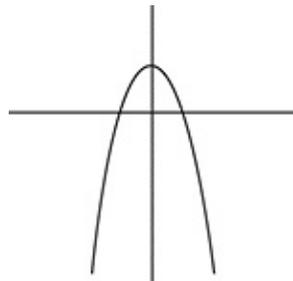
$$f(x) = D^3x^2 - D$$

In explaining this expression, I certainly have a lot of questions to answer: first off, what on earth is D ? It's the Dumper/Dumpee differential: you can give anybody a score between 0 and 5 depending on where they fall on the spectrum of heartbreak. Now, if you're trying to predict how a relationship between a boy and girl will work out, you begin by taking the boy's D/D differential score and subtracting from it the girl's D/D differential score and calling the answer A . (So if the boy is a 2 and the girl is a 4, you get $D = -2$.)

Now, let's see what effect this has on the graph. In the example I just gave where the boy gets a 2 and the girl gets a 4, so that $D = -2$, we have

$$f(x) = -8x^2 + 2$$

whose graph looks like this:

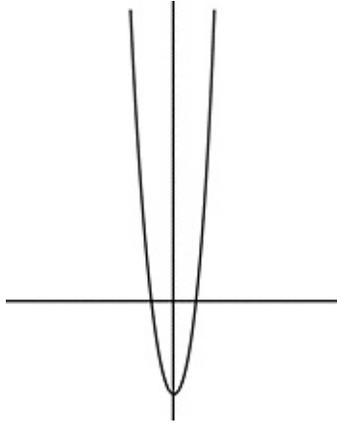


As you can see, the relationship doesn't last too long, and the girl ends up dumping the boy (a situation Colin is quite familiar with).

If, instead, the boy was a 5 and the girl was a 1, we'd have $D = 4$, so that

$$f(x) = 64x^2 - 4$$

which has the following graph:



This relationship is even shorter, but it seems even more intense (the peak is remarkably steep), and this time the boy dumps the girl.

Unfortunately, this formula has problems. For one thing, if $D = 0$, that is, if they're equal Dumpers or Dumpees, then we get

$$f(x) = 0$$

whose graph is just a horizontal line, so you can't tell where the relationship begins or ends. The more basic problem is that it's patently absurd to suggest that relationships are so simple, that their graphs are so uniform, which is what Lindsey Lee Wells eventually helps Colin to figure out. And so Colin's final formula ends up being far more subtle.

But the main point is already visible in this case: because D can vary, this *single* formula is capable of specifying a whole *family* of functions, each of which can be used to describe a different Colin-Katherine affair. So all Colin needs to do now is add more and more variables (more ingredients along the lines of D) to this formula so that the family of functions it encompasses is bigger and more complicated, and therefore has a hope of encapsulating the complex and challenging world of Katherine-dumpings, which is what Colin eventually realizes thanks to Lindsey's insight.

So that's the story of Colin Singleton and his Eureka moment and the Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability. I should briefly point out that although no reasonable adult mathematician (at least not one with a soul) would seriously suggest that you can predict romance with a single formula, there actually has been some recent work that points in this direction. To be specific, psychologist John Gottman (and longtime head of the University of Washington's "Love Lab") and a group of coauthors, including the mathematician James Murray, have published a book entitled *The Mathematics of Marriage* that purports to use

math to predict whether marriages will break up. The basic philosophy is, in its outline, not unlike Colin's Theorem, but the math that goes into it is far more sophisticated, and the claimed outcome is far more modest (these people aren't pretending that they can predict *every* divorce, just that they can make some educated guesses⁸⁶).⁸⁷

There's one last thing I'd like to mention: notwithstanding John's notorious tendency to cannibalize his friends' lives for literary material, and notwithstanding the fact that I was somewhat accelerated in school as a kid, Colin's character was in no way inspired by me. For one thing, I've only ever kissed two girls named Katherine. Interestingly, though, throughout my whole career as a pathological Dumper, the Katherines were the only two women who ever dumped me. Strange. It almost makes me wonder if there's a formula out there somewhere . . .

—Daniel Biss

Assistant Professor, University of Chicago, and Research Fellow at the Clay Mathematics Institute

⁸⁵Yeah, I know, that's a lot to keep in your head all at once. Look, John *told* you that Colin was a prodigy.

⁸⁶Right, big deal—I can also make educated guesses about whether my friends' relationships will last. I guess the point here is that they were able to mathematically justify the educated-guessing process.

⁸⁷This work is too technical for me to summarize here (for example, I don't understand a word of it), but if you want to read about it, you can either try the colossal and impenetrable book *The Mathematics of Marriage* by Gottman, Murray, Swanson, Tyson, and (yet another) Swanson, or else the much more manageable and fun online review and summary by Jordan Ellenberg, available at <http://slate.msn.com/id/2081484/>.

(acknowledgments)

1. My incomparable editor and friend, Julie Strauss-Gabel, who worked on this book when she was, literally, *in labor*. I rely so much on Julie's editing that—this is a true story—I once made her edit an e-mail I wrote the woman with whom I was then “just friends” and with whom I am now “living in holy matrimony.” Which reminds me . . .
2. Sarah. ([See dedication.](#))
3. My mentor and collaborator and alter ego and BFF Ilene Cooper, who is responsible for most of the good things that have ever happened to me. And also, come to think of it, helped me woo Acknowledgee #2.
4. My dear friend Daniel Biss, who fortunately for me is one of the best mathematicians in America—and also one of the best teachers on the subject. I could never have imagined this book without Daniel, let alone written it.
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19. The Katherines. I wish I could name them all, but (a) I lack the space, and (b) I fear the libel suits.

Turn the page
for a Q & A with

**JOHN
GREEN**

Q & A with JOHN GREEN

Were you really dumped 53 times before you got married?

The short answer is yes. But in the interest of full disclosure, there are a couple of caveats to that statistic:

1. I have a rather narrow definition of getting dumped, which is this: Say you kiss someone once. Now, say you want to kiss them again, but they won't let you, on account of how you're just a great friend and she wouldn't want to mess that up, or she's not interested in a relationship right now, or she's decided to pursue a relationship with a semi-professional bodybuilder, or she's worried that if she starts making out with you a lot she won't have time for the school newspaper, or she thinks you're cute and everything but let's be honest you would be disastrous for her social status, or whatever. If any of those things happen (and believe me, they have), you've been dumped.
2. There is widespread controversy over whether or not my wife (#53) technically dumped me. Sarah and I went out on two dates several years ago, after which she announced that she "wasn't looking for a relationship right now." And then we didn't go on a date for about eight months, which, as far as I'm concerned, constitutes dumping regardless of the fact that we later ended up getting married.

This book has a fancy new cover designed by one of your readers. How do you feel about that?

I love the cover so much, and I am so grateful and astonished to have such passionate and creative readers. My publisher was kind enough to hand the cover-making reins over to readers of *Katherines*, who came up with hundreds of really excellent designs, but the winner was a young woman named Sarah Turbin. Her design captures so much about the book—its nerdiness, its heart, and its love of footnotes.

***Katherines* was first published in 2006. Looking back on it now, how do you remember the writing and publication of it?**

It was immensely fun to write. Colin can be a very annoying person, but I had such fondness for him, and I particularly loved Hassan—every minute that I spent with Hassan was such a pleasure, and I’ve often wished that I could write a whole book about him (and who knows, maybe I will someday). When I wrote this book, I was working for *mental_floss* magazine, researching gobs of trivia every day, and so it was a wonderful release to have a place to write about: for instance, how shower curtains are affected by vortexes.

Anagrams play a huge role in *An Abundance of Katherines*—why?

Well, anagrams say something about the malleability of language. We always think of language as an immovable object, as this set of codified and unbreakable rules. But when you consider that one can rearrange the letters in PRESBYTERIANS and spell BRITNEY SPEARS¹, it reminds us that language (and the stories we tell with language) can be twisted and molded. Words are not static. Language shapes our memories, and it is also shaped by our memories.

How’s your anagramming?

Terrible. Whenever I play Words with Friends now, my friends who have read *Katherines* expect me to be some kind of Words with Friends genius, and I invariably fail to spell anything more impressive than “Zap,” while they are—presumably—constantly cheating. I also don’t speak any of the foreign languages that Colin speaks. Nor have I ever been good at math. I was no child prodigy, but like most people, in high school I did have to start grappling with the plain fact that I was not quite so special as I had originally imagined myself to be.

How do your high school experiences shape your writing?

I attended a small and wonderful boarding school in Alabama called Indian Springs School, and I’m certainly not above borrowing from my own high school experiences. I also think that my particular high school experience pushed me toward writing about 1. the South, and 2. smart kids, and 3. teenagers removed from direct parental control, and I also probably—4.—owe this whole numbered-list-inside-a sentence construction to high school, since I stole it from my friend Todd Cartee.

In high school, how did you spend your free time?

Mostly, I sat around with my friends and talked. I mean, we would play video

games or watch TV or sneak out into the woods or play ultimate Frisbee, but all of these activities were just vehicles for talking.² Whenever I'm asked what advice I have for young writers, I always say that the first thing is to read, and to read a lot. The second thing is to write. And the third thing, which I think is absolutely vital, is to tell stories and listen closely to the stories you're being told. Other than talking, I spent a lot of time getting dumped. As any dumpee can tell you, getting dumped is extraordinarily time-consuming.

What's new with Daniel Biss?

Daniel Biss, the mathematician who wrote the formulae in *An Abundance of Katherines* and taught me to understand enough abstract mathematics to be able to write the book, was working happily as a professor of mathematics when this book came out. But then he discovered, of all things, politics, and in 2010, he became the only professional mathematician in the Illinois State House of Representatives. As of this writing, he is running for the state senate in Illinois, and I have no doubt that he'll win. We need people who can actually do the math in positions of power in this country, and I'm very proud of Daniel's success. And even though he is now an elected representative of the people of Illinois, he is generous enough to remain my personal Resident Mathematician.

What have you done since *Katherines*?

My newest book is called *The Fault in Our Stars*. It's about love and loss and romantic epics and stuff. If I'm not mistaken, you can actually just turn the page and start reading it right now.

¹ The whole Britney/Presbyterians thing fascinates me because "Britney" is such an odd spelling. (It is less common than either Brittany or Brittney.) This begs a question: Did Britney Spears's parents choose to spell her name eccentrically *because* of its anagrammatic potential?

² Example: I was on the ultimate Frisbee team at my high school, and I was of course the worst member of the team by a very wide margin, which is really saying something, because we were all pretty bad. And all I remember of playing ultimate Frisbee is running up and down a field, listening to my friends' stories, and telling my own. I suppose that now and again I must have caught or thrown a Frisbee, but I only remember us telling each other these stories between heaving breaths as we ran back and forth across the field.

PRINTZ AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*

JOHN GREEN



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—SLJ, STARRED REVIEW

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*To Julie Strauss-Gabel, without whom none of this
could have become real*

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[*AUTHOR'S NOTE*](#)
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And after, when we went outside to look at her finished lantern from the road, I said I liked the way her light shone through the face that flickered in the dark.

—“*Jack O’Lantern,*” *Katrina Vandenberg from Atlas*

People say friends don’t destroy one another
What do they know about friends?

—“*Game Shows Touch our Lives,*” *The Mountain Goats*

PROLOGUE

The way I figure it, everyone gets a miracle. Like, I will probably never be struck by lightning, or win a Nobel Prize, or become the dictator of a small nation in the Pacific Islands, or contract terminal ear cancer, or spontaneously combust. But if you consider all the unlikely things together, at least one of them will probably happen to each of us. I could have seen it rain frogs. I could have stepped foot on Mars. I could have been eaten by a whale. I could have married the queen of England or survived months at sea. But my miracle was different. My miracle was this: out of all the houses in all the subdivisions in all of Florida, I ended up living next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman.

Our subdivision, Jefferson Park, used to be a navy base. But then the navy didn't need it anymore, so it returned the land to the citizens of Orlando, Florida, who decided to build a massive subdivision, because that's what Florida does with land. My parents and Margo's parents ended up moving next door to one another just after the first houses were built. Margo and I were two.

Before Jefferson Park was a Pleasantville, and before it was a navy base, it belonged to an actual Jefferson, this guy Dr. Jefferson Jefferson. Dr. Jefferson Jefferson has a school named after him in Orlando and also a large charitable foundation, but the fascinating and unbelievable-but-true thing about Dr. Jefferson Jefferson is that he was not a doctor of any kind. He was just an orange juice salesman named Jefferson Jefferson. When he became rich and powerful, he went to court, made "Jefferson" his middle name, and then changed his first name to "Dr." Capital *D*. Lowercase *r*. Period.

So Margo and I were nine. Our parents were friends, so we would sometimes play together, biking past the cul-de-sac streets to Jefferson Park itself, the hub of our subdivision's wheel.

I always got very nervous whenever I heard that Margo was about to show up, on account of how she was the most fantastically gorgeous creature that God had ever created. On the morning in question, she wore white shorts and a pink T-shirt that featured a green dragon breathing a fire of orange glitter. It is difficult to explain how awesome I found this T-shirt at the time.

Margo, as always, biked standing up, her arms locked as she leaned above the handlebars, her purple sneakers a circuitous blur. It was a steam-hot day in March. The sky was clear, but the air tasted acidic, like it might storm later.

At the time, I fancied myself an inventor, and after we locked up our bikes and began the short walk across the park to the playground, I told Margo about an idea I had for an invention called the Ringolator. The Ringolator was a gigantic cannon that would shoot big, colored rocks into a very low orbit, giving Earth the same sort of rings that Saturn has. (I still think this would be a fine idea, but it turns out that building a cannon that can shoot boulders into a low orbit is fairly complicated.)

I'd been in this park so many times before that it was mapped in my mind, so we were only a few steps inside when I began to sense that the world was out of order, even though I couldn't immediately figure out *what* was different.

"Quentin," Margo said quietly, calmly.

She was pointing. And then I realized what was different.

There was a live oak a few feet ahead of us. Thick and gnarled and ancient-looking. That was not new. The playground on our right. Not new, either. But now, a guy wearing a gray suit, slumped against the trunk of the oak tree. Not moving. This was new. He was encircled by blood; a half-dried fountain of it poured out of his mouth. The mouth open in a way that mouths generally shouldn't be. Flies at rest on his pale forehead.

"He's dead," Margo said, as if I couldn't tell.

I took two small steps backward. I remember thinking that if I made any sudden movements, he might

wake up and attack me. Maybe he was a zombie. I knew zombies weren't real, but he sure *looked* like a potential zombie.

As I took those two steps back, Margo took two equally small and quiet steps forward. "His eyes are open," she said.

"Wegottagohome," I said.

"I thought you closed your eyes when you died," she said.

"Margowegottagohomeandtell."

She took another step. She was close enough now to reach out and touch his foot. "What do you think happened to him?" she asked. "Maybe it was drugs or something."

I didn't want to leave Margo alone with the dead guy who might be an attack zombie, but I also didn't care to stand around and chat about the circumstances of his demise. I gathered my courage and stepped forward to take her hand. "Margowegottagorightnow!"

"Okay, yeah," she said. We ran to our bikes, my stomach churning with something that felt exactly like excitement, but wasn't. We got on our bikes and I let her go in front of me because I was crying and didn't want her to see. I could see blood on the soles of her purple sneakers. His blood. The dead guy blood.

And then we were back home in our separate houses. My parents called 911, and I heard the sirens in the distance and asked to see the fire trucks, but my mom said no. Then I took a nap.

Both my parents are therapists, which means that I am really goddamned well adjusted. So when I woke up, I had a long conversation with my mom about the cycle of life, and how death is part of life, but not a part of life I needed to be particularly concerned about at the age of nine, and I felt better. Honestly, I never worried about it much. Which is saying something, because I can do some worrying.

Here's the thing: I found a dead guy. Little, adorable nine-year-old me and my even littler and more adorable playdate found a guy with blood pouring out of his mouth, and that blood was on her little, adorable sneakers as we biked home. It's all very dramatic and everything, but so what? I didn't know the guy. People I don't know die all the damned time. If I had a nervous breakdown every time something awful happened in the world, I'd be crazier than a shithouse rat.

That night, I went into my room at nine o'clock to go to bed, because nine o'clock was my bedtime. My mom tucked me in, told me she loved me, and I said, "See you tomorrow," and she said, "See you tomorrow," and then she turned out the lights and closed the door almost-all-the-way.

As I turned on my side, I saw Margo Roth Spiegelman standing outside my window, her face almost pressed against the screen. I got up and opened the window, but the screen stayed between us, pixelating her.

"I did an investigation," she said quite seriously. Even up close the screen broke her face apart, but I could tell that she was holding a little notebook and a pencil with teeth marks around the eraser. She glanced down at her notes. "Mrs. Feldman from over on Jefferson Court said his name was Robert Joyner. She told me he lived on Jefferson Road in one of those condos on top of the grocery store, so I went over there and there were a bunch of policemen, and one of them asked if I worked at the school paper, and I said our school didn't have a paper, and he said as long as I wasn't a journalist he would answer my questions. He said Robert Joyner was thirty-six years old. A lawyer. They wouldn't let me in the apartment, but a lady named Juanita Alvarez lives next door to him, and I got into her apartment by asking if I could borrow a cup of sugar, and then she said that Robert Joyner had killed himself with a gun. And then I asked why, and then she told me that he was getting a divorce and was sad about it."

She stopped then, and I just looked at her, her face gray and moonlit and split into a thousand little pieces by the weave of the window screen. Her wide, round eyes flitted back and forth from her notebook to me. "Lots of people get divorces and don't kill themselves," I said.

"I *know*," she said, excitement in her voice. "*That's* what I told Juanita Alvarez. And then she said . . ."

Margo flipped the notebook page. “She said that Mr. Joyner was troubled. And then I asked what that meant, and then she told me that we should just pray for him and that I needed to take the sugar to my mom, and I said forget the sugar and left.”

I said nothing again. I just wanted her to keep talking—that small voice tense with the excitement of almost knowing things, making me feel like something important was happening to me.

“I think I maybe know why,” she finally said.

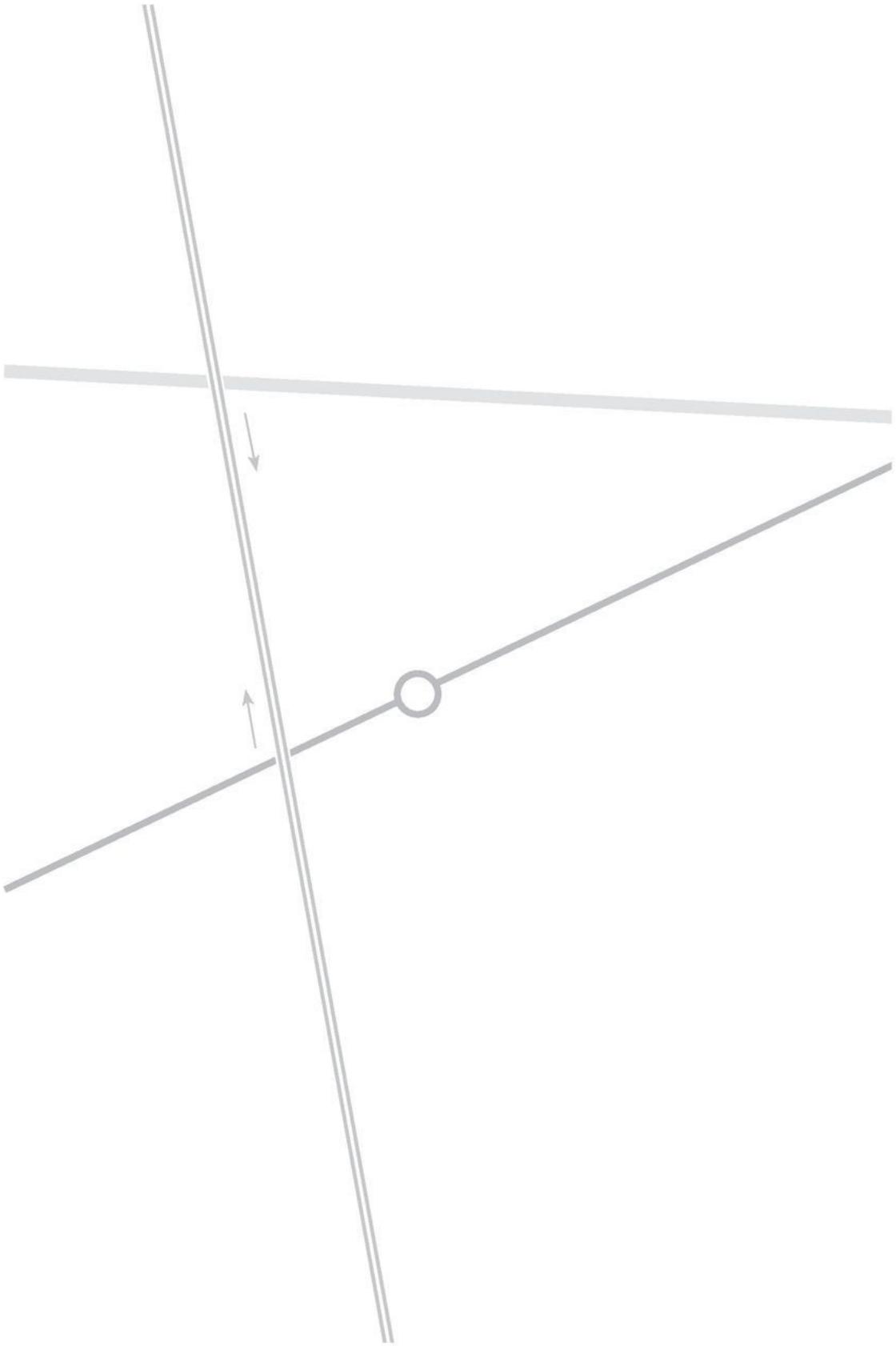
“Why?”

“Maybe all the strings inside him broke,” she said.

While I tried to think of something to say in answer to that, I reached forward and pressed the lock on the screen between us, dislodging it from the window. I placed the screen on the floor, but she didn’t give me a chance to speak. Before I could sit back down, she just raised her face up toward me and whispered, “Shut the window.” So I did. I thought she would leave, but she just stood there, watching me. I waved at her and smiled, but her eyes seemed fixed on something behind me, something monstrous that had already drained the blood from her face, and I felt too afraid to turn around to see. But there was nothing behind me, of course—except maybe the dead guy.

I stopped waving. My head was level with hers as we stared at each other from opposite sides of the glass. I don’t remember how it ended—if I went to bed or she did. In my memory, it doesn’t end. We just stay there, looking at each other, forever.

Margo always loved mysteries. And in everything that came afterward, I could never stop thinking that maybe she loved mysteries so much that she became one.



PART ONE

The Strings

1.

The longest day of my life began tardily. I woke up late, took too long in the shower, and ended up having to enjoy my breakfast in the passenger seat of my mom's minivan at 7:17 that Wednesday morning.

I usually got a ride to school with my best friend, Ben Starling, but Ben had gone to school on time, making him useless to me. "On time" for us was thirty minutes before school actually started, because the half hour before the first bell was the highlight of our social calendars: standing outside the side door that led into the band room and just talking. Most of my friends were in band, and most of my free time during school was spent within twenty feet of the band room. But I was not in the band, because I suffer from the kind of tone deafness that is generally associated with actual deafness. I was going to be twenty minutes late, which technically meant that I'd still be ten minutes early for school itself.

As she drove, Mom was asking me about classes and finals and prom.

"I don't believe in prom," I reminded her as she rounded a corner. I expertly angled my raisin bran to accommodate the g-forces. I'd done this before.

"Well, there's no harm in just going with a friend. I'm sure you could ask Cassie Hiney." And I *could* have asked Cassie Hiney, who was actually perfectly nice and pleasant and cute, despite having a fantastically unfortunate last name.

"It's not just that I don't like prom. I also don't like people who like prom," I explained, although this was, in point of fact, untrue. Ben was absolutely gaga over the idea of going.

Mom turned into school, and I held the mostly empty bowl with both hands as we drove over a speed bump. I glanced over at the senior parking lot. Margo Roth Spiegelman's silver Honda was parked in its usual spot. Mom pulled the minivan into a cul-de-sac outside the band room and kissed me on the cheek. I could see Ben and my other friends standing in a semicircle.

I walked up to them, and the half circle effortlessly expanded to include me. They were talking about my ex-girlfriend Suzie Chung, who played cello and was apparently creating quite a stir by dating a baseball player named Taddy Mac. Whether this was his given name, I did not know. But at any rate, Suzie had decided to go to prom with Taddy Mac. Another casualty.

"Bro," said Ben, standing across from me. He nodded his head and turned around. I followed him out of the circle and through the door. A small, olive-skinned creature who had hit puberty but never hit it very hard, Ben had been my best friend since fifth grade, when we both finally owned up to the fact that neither of us was likely to attract anyone else as a best friend. Plus, he tried hard, and I liked that—most of the time.

"How ya doin'?" I asked. We were safely inside, everyone else's conversations making ours inaudible.

"Radar is going to prom," he said morosely. Radar was our other best friend. We called him Radar because he looked like a little bespectacled guy called Radar on this old TV show *M*A*S*H*, except 1. The TV Radar wasn't black, and 2. At some point after the nicknaming, our Radar grew about six inches and started wearing contacts, so I suppose that 3. He actually didn't look like the guy on *M*A*S*H* at all, but 4. With three and a half weeks left of high school, we weren't very well going to renickname him.

"That girl Angela?" I asked. Radar never told us anything about his love life, but this did not dissuade us from frequent speculation.

Ben nodded, and then said, "You know my big plan to ask a freshbunny to prom because they're the only girls who don't know the Bloody Ben story?" I nodded.

"Well," Ben said, "this morning some darling little ninth-grade honeybunny came up to me and asked me if I was Bloody Ben, and I began to explain that it was a kidney infection, and she giggled and ran away. So that's out."

In tenth grade, Ben was hospitalized for a kidney infection, but Becca Arrington, Margo's best friend,

started a rumor that the real reason he had blood in his urine was due to chronic masturbation. Despite its medical implausibility, this story had haunted Ben ever since. “That sucks,” I said.

Ben started outlining plans for finding a date, but I was only half listening, because through the thickening mass of humanity crowding the hallway, I could see Margo Roth Spiegelman. She was next to her locker, standing beside her boyfriend, Jase. She wore a white skirt to her knees and a blue print top. I could see her collarbone. She was laughing at something hysterical—her shoulders bent forward, her big eyes crinkling at their corners, her mouth open wide. But it didn’t seem to be anything Jase had said, because she was looking away from him, across the hallway to a bank of lockers. I followed her eyes and saw Becca Arrington draped all over some baseball player like she was an ornament and he a Christmas tree. I smiled at Margo, even though I knew she couldn’t see me.

“Bro, you should just hit that. Forget about Jase. God, that is one candy-coated honeybunny.” As we walked, I kept taking glances at her through the crowd, quick snapshots: a photographic series entitled *Perfection Stands Still While Mortals Walk Past*. As I got closer, I thought maybe she wasn’t laughing after all. Maybe she’d received a surprise or a gift or something. She couldn’t seem to close her mouth.

“Yeah,” I said to Ben, still not listening, still trying to see as much of her as I could without being too obvious. It wasn’t even that she was so pretty. She was just so awesome, and in the literal sense. And then we were too far past her, too many people walking between her and me, and I never even got close enough to hear her speak or understand whatever the hilarious surprise had been. Ben shook his head, because he had seen me see her a thousand times, and he was used to it.

“Honestly, she’s hot, but she’s not *that* hot. You know who’s seriously hot?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Lacey,” he said, who was Margo’s other best friend. “Also your mom. Bro, I saw your mom kiss you on the cheek this morning, and forgive me, but I swear to God I was like, *man, I wish I was Q. And also, I wish my cheeks had penises.*” I elbowed him in the ribs, but I was still thinking about Margo, because she was the only legend who lived next door to me. Margo Roth Spiegelman, whose six-syllable name was often spoken in its entirety with a kind of quiet reverence. Margo Roth Spiegelman, whose stories of epic adventures would blow through school like a summer storm: an old guy living in a broken-down house in Hot Coffee, Mississippi, taught Margo how to play the guitar. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who spent three days traveling with the circus—they thought she had potential on the trapeze. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who drank a cup of herbal tea with The Mallionaires backstage after a concert in St. Louis while they drank whiskey. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who got into that concert by telling the bouncer she was the bassist’s girlfriend, and didn’t they recognize her, and come on guys seriously, my name is Margo Roth Spiegelman and if you go back there and ask the bassist to take one look at me, he will tell you that I either am his girlfriend or he wishes I was, and then the bouncer did so, and then the bassist said “yeah that’s my girlfriend let her in the show,” and then later the bassist wanted to hook up with her and she *rejected the bassist from The Mallionaires*.

The stories, when they were shared, inevitably ended with, *I mean, can you believe it?* We often could not, but they always proved true.

And then we were at our lockers. Radar was leaning against Ben’s locker, typing into a handheld device.

“So you’re going to prom,” I said to him. He looked up, and then looked back down.

“I’m de-vandalizing the Omnictionary article about a former prime minister of France. Last night someone deleted the entire entry and then replaced it with the sentence ‘Jacques Chirac is a gay,’ which as it happens is incorrect both factually and grammatically.” Radar is a big-time editor of this online user-created reference source called Omnictionary. His whole life is devoted to the maintenance and well-being of Omnictionary. This was but one of several reasons why his having a prom date was somewhat surprising.

“So you’re going to prom,” I repeated.

“Sorry,” he said without looking up. It was a well-known fact that I was opposed to prom. Absolutely nothing about any of it appealed to me—not slow dancing, not fast dancing, not the dresses, and definitely

not the rented tuxedo. Renting a tuxedo seemed to me an excellent way to contract some hideous disease from its previous tenant, and I did not aspire to become the world's only virgin with pubic lice.

"Bro," Ben said to Radar, "the freshhoneys know about the Bloody Ben story." Radar put the handheld away finally and nodded sympathetically. "So anyway," Ben continued, "my two remaining strategies are either to purchase a prom date on the Internet or fly to Missouri and kidnap some nice corn-fed little honeybunny." I'd tried telling Ben that "honeybunny" sounded more sexist and lame than retro-cool, but he refused to abandon the practice. He called his own mother a honeybunny. There was no fixing him.

"I'll ask Angela if she knows anybody," Radar said. "Although getting you a date to prom will be harder than turning lead into gold."

"Getting you a date to prom is so hard that the hypothetical idea itself is actually used to cut diamonds," I added.

Radar tapped a locker twice with his fist to express his approval, and then came back with another. "Ben, getting you a date to prom is so hard that the American government believes the problem cannot be solved with diplomacy, but will instead require force."

I was trying to think of another one when we all three simultaneously saw the human-shaped container of anabolic steroids known as Chuck Parson walking toward us with some intent. Chuck Parson did not participate in organized sports, because to do so would distract from the larger goal of his life: to one day be convicted of homicide. "Hey, faggots," he called.

"Chuck," I answered, as friendly as I could muster. Chuck hadn't given us any serious trouble in a couple years—someone in cool kid land laid down the edict that we were to be left alone. So it was a little unusual for him even to talk to us.

Maybe because I spoke and maybe not, he slammed his hands against the lockers on either side of me and then leaned in close enough for me to contemplate his toothpaste brand. "What do you know about Margo and Jase?"

"Uh," I said. I thought of everything I knew about them: Jase was Margo Roth Spiegelman's first and only serious boyfriend. They began dating at the tail end of last year. They were both going to University of Florida next year. Jase got a baseball scholarship there. He was never over at her house, except to pick her up. She never acted as if she liked him all that much, but then she never acted as if she liked anyone all that much. "Nothing," I said finally.

"Don't shit me around," he growled.

"I barely even *know* her," I said, which had become true.

He considered my answer for a minute, and I tried hard to stare at his close-set eyes. He nodded very slightly, pushed off the lockers, and walked away to attend his first-period class: The Care and Feeding of Pectoral Muscles. The second bell rang. One minute to class. Radar and I had calc; Ben had finite mathematics. The classrooms were adjacent; we walked toward them together, the three of us in a row, trusting that the tide of class-mates would part enough to let us by, and it did.

I said, "Getting you a date to prom is so hard that a thousand monkeys typing at a thousand typewriters for a thousand years would never once type '*I will go to prom with Ben.*'"

Ben could not resist tearing himself apart. "My prom prospects are so poor that Q's grandma turned me down. She said she was waiting for Radar to ask her."

Radar nodded his head slowly. "It's true, Q. Your grandma loves the brothers."

It was so pathetically easy to forget about Chuck, to talk about prom even though I didn't give a shit about prom. Such was life that morning: nothing really mattered that much, not the good things and not the bad ones. We were in the business of mutual amusement, and we were reasonably prosperous.

I spent the next three hours in classrooms, trying not to look at the clocks above various blackboards, and then looking at the clocks, and then being amazed that only a few minutes had passed since I last looked at

the clock. I'd had nearly four years of experience looking at these clocks, but their sluggishness never ceased to surprise. If I am ever told that I have one day to live, I will head straight for the hallowed halls of Winter Park High School, where a day has been known to last a thousand years.

But as much as it felt like third-period physics would never end, it did, and then I was in the cafeteria with Ben. Radar had fifth-period lunch with most of our other friends, so Ben and I generally sat together alone, a couple seats between us and a group of drama kids we knew. Today, we were both eating mini pepperoni pizzas.

"Pizza's good," I said. He nodded distractedly. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nuffing," he said through a mouthful of pizza. He swallowed. "I know you think it's dumb, but I want to go to prom."

"1. I do think it's dumb; 2. If you want to go, just go; 3. If I'm not mistaken, you haven't even asked anyone."

"I asked Cassie Hiney during calc. I wrote her a note." I raised my eyebrows questioningly. Ben reached into his shorts and slid a heavily folded piece of paper to me. I flattened it out:

Ben,

I'd love to go to prom with you, but I'm already going with Frank. Sorry!

—C

I refolded it and slid it back across the table. I could remember playing paper football on these tables. "That sucks," I said.

"Yeah, whatever." The walls of sound felt like they were closing in on us, and we were silent for a while, and then Ben looked at me very seriously and said, "I'm going to get so much play in college. I'm going to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records* under the category 'Most Honeybunnies Ever Pleased.'"

I laughed. I was thinking about how Radar's parents actually *were* in the *Guinness Book* when I noticed a pretty African-American girl with spiky little dreads standing above us. It took me a moment to realize that the girl was Angela, Radar's I-guess-girlfriend.

"Hi," she said to me.

"Hey," I said. I'd had classes with Angela and knew her a little, but we didn't say hello in the hallway or anything. I motioned for her to sit. She scooted a chair to the head of the table.

"I figure that you guys probably know Marcus better than anyone," she said, using Radar's real name. She leaned toward us, her elbows on the table.

"It's a shitty job, but someone's got to do it," Ben answered, smiling.

"Do you think he's, like, embarrassed of me?"

Ben laughed. "What? No," he said.

"Technically," I added, "*you* should be embarrassed of *him*."

She rolled her eyes, smiling. A girl accustomed to compliments. "But he's never, like, invited me to hang out with you, though."

"Ohhhh," I said, getting it finally. "That's because he's embarrassed of *us*."

She laughed. "You seem pretty normal."

"You've never seen Ben snort Sprite up his nose and then spit it out of his mouth," I said.

"I look like a demented carbonated fountain," he deadpanned.

"But really, you wouldn't worry? I mean, we've been dating for five weeks, and he's never even taken me to his house." Ben and I exchanged a knowing glance, and I scrunched up my face to suppress laughter.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Honestly, Angela. If he was forcing you to hang out with us and taking you to his house all the time—”

“Then it would definitely mean he *didn’t* like you,” Ben finished.

“Are his parents weird?”

I struggled with how to answer that question honestly. “Uh, no. They’re cool. They’re just kinda overprotective, I guess.”

“Yeah, overprotective,” Ben agreed a little too quickly.

She smiled and then got up, saying she had to go say hi to someone before lunch was over. Ben waited until she was gone to say anything. “That girl is awesome,” Ben said.

“I know,” I answered. “I wonder if we can replace Radar with her.”

“She’s probably not that good with computers, though. We need someone who’s good at computers. Plus I bet she sucks at Resurrection,” which was our favorite video game. “By the way,” Ben added, “nice call saying that Radar’s folks are overprotective.”

“Well, it’s not my place to tell her,” I said.

“I wonder how long till she gets to see the Team Radar Residence and Museum.” Ben smiled.

The period was almost over, so Ben and I got up and put our trays onto the conveyer belt. The very same one that Chuck Parson had thrown me onto freshman year, sending me into the terrifying netherworld of Winter Park’s dishwashing corps. We walked over to Radar’s locker and were standing there when he raced up just after the first bell.

“I decided during government that I would actually, literally suck donkey balls if it meant I could skip that class for the rest of the semester,” he said.

“You can learn a lot about government from donkey balls,” I said. “Hey, speaking of reasons you wish you had fourth-period lunch, we just dined with Angela.”

Ben smirked at Radar and said, “Yeah, she wants to know why she’s never been over to your house.”

Radar exhaled a long breath as he spun the combination to open his locker. He breathed for so long I thought he might pass out. “Crap,” he said finally.

“Are you embarrassed about something?” I asked, smiling.

“Shut up,” he answered, poking his elbow into my gut.

“You live in a lovely home,” I said.

“Seriously, bro,” added Ben. “She’s a really nice girl. I don’t see why you can’t introduce her to your parents and show her Casa Radar.”

Radar threw his books into his locker and shut it. The din of conversation around us quieted just a bit as he turned his eyes toward the heavens and shouted, “IT IS NOT MY FAULT THAT MY PARENTS OWN THE WORLD’S LARGEST COLLECTION OF BLACK SANTAS.”

I’d heard Radar say “the world’s largest collection of black Santas” perhaps a thousand times in my life, and it never became any less funny to me. But he wasn’t kidding. I remembered the first time I visited. I was maybe thirteen. It was spring, many months past Christmas, and yet black Santas lined the windowsills. Paper cutouts of black Santas hung from the stairway banister. Black Santa candles adorned the dining room table. A black Santa oil painting hung above the mantel, which was itself lined with black Santa figurines. They had a black Santa Pez dispenser purchased from Namibia. The light-up plastic black Santa that stood in their postage-stamp front yard from Thanksgiving to New Year’s spent the rest of the year proudly keeping watch in the corner of the guest bathroom, a bathroom with homemade black Santa wallpaper created with paint and a Santa-shaped sponge. In every room, save Radar’s, their home was

awash in black Santadom—plaster and plastic and marble and clay and wood and resin and cloth. In total, Radar’s parents owned more than twelve hundred black Santas of various sorts. As a plaque beside their front door proclaimed, Radar’s house was an officially registered Santa Landmark according to the Society for Christmas.

“You just gotta tell her, man,” I said. “You just gotta say, ‘Angela, I really like you, but there’s something you need to know: when we go to my house and hook up, we’ll be watched by the twenty-four hundred eyes of twelve hundred black Santas.’”

Radar ran a hand through his buzz cut and shook his head. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll put it exactly like that, but I’ll deal with it.”

I headed off to government, Ben to an elective about video game design. I watched clocks through two more classes, and then finally the relief radiated out of my chest when I was finished—the end of each day like a dry run for our graduation less than a month away.

I went home. I ate two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as an early dinner. I watched poker on TV. My parents came home at six, hugged each other, and hugged me. We ate a macaroni casserole as a proper dinner. They asked me about school. They asked me about prom. They marveled at what a wonderful job they’d done raising me. They told me about their days dealing with people who had been raised less brilliantly. They went to watch TV. I went to my room to check my e-mail. I wrote a little bit about *The Great Gatsby* for English. I read some of *The Federalist Papers* as early prep for my government final. I IM’ed with Ben, and then Radar came online. In our conversation, he used the phrase “the world’s largest collection of black Santas” four times, and I laughed each time. I told him I was happy for him, having a girlfriend. He said it would be a great summer. I agreed. It was May fifth, but it didn’t have to be. My days had a pleasant identicalness about them. I had always liked that: I liked routine. I liked being bored. I didn’t want to, but I did. And so May fifth could have been any day—until just before midnight, when Margo Roth Spiegelman slid open my screenless bedroom window for the first time since telling me to close it nine years before.

2.

I swiveled around when I heard the window open, and Margo's blue eyes were staring back at me. Her eyes were all I could see at first, but as my vision adjusted, I realized she was wearing black face paint and a black hoodie. "Are you having cybersex?" she asked.

"I'm IM'ing with Ben Starling."

"That doesn't answer my question, perv."

I laughed awkwardly, then walked over and knelt by the window, my face inches from hers. I couldn't imagine why she was here, in my window, like this. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked. Margo and I were still friendly, I guess, but we weren't meet-in-the-dead-of-night-wearing-black-face-paint friendly. She had friends for that, I'm sure. I just wasn't among them.

"I need your car," she explained.

"I don't have a car," I said, which was something of a sore point for me.

"Well, I need your mom's car."

"You have your own car," I pointed out.

Margo puffed out her cheeks and sighed. "Right, but the thing is that my parents have taken the keys to my car and locked them inside a safe, which they put under their bed, and Myrna Mountweazel"—who was her dog—"is sleeping inside their room. And Myrna Mountweazel has a freaking aneurysm whenever she catches sight of me. I mean, I could totally sneak in there and steal the safe and crack it and get my keys out and drive away, but the thing is that it's not even worth trying because Myrna Mountweazel is just going to bark like crazy if I so much as crack open the door. So like I said, I need a car. Also, I need you to drive it, because I have to do eleven things tonight, and at least five of them involve a getaway man."

When I let my sight unfocus, she became nothing but eyes, floating in the ether. And then I locked back on her, and I could see the outline of her face, the paint still wet against her skin. Her cheekbones triangulating into her chin, her pitch-black lips barely turned to a smile. "Any felonies?" I asked.

"Hmm," said Margo. "Remind me if breaking and entering is a felony."

"No," I answered firmly.

"No it's not a felony or no you won't help?"

"No I won't help. Can't you enlist some of your underlings to drive you around?" Lacey and/or Becca were always doing her bidding.

"They're part of the problem, actually," Margo said.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"There are eleven problems," she said somewhat impatiently.

"No felonies," I said.

"I swear to God that you will not be asked to commit a felony."

And right then, the floodlights came on all around Margo's house. In one swift motion, she somersaulted through my window, into my room, and then rolled beneath my bed. Within seconds, her dad was standing on the patio outside. "Margo!" he shouted. "I saw you!"

From beneath my bed, I heard a muffled, "Oh, Christ." Margo scooted out from under the bed, stood up, walked to the window, and said, "Come on, Dad. I'm just trying to have a chat with Quentin. You're always telling me what a fantastic influence he could be on me and everything."

"Just chatting with Quentin?"

"Yes."

“Then why are you wearing black face paint?”

Margo faltered for only the briefest moment. “Dad, to answer that question would take hours of backstory, and I know that you’re probably very tired, so just go back t—”

“In the house,” he thundered. “This minute!”

Margo grabbed hold of my shirt, whispered “Back in a minute” in my ear, and then climbed out the window.

As soon as she left, I grabbed my car keys from my desk. The *keys* are mine; the car, tragically, is not. On my sixteenth birthday, my parents gave me a very small gift, and I knew the moment they handed it to me that it was a car key, and I about peed myself, because they’d said over and over again that they couldn’t afford to give me a car. But when they handed me the tiny wrapped box, I knew they’d been tricking me, that I was getting a car after all. I tore off the wrapping paper and popped open the little box. Indeed, it contained a key.

Upon close inspection, it contained a Chrysler key. A key for a Chrysler minivan. The one and the same Chrysler minivan owned by my mother.

“My present is a key to your car?” I asked my mom.

“Tom,” she said to my dad, “I told you he would get his hopes up.”

“Oh, don’t blame me,” my dad said. “You’re just sublimating your own frustration with my income.”

“Isn’t that snap analysis a tad passive-aggressive?” my mother asked.

“Aren’t rhetorical accusations of passive aggression inherently passive-aggressive?” my dad responded, and they went on like that for a while.

The long and short of it was this: I had access to the vehicular awesomeness that is a late-model Chrysler minivan, except for when my mom was driving it. And since she drove to work every morning, I could only use the car on weekends. Well, weekends and the middle of the goddamned night.

It took Margo more than the promised minute to return to my window, but not much more. But in the time she was gone, I’d started to waffle again. “I’ve got school tomorrow,” I told her.

“Yeah, I know,” Margo answered. “There’s school tomorrow and the day after that, and thinking about that too long could make a girl bonkers. So, yeah. It’s a school night. That’s why we’ve got to get going, because we’ve got to be back by morning.”

“I don’t know.”

“Q,” she said. “Q. Darling. How long have we been dear friends?”

“We’re not friends. We’re neighbors.”

“Oh, Christ, Q. Am I not nice to you? Do I not order my various and sundry minions to be kind to you at school?”

“Uh-huh,” I answered dubiously, although in point of fact I’d always figured it was Margo who had stopped Chuck Parson and his ilk from screwing with us.

She blinked. She’d even painted her eyelids. “Q,” she said, “we have to go.”

And so I went. I slid out the window, and we ran along the side of my house, heads down, until we opened the doors of the minivan. Margo whispered not to close the doors—too much noise—so with the doors open, I put it in neutral, pushed off the cement with my foot, and then let the minivan roll down the driveway. We rolled slowly past a couple houses before I turned on the engine and the headlights. We closed the doors, and then I drove through the serpentine streets of Jefferson Park’s endless-ness, the houses all still new-looking and plastic, like a toy village housing tens of thousands of real people.

Margo started talking. “The thing is they don’t even really *care*; they just feel like my exploits make them look bad. Just now, do you know what he said? He said, ‘I don’t care if you screw up your life, but

don't embarrass us in front of the Jacobsens—they're our *friends*.' Ridiculous. And you have no idea how hard they've made it to get out of that goddamned house. You know how in prison-escape movies they put bundled-up clothes under the blankets to make it look like there's a person in there?" I nodded. "Yeah, well, Mom put a goddamned baby monitor in my room so she could hear my sleep-breathing all night. So I just had to pay Ruthie five bucks to sleep in my room, and then I put bundled-up clothes in *her* room." Ruthie is Margo's little sister. "It's *Mission Impossible* shit now. Used to be I could just sneak out like a regular goddamned American—just climb out the window and jump off the roof. But God, these days, it's like living in a fascist dictatorship."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Well, first we're going to Publix. Because for reasons I'll explain later, I need you to go grocery shopping for me. And then to Wal-Mart."

"What, we're just gonna go on a grand tour of every commercial establishment in Central Florida?" I asked.

"Tonight, darling, we are going to right a lot of wrongs. And we are going to wrong some rights. The first shall be last; the last shall be first; the meek shall do some earth-inheriting. But before we can radically reshape the world, we need to shop." I pulled into the Publix then, the parking lot almost entirely empty, and parked.

"Listen," she said, "how much money do you have on you right now?"

"Zero dollars and zero cents," I answered. I turned off the ignition and looked over at her. She wriggled a hand into a pocket of her tight, dark jeans and pulled out several hundred-dollar bills. "Fortunately, the good Lord has provided," she said.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Bat mitzvah money, bitch. I'm not allowed to access the account, but I know my parents' password because they use 'myrnamountw 3az3l' for everything. So I made a withdrawal." I tried to blink away the awe, but she saw the way I was looking at her and smirked at me. "Basically," she said, "this is going to be the best night of your life."

3.

The thing about Margo Roth Spiegelman is that really all I could ever do was let her talk, and then when she stopped talking encourage her to go on, due to the facts that 1. I was incontestably in love with her, and 2. She was absolutely unprecedented in every way, and 3. She never really asked me any questions, so the only way to avoid silence was to keep her talking.

And so in the parking lot of Publix she said, “So, right. I made you a list. If you have any questions, just call my cell. Listen, that reminds me, I took the liberty of putting some supplies in the back of the van earlier.”

“What, like, before I agreed to all this?”

“Well, yes. Technically yes. Anyway, just call me if you have any questions, but with the Vaseline, you want the one that’s bigger than your fist. There’s like a Baby Vaseline, and then there’s a Mommy Vaseline, and then there’s a big fat Daddy of a Vaseline, and that’s the one you want. If they don’t have that, then get, like, three of the Mommies.” She handed me the list and a hundred-dollar bill and said, “That should cover it.”

Margo’s list:

3 whole Catfish, Wrapped separately
Veet (It’s for Shaving your legs Only you don’t Need A razor
It’s with all the Girly cosmetic stuff)
Vaseline
six-pack, Mountain Dew
One dozen Tulips
one Bottle Of water
Tissues
one Can of blue Spray paint

“Interesting capitalization,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m a big believer in random capitalization. The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle.”

Now, I’m not sure what you’re supposed to say to the checkout woman at twelve-thirty in the morning when you put thirteen pounds of catfish, Veet, the fat-daddy-size tub of Vaseline, a six-pack of Mountain Dew, a can of blue spray paint, and a dozen tulips on the conveyor belt. But here’s what I said: “This isn’t as weird as it looks.”

The woman cleared her throat but didn’t look up. “Still weird,” she muttered.

“I really don’t want to get in any trouble,” I told Margo back in the minivan as she used the bottled water to wipe the black paint off her face with the tissues. She’d only needed the makeup, apparently, to get out of the house. “In my admission letter from Duke it actually explicitly says that they won’t take me if I get arrested.”

“You’re a very anxious person, Q.”

“Let’s just please not get in trouble,” I said. “I mean, I want to have fun and everything, but not at the expense of, like, my future.”

She looked up at me, her face mostly revealed now, and she smiled just the littlest bit. “It amazes me that you can find all that shit even remotely interesting.”

“Huh?”

“College: getting in or not getting in. Trouble: getting in or not getting in. School: getting A’s or getting D’s. Career: having or not having. House: big or small, owning or renting. Money: having or not having. It’s all so boring.”

I started to say something, to say that she obviously cared a little, because she had good grades and was going to the University of Florida’s honors program next year, but she just said, “Wal-Mart.”

We entered Wal-Mart together and picked up that thing from infomercials called The Club, which locks a car’s steering wheel into place. As we walked through the Juniors department, I asked Margo, “Why do we need The Club?”

Margo managed to speak in her usual manic soliloquy without answering my question. “Did you know that for pretty much the entire history of the human species, the average life span was less than thirty years? You could count on ten years or so of real adulthood, right? There was no planning for retirement. There was no planning for a career. There was no *planning*. No time for planning. No time for a future. But then the life spans started getting longer, and people started having more and more future, and so they spent more time thinking about it. About the future. And now life has *become* the future. Every moment of your life is lived for the future—you go to high school so you can go to college so you can get a good job so you can get a nice house so you can afford to send your kids to college so they can get a good job so they can get a nice house so they can afford to send their kids to college.”

It felt like Margo was just rambling to avoid the question at hand. So I repeated it. “Why do we need The Club?”

Margo patted me in the middle of the back softly. “I mean, obviously this is all going to be revealed to you before the night is over.” And then, in boating supplies, Margo located an air horn. She took it out of the box and held it up in the air, and I said, “No,” and she said, “No what?” And I said, “No, don’t blow the air horn,” except when I got to about the *b* in *blow*, she squeezed on it and it let out an excruciatingly loud honk that felt in my head like the auditory equivalent of an aneurysm, and then she said, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you. What was that?” And I said, “Stop b—” and then she did it again.

A Wal-Mart employee just a little older than us walked up to us then and said, “Hey, you can’t use that in here,” and Margo said, with seeming sincerity, “Sorry, I didn’t know that,” and the guy said, “Oh, it’s cool. I don’t mind, actually.” And then the conversation seemed over, except the guy could not stop looking at Margo, and honestly I don’t blame him, because she is hard to stop looking at, and then finally he said, “What are you guys up to tonight?”

And Margo said, “Not much. You?”

And he said, “I get off at one and then I’m going out to this bar down on Orange, if you want to come. But you’d have to drop off your brother; they’re really strict about ID’s.”

Her what?! “I’m not her brother,” I said, looking at the guy’s sneakers.

And then Margo proceeded to lie. “He’s actually my *cousin*,” she said. Then she sidled up to me, put her hand around my waist so that I could feel each of her fingers taut against my hip bone, and she added, “*And* my lover.”

The guy just rolled his eyes and walked away, and Margo’s hand lingered for a minute and I took the opportunity to put my arm around her. “You really are my favorite cousin,” I told her. She smiled and bumped me softly with her hip, spinning out of my embrace.

“Don’t I know it,” she said.

4.

We were driving down a blessedly empty I-4, and I was following Margo's directions. The clock on the dashboard said it was 1:07.

"It's pretty, huh?" she said. She was turned away from me, staring out the window, so I could hardly see her. "I love driving fast under streetlights."

"Light," I said, "the visible reminder of Invisible Light."

"That's beautiful," she said.

"T. S. Eliot," I said. "You read it, too. In English last year." I hadn't actually ever read the whole poem that line was from, but a couple of the parts I did read got stuck in my head.

"Oh, it's a quote," she said, a little disappointed. I saw her hand on the center console. I could have put my own hand on the center console and then our hands would have been in the same place at the same time. But I didn't. "Say it again," she said.

"Light, the visible reminder of Invisible Light."

"Yeah. Damn, that's good. That must help with your lady friend."

"Ex-lady friend," I corrected her.

"Suzie dumped you?" Margo asked.

"How do you know *she* dumped *me*?"

"Oh, sorry."

"Although she did," I admitted, and Margo laughed. The breakup had happened months ago, but I didn't blame Margo for failing to pay attention to the world of lower-caste romance. What happens in the band room stays in the band room.

Margo put her feet up on the dashboard and wiggled her toes to the cadence of her speaking. She always talked like that, with this discernible rhythm, like she was reciting poetry. "Right, well, I'm sorry to hear that. But I can relate. My lovely boyfriend of lo these many months is fucking my best friend."

I looked over but her hair was all in her face, so I couldn't make out if she was kidding. "Seriously?" She didn't say anything. "But you were just laughing with him this morning. I saw you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I heard about it before first period, and then I found them both talking together and I started screaming bloody murder, and Becca ran into the arms of Clint Bauer, and Jase was just standing there like a dumbass with the chaw drool running out of his stank mouth."

I had clearly misinterpreted the scene in the hallway. "That's weird, because Chuck Parson asked me this morning what I knew about you and Jase."

"Yeah, well, Chuck does as he's told, I guess. Probably trying to find out for Jase who knew."

"Jesus, why would he hook up with Becca?"

"Well, she's not known for her personality or generosity of spirit, so it's probably because she's hot."

"She's not as hot as you," I said, before I could think better of it.

"That's always seemed so ridiculous to me, that people would want to be around someone because they're pretty. It's like picking your breakfast cereals based on color instead of taste. It's the next exit, by the way. But I'm not pretty, not close up anyway. Generally, the closer people get to me the less hot they find me."

"That's—" I started.

"Whatever," she answered.

It struck me as somewhat unfair that an asshole like Jason Worthington would get to have sex with both Margo *and* Becca, when perfectly likable individuals such as myself don't get to have sex with either of them—or anyone else, for that matter. That said, I like to think that I am the type of person who wouldn't hook up with Becca Arrington. She may be hot, but she is also 1. aggressively vapid, and 2. an absolute, unadulterated, raging bitch. Those of us who frequent the band room have long suspected that Becca maintains her lovely figure by eating nothing but the souls of kittens and the dreams of impoverished children. “Becca does sort of suck,” I said, trying to draw Margo back into conversation.

“Yeah,” she answered, looking out the passenger window, her hair reflecting oncoming streetlights. I thought for a second she might be crying, but she rallied quickly, pulling her hoodie up and taking The Club out of the Wal-Mart bag. “Well, this'll be fun at any rate,” she said as she ripped open The Club's packaging.

“May I ask where we're going yet?”

“Becca's,” she answered.

“Uh-oh,” I said as I pulled up to a stop sign. I put the minivan in park and started to tell Margo that I was taking her home.

“No felonies. Promise. We need to find Jase's car. Becca's street is the next one up on the right, but he wouldn't park his car on her street, because her parents are home. Try the one after. That's the first thing.”

“Okay,” I said, “but then we go home.”

“No, then we move on to Part Two of Eleven.”

“Margo, this is a bad idea.”

“Just drive,” she said, and so I just did. We found Jase's Lexus two blocks down from Becca's street, parked in a cul-de-sac. Before I'd even come to a complete stop, Margo jumped out of the minivan with The Club in hand. She pulled open the Lexus's driver-side door, sat down in the seat, and proceeded to attach The Club to Jase's steering wheel. Then she softly closed the door to the Lexus.

“Dumb bastard never locks that car,” she mumbled as she climbed back into the minivan. She pocketed the key to The Club. She reached over and tousled my hair. “Part One—done. Now, to Becca's house.”

As I drove, Margo explained Parts Two and Three to me.

“That's quite brilliant,” I said, even though inside I was bursting with a shimmering nervousness.

I turned onto Becca's street and parked two houses down from her McMansion. Margo crawled into the wayback of the minivan and returned with a pair of binoculars and a digital camera. She looked through the binoculars first, and then handed them to me. I could see a light on in the house's basement, but no movement. I was mostly surprised that the house even *had* a basement—you can't dig very deep before hitting water in most of Orlando.

I reached into my pocket, grabbed my cell phone, and dialed the number that Margo recited to me. The phone rang once, twice, and then a groggy male voice answered, “Hello?”

“Mr. Arrington?” I asked. Margo wanted me to call because no one would ever recognize my voice.

“Who is this? God, what time is it?”

“Sir, I think you should know that your daughter is currently having sex with Jason Worthington in your basement.” And then I hung up. Part Two: accompli.

Margo and I threw open the doors of the minivan and charged down the street, diving onto our stomachs just behind the hedge ringing Becca's yard. Margo handed me the camera, and I watched as an upstairs bedroom light came on, and then a stairway light, and then the kitchen light. And finally, the stairway down to the basement.

“Here he comes,” Margo whispered, and I didn't know what she meant until, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a shirtless Jason Worthington wiggling out of the basement window. He took off sprinting across

the lawn, naked but for his boxer shorts, and as he approached I jumped up and took a picture of him, completing Part Three. The flash surprised both of us, I think, and he blinked at me through the darkness for a white-hot moment before running off into the night.

Margo tugged on my jeans leg; I looked down at her, and she was smiling goofily. I reached my hand down, helped her up, and then we raced back to the car. I was putting the key in the ignition when she said, “Let me see the picture.”

I handed her the camera, and we watched it come up on the screen together, our heads almost touching. Upon seeing the stunned, pale face of Jason Worthington, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh, God,” Margo said, and pointed. In the rush of the moment, it seemed that Jason had been unable to get Little Jason inside his boxers, and so there it was, hanging out, digitally captured for posterity.

“It’s a penis,” Margo said, “in the same sense that Rhode Island is a state: it may have an illustrious history, but it sure isn’t big.”

I looked back at the house and noticed that the basement light was now off. I found myself feeling slightly bad for Jason—it wasn’t his fault he had a micropenis and a brilliantly vindictive girlfriend. But then again, in sixth grade, Jase promised not to punch my arm if I ate a live earthworm, so I ate a live earthworm and then he punched me in the face. So I didn’t feel very bad for very long.

When I looked over at Margo, she was staring at the house through her binoculars. “We have to go,” Margo said. “Into the basement.”

“What? Why?”

“Part Four. Get his clothes in case he tries to sneak back into her house. Part Five. Leave fish for Becca.”

“No.”

“Yes. Now,” she said. “She’s upstairs getting yelled at by her parents. But, like, how long does that lecture last? I mean, what do you say? ‘You shouldn’t screw Margo’s boyfriend in the basement.’ It’s a one-sentence lecture, basically. So we have to hustle.”

She got out of the car with the spray paint in one hand and one of the catfish in the other. I whispered, “This is a bad idea,” but I followed behind her, crouched down as she was, until we were standing in front of the still-open basement window.

“I’ll go first,” she said. She went in feetfirst and was standing on Becca’s computer desk, half in the house and half out of it, when I asked her, “Can’t I just be lookout?”

“Get your skinny ass in here,” she answered, and so I did. Quickly, I grabbed all the boy-type clothes I saw on Becca’s lavender-carpeted floor. A pair of jeans with a leather belt, a pair of flip-flops, a Winter Park High School Wildcats baseball cap, and a baby blue polo shirt. I turned back to Margo, who handed me the paper-wrapped catfish and one of Becca’s sparkly purple pens. She told me what to write:

A message from Margo Roth Spiegelman: Your friendship with her—it sleeps with the fishes

Margo hid the fish between folded pairs of shorts in Becca’s closet. I could hear footsteps upstairs, and tapped Margo on the shoulder and looked at her, my eyes bulging. She just smiled and leisurely pulled out the spray paint. I scrambled out the window, and then turned back to watch as Margo leaned over the desk and calmly shook the spray paint. In an elegant motion—the kind you associate with calligraphy or Zorro—she spray-painted the letter *M* onto the wall above the desk.

She reached her hands up to me, and I pulled her through the window. She was just starting to stand when we heard a high-pitched voice shout, “DWIGHT!” I grabbed the clothes and took off running, Margo behind me.

I heard, but did not see, the front door of Becca’s house swing open, but I didn’t stop or turn around, not when a booming voice shouted “HALT!” and not even when I heard the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being pumped.

I heard Margo mumble “gun” behind me—she didn’t sound upset about it exactly; she was just making

an observation—and then rather than walk around Becca’s hedge, I dove over it head-first. I’m not sure how I intended to land—maybe an artful somersault or something—but at any rate, I spilled onto the asphalt of the road, landing on my left shoulder. Fortunately, Jase’s bundle of clothes hit the ground first, softening the blow.

I swore, and before I could even start to stand, I felt Margo’s hands pulling me up, and then we were in the car and I was driving in reverse with the lights off, which is how I nearly came to run over the mostly naked starting shortstop of the Winter Park High School Wildcats baseball team. Jase was running very fast, but he didn’t seem to be running anyplace in particular. I felt another stab of regret as we backed up past him, so I rolled the window halfway down and threw his polo in his general direction. Fortunately, I don’t think he saw either Margo or me, and he had no reason to recognize the minivan since—and I don’t want to sound bitter or anything by dwelling on this—I *can’t drive it to school*.

“Why the hell would you do that?” Margo asked as I turned on the lights and, driving forward now, began to navigate the suburban labyrinth back toward the interstate.

“I felt bad for him.”

“For him? Why? Because he’s been cheating on me for six weeks? Because he’s probably given me god-only-knows-what disease? Because he’s a disgusting idiot who will probably be rich and happy his whole life, thus proving the absolute unfairness of the cosmos?”

“He just looked sort of desperate,” I said.

“Whatever. We’re going to Karin’s house. It’s on Pennsylvania, by the ABC Liquors.”

“Don’t be pissed at me,” I said. “I just had a guy point a freaking shotgun at me for helping you, so don’t be pissed at me.”

“I’M NOT PISSED AT YOU!” Margo shouted, and then punched the dashboard.

“Well, you’re screaming.”

“I thought maybe—whatever. I thought maybe he wasn’t cheating.”

“Oh.”

“Karin told me at school. And I guess a lot of people have known for a long time. And no one told me until Karin. I thought maybe she was just trying to stir up drama or something.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Yeah. Yeah. I can’t believe I even care.”

“My heart is really pounding,” I said.

“That’s how you know you’re having fun,” Margo said.

But it didn’t feel like fun; it felt like a heart attack. I pulled over into a 7-Eleven parking lot and held my finger to my jugular vein while watching the : in the digital clock blink every second. When I turned to Margo, she was rolling her eyes at me. “My pulse is dangerously high,” I explained.

“I don’t even remember the last time I got excited about something like that. The adrenaline in the throat and the lungs expanding.”

“In through the nose out through the mouth,” I answered her.

“All your little anxieties. It’s just so . . .”

“Cute?”

“Is that what they’re calling childish these days?” She smiled.

Margo crawled into the backseat and came back with a purse. *How much shit did she put back there?* I thought. She opened up the purse and pulled out a full bottle of nail polish so darkly red it was almost black. “While you calm down, I’m going to paint my nails,” she said, smiling up at me through her bangs. “You just take your time.”

And so we sat there, she with her nail polish balanced on the dash, and me with a shaky finger on the pulse of myself. It was a good color of nail polish, and Margo had nice fingers, thinner and bonier than the rest of her, which was all curves and soft edges. She had the kind of fingers you want to interlace with your own. I remembered them against my hip bone in Wal-Mart, which felt like days ago. My heartbeat slowed. And I tried to tell myself: Margo's right. There's nothing out here to be afraid of, not in this little city on this quiet night.

5.

“Part Six,” Margo said once we were driving again. She was waving her fingernails through the air, almost like she was playing piano. “Leave flowers on Karin’s doorstep with apologetic note.”

“What’d you do to her?”

“Well, when she told me about Jase, I sort of shot the messenger.”

“How so?” I asked. We were pulled up to a stoplight, and some kids in a sports car next to us were revving their engine—as if I was going to race the Chrysler. When you floored it, it whimpered.

“Well, I don’t remember exactly what I called her, but it was something along the lines of ‘sniveling, repulsive, idiotic, backneridden, snaggletoothed, fat-assed bitch with the worst hair in Central Florida—and that’s saying something.’”

“Her hair *is* ridiculous,” I said.

“I know. That was the only thing I said about her that was true. When you say nasty things about people, you should never say the true ones, because you can’t really fully and honestly take those back, you know? I mean, there are highlights. And there are streaks. And then there are skunk stripes.”

As I drove up to Karin’s house, Margo disappeared into the wayback and returned with the bouquet of tulips. Taped to one of the flowers’ stems was a note Margo’d folded to look like an envelope. She handed me the bouquet once I stopped, and I sprinted down a sidewalk, placed the flowers on Karin’s doorstep, and sprinted back.

“Part Seven,” she said as soon as I was back in the minivan. “Leave a fish for the lovely Mr. Worthington.”

“I suspect he won’t be home yet,” I said, just the slightest hint of pity in my voice.

“I hope the cops find him barefoot, frenzied, and naked in some roadside ditch a week from now,” Margo answered dispassionately.

“Remind me never to cross Margo Roth Spiegelman,” I mumbled, and Margo laughed.

“Seriously,” she said. “We bring the fucking *rain* down on our enemies.”

“Your enemies,” I corrected.

“We’ll see,” she answered quickly, and then perked up and said, “Oh, hey, I’ll handle this one. The thing about Jason’s house is they have this crazy good security system. And we can’t have another panic attack.”

“Um,” I said.

Jason lived just down the road from Karin, in this uber-rich subdivision called Casavilla. All the houses in Casavilla are Spanish-style with the red-tile roofs and everything, only they weren’t built by the Spanish. They were built by Jason’s dad, who is one of the richest land developers in Florida. “Big, ugly homes for big, ugly people,” I told Margo as we pulled into Casavilla.

“No shit. If I ever end up being the kind of person who has one kid and seven bedrooms, do me a favor and shoot me.”

We pulled up in front of Jase’s house, an architectural monstrosity that looked generally like an oversize Spanish hacienda except for three thick Doric columns going up to the roof. Margo grabbed the second catfish from the backseat, uncapped a pen with her teeth, and scrawled in handwriting that didn’t look much like hers:

MS’s love For you: it Sleeps With the Fishes

“Listen, keep the car on,” she said. She put Jase’s WPHS baseball hat on backward.

“Okay,” I said.

“Keep it in drive,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, and felt my pulse rising. *In through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth.* Catfish and spray paint in hand, Margo threw the door open, jogged across the Worthingtons’ expansive front lawn, and then hid behind an oak tree. She waved at me through the darkness, and I waved back, and then she took a dramatically deep breath, puffed her cheeks out, turned, and ran.

She’d only taken one stride when the house lit up like a municipal Christmas tree, and a siren started blaring. I briefly contemplated abandoning Margo to her fate, but just kept breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth as she ran toward the house. She heaved the fish through a window, but the sirens were so loud I could barely even hear the glass breaking. And then, just because she’s Margo Roth Spiegelman, she took a moment to carefully spray-paint a lovely *M* on the part of the window that wasn’t shattered. Then she was running all out toward the car, and I had a foot on the accelerator and a foot on the brake, and the Chrysler felt at that moment like a Thoroughbred racehorse. Margo ran so fast her hat blew off behind her, and then she jumped into the car, and we were gone before she even got the door closed.

I stopped at the stop sign at the end of the street, and Margo said, “What the hell? Go go go go go,” and I said, “Oh, right,” because I had forgotten that I was throwing caution to the wind and everything. I rolled through the three other stop signs in Casavilla, and we were a mile down Pennsylvania Avenue before we saw a cop car roar past us with its lights on.

“That was pretty hardcore,” Margo said. “I mean, even for me. To put it Q-style, my pulse is a little elevated.”

“Jesus,” I said. “I mean, you couldn’t have just left it in his car? Or at least at the doorstep?”

“We bring the fucking *rain*, Q. Not the scattered showers.”

“Tell me Part Eight is less terrifying.”

“Don’t worry. Part Eight is child’s play. We’re going back to Jefferson Park. Lacey’s house. You know where she lives, right?” I did, although God knows Lacey Pemberton would never deign to have me over. She lived on the opposite side of Jefferson Park, a mile away from me, in a nice condo on top of a stationery store—the same block the dead guy had lived on, actually. I’d been to the building before, because friends of my parents lived on the third floor. There were two locked doors before you even got to the condos. I figured even Margo Roth Spiegelman couldn’t break into that place.

“So has Lacey been naughty or nice?” I asked.

“Lacey has been *distinctly* naughty,” Margo answered. She was looking out the passenger window again, talking away from me, so I could barely hear her. “I mean, we have been friends since kindergarten.”

“And?”

“And she didn’t tell me about Jase. But not just that. When I look back on it, she’s just a *terrible* friend. I mean, for instance, do you think I’m fat?”

“Jesus, no,” I said. “You’re—” And I stopped myself from saying *not skinny, but that’s the whole point of you; the point of you is that you don’t look like a boy*. “You should not lose any weight.”

She laughed, waved her hand at me, and said, “You just love my big ass.” I turned from the road for a second and glanced over, and I shouldn’t have, because she could read my face and my face said: Well, first off I wouldn’t say it’s *big* exactly and second off, it is kind of spectacular. But it was more than that. You can’t divorce Margo the person from Margo the body. You can’t see one without seeing the other. You looked at Margo’s eyes and you saw both their blueness and their Margo-ness. In the end, you could not say that Margo Roth Spiegelman was fat, or that she was skinny, any more than you can say that the Eiffel Tower is or is not lonely. Margo’s beauty was a kind of sealed vessel of perfection—uncracked and uncrackable.

“But she would always make these little comments,” Margo continued. “I’d loan you these shorts but I

don't think they'd fit right on you.' Or, 'You're so spunky. I love how you just make guys fall in love with your personality.' Constantly undermining me. I don't think she ever said anything that wasn't an attempt at undermining."

"Undermining."

"Thank you, Annoying McMasterGrammician."

"Grammarians," I said.

"Oh my God I'm going to kill you!" But she was laughing.

I drove around the perimeter of Jefferson Park so we could avoid driving past our houses, just in case our parents had woken up and discovered us missing. We drove in along the lake (Lake Jefferson), and then turned onto Jefferson Court and drove into Jefferson Park's little faux downtown, which felt eerily deserted and quiet. We found Lacey's black SUV parked in front of the sushi restaurant. We stopped a block away in the first parking spot we could find not beneath a streetlight.

"Would you please hand me the last fish?" Margo asked me. I was glad to get rid of the fish because it was already starting to smell. And then Margo wrote on the paper wrapper in her lettering:

your Friendship with ms Sleeps with The fishes

We wove our way around the circular glow of the streetlights, walking as casually as two people can when one of them (Margo) is holding a sizable fish wrapped in paper and the other one (me) is holding a can of blue spray paint. A dog barked, and we both froze, but then it was quiet again, and soon we were at Lacey's car.

"Well, that makes it harder," Margo said, seeing it was locked. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a length of wire that had once been a coat hanger. It took her less than a minute to jimmy the lock open. I was duly awed.

Once she had the driver's-side door open, she reached over and opened my side. "Hey, help me get the seat up," she whispered. Together we pulled the backseat up. Margo slipped the fish underneath it, and then she counted to three, and in one motion we slammed the seat down on the fish. I heard the disgusting sound of catfish guts exploding. I let myself imagine the way Lacey's SUV would smell after just one day of roasting in the sun, and I'll admit that a kind of serenity washed over me. And then Margo said, "Put an *M* on the roof for me."

I didn't even have to think about it for a full second before I nodded, scrambled up onto the back bumper, and then leaned over, quickly spraying a gigantic *M* all across the roof. Generally, I am opposed to vandalism. But I am also generally opposed to Lacey Pemberton—and in the end, that proved to be the more deeply held conviction. I jumped off the car. I ran through the darkness—my breath coming fast and short—for the block back to the minivan. As I put my hand on the steering wheel, I noticed my pointer finger was blue. I held it up for Margo to see. She smiled, and held out her own blue finger, and then they touched, and her blue finger was pushing against mine softly and my pulse failed to slow. And then after a long time, she said, "Part Nine—downtown."

It was 2:49 in the morning. I had never, in my entire life, felt less tired.

6.

Tourists never go to downtown Orlando, because there's nothing there but a few skyscrapers owned by banks and insurance companies. It's the kind of downtown that becomes absolutely deserted at night and on the weekends, except for a few nightclubs half-filled with the desperate and the desperately lame. As I followed Margo's directions through the maze of one-way streets, we saw a few people sleeping on the sidewalk or sitting on benches, but nobody was moving. Margo rolled down the window, and I felt the thick air blow across my face, warmer than night ought to be. I glanced over and saw strands of hair blowing all around her face. Even though I could see her there, I felt entirely alone among these big and empty buildings, like I'd survived the apocalypse and the world had been given to me, this whole and amazing and endless world, mine for the exploring.

"You just giving me the tour?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm trying to get to the SunTrust Building. It's right next to the Asparagus."

"Oh," I said, because for once on this night I had useful information. "That's on South." I drove down a few blocks and then turned. Margo pointed happily, and yes, there, before us, was the Asparagus.

The Asparagus is not, technically, an asparagus spear, nor is it derived from asparagus parts. It is just a sculpture that bears an uncanny resemblance to a thirty-foot-tall piece of asparagus—although I've also heard it likened to:

1. A green-glass beanstalk
2. An abstract representation of a tree
3. A greener, glassier, uglier Washington Monument
4. The Jolly Green Giant's gigantic jolly green phallus

At any rate, it certainly does *not* look like a Tower of Light, which is the actual name of the sculpture. I pulled in front of a parking meter and looked over at Margo. I caught her staring into the middle distance just for a moment, her eyes blank, looking not at the Asparagus, but past it. It was the first time I thought something might be wrong—not my-boyfriend-is-an-ass wrong, but really *wrong*. And I should have said something. Of course. I should have said thing after thing after thing after thing. But I only said, "May I ask why you have taken me to the Asparagus?"

She turned her head to me and shot me a smile. Margo was so beautiful that even her fake smiles were convincing. "We gotta check on our progress. And the best place to do that is from the top of the SunTrust Building."

I rolled my eyes. "Nope. No. No way. You said no breaking and entering."

"This isn't breaking and entering. It's just entering, because there's an unlocked door."

"Margo, that's ridiculous. Of c—"

"I will acknowledge that over the course of the evening there has been both breaking and entering. There was entering at Becca's house. There was breaking at Jase's house. And there will be entering here. But there has never been simultaneous breaking and entering. Theoretically, the cops could charge us with breaking, and they could charge us with entering, but they could not charge us with breaking *and* entering. So I've kept my promise."

"Surely the SunTrust Building has, like, a security guard or whatever," I said.

"They do," she said, unbuckling her seat belt. "Of course they do. His name is Gus."

We walked in through the front door. Sitting behind a broad, semicircular desk sat a young guy with a struggling goatee wearing a Regents Security uniform. "What's up, Margo?" he said.

"Hey, Gus," she answered.

“Who’s the kid?”

WE ARE THE SAME AGE! I wanted to shout, but I let Margo talk for me. “This is my colleague, Q. Q., this is Gus.”

“What’s up, Q?” asked Gus.

Oh, we’re just scattering some dead fish about town, breaking some windows, photographing naked guys, hanging out in sky-scraper lobbies at three-fifteen in the morning, that kind of thing. “Not much,” I answered.

“Elevators are down for the night,” Gus said. “Had to shut ’em off at three. You’re welcome to take the stairs, though.”

“Cool. See ya, Gus.”

“See ya, Margo.”

“How the hell do you know the security guard at the SunTrust Building?” I asked once we were safely in the stairwell.

“He was a senior when we were freshmen,” she answered. “We gotta hustle, okay? Time’s a-wastin’.” Margo started taking the stairs two at a time, flying up, one arm on the rail, and I tried to keep pace with her, but couldn’t. Margo didn’t play any sports, but she liked to run—I sometimes saw her running by herself listening to music in Jefferson Park. I, however, did not like to run. Or, for that matter, engage in any kind of physical exertion. But now I tried to keep up a steady pace, wiping the sweat off my forehead and ignoring the burning in my legs. When I got to the twenty-fifth floor, Margo was standing on the landing, waiting for me.

“Check it out,” she said. She opened the stairwell door and we were inside a huge room with an oak table as long as two cars, and a long bank of floor-to-ceiling windows. “Conference room,” she said. “It’s got the best view in the whole building.” I followed her as she walked along the windows. “Okay, so there,” she said pointing, “is Jefferson Park. See our houses? Lights still off, so that’s good.” She moved over a few panes. “Jase’s house. Lights off, no more cop cars. Excellent, although it might mean he’s made it home, which is unfortunate.” Becca’s house was too far away to see, even from up here.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she walked right up to the glass and leaned her forehead against it. I hung back, but then she grabbed my T-shirt and pulled me forward. I didn’t want our collective weight against a single pane of glass, but she kept pulling me forward, and I could feel her balled fist in my side, and finally I put my head against the glass as gently as possible and looked around.

From above, Orlando was pretty well lit. Beneath us I could see the flashing DON’T WALK signs at intersections, and the streetlights running up and down the city in a perfect grid until downtown ended and the winding streets and cul-de-sacs of Orlando’s infinite suburb started.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

Margo scoffed. “Really? You seriously think so?”

“I mean, well, maybe not,” I said, although it was. When I saw Orlando from an airplane, it looked like a LEGO set sunk into an ocean of green. Here, at night, it looked like a real place—but for the first time, a place I could see. As I walked around the conference room, and then through the other offices on the floor, I could see it all: there was school. There was Jefferson Park. There, in the distance, Disney World. There was Wet ’n Wild. There, the 7-Eleven where Margo painted her nails and I fought for breath. It was all here—my whole world, and I could see it just by walking around a building. “It’s more impressive,” I said out loud. “From a distance, I mean. You can’t see the wear on things, you know? You can’t see the rust or the weeds or the paint cracking. You see the place as someone once imagined it.”

“Everything’s uglier close up,” she said.

“Not you,” I answered before thinking better of it.

Her forehead still against the glass, she turned to me and smiled. “Here’s a tip: you’re cute when you’re confident. And less when you’re not.” Before I had a chance to say anything, her eyes went back to the view and she started talking. “Here’s what’s not beautiful about it: from here, you can’t see the rust or the cracked paint or whatever, but you can tell what the place really is. You see how fake it all is. It’s not even hard enough to be made out of plastic. It’s a paper town. I mean look at it, Q: look at all those cul-de-sacs, those streets that turn in on themselves, all the houses that were built to fall apart. All those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm. All the paper kids drinking beer some bum bought for them at the paper convenience store. Everyone demented with the mania of owning things. All the things paper-thin and paper-frail. And all the people, too. I’ve lived here for eighteen years and I have never once in my life come across anyone who cares about anything that matters.”

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” I said. We were both staring into the inky distance, the cul-de-sacs and quarter-acre lots. But her shoulder was against my arm, and the backs of our hands were touching, and although I was not looking at Margo, pressing myself against the glass felt almost like pressing myself against her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Maybe things would have been different for me if I’d been hanging out with you the whole time instead of—ugh. Just, God. I just hate myself so much for even caring about my, quote, friends. I mean, just so you know, it’s not that I am oh-so-upset about Jason. Or Becca. Or even Lacey, although I actually liked her. But it was the last string. It was a lame string, for sure, but it was the one I had left, and every paper girl needs at least one string, right?”

And here is what I said. I said, “You would be welcome at our lunch table tomorrow.”

“That’s sweet,” she answered, her voice trailing off. She turned to me and nodded softly. I smiled. She smiled. I believed the smile. We walked to the stairs and then ran down them. At the bottom of each flight, I jumped off the bottom step and clicked my heels to make her laugh, and she laughed. I thought I was cheering her up. I thought she was cheerable. I thought maybe if I could be confident, something might happen between us.

I was wrong.

7.

Sitting in the minivan with the keys in the ignition but the engine not yet started, she asked, “What time do your parents get up, by the way?”

“I don’t know, like, six-fifteen?” It was 3:51. “I mean, we have two-plus hours and we’re through with nine parts.”

“I know, but I saved the most laborious one for last. Anyway, we’ll get it all done. Part Ten—Q’s turn to pick a victim.”

“What?”

“I already picked a punishment. Now you just pick who we’re going to rain our mighty wrath down on.”

“Upon whom we are going to rain our mighty wrath,” I corrected her, and she shook her head in disgust. “And I don’t really have anyone upon whom I want to rain down my wrath,” I said, because in truth I didn’t. I always felt like you had to be important to have enemies. Example: Historically, Germany has had more enemies than Luxembourg. Margo Roth Spiegelman was Germany. And Great Britain. And the United States. And czarist Russia. Me, I’m Luxembourg. Just sitting around, tending sheep, and yodeling.

“What about Chuck?” she asked.

“Hmm,” I said. Chuck Parson was pretty horrible in all those years before he’d been reined in. Aside from the cafeteria conveyor belt debacle, he once grabbed me outside school while I waited for the bus and twisted my arm and kept saying, “Call yourself a faggot.” That was his all-purpose, I-have-a-vocabulary-of-twelve-words-so-don’t-expect-a-wide-variety-of-insults insult. And even though it was ridiculously childish, in the end I had to call myself a faggot, which really annoyed me, because 1. I don’t think that word should ever be used by anyone, let alone me, and 2. As it happens, I am not gay, and furthermore, 3. Chuck Parson made it out like calling yourself a faggot was the ultimate humiliation, even though there’s nothing at all embarrassing about being gay, which I was trying to say while he twisted my arm farther and farther toward my shoulder blade, but he just kept saying, “If you’re so proud of being a faggot, why don’t you admit that you’re a faggot, faggot?”

Clearly, Chuck Parson was no Aristotle when it came to logic. But he was six three, and 270 pounds, which counts for something.

“You could make a case for Chuck,” I acknowledged. And then I turned on the car and started to make my way back toward the interstate. I didn’t know where we were going, but we sure as hell weren’t staying downtown.

“Remember at the Crown School of Dance?” she asked. “I was just thinking about that tonight.”

“Ugh. Yeah.”

“I’m sorry about that, by the way. I have no idea why I went along with him.”

“Yeah. It’s all good,” I said, but remembering the godforsaken Crown School of Dance pissed me off, and I said, “Yeah. Chuck Parson. You know where he lives?”

“I knew I could bring out your vengeful side. He’s in College Park. Get off at Princeton.” I turned onto the interstate entrance ramp and floored it. “Whoa there,” Margo said. “Don’t break the Chrysler.”

In sixth grade, a bunch of kids including Margo and Chuck and me were forced by our parents to take ballroom dancing lessons at the Crown School of Humiliation, Degradation, and Dance. And how it worked was the boys would stand on one side and the girls would stand on the other and then when the teacher told us to, the boys would walk over to the girls and the boy would say, “May I have this dance?” and the girl would say, “You may.” Girls were *not allowed* to say no. But then one day—we were doing the fox-trot—Chuck Parson convinced every single girl to say no to me. Not anyone else. Just me. So I walked across to

Mary Beth Shortz and I said, “May I have this dance?” and she said no. And then I asked another girl, and then another, and then Margo, who also said no, and then another, and then I started to cry.

The only thing worse than getting rejected at dance school is crying about getting rejected at dance school, and the only thing worse than that is going to the dance teacher and saying through your tears, “The girls are saying no to me and they’re not *supposedtuh*.” So of course I went weeping to the teacher, and I spent the majority of middle school trying to live down that one embarrassing event. So, long story short, Chuck Parson kept me from ever dancing the fox-trot, which doesn’t seem like a particularly horrible thing to do to a sixth-grader. And I wasn’t really pissed about it anymore, or about everything else he’d done to me over the years. But I certainly wasn’t going to lament his suffering.

“Wait, he won’t know it’s me, will he?”

“Nope. Why?”

“I don’t want him to think I give enough of a shit about him to hurt him.” I put a hand down on the center console and Margo patted it. “Don’t worry,” she said. “He’ll never know what depilated him.”

“I think you just misused a word, but I don’t know what it means.”

“I know a word you don’t know,” Margo chanted. “I’M THE NEW QUEEN OF VOCABULARY! I’VE USURPED YOU!”

“Spell *usurped*,” I told her.

“No,” she answered, laughing. “I’m not giving up my crown over *usurped*. You’ll have to do better.”

“Fine.” I smiled.

We drove through College Park, a neighborhood that passes for Orlando’s historic district on account of how the houses were mostly built thirty whole years ago. Margo couldn’t remember Chuck’s exact address, or what his house looked like, or even for sure what street it was on (“I’m almost like ninety-five percent positive it’s on Vassar.”). Finally, after the Chrysler had prowled three blocks of Vassar Street, Margo pointed to her left and said, “That one.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I’m like ninety-seven-point-two percent sure. I mean, I’m pretty sure his bedroom is right there,” she said, pointing. “One time he had a party, and when the cops came I shimmied out his window. I’m pretty sure it’s the same window.”

“This seems like we could get in trouble.”

“But if the window is open, there’s no breaking involved. Only entering. And we *just* did entering at the SunTrust, and it wasn’t that big of a deal, right?”

I laughed. “It’s like you’re turning me into a badass.”

“That’s the idea. Okay, supplies: get the Veet, the spray paint, and the Vaseline.”

“Okay.” I grabbed them.

“Now don’t freak out on me, Q. The good news is that Chuck sleeps like a hibernating bear—I know because I had English with him last year and he wouldn’t wake up even when Ms. Johnston swatted him with *Jane Eyre*. So we’re going to go up to his bedroom window, we’re gonna open it, we’re gonna take off our shoes, and then very quietly go inside, and I’m going to screw with Chuck. Then you and I are going to fan out to opposite sides of the house, and we’re going to cover every door handle in Vaseline, so even if someone wakes up, they’ll have a hella hard time getting out of the house in time to catch us. Then we’ll screw with Chuck some more, paint his house a little, and we’re out of there. And no talking.”

I put my hand to my jugular, but I was smiling.

We were walking away from the car together when Margo reached down for my hand, laced her fingers in

mine, and squeezed. I squeezed back and then glanced at her. She nodded her head solemnly, and I nodded back, and then she let go of my hand. We scampered up to the window. I gently pushed the wooden casing up. It squeaked ever so quietly but opened in one motion. I looked in. It was dark, but I could see a body in a bed.

The window was a little high for Margo, so I put my hands together and she stepped a socked foot onto my hand and I boosted her up. Her silent entrance into the house would have made a ninja jealous. I proceeded to jump up, get my head and shoulders into the window, and then attempt, via a complicated torso undulation, to dance the caterpillar into the house. That might have worked fine except I racked my balls against the windowsill, which hurt so bad that I groaned, which was a pretty sizable mistake.

A bedside light came on. And there, lying in bed, was some old guy—decidedly not Chuck Parson. His eyes were wide with terror; he didn't say a thing.

"Um," said Margo. I thought about shoving off and running back to the car, but for Margo's sake I stayed there, the top half of me in the house, parallel to the floor. "Um, I think we have the wrong house." She turned around then and looked at me urgently, and only then did I realize I was blocking Margo's exit. So I pushed myself back out the window, grabbed my shoes, and took off.

We drove to the other side of College Park to regroup.

"I think we share the blame on that one," Margo said.

"Um, *you picked the wrong house*," I said.

"Right, but *you* were the one who made noise." It was quiet for a minute, and we were just driving in circles, and then finally I said, "We could probably get his address off the Internet. Radar has a log-in to the school directory."

"Brilliant," Margo said.

So I called Radar, but his phone went straight to voice mail. I contemplated calling his house, but his parents were friends with my parents, so that wouldn't work. Finally, it occurred to me to call Ben. He wasn't Radar, but he did know all of Radar's passwords. I called. It went to voice mail, but only after ringing. So I called again. Voice mail. I called again. Voice mail. Margo said, "He's obviously not answering," and as I dialed again, I said, "Oh, he'll answer." And after just four more calls, he did.

"You'd better be calling me to say that there are eleven naked honeybunnies in your house, and that they're asking for the Special Feeling that only Big Daddy Ben can provide."

"I need you to use Radar's login to the student directory and look up an address. Chuck Parson."

"No."

"Please," I said.

"No."

"You'll be glad you did this, Ben. I promise."

"Yeah yeah, I just did it. I was doing it while saying no—can't help but help. Four-two-two Amherst. Hey, why do you want Chuck Parson's address at four-twelve in the morning?"

"Get some sleep, Benners."

"I'm going to assume this is a dream," Ben answered, and hung up.

Amherst was only a couple blocks down. We parked on the street in front of 418 Amherst, got our supplies together, and jogged across Chuck's lawn, the morning dew shaking off the grass and onto my calves.

At his window, which was fortunately lower than that of Random Old Guy, I climbed in quietly and then pulled Margo up and in. Chuck Parson was asleep on his back. Margo walked over to him, tiptoeing, and I stood behind her, my heart pounding. He'd kill us both if he woke up. She pulled out the Veet, sprayed a dob of what looked like shaving cream onto her palm, and then softly and carefully spread it across Chuck's

right eyebrow. He didn't so much as twitch.

Then she opened the Vaseline—the lid made what seemed like a deafeningly loud *clorp*, but again Chuck showed no sign of waking. She scooped a huge gob of it into my hand, and then we headed off to opposite sides of the house. I went to the entryway first and slathered Vaseline on the front door's doorknob, and then to the open door of a bedroom, where I Vaselined the inner knob and then quietly, with only the slightest creak, shut the door to the room.

Finally I returned to Chuck's room—Margo was already there—and together we closed his door and then Vaselined the hell out of Chuck's doorknob. We slathered every surface of his bedroom window with the rest of the Vaseline, hoping it would make it hard to open the window after we closed it shut on our way out.

Margo glanced at her watch and held up two fingers. We waited. And for those two minutes we just stared at each other, and I watched the blue in her eyes. It was nice—in the dark and the quiet, with no possibility of me saying anything to screw it up, and her eyes looking back, like there was something in me worth seeing.

Margo nodded then, and I walked over to Chuck. I wrapped my hand in my T-shirt, as she'd told me to do, leaned forward, and—as softly as I could—pressed my finger against his forehead and then quickly wiped away the Veet. With it came every last hair that had been Chuck Parson's right eyebrow. I was standing above Chuck with his right eyebrow on my T-shirt when his eyes shot open. Lightning fast, Margo grabbed his comforter and threw it over him, and when I looked up, the little ninja was already out the window. I followed as quickly as I could, as Chuck screamed, "MAMA! DAD! ROBBERY ROBBERY!"

I wanted to say, *The only thing we stole was your eyebrow*, but I kept mum as I swung myself feetfirst out the window. I damn near landed on Margo, who was spray-painting an *M* onto the vinyl siding of Chuck's house, and then we both grabbed our shoes and hauled ass to the minivan. When I looked back at the house, lights were on but no one was outside yet, a testament to the brilliant simplicity of the well-Vaselined doorknob. By the time Mr. (or possibly Mrs., I couldn't really see) Parson pulled open the living room curtains and looked outside, we were driving in reverse back toward Princeton Street and the interstate.

"Yes!" I shouted. "God, that was brilliant."

"Did you see it? His face without the eyebrow? He looks permanently doubtful, you know? Like, 'oh, really? You're saying I only have one eyebrow? Likely story.' And I love making that asshole choose: better to shave off Lefty, or paint on Righty? Oh, I just love it. And how he yelled for his mama, that sniveling little shit."

"Wait, why do you hate him?"

"I didn't say I hated him. I said he was a sniveling little shit."

"But you were always kind of friends with him," I said, or at least I thought she had been.

"Yeah, well, I was always kind of friends with a lot of people," she said. Margo leaned across the minivan and put her head on my bony shoulder, her hair falling against my neck. "I'm tired," she said.

"Caffeine," I said. She reached into the back and grabbed us each a Mountain Dew, and I drank it in two long chugs.

"So we're going to SeaWorld," she told me. "Part Eleven."

"What, are we going to Free Willy or something?"

"No," she said. "We're just going to go to SeaWorld, that's all. It's the only theme park I haven't broken into yet."

"We can't break into SeaWorld," I said, and then I pulled over into an empty furniture store parking lot and turned off the car.

"We're in a bit of a time crunch," she told me, and then reached over to start the car again.

I pushed her hand away. “We can’t break into SeaWorld,” I repeated.

“There you go with the breaking again.” Margo paused and opened another Mountain Dew. Light reflected off the can onto her face, and for a second, I could see her smiling at the thing she was about to say. “We’re not going to *break* anything. Don’t think of it as *breaking in* to SeaWorld. Think of it as visiting SeaWorld in the middle of the night for free.”

8.

“Well, first off, we will get caught,” I said. I hadn’t started the minivan and was laying out the reasons I wouldn’t start it and wondering if she could see me in the dark.

“Of course we’ll get caught. So what?”

“It’s illegal.”

“Q, in the scheme of things, what kind of trouble can SeaWorld get you into? I mean, Jesus, after everything I’ve done for you tonight, you can’t do one thing for me? You can’t just shut up and calm down and stop being so goddamned terrified of every little adventure?” And then under her breath she said, “I mean, God. Grow some nuts.”

And now I was mad. I ducked underneath my shoulder belt so I could lean across the console toward her. “After everything YOU did for ME?” I almost shouted. She wanted confident? I was getting confident. “Did you call MY friend’s father who was screwing MY boyfriend so no one would know that I was calling? Did you chauffeur MY ass all around the world not because you are oh-so-important to me but because I needed a ride and you were close by? Is that the kind of shit you’ve done for me tonight?”

She wouldn’t look at me. She just stared straight ahead at the vinyl siding of the furniture store. “You think I needed you? You don’t think I could have given Myrna Mountweazel a Benadryl so she’d sleep through my stealing the safe from under my parents’ bed? Or snuck into your bedroom while you were sleeping and taken your car key? I didn’t need you, you idiot. I *picked* you. And then you picked me back.” Now she looked at me. “And that’s like a promise. At least for tonight. In sickness and in health. In good times and in bad. For richer, for poorer. Till dawn do us part.”

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, but all her teamwork stuff aside, I still felt like I was getting badgered into something, and I wanted the last word. “Fine, but when SeaWorld, Incorporated, or whatever sends a letter to Duke University saying that miscreant Quentin Jacobsen broke into their facility at four-thirty in the morning with a wild-eyed lass at his side, Duke University will be mad. Also, my parents will be mad.”

“Q, you’re going to go to Duke. You’re going to be a very successful lawyer-or-something and get married and have babies and live your whole little life, and then you’re going to die, and in your last moments, when you’re choking on your own bile in the nursing home, you’ll say to yourself: ‘Well, I wasted my whole goddamned life, but at least I broke into SeaWorld with Margo Roth Spiegelman my senior year of high school. At least I *carpe’d* that one diem.’”

“*Noctem*,” I corrected.

“Okay, you are the Grammar King again. You’ve regained your throne. Now take me to SeaWorld.”

As we drove silently down I-4, I found myself thinking about the day that the guy in the gray suit showed up dead. *Maybe that’s the reason she chose me*, I thought. And that’s when, finally, I remembered what she said about the dead guy and the strings—and about herself and the strings.

“Margo,” I said, breaking our silence.

“Q,” she said.

“You said . . . When the guy died, you said maybe all the strings inside him broke, and then you just said that about yourself, that the last string broke.”

She half laughed. “You worry too much. I don’t want some kids to find me swarmed with flies on a Saturday morning in Jefferson Park.” She waited a beat before delivering the punch line. “I’m too vain for that fate.”

I laughed, relieved, and exited the interstate. We turned onto International Drive, the tourism capital of

the world. There were a thousand shops on International Drive, and they all sold the exact same thing: crap. Crap molded into seashells, key rings, glass turtles, Florida-shaped refrigerator magnets, plastic pink flamingos, whatever. In fact, there were several stores on I-Drive that sold actual, literal armadillo crap—\$4.95 a bag.

But at 4:50 in the morning, the tourists were sleeping. The Drive was completely dead, like everything else, as we drove past store after parking lot after store after parking lot.

“SeaWorld is just past the parkway,” Margo said. She was in the wayback of the minivan again, rifling through a backpack or something. “I got all these satellite maps and drew our plan of attack, but I can’t freaking find them anywhere. But anyway, just go right past the parkway, and on your left there will be this souvenir shop.”

“On my left, there are about seventeen thousand souvenir shops.”

“Right, but there will only be one right after the parkway.”

And sure enough, there was only one, and so I pulled into the empty parking lot and parked the car directly beneath a streetlight, because cars are always getting stolen on I-Drive. And while only a truly masochistic car thief would ever think of jacking the Chrysler, I still didn’t relish the thought of explaining to my mom how and why her car went missing in the small hours of a school night.

We stood outside, leaning against the back of the minivan, the air so warm and thick I felt my clothes clinging to my skin. I felt scared again, as if people I couldn’t see were looking at me. It had been too dark for too long, and my gut ached from the hours of worrying. Margo had found her maps, and by the light of the street lamp, her spray-paint-blue fingertip traced our route. “I think there’s a fence right there,” she said, pointing to a wooden patch we’d hit just after crossing the parkway. “I read about it online. They installed it a few years ago after some drunk guy walked into the park in the middle of the night and decided to go swimming with Shamu, who promptly killed him.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, so if that guy can make it in drunk, surely we can make it in sober. I mean, we’re ninjas.”

“Well, maybe *you’re* a ninja,” I said.

“You’re just a really loud, awkward ninja,” Margo said, “but we are both ninjas.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, pulled up her hood, and scrunched it shut with a drawstring; the streetlight lit up the sharp features of her pale face. Maybe we were both ninjas, but only she had the outfit.

“Okay,” she said. “Memorize the map.” By far the most terrifying part of the half-mile-long journey Margo had plotted for us was the moat. SeaWorld was shaped like a triangle. One side was protected by a road, which Margo figured was regularly patrolled by night watchmen. The second side was guarded by a lake that was at least a mile around, and the third side had a drainage ditch; from the map, it looked to be about as wide as a two-lane road. And where there are water-filled drainage ditches near lakes in Florida, there are often alligators.

Margo grabbed me by both shoulders and turned me toward her. “We’re going to get caught, probably, and when we do, just let me talk. You just look cute and be that weird mix of innocent and confident, and we’ll be fine.”

I locked the car, tried to pat down my puffy hair, and whispered, “I’m a ninja.” I didn’t mean for Margo to hear, but she piped up. “Damned right you are! Now let’s go.”

We jogged across I-Drive and then started bushwhacking through a thicket of tall shrubs and oak trees. I started to worry about poison ivy, but ninjas don’t worry about poison ivy, so I led the trail, my arms in front of me, pushing aside briars and brush as we walked toward the moat. Finally the trees stopped and the field opened up, and I could see the parkway on our right and the moat straight ahead of us. People could have seen us from the road if there had been any cars, but there weren’t. Together we took off running through the brush, and then made a sharp turn toward the parkway. Margo said, “Now, now!” and I dashed across the six lanes of highway. Even though it was empty, something felt exhilarating and wrong about running across a road that big.

We made it across and then knelt down in the knee-high grass beside the parkway. Margo pointed to the strip of trees between SeaWorld's endlessly gigantic parking lot and the black standing water of the moat. We ran for a minute along that line of trees, and then Margo pulled on the back of my shirt, and said quietly, "Now the moat."

"Ladies first," I said.

"No, really. Be my guest," she answered.

And I didn't think about the alligators or the disgusting layer of brackish algae. I just got a running start and jumped as far as I could. I landed in waist-deep water and then high-stepped across. The water smelled rank and felt slimy on my skin, but at least I wasn't wet above my waist. Or at least I wasn't until Margo jumped in, splashing water all over me. I turned around and splashed her. She faux-retched.

"Ninjas don't splash other ninjas," Margo complained.

"The true ninja doesn't make a splash at all," I said.

"Ooh, touché."

I was watching Margo pull herself up out of the moat. And I was feeling thoroughly pleased about the lack of alligators. And my pulse was acceptable, if brisk. And beneath her unzipped hoodie, her black T-shirt had become clingy in the water. In short, a lot of things were going pretty well when I saw in my peripheral vision a slithering in the water beside Margo. Margo started to step out of the water, and I could see her Achilles tendon tensing, and before I could even say anything, the snake lashed out and bit her left ankle, right below the line of her jeans.

"Shit!" Margo said, and she looked down and then said "Shit!" again. The snake was still attached. I dove down and grabbed the snake by the tail and ripped it from Margo's leg and threw it into the moat. "Ow, God," she said. "What was it? Was it a moccasin?"

"I don't know. Lie down lie down," I said, and then I took her leg in my hands, and I pulled up her jeans. There were two drops of blood coming out where the fangs had been, and I leaned down and put my mouth on the wound and sucked as hard as I could, trying to draw out the venom. I spit, and was going to go back to her leg when she said, "Wait, I see it." I jumped up, terrified, and she said, "No no, God, it's just a garter snake." She was pointing into the moat, and I followed her finger and could see the little garter snake skirting along the surface, swimming beneath a floodlight's skirt. From the well-lit distance, the thing didn't look much scarier than a baby lizard.

"Thank God," I said, sitting down next to her and catching my breath.

After looking at the bite and seeing that the bleeding had already stopped, she asked, "How was making out with my leg?"

"Pretty good," I said, which was true. She leaned her body into mine a little and I could feel her upper arm against my ribs.

"I shaved this morning for *precisely* that reason. I was like, 'Well, you never know when someone is going to clamp down on your calf and try to suck out the snake poison.'"

There was a chain-link fence before us, but it was only about six feet tall. As Margo put it, "Honestly, first garter snakes and now this fence? This security is sort of insulting to a ninja." She scampered up, swung her body around, and climbed down like it was a ladder. I managed not to fall.

We ran through a small thicket of trees, hugging tight against these huge opaque tanks that might have stored animals, and then we came out to an asphalt path and I could see the big amphitheater where Shamu splashed me when I was a kid. The little speakers lining the walkway were playing soft Muzak. Maybe to keep the animals calm. "Margo," I said, "we're in SeaWorld."

And she said, "Seriously," and then she jogged away and I followed her. We ended up by the seal tank,

but it seemed like there were no seals inside it.

“Margo,” I said again. “We’re in SeaWorld.”

“Enjoy it,” she said without moving her mouth much. “Cause here comes security.” I dashed through a stand of waist-high bushes, but when Margo didn’t run, I stopped. A guy strolled up wearing a SEAWORLD SECURITY vest and very casually asked, “How y’all?” He held a can of something in his hand—pepper spray, I guessed.

To stay calm, I wondered to myself, *Does he have regular handcuffs, or does he have special SeaWorld handcuffs? Like, are they shaped like two curved dolphins coming together?*

“We were just on our way out, actually,” said Margo.

“Well, that’s certain,” the man said. “The question is whether you walkin’ out or gettin’ driven out by the Orange County sheriff.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Margo said, “we’d rather walk.” I shut my eyes. This, I wanted to tell Margo, was no time for snappy comebacks. But the man laughed.

“You know a man got kilt here a couple years ago jumping in the big tank, and they told us we cain’t never let anybody go if they break in, no matter if they’re pretty.” Margo pulled her shirt out so it wouldn’t look so clingy. And only then did I realize he was talking to her breasts.

“Well, then I guess you have to arrest us.”

“But that’s the thing. I’m ’bout to get off and go home and have a beer and get some sleep, and if I call the police they’ll take their sweet time in coming. I’m just thinkin’ out loud here,” he said, and then Margo raised her eyes in recognition. She wiggled a hand into a wet pocket and pulled out one moat-water-soaked hundred-dollar bill.

The guard said, “Well, y’all best be getting on now. If I were you, I wouldn’t walk out past the whale tank. It’s got all-night security cameras all ’round it, and we wouldn’t want anyone to know y’all was here.”

“Yessir,” Margo said demurely, and with that the man walked off into the darkness. “Man,” Margo mumbled as the guy walked away, “I really didn’t want to pay that perv. But, oh well. Money’s for spendin’.” I could barely even hear her; the only thing happening was the relief shivering out of my skin. This raw pleasure was worth all the worry that preceded it.

“Thank God he’s not turning us in,” I said.

Margo didn’t respond. She was staring past me, her eyes squinting almost closed. “I felt this exact same way when I got into Universal Studios,” she said after a moment. “It’s kind of cool and everything, but there’s nothing much to see. The rides aren’t working. Everything cool is locked up. Most of the animals are put into different tanks at night.” She turned her head and appraised the SeaWorld we could see. “I guess the pleasure isn’t being inside.”

“What’s the pleasure?” I asked.

“Planning, I guess. I don’t know. Doing stuff never feels as good as you hope it will feel.”

“This feels pretty good to me,” I confessed. “Even if there isn’t anything to see.” I sat down on a park bench, and she joined me. We were both looking out at the seal tank, but it contained no seals, just an unoccupied island with rocky outcroppings made of plastic. I could smell her next to me, the sweat and the algae from the moat, her shampoo like lilacs, and the smell of her skin like crushed almonds.

I felt tired for the first time, and I thought of us lying down on some grassy patch of SeaWorld together, me on my back and she on her side with her arm draped against me, her head on my shoulder, facing me. Not doing anything—just lying there together beneath the sky, the night here so well lit that it drowns out the stars. And maybe I could feel her breathe against my neck, and maybe we could just stay there until morning and then the people would walk past as they came into the park, and they would see us and think that we were tourists, too, and we could just disappear into them.

But no. There was one-eyebrowed Chuck to see, and Ben to tell the story to, and classes and the band

room and Duke and the future.

“Q,” Margo said.

I looked up at her, and for a moment I didn’t know why she’d said my name, but then I snapped out of my half-sleep. And I heard it. The Muzak from the speakers had been turned up, only it wasn’t Muzak anymore—it was real music. This old, jazzy song my dad likes called “Stars Fell on Alabama.” Even through the tinny speakers you could hear that whoever was singing it could sing a thousand goddamned notes at once.

And I felt the unbroken line of me and of her stretching back from our cribs to the dead guy to acquaintanceship to now. And I wanted to tell her that the pleasure for me wasn’t planning or doing or leaving; the pleasure was in seeing our strings cross and separate and then come back together—but that seemed too cheesy to say, and anyway, she was standing up.

Margo’s blue blue eyes blinked and she looked impossibly beautiful right then, her jeans wet against her legs, her face shining in the gray light.

I stood up and reached out my hand and said, “May I have this dance?” Margo curtsied, gave me her hand, and said, “You may,” and then my hand was on the curve between her waist and her hip, and her hand was on my shoulder. And then step-step-sidestep, step-step-sidestep. We fox-trotted all the way around the seal tank, and still the song kept going on about the stars falling. “Sixth-grade slow dance,” Margo announced, and we switched positions, her hands on my shoulders and mine on her hips, elbows locked, two feet between us. And then we fox-trotted some more, until the song ended. I stepped forward and dipped Margo, just as they’d taught us to do at Crown School of Dance. She raised one leg and gave me all her weight as I dipped her. She either trusted me or wanted to fall.

9.

We bought dish towels at a 7-Eleven on I-Drive and tried our best to wash the slime and stink from the moat off our clothes and skin, and I filled the gas tank to where it had been before we drove the circumference of Orlando. The Chrysler's seats were going to be a little bit wet when Mom drove to work, but I held out hope that she wouldn't notice, since she was pretty oblivious. My parents generally believed that I was the most well-adjusted and not-likely-to-break-into-SeaWorld person on the planet, since my psychological well-being was proof of their professional talents.

I took my time going home, avoiding interstates in favor of back roads. Margo and I were listening to the radio, trying to figure out what station had been playing "Stars Fell on Alabama," but then she turned it down and said, "All in all, I think it was a success."

"Absolutely," I said, although by now I was already wondering what tomorrow would be like. Would she show up by the band room before school to hang out? Eat lunch with me and Ben? "I do wonder if it will be different tomorrow," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Me, too." She left it hanging in the air, and then said, "Hey, speaking of tomorrow, as thanks for your hard work and dedication on this remarkable evening, I would like to give you a small gift." She dug around beneath her feet and then produced the digital camera. "Take it," she said. "And use the Power of the Tiny Winky wisely."

I laughed and put the camera in my pocket. "I'll download the pic when we get home and then give it back to you at school?" I asked. I still wanted her to say, *Yes, at school, where things will be different, where I will be your friend in public, and also decidedly single*, but she just said, "Yeah, or whenever."

It was 5:42 when I turned into Jefferson Park. We drove down Jefferson Drive to Jefferson Court and then turned onto our road, Jefferson Way. I killed the headlights one last time and idled up my driveway. I didn't know what to say, and Margo wasn't saying anything. We filled a 7-Eleven bag with trash, trying to make the Chrysler look and feel as if the past six hours had not happened. In another bag, she gave me the remnants of the Vaseline, the spray paint, and the last full Mountain Dew. My brain raced with fatigue.

With a bag in each hand, I paused for a moment outside the van, staring at her. "Well, it was a helluva night," I said finally.

"Come here," she said, and I took a step forward. She hugged me, and the bags made it hard to hug her back, but if I dropped them I might wake someone. I could feel her on her tiptoes and then her mouth was right up against my ear and she said, very clearly, "I. Will. Miss. Hanging. Out. With. You."

"You don't have to," I answered aloud. I tried to hide my disappointment. "If you don't like them anymore," I said, "just hang out with me. My friends are actually, like, nice."

Her lips were so close to me that I could feel her smile. "I'm afraid it's not possible," she whispered. She let go then, but kept looking at me, taking step after step backward. She raised her eyebrows finally, and smiled, and I believed the smile. I watched her climb up a tree and then lift herself onto the roof outside of her second-floor bedroom window. She jimmied her window open and crawled inside.

I walked through my unlocked front door, tiptoed through the kitchen to my bedroom, peeled off my jeans, threw them into a corner of the closet back near the window screen, downloaded the picture of Jase, and got into bed, my mind booming with the things I would say to her at school.



PART TWO

The Grass

1.

I'd been asleep for just about thirty minutes when my alarm clock went off at 6:32. But I did not personally notice that my alarm clock was going off for seventeen minutes, not until I felt hands on my shoulders and heard the distant voice of my mother saying, "Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Uhh," I responded. I felt significantly more tired than I had back at 5:55, and I would have skipped school, except I had perfect attendance, and while I realized that perfect attendance is not particularly impressive or even necessarily admirable, I wanted to keep the streak alive. Plus, I wanted to see how Margo would act around me.

When I walked into the kitchen, Dad was telling Mom something while they ate at the breakfast counter. Dad paused when he saw me and said, "How'd you sleep?"

"I slept fantastically," I said, which was true. Briefly, but well.

He smiled. "I was just telling your mom that I have this recurring anxiety dream," he said. "So I'm in college. And I'm taking a Hebrew class, except the professor doesn't speak Hebrew, and the tests aren't in Hebrew—they're in gibberish. But everyone is acting like this made-up language with a made-up alphabet is Hebrew. And so I have this test, and I have to write in a language I don't know using an alphabet I can't decipher."

"Interesting," I said, although in point of fact it wasn't. Nothing is as boring as other people's dreams.

"It's a metaphor for adolescence," my mother piped up. "Writing in a language—adulthood—you can't comprehend, using an alphabet—mature social interaction—you can't recognize." My mother worked with crazy teenagers in juvenile detention centers and prisons. I think that's why she never really worried about me—as long as I wasn't ritually decapitating gerbils or urinating on my own face, she figured I was a success.

A normal mother might have said, "Hey, I notice you look like you're coming down off a meth binge and smell vaguely of algae. Were you perchance dancing with a snakebit Margo Roth Spiegelman a couple hours ago?" But no. They preferred dreams. I showered, put on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. I was late, but then again, I was always late.

"You're late," Mom said when I made it back to the kitchen. I tried to shake the fog in my brain enough to remember how to tie my sneakers.

"I am aware," I answered groggily.

Mom drove me to school. I sat in the seat that had been Margo's. Mom was mostly quiet on the drive, which was good, because I was entirely asleep, the side of my head against the minivan window.

As Mom pulled up to school, I saw Margo's usual spot empty in the senior parking lot. Couldn't blame her for being late, really. Her friends didn't gather as early as mine.

As I walked up toward the band kids, Ben shouted, "Jacobsen, was I dreaming or did you—" I gave him the slightest shake of my head, and he changed gears midsentence—"and me go on a wild adventure in French Polynesia last night, traveling in a sailboat made of bananas?"

"That was one delicious sailboat," I answered. Radar raised his eyes at me and ambled into the shade of a tree. I followed him. "Asked Angela about a date for Ben. No dice." I glanced over at Ben, who was talking animatedly, a coffee stirrer dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

"That sucks," I said. "It's all good, though. He and I will hang out and have like a marathon session of Resurrection or something."

Ben came over then, and said, "Are you trying to be subtle? Because I know you're talking about the

honeybunnyless prom tragedy that is my life.” He turned around and headed inside. Radar and I followed him, talking as we went past the band room, where freshmen and sophomores were sitting and chatting amid a slew of instrument cases.

“Why do you even want to go?” I asked.

“Bro, it’s our *senior prom*. It’s my last best chance to be some honeybunny’s fondest high school memory.” I rolled my eyes.

The first bell rang, meaning five minutes to class, and like Pavlov’s dogs, people started rushing around, filling up the hallways. Ben and Radar and I stood by Radar’s locker. “So why’d you call me at three in the morning for Chuck Parson’s address?”

I was mulling over how to best answer that question when I saw Chuck Parson walking toward us. I elbowed Ben’s side and cut my eyes toward Chuck. Chuck, incidentally, had decided that the best strategy was to shave off Lefty. “Holy shitstickers,” Ben said.

Soon enough, Chuck was in my face as I scrunched back against the locker, his forehead deliciously hairless. “What are you assholes looking at?”

“Nothing,” said Radar. “We’re certainly not looking at your eyebrows.” Chuck flicked Radar off, slammed an open palm against the locker next to me, and walked away.

“You did that?” Ben asked, incredulous.

“You can never tell anyone,” I said to both of them. And then quietly added, “I was with Margo Roth Spiegelman.”

Ben’s voice rose with excitement. “You were with Margo Roth Spiegelman last night? At THREE A.M.?” I nodded. “Alone?” I nodded. “Oh my God, if you hooked up with her, you have to tell me every single thing that happened. You have to write me a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts. Thirty pages, minimum!”

“I want you to do a photo-realistic pencil drawing,” Radar said.

“A sculpture would also be acceptable,” Ben added.

Radar half raised his hand. I dutifully called on him. “Yes, I was wondering if it would be possible for you to write a sestina about Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts? Your six words are: *pink, round, firmness, succulent, supple, and pillowy.*”

“Personally,” Ben said, “I think at least one of the words should be *buhbuhbuhbuh.*”

“I don’t think I’m familiar with that word,” I said.

“It’s the sound my mouth makes when I’m giving a honeybunny the patented Ben Starling Speedboat.” At which point Ben mimicked what he would do in the unlikely event that his face ever encountered cleavage.

“Right now,” I said, “although they have no idea why, thousands of girls all across America are feeling a chill of fear and disgust run down their spines. Anyway, I didn’t hook up with her, perv.”

“Typical,” Ben said. “I’m the only guy I know with the balls to give a honeybunny what she wants, and the only one with no opportunities.”

“What an amazing coincidence,” I said. It was life as it had always been—only more fatigued. I had hoped that last night would change my life, but it hadn’t—at least not yet.

The second bell rang. We hustled off to class.

I became extremely tired during calc first period. I mean, I had been tired since waking, but combining fatigue with calculus seemed unfair. To stay awake, I was scribbling a note to Margo—nothing I’d ever send to her, just a summary of my favorite moments from the night before—but even that could not keep me awake. At some point, my pen just stopped moving, and I found my field of vision shrinking and

shrinking, and then I was trying to remember if tunnel vision was a symptom of fatigue. I decided it must be, because there was only one thing in front of me, and it was Mr. Jiminez at the blackboard, and this was the only thing that my brain could process, and so when Mr. Jiminez said, “Quentin?” I was extraordinarily confused, because the one thing happening in my universe was Mr. Jiminez writing on the blackboard, and I couldn’t fathom how he could be both an auditory and a visual presence in my life.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Did you hear the question?”

“Yes?” I asked again.

“And you raised your hand to answer it?” I looked up, and sure enough my hand was raised, but I did not know how it had come to be raised, and I only sort of knew how to go about de-raising it. But then after considerable struggle, my brain was able to tell my arm to lower itself, and my arm was able to do so, and then finally I said, “I just needed to ask to go to the bathroom?”

And he said, “Go ahead,” and then someone else raised a hand and answered some question about some kind of differential equation.

I walked to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and then leaned over the sink, close to the mirror, and appraised myself. I tried to rub the bloodshotness out of my eyes, but I couldn’t. And then I had a brilliant idea. I went into a stall, put the seat down, sat down, leaned against the side, and fell asleep. The sleep lasted for about sixteen milliseconds before the second period bell rang. I got up and walked to Latin, and then to physics, and then finally it was fourth period, and I found Ben in the cafeteria and said, “I really need a nap or something.”

“Let’s have lunch with RHAPAW,” he answered.

RHAPAW was a fifteen-year-old Buick that had been driven with impunity by all three of Ben’s older siblings and was, by the time it reached Ben, composed primarily out of duct tape and spackle. Her full name was Rode Hard And Put Away Wet, but we called her RHAPAW for short. RHAPAW ran not on gasoline, but on the inexhaustible fuel of human hope. You would sit on the blisteringly hot vinyl seat and hope she would start, and then Ben would turn the key and the engine would turn over a couple times, like a fish on land making its last, meager, dying flops. And then you would hope harder, and the engine would turn over a couple more times. You hoped some more, and it would finally catch.

Ben started RHAPAW and turned the AC on high. Three of the four windows didn’t even open, but the air conditioner worked magnificently, though for the first few minutes it was just hot air blasting out of the vents and mixing with the hot stale air in the car. I reclined the passenger seat all the way back, so that I was almost lying down, and I told him everything: Margo at my window, the Wal-Mart, the revenge, the SunTrust Building, entering the wrong house, SeaWorld, the I-will-miss-hanging-out-with-you.

He didn’t interrupt me once—Ben was a good friend in the not-interrupting way—but when I finished, he immediately asked me the most pressing question in his mind.

“Wait, so about Jase Worthington, how small are we talking?”

“Shrinkage may have played a role, since he was under significant anxiety, but have you ever seen a pencil?” I asked him, and Ben nodded. “Well, have you ever seen a pencil eraser?” He nodded again. “Well, have you ever seen the little shavings of rubber left on the paper after you erase something?” More nodding. “I’d say three shavings long and one shaving wide,” I said. Ben had taken a lot of crap from guys like Jason Worthington and Chuck Parson, so I figured he was entitled to enjoy it a little. But he didn’t even laugh. He was just shaking his head slowly, awestruck.

“God, she is such a badass.”

“I know.”

“She’s the kind of person who either dies tragically at twenty-seven, like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, or else grows up to win, like, the first-ever Nobel Prize for Awesome.”

“Yeah,” I said. I rarely tired of talking about Margo Roth Spiegelman, but I was rarely this tired. I leaned back against the cracked vinyl headrest and fell immediately asleep. When I woke up, a Wendy’s hamburger was sitting in my lap with a note. *Had to go to class, bro. See you after band.*

Later, after my last class, I translated Ovid while sitting up against the cinder-block wall outside the band room, trying to ignore the groaning cacophony coming from inside. I always hung around school for the extra hour during band practice, because to leave before Ben and Radar meant enduring the unbearable humiliation of being the lone senior on the bus.

After they got out, Ben dropped Radar off at his house right by the Jefferson Park “village center,” near where Lacey lived. Then he took me home. I noticed Margo’s car was not parked in her driveway, either. So she hadn’t skipped school to sleep. She’d skipped school for another adventure—a *me-less* adventure. She’d probably spent her day spreading hair-removal cream on the pillows of other enemies or something. I felt a little left out as I walked into the house, but of course she knew I would never have joined her anyway—I cared too much about a day of school. And who even knew if it would be just a day for Margo. Maybe she was off on another three-day jaunt to Mississippi, or temporarily joining the circus. But it wasn’t either of those, of course. It was something I couldn’t imagine, that I would never imagine, because I couldn’t be Margo.

I wondered what stories she would come home with this time. And I wondered if she would tell them to me, sitting across from me at lunch. Maybe, I thought, this is what she meant by I will miss hanging out with you. She knew she was heading somewhere for another of her brief respites from Orlando’s paperiness. But when she came back, who knew? She couldn’t spend the last weeks of school with the friends she’d always had, so maybe she would spend them with me after all.

She didn’t have to be gone long for the rumors to start. Ben called me that night after dinner. “I hear she’s not answering her phone. Someone on Facebook said she’d told them she might move into a secret storage room in Tomorrowland at Disney.”

“That’s idiotic,” I said.

“I know. I mean, Tomorrowland is by far the crappiest of the Lands. Someone else said she met a guy online.”

“Ridiculous,” I said.

“Okay, fine, but what?”

“She’s somewhere by herself having the kind of fun we can only imagine,” I said.

Ben giggled. “Are you saying that she’s playing with herself?”

I groaned. “Come on, Ben. I mean she’s just doing Margo stuff. Making stories. Rocking worlds.”

That night, I lay on my side, staring out the window into the invisible world outside. I kept trying to fall asleep, but then my eyes would dart open, just to check. I couldn’t help but hope that Margo Roth Spiegelman would return to my window and drag my tired ass through one more night I’d never forget.

2.

Margo left often enough that there weren't any Find Margo rallies at school or anything, but we all felt her absence. High school is neither a democracy nor a dictatorship—nor, contrary to popular belief, an anarchic state. High school is a divine-right monarchy. And when the queen goes on vacation, things change. Specifically, they get worse. It was during Margo's trip to Mississippi sophomore year, for example, that Becca had unleashed the Bloody Ben story to the world. And this was no different. The little girl with her finger in the dam had run off. Flooding was inevitable.

That morning, I was on time for once and got a ride with Ben. We found everyone unusually quiet outside the band room. "Dude," our friend Frank said with great seriousness.

"What?"

"Chuck Parson, Taddy Mac, and Clint Bauer took Clint's Tahoe and ran over twelve bikes belonging to freshmen and sophomores."

"That sucks," I said, shaking my head.

Our friend Ashley added, "Also, yesterday somebody posted our phone numbers in the boys' bathroom with—well, with dirty stuff."

I shook my head again, and then joined the silence. We couldn't turn them in; we'd tried that plenty in middle school, and it inevitably resulted in more punishment. Usually, we'd just have to wait until someone like Margo reminded everyone what immature jackasses they all were.

But Margo had given me a way of starting a counteroffensive. And I was just about to say something when, in my peripheral vision, I saw a large individual running toward us at a full sprint. He wore a black ski mask and carried a large, complex green water cannon. As he ran past he tagged me on the shoulder and I lost my footing, landing against the cracked concrete on my left side. As he reached the door, he turned back and shouted toward me, "You screw with us and you're gonna get *smackdown*." The voice was not familiar to me.

Ben and another of our friends picked me up. My shoulder hurt, but I didn't want to rub it. "You okay?" asked Radar.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I rubbed the shoulder now.

Radar shook his head. "Someone needs to tell him that while it is possible to get *smacked* down, and it is also possible to get *a* smackdown, it is not possible to get 'smackdown.'" I laughed. Someone nodded toward the parking lot, and I looked up to see two little freshmen guys walking toward us, their T-shirts hanging wet and limp from their narrow frames.

"It was pee!" one of them shouted at us. The other one didn't say anything; he just held his hands far away from his T-shirt, which only sort of worked. I could see rivulets of liquid snaking from his sleeve down his arm.

"Was it animal pee or human pee?" someone asked.

"How would I know! What, am I an expert in the study of pee?"

I walked over to the kid. I put my hand on the top of his head, the only place that seemed totally dry. "We'll fix this," I said.

The second bell rang, and Radar and I raced to calc. As I slid into my desk I dinged my arm, and the pain radiated into my shoulder. Radar tapped his notebook, where he'd circled a note: *Shoulder okay?*

I wrote on the corner of my notebook: *Compared to those freshmen, I spent the morning in a field of rainbows frolicking with puppies.*

Radar laughed enough for Mr. Jiminez to shoot him a look. I wrote, *I have a plan, but we have to figure out who it was.*

Radar wrote back, *Jasper Hanson*, and circled it several times. That was a surprise.

How do you know?

Radar wrote, *You didn't notice? Dumbass was wearing his own football jersey.*

Jasper Hanson was a junior. I'd always thought him harmless, and actually sort of nice—in that bumbling, dude-how's-it-going kind of way. Not the kind of guy you'd expect to see shooting geysers of pee at freshmen. Honestly, in the governmental bureaucracy of Winter Park High School, Jasper Hanson was like Deputy Assistant Undersecretary of Athletics and Malfeasance. When a guy like that gets promoted to Executive Vice President of Urine Gunning, immediate action must be taken.

So when I got home that afternoon, I created an e-mail account and wrote my old friend Jason Worthington.

From: mavenger@gmail.com

To: jworthington90@yahoo.com

*Subject: You, Me, Becca Arrington's House, Your Penis,
Etc.*

Dear Mr. Worthington,

- 1. \$200 in cash should be provided to each of the 12 people whose bikes your colleagues destroyed via Chevy Tahoe. This shouldn't be a problem, given your magnificent wealth.*
- 2. This graffiti situation in the girls' bathroom has to stop.*
- 3. Water guns? With pee? Really? Grow up.*
- 4. You should treat your fellow students with respect, particularly those less socially fortunate than you.*
- 5. You should probably instruct members of your clan to behave in similarly considerate ways.*

I realize that it will be very difficult to accomplish some of these tasks. But then again, it will also be very difficult not to share the attached photograph with the world.

Yours truly,

Your Friendly Neighborhood Nemesis

The reply came twelve minutes later.

Look, Quentin, and yeah, I know it's you. You know it wasn't me who squirt-peed those freshmen. I'm sorry, but it's not like I control the actions of other people.

My answer:

Mr. Worthington,

I understand that you do not control Chuck and Jasper.

But you see, I am in a similar situation. I do not control the little devil sitting on my left shoulder. The devil is saying, "PRINT THE PICTURE PRINT THE PICTURE TAPE IT UP ALL OVER SCHOOL DO IT DO IT DO IT." And then on my right shoulder, there is a little tiny white angel. And the angel is saying, "Man, I sure as shit hope all those freshmen get their money bright and early on Monday morning."

So do I, little angel. So do I.

*Best wishes,
Your Friendly Neighborhood Nemesis*

He did not reply, and he didn't need to. Everything had been said.

Ben came over after dinner and we played Resurrection, pausing every half hour or so to call Radar, who was on a date with Angela. We left him eleven messages, each more annoying and salacious than the last. It was after nine o'clock when the doorbell rang. "Quentin!" my mom shouted. Ben and I figured it was Radar, so we paused the game and walked out into the living room. Chuck Parson and Jason Worthington were standing in my doorway. I walked over to them, and Jason said, "Hey, Quentin," and I nodded my head. Jason glanced over at Chuck, who looked at me and mumbled, "Sorry, Quentin."

"For what?" I asked.

"For telling Jasper to piss-gun those freshmen," he mumbled. He paused, and then said, "And the bikes."

Ben opened his arms, as if to hug. "C'mere, bro," he said.

"What?"

"C'mere," he said again. Chuck stepped forward. "Closer," Ben said. Chuck was standing fully in the entryway now, maybe a foot from Ben. Out of nowhere, Ben slammed a punch into Chuck's gut. Chuck barely flinched, but he immediately reared back to clobber Ben. Jase grabbed his arm, though. "Chill, bro," Jase said. "It's not like it hurt." Jase reached out his hand, to shake. "I like your guts, bro," he said. "I mean, you're an asshole. But still." I shook his hand.

They left then, getting into Jase's Lexus and backing down the driveway. As soon as I closed the front door, Ben let out a mighty groan. "Ahhhhhhggg. Oh, sweet Lord Jesus, my hand." He attempted to make a fist and winced. "I think Chuck Parson had a textbook strapped to his stomach."

"Those are called abs," I told him.

"Oh, yeah. I've heard of those." I clapped him on the back and we headed back to the bedroom to play Resurrection. We'd just unpaused it when Ben said, "By the way, did you notice that Jase says 'bro'? I've totally brought *bro* back. Just with the sheer force of my own awesomeness."

"Yeah, you're spending Friday night gaming and nursing the hand you broke while trying to sucker punch somebody. No wonder Jase Worthington has chosen to hitch his star to your wagon."

"At least I'm *good* at Resurrection," he said, whereupon he shot me in the back even though we were playing in team mode.

We played for a while longer, until Ben just curled onto the floor, holding the controller up to his chest, and went to sleep. I was tired, too—it had been a long day. I figured Margo would be back by Monday anyway, but even so, I felt a little pride at having been the person who stemmed the tide of lame.

3.

Every morning, I now looked up through my bedroom window to check whether there was any sign of life in Margo's room. She always kept her rattan shades closed, but since she'd left, her mom or somebody had pulled them up, so I could see a little snippet of blue wall and white ceiling. On that Saturday morning, with her only forty-eight hours gone, I figured she wouldn't be home yet, but even so, I felt a flicker of disappointment when I saw the shade still pulled up.

I brushed my teeth and then, after briefly kicking at Ben in an attempt to wake him, walked out in shorts and a T-shirt. Five people were seated at the dining room table. My mom and dad. Margo's mom and dad. And a tall, stout African-American man with oversize glasses wearing a gray suit, holding a manila folder.

"Uh, hi," I said.

"Quentin," my mom asked, "did you see Margo on Wednesday night?"

I walked into the dining room and leaned against the wall, standing opposite the stranger. I'd thought of my answer to this question already. "Yeah," I said. "She showed up at my window at like midnight and we talked for a minute and then Mr. Spiegelman caught her and she went back to her house."

"And was that—? Did you see her after that?" Mr. Spiegelman asked. He seemed quite calm.

"No, why?" I asked.

Margo's mom answered, her voice shrill. "Well," she said, "it seems that Margo has run away. Again." She sighed. "This would be—what is it, Josh, the fourth time?"

"Oh, I've lost count," her dad answered, annoyed.

The African-American man spoke up then. "Fifth time you've filed a report." The man nodded at me and said, "Detective Otis Warren."

"Quentin Jacobsen," I said.

Mom stood up and put her hands on Mrs. Spiegelman's shoulders. "Debbie," she said, "I'm so sorry. It's a very frustrating situation." I knew this trick. It was a psychology trick called empathic listening. You say what the person is feeling so they feel understood. Mom does it to me all the time.

"I'm not frustrated," Mrs. Spiegelman answered. "I'm done."

"That's right," Mr. Spiegelman said. "We've got a locksmith coming this afternoon. We're changing the locks. She's eighteen. I mean, the detective has just said there's nothing we can do—"

"Well," Detective Warren interrupted, "I didn't quite say that. I said that she's not a missing *minor*, and so she has the right to leave home."

Mr. Spiegelman continued talking to my mom. "We're happy to pay for her to go to college, but we can't support this . . . this silliness. Connie, she's eighteen! And still so self-centered! She needs to see some consequences."

My mom removed her hands from Mrs. Spiegelman. "I would argue she needs to see *loving* consequences," my mom said.

"Well, she's not your daughter, Connie. She hasn't walked all over you like a doormat for a decade. We've got another child to think about."

"And ourselves," Mr. Spiegelman added. He looked up at me then. "Quentin, I'm sorry if she tried to drag you into her little game. You can imagine how . . . just how embarrassing this is for us. You're such a good boy, and she . . . well."

I pushed myself off the wall and stood up straight. I knew Margo's parents a little, but I'd never seen them act so bitchy. No wonder she was annoyed with them Wednesday night. I glanced over at the detective. He was flipping through pages in the folder. "She's been known to leave a bit of a bread crumb

trail; is that right?"

"Clues," Mr. Spiegelman said, standing up now. The detective had placed the folder on the table, and Margo's dad leaned forward to look at it with him. "Clues everywhere. The day she ran away to Mississippi, she ate alphabet soup and left exactly four letters in her soup bowl: An *M*, an *I*, an *S*, and a *P*. She was disappointed when we didn't piece it together, although as I told her when she finally returned: 'How can we find you when all we know is *Mississippi*? It's a big state, Margo!'"

The detective cleared his throat. "And she left Minnie Mouse on her bed when she spent a night inside Disney World."

"Yes," her mom said. "The clues. The stupid clues. But you can never *follow* them anywhere, trust me."

The detective looked up from his notebook. "We'll get the word out, of course, but she can't be compelled to come home; you shouldn't necessarily expect her back under your roof in the near future."

"I don't *want* her under our roof." Mrs. Spiegelman raised a tissue to her eyes, although I heard no crying in her voice. "I know that's terrible, but it's true."

"Deb," my mom said in her therapist voice.

Mrs. Spiegelman just shook her head—the smallest shake. "What can we do? We told the detective. We filed a report. She's an adult, Connie."

"She's *your* adult," my mom said, still calm.

"Oh, come on, Connie. Look, is it sick that it's a blessing to have her out of the house? Of course it's sick. But she was a sickness in this family! How do you look for someone who announces she won't be found, who always leaves clues that lead nowhere, who runs away constantly? You can't!"

My mom and dad shared a glance, and then the detective spoke to me. "Son, I'm wondering if we can chat privately?" I nodded. We ended up in my parents' bedroom, he in an easy chair and me sitting on the corner of their bed.

"Kid," he said once he'd settled into the chair, "let me give you some advice: never work for the government. Because when you work for the government, you work for the people. And when you work for the people, you have to interact with the people, even the Spiegelmans." I laughed a little.

"Let me be frank with you, kid. Those people know how to parent like I know how to diet. I've worked with them before, and I don't like them. I don't care if you tell her parents where she is, but I'd appreciate it if you told me."

"I don't know," I said. "I really don't."

"Kid, I've been thinking about this girl. This stuff she does—she breaks into Disney World, for instance, right? She goes to Mississippi and leaves alphabet soup clues. She organizes a huge campaign to toilet paper houses."

"How do you know about *that*?" Two years before, Margo had led the TP-ing of two hundred houses in a single night. Needless to say, I wasn't invited on that adventure.

"I worked this case before. So, kid, here's where I need your help: who plans this stuff? These crazy schemes? She's the mouthpiece for it all, the one crazy enough to do everything. But who plans it? Who's sitting around with notebooks full of diagrams figuring out how much toilet paper you need to toilet paper a ton of houses?"

"It's all her, I assume."

"But she might have a partner, somebody helpin' her do all these big and brilliant things, and maybe the person who's in on her secret isn't the obvious person, isn't her best friend or her boyfriend. Maybe it's somebody you wouldn't think of right off," he said. He took a breath and was about to say something more when I cut him off.

"I don't know where she is," I said. "I swear to God."

“Just checking, kid. Anyway, you know something, don’t you? So let’s start there.” I told him everything. I trusted the guy. He took a few notes while I talked, but nothing very detailed. And something about telling him, and his scribbling in the notebook, and her parents being so lame—something about all of it made the possibility of her being lastingly missing well up in me for the first time. I felt the worry start to snatch at my breath when I finished talking. The detective didn’t say anything for a while. He just leaned forward in the chair and stared past me until he’d seen whatever he was waiting to see, and then he started talking.

“Listen, kid. This is what happens: somebody—girl usually—got a free spirit, doesn’t get on too good with her parents. These kids, they’re like tied-down helium balloons. They strain against the string and strain against it, and then something happens, and that string gets cut, and they just float away. And maybe you never see the balloon again. It lands in Canada or somethin’, gets work at a restaurant, and before the balloon even notices, it’s been pouring coffee in that same diner to the same sad bastards for thirty years. Or maybe three or four years from now, or three or four days from now, the prevailing winds take the balloon back home, because it needs money, or it sobered up, or it misses its kid brother. But listen, kid, that string gets cut all the time.”

“Yeah, bu—”

“I’m not finished, kid. The thing about these balloons is that there are so goddamned many of them. The sky is choked full of them, rubbing up against one another as they float to here or from there, and every one of those damned balloons ends up on my desk one way or another, and after a while a man can get discouraged. Everywhere the balloons, and each of them with a mother or a father, or God forbid both, and after a while, you can’t even see ’em individually. You look up at all the balloons in the sky and you can see all of the balloons, but you cannot see any one balloon.” He paused then, and inhaled sharply, as if he was realizing something. “But then every now and again you talk to some big-eyed kid with too much hair for his head and you want to lie to him because he seems like a good kid. And you feel bad for this kid, because the only thing worse than the skyful of balloons *you* see is what he sees: a clear blue day interrupted by just the one balloon. But once that string gets cut, kid, you can’t uncut it. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I nodded, although I wasn’t sure I *did* understand. He stood up. “I do think she’ll be back soon, kid. If that helps.”

I liked the image of Margo as a balloon, but I figured that in his urge for the poetic, the detective had seen more worry in me than the pang I’d actually felt. I knew she’d be back. She’d deflate and float back to Jefferson Park. She always had.

I followed the detective back to the dining room, and then he said he wanted to go back over to the Spiegelmans’ house and pick through her room a little. Mrs. Spiegelman gave me a hug and said, “You’ve always been such a good boy; I’m sorry she ever got you caught up in this ridiculousness.” Mr. Spiegelman shook my hand, and they left. As soon as the door closed, my dad said, “Wow.”

“Wow,” agreed Mom.

My dad put his arm around me. “Those are some very troubling dynamics, eh, bud?”

“They’re kind of assholes,” I said. My parents always liked it when I cursed in front of them. I could see the pleasure of it in their faces. It signified that I trusted them, that I was myself in front of them. But even so, they seemed sad.

“Margo’s parents suffer a severe narcissistic injury whenever she acts out,” Dad said to me.

“It prevents them from parenting effectively,” my mom added.

“They’re assholes,” I repeated.

“Honestly,” my dad said, “they’re probably right. She probably is in need of attention. And God knows, I would need attention, too, if I had those two for parents.”

“When she comes back,” my mom said, “she’s going to be devastated. To be abandoned like that! Shut out when you most need to be loved.”

“Maybe she could live here when she comes back,” I said, and in saying it I realized what a fantastically great idea it was. My mom’s eyes lit up, too, but then she saw something in my dad’s expression and answered me in her usual measured way.

“Well, she’d certainly be welcome, although that would come with its own challenges—being next door to the Spiegelmans. But when she returns to school, please do tell her that she’s welcome here, and that if she doesn’t want to stay with us, there are many resources available to her that we’re happy to discuss.”

Ben came out then, his bedhead seeming to challenge our basic understanding of the force gravity exerts upon matter. “Mr. and Mrs. Jacobsen—always a pleasure.”

“Good morning, Ben. I wasn’t aware you were staying the night.”

“Neither was I, actually,” he said. “What’s wrong?”

I told Ben about the detective and the Spiegelmans and Margo being technically a missing adult. And when I had finished, he nodded and said, “We should probably discuss this over a piping hot plate of Resurrection.” I smiled and followed him back to my room. Radar came over shortly thereafter, and as soon as he arrived, I was kicked off the team, because we were facing a difficult mission and despite being the only one of us who actually owned the game, I wasn’t very good at Resurrection. As I watched them tramp through a ghoulish-infested space station, Ben said, “Goblin, Radar, goblin.”

“I see him.”

“Come here you little bastard,” Ben said, the controller twisting in his hand. “Daddy’s gonna put you on a sailboat across the River Styx.”

“Did you just use Greek mythology to talk trash?” I asked.

Radar laughed. Ben started pummeling buttons, shouting, “Eat it, goblin! Eat it like Zeus ate Metis!”

“I would think that she’d be back by Monday,” I said. “You don’t want to miss too much school, even if you’re Margo Roth Spiegelman. Maybe she can stay here till graduation.”

Radar answered me in the disjointed way of someone playing Resurrection. “I don’t even get why she left, was it just *imp six o’clock no dude use the ray gun* like because of lost love? I would have figured her to be *where is the crypt is it to the left* immune to that kind of stuff.”

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t that, I don’t think. Not just that, anyway. She kind of hates Orlando; she called it a paper town. Like, you know, everything so fake and flimsy. I think she just wanted a vacation from that.”

I happened to glance out my window, and I saw immediately that someone—the detective I guessed—had lowered the shade in Margo’s room. But I wasn’t seeing the shade. Instead, I was seeing a black-and-white poster, taped to the back of the shade. In the photograph, a man stands, his shoulders slightly slumped, staring ahead. A cigarette dangles out of his mouth. A guitar is slung over his shoulder, and the guitar is painted with the words THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS.

“There’s something in Margo’s window.” The game music stopped, and Radar and Ben knelt down on either side of me. “That’s new?” asked Radar.

“I’ve seen the back of that shade a million times,” I answered, “but I’ve never seen that poster before.”

“Weird,” Ben said.

“Margo’s parents just said this morning that she sometimes leaves clues,” I said. “But never anything, like, concrete enough to find her before she comes home.”

Radar already had his handheld out; he was searching Omnictionary for the phrase. “The picture’s of Woody Guthrie,” he said. “A folksinger, 1912 to 1967. Sang about the working class. ‘This Land Is Your Land.’ Bit of a Communist. Um, inspired Bob Dylan.” Radar played a snippet of one of his songs—a high-pitched scratchy voice sang about unions.

“I’ll e-mail the guy who wrote most of this page and see if there are any obvious connections between Woody Guthrie and Margo,” Radar said.

“I can’t imagine she likes his songs,” I said.

“Seriously,” Ben said. “This guy sounds like an alcoholic Kermit the Frog with throat cancer.”

Radar opened the window and stuck his head out, swiveling it around. “It sure seems she left this for you, though, Q. I mean, does she know anyone else who could see this window?” I shook my head no.

After a moment, Ben added, “The way he’s staring at us—it’s like, ‘pay attention to me.’ And his head like that, you know? It’s not like he’s standing on a stage; it’s like he’s standing in a doorway or something.”

“I think he wants us to come inside,” I said.

4.

We didn't have a view of the front door or the garage from my bedroom: for that, we needed to sit in the family room. So while Ben continued playing Resurrection, Radar and I went out to the family room and pretended to watch TV while keeping watch on the Spiegelmans' front door through a picture window, waiting for Margo's mom and dad to leave. Detective Warren's black Crown Victoria was still in the driveway.

He left after about fifteen minutes, but neither the garage door nor the front door opened again for an hour. Radar and I were watching some half-funny stoner comedy on HBO, and I had started to get into the story when Radar said, "Garage door." I jumped off the couch and got close to the window so that I could see clearly who was in the car. Both Mr. and Mrs. Spiegelman. Ruthie was still at home. "Ben!" I shouted. He was out in a flash, and as the Spiegelmans turned off Jefferson Way and onto Jefferson Road, we raced outside into the muggy morning.

We walked through the Spiegelmans' lawn to their front door. I rang the doorbell and heard Myrna Mountweazel's paws scurrying on the hardwood floors, and then she was barking like crazy, staring at us through the sidelight glass. Ruthie opened the door. She was a sweet girl, maybe eleven.

"Hey, Ruthie."

"Hi, Quentin," she said.

"Hey, are your parents here?"

"They just left," she said, "to go to Target." She had Margo's big eyes, but hers were hazel. She looked up at me, her lips pursed with worry. "Did you meet the policeman?"

"Yeah," I said. "He seemed nice."

"Mom says that it's like if Margo went to college early."

"Yeah," I said, thinking that the easiest way to solve a mystery is to decide that there is no mystery to solve. But it seemed clear to me now that she had left the clues to a mystery behind.

"Listen, Ruthie, we need to look in Margo's room," I said. "But the thing is—it's like when Margo would ask you to do top-secret stuff. We're in the same situation here."

"Margo doesn't like people in her room," Ruthie said. "'Cept me. And sometimes Mommy."

"But we're her friends."

"She doesn't like her friends in her room," Ruthie said.

I leaned down toward her. "Ruthie, please."

"And you don't want me to tell Mommy and Dad," she said.

"Correct."

"Five dollars," she said. I was about to bargain with her, but then Radar produced a five-dollar bill and handed it to her. "If I see the car in the driveway, I'll let you know," she said conspiratorially.

I knelt down to give the aging-but-always-enthusiastic Myrna Mountweazel a good petting, and then we raced upstairs to Margo's room. As I put my hand on the doorknob, it occurred to me that I had not seen Margo's entire room since I was about ten years old.

I walked in. Much neater than you'd expect Margo to be, but maybe her mom had just picked everything up. To my right, a closet packed-to-bursting with clothes. On the back of the door, a shoe rack with a couple dozen pairs of shoes, from Mary Janes to prom heels. It didn't seem like much could be missing from that closet.

"I'm on the computer," Radar said. Ben was fiddling with the shade. "The poster is taped on," he said.

“Just Scotch tape. Nothing strong.”

The great surprise was on the wall next to the computer desk: bookcases as tall as me and twice as long, filled with vinyl records. *Hundreds* of them. “John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* is in the record player,” Ben said.

“God, that is a brilliant album,” Radar said without looking away from the computer. “Girl’s got taste.” I looked at Ben, confused, and then Ben said, “He was a sax player.” I nodded.

Still typing, Radar said, “I can’t believe Q has never heard of Coltrane. Trane’s playing is literally the most convincing proof of God’s existence I’ve ever come across.”

I began to look through the records. They were organized alphabetically by artist, so I scanned through, looking for the G’s. Dizzy Gillespie, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Green Day, Guided by Voices, George Harrison. “She has, like, every musician in the world *except* Woody Guthrie,” I said. And then I went back and started from the A’s.

“All her schoolbooks are still here,” I heard Ben say. “Plus some other books by her bedside table. No journal.”

But I was distracted by Margo’s music collection. She liked *everything*. I could never have imagined her listening to all these old records. I’d seen her listening to music while running, but I’d never suspected this kind of obsession. I’d never heard of most of the bands, and I was surprised to learn that vinyl records were even being produced for the newer ones.

I kept going through the A’s and then the B’s—making my way through the Beatles and the Blind Boys of Alabama and Blondie—and I started to rifle through them more quickly, so quickly that I didn’t even see the back cover of Billy Bragg’s *Mermaid Avenue* until I was looking at the Buzzcocks. I stopped, went back, and pulled out the Billy Bragg record. The front was a photograph of urban row houses. But on the back, Woody Guthrie was staring at me, a cigarette hanging out of his lips, holding a guitar that said THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS.

“Hey,” I said. Ben looked over.

“Holy shitstickers,” he said. “Nice find.” Radar spun around the chair and said, “Impressive. Wonder what’s inside.”

Unfortunately, only a record was inside. The record looked exactly like a record. I put it on Margo’s record player and eventually figured out how to turn it on and put down the needle. It was some guy singing Woody Guthrie songs. He sang better than Woody Guthrie.

“What is it, just a crazy coincidence?”

Ben was holding the album cover. “Look,” he said. He was pointing at the song list. In thin black pen, the song title “Walt Whitman’s Niece” had been circled.

“Interesting,” I said. Margo’s mom had said that Margo’s clues never led anywhere, but I knew now that Margo had created a chain of clues—and she had seemingly made them for me. I immediately thought of her in the SunTrust Building, telling me I was better when I showed confidence. I turned the record over and played it. “Walt Whitman’s Niece” was the first song on side two. Not bad, actually.

I saw Ruthie in the doorway then. She looked at me. “Got any clues for us, Ruthie?” She shook her head. “I already looked,” she said glumly. Radar looked at me and gestured his head toward Ruthie.

“Can you please keep watch for your mom for us?” I asked. She nodded and left. I closed the door.

“What’s up?” I asked Radar. He motioned us over to the computer. “In the week before she left, Margo was on Omnictionary a bunch. I can tell from minutes logged by her username, which she stored in her passwords. But she erased her browsing history, so I can’t tell what she was looking at.”

“Hey, Radar, look up who Walt Whitman was,” Ben said.

“He was a poet,” I answered. “Nineteenth century.”

“Great,” Ben said, rolling his eyes. “Poetry.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“Poetry is just so emo,” he said. “Oh, the pain. The pain. It always rains. In my soul.”

“Yeah, I believe that’s Shakespeare,” I said dismissively. “Did Whitman have any nieces?” I asked Radar. He was already on Whitman’s Omnictionary page. A burly guy with this huge beard. I’d never read him, but he *looked* like a good poet.

“Uh, no one famous. Says he had a couple brothers, but no mention of whether they had kids. I can probably find out if you want.” I shook my head. That didn’t seem right. I went back to looking around the room. The bottom shelf of her record collection included some books—middle school yearbooks, a beat-up copy of *The Outsiders*—and some back issues of teen magazines. Nothing relating to Walt Whitman’s niece, certainly.

I looked through the books by her bedside table. Nothing of interest. “It would make sense if she had a book of his poetry,” I said. “But she doesn’t seem to.”

“She does!” Ben said excitedly. I went over to where he had knelt by the bookshelves, and saw it now. I’d looked right past the slim volume on the bottom shelf, wedged between two yearbooks. Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. I pulled out the book. There was a photograph of Whitman on the cover, his light eyes staring back at me.

“Not bad,” I told Ben.

He nodded. “Yeah, now can we get out of here? Call me old-fashioned, but I’d rather not be here when Margo’s parents get back.”

“Is there anything we’re missing?”

Radar stood up. “It really seems like she’s drawing a pretty straight line; there’s gotta be something in that book. It’s weird, though—I mean, no offense, but if she always left clues for her parents, why would she leave them for you this time?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t know the answer, but of course I had my hopes: maybe Margo needed to see my confidence. Maybe this time she *wanted* to be found, and to be found by *me*. Maybe—just as she had chosen me on the longest night, she had chosen me again. And maybe untold riches awaited he who found her.

Ben and Radar left soon after we got back to my house, after they’d each looked through the book and not found any obvious clues. I grabbed some cold lasagna from the fridge for lunch and went to my room with Walt. It was the Penguin Classics version of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I read a little from the introduction and then paged through the book. There were several quotes highlighted in blue, all from the epically long poem known as “Song of Myself.” And there were two lines from the poem that were highlighted in green:

*Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!*

I spent most of my afternoon trying to make sense of that quote, thinking maybe it was Margo’s way of telling me to become more of a badass or something. But I also read and reread everything highlighted in blue:

*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . .
nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on
the spectres in books.*

I tramp a perpetual journey

*All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier.*

*If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.*

The final three stanzas of “Song of Myself” were also highlighted.

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsles.*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you*

It became a weekend of reading, of trying to see her in the fragments of the poem she’d left for me. I could never get anywhere with the lines, but I kept thinking about them anyway, because I didn’t want to disappoint her. She wanted me to play out the string, to find the place where she had stopped and was waiting for me, to follow the bread crumb trail until it dead-ended into her.

5.

Monday morning, an extraordinary event occurred. I was late, which was normal; and then my mom dropped me off at school, which was normal; and then I stood outside talking with everyone for a while, which was normal; and then Ben and I headed inside, which was normal. But as soon as we swung open the steel door, Ben's face became a mix of excitement and panic, like he'd just been picked out of a crowd by a magician for the get-sawn-in-half trick. I followed his gaze down the hall.

Denim miniskirt. Tight white T-shirt. Scooped neck. Extraordinarily olive skin. Legs that make you care about legs. Perfectly coiffed curly brown hair. A laminated button reading ME FOR PROM QUEEN. Lacey Pemberton. Walking toward us. By the *band room*.

"Lacey Pemberton," Ben whispered, even though she was about three steps from us and could clearly hear him, and in fact flashed a faux-bashful smile upon hearing her name.

"Quentin," she said to me, and more than anything else, I found it impossible that she knew my name. She motioned with her head, and I followed her past the band room, over to a bank of lockers. Ben kept pace with me.

"Hi, Lacey," I said once she stopped walking. I could smell her perfume, and I remembered the smell of it in her SUV, remembered the crunch of the catfish as Margo and I slammed her seat down.

"I hear you were with Margo."

I just looked at her.

"That night, with the fish? In my car? And in Becca's closet? And through Jase's window?"

I kept looking. I wasn't sure what to say. A man can live a long and adventurous life without ever being spoken to by Lacey Pemberton, and when that rare opportunity does arise, one does not wish to misspeak. So Ben spoke for me. "Yeah, they hung out," Ben said, as if Margo and I were tight.

"Was she mad at me?" Lacey asked after a moment. She was looking down; I could see her brown eye shadow.

"What?"

She spoke quietly then, the tiniest crack in her voice, and all at once Lacey Pemberton was not Lacey Pemberton. She was just—like, a person. "Was she, you know, pissed at me about something?"

I thought about how to answer that for a while. "Uh, she was a little disappointed that you didn't tell her about Jase and Becca, but you know Margo. She'll get over it."

Lacey started walking down the hall. Ben and I let her go, but then she slowed down. She wanted us to walk with her. Ben nudged me, and then we started walking together. "I didn't even *know* about Jase and Becca. That's the thing. God, I hope I can explain that to her soon. For a while, I was really worried that maybe she had like really left, but then I went into her locker 'cause I know her combination and she still has all her pictures up and everything, and all her books are stacked there."

"That's good," I said.

"Yeah, but it's been like four days. That's almost a record for her. And you know, this has really sucked, because Craig knew, and I was so pissed at him for not telling me that I broke up with him, and now I'm out a prom date, and my best friend is off wherever, in New York or whatever, thinking I did something I would NEVER do." I shot a look to Ben. Ben shot a look back to me.

"I have to run to class," I said. "But why do you say she's in New York?"

"I guess she told Jase like two days before she left that New York was the only place in America where a person could actually live a halfway livable life. Maybe she was just saying it. I don't know."

"Okay, I gotta run," I said.

I knew Ben would never convince Lacey to go to prom with him, but I figured he at least deserved the opportunity. I jogged through the halls toward my locker, rubbing Radar's head as I ran past him. He was talking to Angela and a freshman girl in band. "Don't thank me. Thank Q," I heard him say to the freshman, and she called out, "Thank you for my two hundred dollars!" Without looking back I shouted, "Don't thank me, thank Margo Roth Spiegelman!" because of course she'd given me the tools I needed.

I made it to my locker and grabbed my calc notebook, but then I just stayed, even after the second bell rang, standing still in the middle of the hallway while people rushed past me in both directions, like I was the median in their freeway. Another kid thanked me for his two hundred dollars. I smiled at him. The school felt more *mine* than in all my four years there. We'd gotten a measure of justice for the bikeless band geeks. Lacey Pemberton had spoken to me. Chuck Parson had apologized.

I knew these halls so well—and finally it was starting to feel like they knew me, too. I stood there as the third bell rang and the crowds dwindled. Only then did I walk to calc, sitting down just after Mr. Jiminez had started another interminable lecture.

I'd brought Margo's copy of *Leaves of Grass* to school, and I started reading the highlighted parts of "Song of Myself" again, under the desk while Mr. Jiminez scratched away at the blackboard. There were no direct references to New York that I could see. I handed it to Radar after a few minutes, and he looked at it for a while before writing on the corner of his notebook closest to me, *The green highlighting must mean something. Maybe she wants you to open the door of your mind?* I shrugged, and wrote back, *Or maybe she just read the poem on two different days with two different highlighters.*

A few minutes later, as I glanced toward the clock for only the thirty-seventh time, I saw Ben Starling standing outside the classroom door, a hall pass in his hand, dancing a spastic jig.

When the bell rang for lunch, I raced to my locker, but somehow Ben had beaten me there, and somehow he was talking to Lacey Pemberton. He was crowding her, slumping slightly so he could talk toward her face. Talking to Ben could make me feel a little claustrophobic sometimes, and I wasn't even a hot girl.

"Hey, guys," I said when I got up to them.

"Hey," Lacey answered, taking an obvious step back from Ben. "Ben was just bringing me up-to-date on Margo. No one ever went into her room, you know. She said her parents didn't allow her to have friends over."

"Really?" Lacey nodded. "Did you know that Margo owns, like, a thousand records?"

Lacey threw up her hands. "No, that's what Ben was saying!"

Margo never talked about music. I mean, she would say she liked something on the radio or whatever. But—no. She's so *weird*."

I shrugged. Maybe she was weird, or maybe the rest of us were weird. Lacey kept talking. "But we were just saying that Walt Whitman was from New York."

"And according to Omnictionary, Woody Guthrie lived there for a long time, too," Ben said.

I nodded. "I can totally see her in New York. I think we have to figure out the next clue, though. It can't end with the book. There must be some code in the highlighted lines or something."

"Yeah, can I look at it during lunch?"

"Yeah," I said. "Or I can make you a copy in the library if you want."

"Nah, I can just read it. I mean, I don't know crap about poetry. Oh, but anyway, I have a cousin in college there, at NYU, and I sent her a flyer she could print. So I'm going to tell her to put them up in record stores. I mean, I know there are a lot of record stores, but still."

"Good idea," I said. They started to walk to the cafeteria, and I followed them.

"Hey," Ben asked Lacey, "what color is your dress?"

"Um, it's kind of sapphire, why?"

“Just want to make sure my tux matches,” Ben said. I’d never seen Ben’s smile so giddy-ridiculous, and that’s saying something, because he was a fairly giddy-ridiculous person.

Lacey nodded. “Well, but we don’t want to be *too* matchy-matchy. Maybe if you go traditional: black tux and a black vest?”

“No cummerbund, you don’t think?”

“Well, they’re okay, but you don’t want to get one with really fat pleats, you know?”

They kept talking—apparently, the ideal level of pleat-fatness is a conversational topic to which hours can be devoted—but I stopped listening as I waited in the Pizza Hut line. Ben had found his prom date, and Lacey had found a boy who would happily talk prom for hours. Now everyone had a date—except me, and I wasn’t going. The only girl I’d want to take was off tramping some kind of perpetual journey or something.

When we sat down, Lacey started reading “Song of Myself,” and she agreed that none of it sounded like anything and certainly none of it sounded like Margo. We still had no idea what, if anything, Margo was trying to say. She gave the book back to me, and they started talking about prom again.

All afternoon, I kept feeling like it wasn’t doing any good to look at the highlighted quotes, but then I would get bored and reach into my backpack and put the book on my lap and go back to it. I had English at the end of the day, seventh period, and we were just starting to read *Moby Dick*, so Dr. Holden was talking quite a lot about fishing in the nineteenth century. I kept *Moby Dick* on the desk and Whitman in my lap, but even being in English class couldn’t help. For once, I went a few minutes without looking at the clock, so I was surprised by the bell ringing, and took longer than everyone else to get my backpack packed. As I slung it over one shoulder and started to leave, Dr. Holden smiled at me and said, “Walt Whitman, huh?”

I nodded sheepishly.

“Good stuff,” she said. “So good that I’m almost okay with you reading it in class. But not quite.” I mumbled *sorry* and then walked out to the senior parking lot.

While Ben and Radar banded, I sat in RHAPAW with the doors open, a slow husky breeze blowing through. I read from *The Federalist Papers* to prepare for a quiz I had the next day in government, but my mind kept returning to its continuous loop: Guthrie and Whitman and New York and Margo. Had she gone to New York to immerse herself in folk music? Was there some secret folk music-loving Margo I’d never known? Was she maybe staying in an apartment where one of them had once lived? And why did she want to tell *me* about it?

I saw Ben and Radar approaching in the sideview mirror, Radar swinging his sax case as he walked quickly toward RHAPAW. They hustled in through the already-open door, and Ben turned the key and RHAPAW sputtered, and then we hoped, and then she sputtered again, and then we hoped some more, and finally she gurgled to life. Ben raced out of the parking lot and turned off campus before saying to me, “CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS SHIT!” He could hardly contain his glee.

He started hitting the car’s horn, but of course the horn didn’t work, so every time he hit it, he just yelled, “BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! HONK IF YOU’RE GOING TO PROM WITH TRUE-BLUE HONEYBUNNY LACEY PEMBERTON! HONK, BABY, HONK!”

Ben could hardly shut up the whole way home. “You know what did it? Aside from desperation? I guess she and Becca Arrington are fighting because Becca’s, you know, a cheater, and I think she started to feel bad about the whole Bloody Ben thing. She didn’t *say* that, but she sort of *acted* it. So in the end, Bloody Ben is going to get me some puh-lay-hey.” I was happy for him and everything, but I wanted to focus on the game of getting to Margo.

“Do you guys have any ideas at all?”

It was quiet for a moment, and then Radar looked at me through the rearview mirror and said, “That doors thing is the only one marked different from the others, and it’s also the most random; I really think that’s the one with the clue. What is it again?”

“Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” I replied.

“Admittedly, Jefferson Park is not really the best place to unscrew the doors of closed-mindedness from their jambs,” Radar allowed. “Maybe that’s what she’s saying. Like the paper town thing she said about Orlando? Maybe she’s saying that’s why she left.”

Ben slowed for a stoplight and then turned around to look at Radar. “Bro,” he said, “I think you guys are giving Margo Honeybunny way too much credit.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Unscrew the locks from the doors,” he said. “Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs.”

“Yeah,” I said. The light turned green and Ben hit the gas. RHAPAW shuddered like she might disintegrate but then began to move.

“It’s not *poetry*. It’s not *metaphor*. It’s instructions. We are supposed to go to Margo’s room and unscrew the lock from the door and unscrew the door itself from its jamb.”

Radar looked at me in the rearview mirror, and I looked back at him. “Sometimes,” Radar said to me, “he’s so retarded that he becomes kind of brilliant.”

6.

After parking in my driveway, we walked across the strip of grass that separated Margo's house from mine, just as we had Saturday. Ruthie answered the door and said her parents wouldn't be home until six; Myrna Mountweazel ran excited circles around us; we went upstairs. Ruthie brought us a toolbox from the garage, and then we all stared at the door leading to Margo's bedroom for a while. We were not handy people.

"What the hell are you supposed to do?" asked Ben.

"Don't curse in front of Ruthie," I said.

"Ruthie, do you mind if I say hell?"

"We don't believe in hell," she said, by way of answering.

Radar interrupted. "People," he said. "People. The door." Radar dug out a Phillips-head screwdriver from the mess of a toolbox and knelt down, unscrewing the locking doorknob. I grabbed a bigger screwdriver and tried to unscrew the hinges, but there didn't seem to be any screws involved. I looked at the door some more. Eventually, Ruthie got bored and went downstairs to watch TV.

Radar got the doorknob loose, and we each, in turn, peered inside at the unpainted, unfinished wood around the knob. No message. No note. Nothing. Annoyed, I moved onto the hinges, wondering how to open them. I swung the door open and shut, trying to understand its mechanics. "That poem is so damned long," I said. "You'd think old Walt could have taken a line or two to tell us *how* to unscrew the door itself from its jamb."

Only when he responded did I realize Radar was sitting at Margo's computer. "According to Omnictionary," he said, "we're looking at a butt hinge. And you just use the screwdriver as a lever to pop out the pin. Incidentally, some vandal has added that butt hinges function well because they are powered by farts. Oh, Omnictionary. Wilt thou ever be accurate?"

Once Omnictionary had told us what to do, doing it proved surprisingly easy. I got the pin off each of the three hinges and then Ben pulled the door away. I examined the hinges, and the unfinished wood of the doorway. Nothing.

"Nothing on the door," Ben said. Ben and I placed the door back in place, and Radar pounded in the pins with the screwdriver's handle.

Radar and I went over to Ben's house, which was architecturally identical to mine, to play a game called Arctic Fury. We were playing this game-within-a-game where you shoot each other with paintballs on a glacier. You received extra points for shooting your opponents in the balls. It was very sophisticated. "Bro, she's definitely in New York City," Ben said. I saw the muzzle of his rifle around a corner, but before I could move, he shot me between the legs. "Shit," I mumbled.

Radar said, "In the past, it seems like her clues have pointed to a place. She tells Jase; she leaves us clues involving two people who both lived in New York City most of their lives. It does make sense."

Ben said, "Dude, that's what she wants." Just as I was creeping up on Ben, he paused the game. "She wants you to *go* to New York. What if she arranged to make that the only way to find her? To actually *go*?"

"What? It's a city of like twelve million people."

"She could have a mole here," Radar said. "Who will tell her if you go."

"Lacey!" Ben said. "It's totally Lacey. Yes! You gotta get on a plane and go to New York City right now. And when Lacey finds out, Margo will pick you up at the airport. Yes. Bro, I am going to take you to your house, and you're gonna pack, and then I'm driving your ass to the airport, and you're gonna put a plane ticket on your emergencies-only credit card, and then when Margo finds out what a badass you are, the kind

of badass Jase Worthington only *dreams* about being, all *three* of us will be taking hotties to prom.”

I didn’t doubt there was a flight to New York City leaving shortly. From Orlando, there’s a flight to *everywhere* leaving shortly. But I doubted everything else. “If you call Lacey . . . ,” I said.

“She’s not going to confess!” Ben said. “Think of all the misdirection they used—they probably only acted like they were fighting so you wouldn’t suspect she was the mole.”

Radar said, “I don’t know, that doesn’t really add up.” He kept talking, but I was only half listening. Staring at the paused screen, I thought it over. If Margo and Lacey were fake-fighting, did Lacey fake-break-up with her boyfriend? Had she faked her concern? Lacey had been fielding dozens of e-mails—none with real information—from the flyers her cousin had put in record stores in New York. She was no mole, and Ben’s plan was idiotic. Still, the mere idea of a plan appealed to me. But there were only two and a half weeks left of school, and I’d miss at least two days if I went to New York—not to mention my parents would kill me for putting a plane ticket on my credit card. The more I thought about it, the dumber it was. Still, if I could see her tomorrow. . . . But no. “I can’t miss school,” I finally said. I unpaused the game. “I have a French quiz tomorrow.”

“You know,” Ben said, “your romanticism is a real inspiration.”

I played for a few more minutes and then walked across Jefferson Park back home.

My mom told me once about this crazy kid she worked with. He was a completely normal kid until he was nine, when his dad died. And even though obviously a lot of nine-year-olds have had a lot of dead fathers and most of the time the kids don’t go crazy, I guess this kid was an exception.

So what he did was he took a pencil and one of those steel compass things, and he started drawing circles onto a piece of paper. All the circles exactly two inches in diameter. And he would draw the circles until the entire piece of paper was completely black, and then he would get another piece of paper and draw more circles, and he did this every day, all day, and didn’t pay attention in school and drew circles all over all of his tests and shit, and my mom said that this kid’s problem was that he had created a routine to cope with his loss, only the routine became destructive. So anyway, then my mom made him cry about his dad or whatever and the kid stopped drawing circles and presumably lived happily ever after. But I think about the circles kid sometimes, because I can sort of understand him. I always liked routine. I suppose I never found boredom very boring. I doubted I could explain it to someone like Margo, but drawing circles through life struck me as a kind of reasonable insanity.

So I should have felt fine about not going to New York—it was a dumb idea, anyway. But as I went about my routine that night and the next day at school, it ate away at me, as if the routine itself was taking me farther from reuniting with her.

7.

Tuesday evening, when she had been gone six days, I talked to my parents. It wasn't a big *decision* or anything; I just did. I was sitting at the kitchen counter while Dad chopped vegetables and Mom browned some beef in a skillet. Dad was razzing me about how much time I'd spent reading such a short book, and I said, "Actually, it's not for English; it seems like maybe Margo left it for me to find." They got quiet, and then I told them about Woody Guthrie and the Whitman.

"She clearly likes to play these games of incomplete information," my dad said.

"I don't blame her for wanting attention," my mom said, and then to me added, "but that doesn't make her well-being your responsibility."

Dad scraped the carrots and onions into the skillet. "Yeah, true. Not that either of us could diagnose her without seeing her, but I suspect she'll be home soon."

"We shouldn't speculate," my mom said to him quietly, as if I couldn't hear or something. Dad was about to respond but I interrupted.

"What should *I* do?"

"Graduate," my mom said. "And trust that Margo can take of herself, for which she has shown a great talent."

"Agreed," my dad said, but after dinner, when I went back to my room and played Resurrection on mute, I could hear them talking quietly back and forth. I could not hear the words, but I could hear the worry.

Later that night, Ben called my cell.

"Hey," I said.

"Bro," he said.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm about to go shoe shopping with Lacey."

"*Shoe* shopping?"

"Yeah. Everything's thirty percent off from ten to midnight. She wants me to help her pick out her prom shoes. I mean, she had some, but I was over at her house yesterday and we agreed that they weren't . . . you know, you want the *perfect* shoes for prom. So she's going to return them and then we're going to Burdines and we're going to like pi—"

"Ben," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Dude, I don't want to talk about Lacey's prom shoes. And I'll tell you why: I have this thing that makes me really uninterested in prom shoes. It's called a penis."

"I'm really nervous and I can't stop thinking that I actually kinda really like her not just in the she's-a-hot-prom-date way but in the she's-actually-really-cool-and-I-like-hanging-out-with-her kinda way. And, like, maybe we're going to go to prom and we'll be, like, kissing in the middle of the dance floor and everyone will be like, holy shit and, you know, everything they ever thought about me will just go out the window—"

"Ben," I said. "Stop the dork babble and you'll be fine." He kept talking for a while, but I finally got off the phone with him.

I lay down and started to feel a little depressed about prom. I refused to feel any kind of sadness over the fact that I wasn't *going* to prom, but I had—stupidly, embarrassingly—thought of finding Margo, and getting her to come home with me just in time for prom, like late on Saturday night, and we'd walk into the

Hilton ballroom wearing jeans and ratty T-shirts, and we'd be just in time for the last dance, and we'd dance while everyone pointed at us and marveled at the return of Margo, and then we'd fox-trot the hell out of there and go get ice cream at Friendly's. So yes, like Ben, I harbored ridiculous prom fantasies. But at least I didn't *say mine out loud*.

Ben was such a self-absorbed idiot sometimes, and I had to remind myself why I still liked him. If nothing else, he sometimes got surprisingly bright ideas. The door thing was a good idea. It didn't work, but it was a good idea. But obviously Margo had intended it to mean something else to me.

To me.

The clue was *mine*. The doors were mine!

On my way to the garage, I had to walk through the living room, where Mom and Dad were watching TV. "Want to watch?" my mom asked. "They're about to crack the case." It was one of those solve-the-murder crime shows.

"No, thanks," I said, and breezed past them through the kitchen and into the garage. I found the widest flathead screwdriver and then stuck it in the waistband of my khaki shorts, cinching my belt tight. I grabbed a cookie out of the kitchen and then walked back through the living room, my gait only slightly awkward, and while they watched the televised mystery unfold, I removed the three pins from my bedroom door. When the last one came off, the door creaked and started to fall, so I swung it all the way open against the wall with one hand, and as I swung it, I saw a tiny piece of paper—about the size of my thumbnail—flutter down from the door's top hinge. Typical Margo. Why hide something in her own room when she could hide it in mine? I wondered when she'd done it, how she'd gotten in. I couldn't help but smile.

It was a sliver of the *Orlando Sentinel*, half straight edges and half ripped. I could tell it was the *Sentinel* because one ripped edge read "*do Sentinel* May 6, 2." The day she'd left. The message was clearly from her. I recognized her handwriting:

8328 bartlesville Avenue

I couldn't put the door back on without beating the pins back into place with the screwdriver, which would have definitely alerted my parents, so I just propped the door on its hinges and kept it all the way open. I pocketed the pins and then went to my computer and looked up a map of 8328 Bartlesville Avenue. I'd never heard of the street.

It was 34.6 miles away, way the hell out Colonial Drive almost to the town of Christmas, Florida. When I zoomed in on the satellite image of the building, it looked like a black rectangle fronted by dull silver and then grass behind. A mobile home, maybe? It was hard to get a sense of scale, because it was surrounded by so much green.

I called Ben and told him. "So I was right!" he said. "I can't wait to tell Lacey, because she totally thought it was a good idea, too!"

I ignored the Lacey comment. "I think I'm gonna go," I said.

"Well, yeah, of course you've gotta go. I'm coming. Let's go on Sunday morning. I'll be tired from all-night prom partying, but whatever."

"No, I mean I'm going tonight," I said.

"Bro, it's *dark*. You can't go to a strange building with a mysterious address in the *dark*. Haven't you ever seen a horror movie?"

"She could be there," I said.

"Yeah, and a demon who can only be nourished by the pancreases of young boys could also be there," he said. "Christ, at least wait till tomorrow, although I've got to order her corsage after band, and then I want to be home in case Lacey IM's, because we've been IM'ing a lot—"

I cut him off. “No, tonight. I want to see her.” I could feel the circle closing. In an hour, if I hurried, I could be looking at her.

“Bro, I am not letting you go to some sketchy address in the middle of the night. I will Tase your ass if necessary.”

“Tomorrow morning,” I said, mostly to myself. “I’ll just go tomorrow morning.” I was tired of having perfect attendance anyway. Ben was quiet. I heard him blowing air between his front teeth.

“I do feel a little something coming on,” he said. “Fever. Cough. Aches. Pains.” I smiled. After I hung up, I called Radar.

“I’m on the other line with Ben,” he said. “Let me call you back.”

He called back a minute later. Before I could even say hello, Radar said, “Q, I’ve got this terrible migraine. There’s no way I can go to school tomorrow.” I laughed.

After I got off the phone, I stripped down to T-shirt and boxers, emptied my garbage can into a drawer, and put the can next to the bed. I set my alarm for the ungodly hour of six in the morning, and spent the next few hours trying in vain to fall asleep.

8.

Mom came into my room the next morning and said, “You didn’t even close the door last night, sleepyhead,” and I opened my eyes and said, “I think I have a stomach bug.” And then I motioned toward the trash can, which contained puke.

“Quentin! Oh, goodness. When did this happen?”

“About six,” I said, which was true.

“Why didn’t you come get us?”

“Too tired,” I said, which was also true.

“You just woke up feeling ill?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, which was untrue. I woke up because my alarm went off at six, and then I snuck into the kitchen and ate a granola bar and some orange juice. Ten minutes later, I stuck two fingers down my throat. I didn’t want to do it the night before because I didn’t want it stinking the room up all night. The puking sucked, but it was over quickly.

Mom took the bucket, and I could hear her cleaning it out in the kitchen. She returned with a fresh bucket, her lips pouting with worry. “Well, I feel like I should take the day—” she started, but I cut her off.

“I’m honestly fine,” I said. “Just queasy. Something I ate.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll call if it gets worse,” I said. She kissed my forehead. I could feel her sticky lipstick on my skin. I wasn’t really sick, but still, somehow she’d made me feel better.

“Do you want me to close the door?” she asked, one hand on it. The door clung to its hinges, but only barely.

“No no no,” I said, perhaps too nervously.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll call school on my way to work. You let me know if you need anything. Anything. Or if you want me to come home. And you can always call Dad. And I’ll check up on you this afternoon, okay?”

I nodded, and then pulled the covers back up to my chin. Even though the bucket had been cleaned, I could smell the puke underneath the detergent, and the smell of it reminded me of the act of puking, which for some reason made me want to puke again, but I just took slow, even mouth breaths until I heard the Chrysler backing down the driveway. It was 7:32. For once, I thought, I would be on time. Not to school, admittedly. But still.

I showered and brushed my teeth and put on dark jeans and a plain black T-shirt. I put Margo’s scrap of newspaper in my pocket. I hammered the pins back into their hinges, and then packed. I didn’t really know what to throw into my backpack, but I included the doorjamb-opening screwdriver, a printout of the satellite map, directions, a bottle of water, and in case she was there, the Whitman. I wanted to ask her about it.

Ben and Radar showed up at eight on the dot. I got in the backseat. They were shouting along to a song by the Mountain Goats.

Ben turned around and offered me his fist. I punched it softly, even though I hated that greeting. “Q!” he shouted over the music. “How good does this feel?”

And I knew exactly what Ben meant: he meant listening to the Mountain Goats with your friends in a car that runs on a Wednesday morning in May on the way to Margo and whatever Margotastic prize came with finding her. “It beats calculus,” I answered. The music was too loud for us to talk. Once we got out of Jefferson Park, we rolled down the one window that worked so the world would know we had good taste in music.

We drove all the way out Colonial Drive, past the movie theaters and the bookstores that I had been driving to and past my whole life. But this drive was different and better because it occurred during calculus, because it occurred with Ben and Radar, because it occurred on our way to where I believed I would find her. And finally, after twenty miles, Orlando gave way to the last remaining orange tree groves and undeveloped ranches—the endlessly flat land grown over thick with brush, the Spanish moss hanging off the branches of oak trees, still in the windless heat. This was the Florida where I used to spend mosquito-bitten, armadillo-chasing nights as a Boy Scout. The road was dominated now by pickup trucks, and every mile or so you could see a subdivision off the highway—little streets winding for no reason around houses that rose up out of nothing like a volcano of vinyl siding.

Farther out we passed a rotting wooden sign that said GROVEPOINT ACRES. A cracked blacktop road lasted only a couple hundred feet before dead-ending into an expanse of gray dirt, signaling that Grovepoint Acres was what my mom called a pseudovision—a subdivision abandoned before it could be completed. Pseudovisions had been pointed out to me a couple times before on drives with my parents, but I'd never seen one so desolate.

We were about five miles past Grovepoint Acres when Radar turned down the music and said, “Should be in about a mile.”

I took a long breath. The excitement of being somewhere other than school had started to wane. This didn't seem like a place where Margo would hide, or even visit. It was a far cry from New York City. This was the Florida you fly over, wondering why people ever thought to inhabit this peninsula. I stared at the empty asphalt, the heat distorting my vision. Ahead, I saw a strip mall wavering in the bright distance.

“Is that it?” I asked, leaning forward and pointing.

“Must be,” Radar said.

Ben pushed the power button on the stereo, and we all got very quiet as Ben pulled into a parking lot long since reclaimed by the gray sandy dirt. There had once been a sign for these four storefronts. A rusted pole stood about eight feet high by the side of the road. But the sign was long gone, snapped off by a hurricane or an accumulation of decay. The stores themselves had fared little better: it was a single-story building with a flat roof, and bare cinder block was visible in places. Strips of cracked paint wrinkled away from the walls, like insects clinging to a nest. Water stains formed brown abstract paintings between the store windows. The windows were boarded up with warped sheets of particleboard. I was struck by an awful thought, the kind that cannot be taken back once it escapes into the open air of consciousness: it seemed to me that this was not a place you go to live. It was a place you go to die.

As soon as the car stopped, my nose and mouth were flooded with the rancid smell of death. I had to swallow back a rush of puke that rose up into the raw soreness in the back of my throat. Only now, after all this lost time, did I realize how terribly I had misunderstood both her game and the prize for winning it.

I get out of the car and Ben is standing next to me, and Radar next to him. And I know all at once that this isn't funny, that this hasn't been prove-to-me-you're-good-enough-to-hang-out-with-me. I can hear Margo that night as we drove around Orlando. I can hear her saying to me, “I don't want some kids to find me swarmed with flies on a Saturday morning in Jefferson Park.” Not wanting to be found by some kids in Jefferson Park isn't the same thing as not wanting to die.

There is no evidence that anyone has been here in a long time except for the smell, that sickly sour stench designed to keep the living from the dead. I tell myself she can't smell like that, but of course she can. We all can. I hold my forearm up to my nose so I can smell sweat and skin and anything but death.

“MARGO?” Radar calls. A mockingbird perched on the rusted gutter of the building spits out two syllables in response. “MARGO!” he shouts again. Nothing. He digs a parabola into the sand with his foot and sighs. “Shit.”

Standing before this building, I learn something about fear. I learn that it is not the idle fantasies of someone who maybe wants something important to happen to him, even if the important thing is horrible. It is not the disgust of seeing a dead stranger, and not the breathlessness of hearing a shotgun pumped outside

of Becca Arrington's house. This cannot be addressed by breathing exercises. This fear bears no analogy to any fear I knew before. This is the basest of all possible emotions, the feeling that was with us before we existed, before this building existed, before the earth existed. This is the fear that made fish crawl out onto dry land and evolve lungs, the fear that teaches us to run, the fear that makes us bury our dead.

The smell leaves me seized by desperate panic—panic not like my lungs are out of air, but like the atmosphere itself is out of air. I think maybe the reason I have spent most of my life being afraid is that I have been trying to prepare myself, to train my body for the real fear when it comes. But I am not prepared.

“Bro, we should leave,” Ben says. “We should call the cops or something.” We have not looked at each other yet. We are all still looking at this building, this long-abandoned building that cannot possibly hold anything but corpses.

“No,” Radar says. “No no no no no. We call if there's something to call about. She left the address for Q. Not for the cops. We have to find a way in there.”

“*In there?*” Ben says dubiously.

I clap Ben on the back, and for the first time all day, the three of us are looking not forward but at one another. That makes it bearable. Something about seeing them makes me feel as if she is not dead until we find her. “Yeah, in there,” I say.

I don't know who she is anymore, or who she was, but I need to find her.

9.

We walk around the back of the building and find four locked steel doors and nothing but ranch land, patches of palmettos dotting an expanse of gold-green grass. The stench is worse here, and I feel afraid to keep walking. Ben and Radar are just behind me, to my right and left. We form a triangle together, walking slowly, our eyes scanning the area.

“It’s a raccoon!” Ben shouts. “Oh, thank God. It’s a raccoon. Jesus.” Radar and I walk away from the building to join him near a shallow drainage ditch. A huge, bloated raccoon with matted hair lies dead, no visible trauma, its fur falling off, one of its ribs exposed. Radar turns away and heaves, but nothing comes out. I lean down next to him and put my arm between his shoulder blades, and when he gets his breath back, he says, “I am so fucking glad to see that dead fucking raccoon.”

But even so, I cannot picture her here alive. It occurs to me that the Whitman could be a suicide note. I think about things she highlighted: “To die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.” “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.” For a moment, I feel a flash of hope when I think about the last line of the poem: “I stop some where waiting for you.” But then I think that the *I* does not need to be a person. The *I* can also be a body.

Radar has walked away from the raccoon and is tugging on the handle of one of the four locked steel doors. I feel like praying for the dead—saying Kaddish for this raccoon—but I don’t even know how. I’m so sorry for him, and so sorry for how happy I am to see him like this.

“It’s giving a little,” Radar shouts to us. “Come help.”

Ben and I both put our arms around Radar’s waist and pull back. He puts his foot up against the wall to give himself extra leverage as he pulls, and then all at once they collapse onto me, Radar’s sweat-soaked T-shirt pressed up against my face. For a moment, I’m excited, thinking we’re in. But then I see Radar holding the door handle. I scramble up and look at the door. Still locked.

“Piece of shit forty-year-old goddamned doorknob,” Radar says. I’ve never heard him talk like this before.

“It’s okay,” I say. “There’s a way. There has to be.”

We walk all the way around to the front of the building. No doors, no holes, no visible tunnels. But I need in. Ben and Radar try to peel the slabs of particleboard from the windows, but they’re all nailed shut. Radar kicks at the board, but it doesn’t give. Ben turns back to me. “There’s no glass behind one of these boards,” he says, and then he starts jogging away from the building, his sneakers splashing sand as he goes.

I give him a confused look. “I’m going to bust through the particleboard,” he explains.

“You can’t do that.” He is the smallest of our light trio. If anyone tries to smash through the boarded-up windows, it should be me.

He balls his hands into fists and then extends his fingers out. As I walk toward him, he starts talking to me. “When my mom was trying to keep me from getting beat up in third grade, she put me in tae kwon do. I only went to like three classes, and I only learned one thing, but the thing comes in handy sometimes: we watched this tae kwon do master punch through a thick wooden block, and we were all like, dude, how did he do that, and he told us that if you move as though your hand will go through the block, and if you believe that your hand will go through the block, then it will.”

I’m about to refute this idiotic logic when he takes off, running past me in a blur. His acceleration continues as he approaches the board, and then utterly without fear, he leaps up at the last possible second, twists his body sideways—his shoulder out to bear the brunt of the force—and slams into the wood. I half-expect him to burst through and leave a Ben-shaped cutout, like a cartoon. Instead, he bounces off the board and falls onto his ass in a patch of bright grass amid the sea of sandy dirt. Ben rolls onto his side, rubbing his shoulder. “It broke,” he announces.

I assume he means his shoulder as I race toward him, but then he stands up, and I'm looking at a Ben-high crack in the particleboard. I start kicking at it, and the crack spreads horizontally, and then Radar and I get our fingers inside the crack and start tugging. I squint to keep the sweat from burning my eyes, and pull with all my force back and forth until the crack starts to make a jagged opening. Radar and I urge it on with silent work, until eventually he has to take a break and Ben replaces him. Finally we are able to punch a big chunk of the board into the minimall. I climb in feetfirst, landing blindly onto what feels like a stack of papers.

The hole we've carved into this building gives a little light, but I can't even make out the dimensions of the room, or whether there is a ceiling. The air in here is so stale and hot that inhaling and exhaling feel identical.

I turn around and my chin hits Ben's forehead. I find myself whispering, even though there's no reason to. "Do you have a—"

"No," he whispers back before I can finish. "Radar, did you bring a flashlight?"

I hear Radar coming through the hole. "I have one on my key chain. It's not much, though."

The light comes on, and I still can't see very well, but I can tell we've stepped into a big room filled with a labyrinth of metal shelves. The papers on the floor are pages from an old day-by-day calendar, the days scattered through the room, all of them yellowing and mouse-bit. I wonder if this might once have been a little bookstore, although it's been decades since these shelves held anything but dust.

We fall into line behind Radar. I hear something creak above us, and we all stop moving. I try to swallow the panic. I can hear each of Radar's and Ben's breaths, their shuffling footsteps. I want out of here, but that could be Margo creaking for all I know. It could also be crack addicts.

"Just the building settling," Radar whispers, but he seems less sure than usual. I stand there unable to move. After a moment, I hear Ben's voice. "The last time I was this scared, I peed myself."

"The last time I was this scared," Radar says, "I actually had to face a Dark Lord in order to make the world safe for wizards."

I made a feeble attempt. "The last time I was this scared I had to sleep in Mommy's room."

Ben chuckles. "Q, if I were you, I would get that scared Every. Single. Night."

I'm not up for laughing, but their laughter makes the room feel safer, and so we begin to explore. We walk through each row of shelves, finding nothing but a few copies of *Reader's Digest* from the 1970s lying on the floor. After a while, I find my eyes adjusting to the darkness, and in the gray light we start walking in different directions at different speeds.

"No one leaves the room until everyone leaves the room," I whisper, and they whisper *okay's* back. I get to a side wall of the room and find the first evidence that someone has been here since everyone left. A jagged semicircular, waist-high tunnel has been cut out of the wall. The words TROLL HOLE have been spray-painted in orange above the hole, with a helpful arrow pointing down to the hole. "Guys," Radar says, so loud that the spell breaks for just a moment. I follow his voice and find him standing by the opposite wall, his flashlight illuminating another Troll Hole. The graffiti doesn't look particularly like Margo's, but it's hard to tell for sure. I've only seen her spray-paint a single letter.

Radar shines the light through the hole as I duck down and lead the way through. This room is entirely empty except for a rolled carpet in one corner. As the flashlight scans the floor, I can see glue stains on the concrete from where the carpet had once been. Across the room, I can just make out another hole cut into the wall, this time without the graffiti.

I crawl through that Troll Hole into a room lined with clothing racks, the stainless-steel poles still bolted into walls wine-stained with water damage. This room is better lit, and it takes me a moment to realize it's because there are several holes in the roof—tar paper hangs down, and I can see places where the roof sags against exposed steel girders.

"Souvenir store," Ben whispers in front of me, and I know immediately he is right.

In the middle of the room five display cases form a pentagon. The glass that once kept the tourists from their tourist crap has mostly been shattered and lies in shards around the cases. The gray paint peels off the wall in odd and beautiful patterns, each cracked polygon of paint a snowflake of decay.

Strangely, though, there's still some merchandise: there's a Mickey Mouse phone I recognize from some way back part of childhood. Moth-bit but still-folded SUNNY ORLANDO T-shirts are on display, splattered with broken glass. Beneath the glass cases, Radar finds a box filled with maps and old tourist brochures advertising Gator World and Crystal Gardens and fun houses that no longer exist. Ben waves me over and silently points out the green glass alligator tchotchke lying alone in the case, almost buried in the dust. This is the value of our souvenirs, I think: you can't give this shit away.

We make our way back through the empty room and the shelved room and crawl through the last Troll Hole. This room looks like an office only without computers, and it appears to have been abandoned in a great hurry, like its employees were beamed up to space or something. Twenty desks sit in four rows. There are still pens on some of the desks, and they all feature oversize paper calendars lying flat against the desks. On each calendar, it is perpetually February of 1986. Ben pushes a cloth desk chair and it spins, creaking rhythmically. Thousands of Post-it notes advertising The Martin-Gale Mortgage Corp. are piled beside one desk in a rickety pyramid. Open boxes contain stacks of paper from old dot matrix printers, detailing the expenses and income of the Martin-Gale Mortgage Corp. On one of the desks, someone has stacked brochures for subdivisions into a single-story house of cards. I spread the brochures out, thinking that they may hold a clue, but no.

Radar fingers through the papers, whispering, "Nothing after 1986." I start to go through the desk drawers. I find Q-tips and stickpins. Pens and pencils packed a dozen each in flimsy cardboard packaging with retro fonts and design. Napkins. A pair of golf gloves.

"Do you guys see anything," I ask, "that gives any hint that anyone has been here in the last, say, twenty years?"

"Nothing but the Troll Holes," Ben answers. It's a tomb, everything wrapped in dust.

"So why did she lead us here?" asks Radar. We are speaking now.

"Dunno," I say. She is clearly not here.

"There are some spots," Radar says, "with less dust. There's a dustless rectangle in the empty room, like something was moved. But I don't know."

"And there's that painted part," Ben says. Ben points and Radar's flashlight shows me that a piece of the far wall in this office has been brushed over with white primer, like someone got the idea to remodel the place but abandoned the project after half an hour. I walk over to the wall, and up close, I can see that there's some red graffiti behind the white paint. But I can only see occasional hints of the red paint bleeding through—not nearly enough to make anything out. There's a can of primer up against the wall, open. I kneel down and push my finger into the paint. There's a hard surface, but it breaks easily, and my finger comes up drenched in white. As the paint drips off my finger, I don't say anything, because we've all come to the same conclusion, that someone has been here recently after all, and then the building creaks again and Radar drops the flashlight and curses.

"This is freaky," he says.

"Guys," Ben says. The flashlight is still on the ground, and I take a step back, to pick it up, but then I see Ben pointing. He is pointing at the wall. A trick of the indirect light has made the graffiti letters float up through the coat of primer, a ghost-gray print I recognize immediately as Margo's.

YOU WILL GO TO THE PAPER TOWNS AND YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK

I pick up the flashlight and shine it on the paint directly, and the message disappears. But when I shine it against a different part of the wall, I can read it again. "Shit," Radar says under his breath.

And now Ben says, "Bro, can we go now? Because the last time I was this scared . . . screw it. I'm

freaked out. There's nothing funny about this shit."

There's nothing funny about this shit is the closest Ben can come to the terror I feel, maybe. And it is close enough for me. I fast-walk toward the Troll Hole. I can feel the walls closing in on us.

10.

Ben and Radar dropped me off at my house—even though they’d skipped school, they couldn’t afford to skip band practice. I sat alone with “Song of Myself” for a long time, and for about the tenth time I tried to read the entire poem starting at the beginning, but the problem was that it’s like eighty pages long and weird and repetitive, and although I could understand each word of it, I couldn’t understand anything about it as a whole. Even though I knew the highlighted parts were probably the only important parts, I wanted to know whether it was a suicide-note kind of poem. But I couldn’t make sense of it.

I was ten confusing pages into the poem when I got so freaked out that I decided to call the detective. I dug his business card out of a pair of shorts in the laundry hamper. He answered on the second ring.

“Warren.”

“Hi, um, it’s Quentin Jacobsen. I’m a friend of Margo Roth Spiegelman?”

“Sure, kid, I remember you. What’s up?”

I told him about the clues and the minimall and about paper towns, about how she had called Orlando a paper town from the top of the SunTrust Building, but she hadn’t used it in the plural, about her telling me that she wouldn’t want to be found, about finding her underneath our bootsoles. He didn’t even tell me not to break into abandoned buildings, or ask why I was at an abandoned building at 10 A.M. on a school day. He just waited until I stopped talking and said, “Jesus, kid, you’re almost a detective. All you need now is a gun, a gut, and three ex-wives. So what’s your theory?”

“I’m worried that she might have, um, I guess killed herself.”

“It never crossed my mind this girl did anything but run off, kid. I can see your case, but you gotta remember she’s done this before. The clues, I mean. Adds drama to the whole enterprise. Honestly, kid, if she wanted you to find her—dead or alive—you already would have.”

“But don’t you—”

“Kid, the unfortunate thing is that she’s a legal adult with free will, you know? Let me give you some advice: let her come home. I mean, at some point, you gotta stop looking up at the sky, or one of these days you’ll look back down and see that you floated away, too.”

I hung up with a bad taste in my mouth—I realized it wasn’t Warren’s poetry that would take me to Margo. I kept thinking about those lines at the end Margo had underlined: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.” That grass, Whitman writes in the first few pages, is “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” But where were the graves? Where were the paper towns?

I logged onto Omnictionary to see if it knew anything more about the phrase “paper towns” than I did. They had an extremely thoughtful and helpful entry created by a user named skunkbutt: “A Paper Town is a town that’s got a paper mill in it.” This was the shortcoming of Omnictionary: the stuff written by Radar was thorough and extremely helpful; the unedited work of skunkbutt left something to be desired. But when I searched the whole Web, I found something interesting buried forty entries down on a forum about real estate in Kansas.

Looks like Madison Estates isn’t going to get built; my husband and I bought property there, but someone called this week to say they’re refunding us our deposit because they didn’t presell enough houses to finance the project. Another paper town for KS!—Marge in Cawker, KS

A pseudovision! You will go to the pseudovisions and you will never come back. I took a deep breath and stared at the screen for a while.

The conclusion seemed inescapable. Even with everything broken and decided inside her, she couldn't quite allow herself to disappear for good. And she had decided to leave her body—to leave it for me—in a shadow version of *our* subdivision, where her first strings had broken. She had said she didn't want her body found by random kids—and it made sense that out of everyone she knew, she would pick me to find her. She wouldn't be hurting me in a new way. I'd done it before. I had experience in the field.

I saw that Radar was online and was clicking over to talk to him when an IM from him popped up on my screen.

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Hey.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Paper towns = pseudovisions.*

I think she wants me to find her body. Because she thinks

I can handle it. Because we found that dead guy when we were kids.

I sent him the link.

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Slow down. Let me look at the link.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *K.*

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Okay, don't be so morbid. You don't know anything for sure. I think she's probably fine.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *No you don't.*

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Okay, I don't. But if anybody's alive in the face of this evidence . . .*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Yeah, I guess. I'm gonna go lie down. My parents get home soon.*

But I couldn't calm down, so I called Ben from bed and told him my theory.

"Pretty morbid shit, bro. But she's fine. It's all part of some game she's playing."

"You're being kind of cavalier about it."

He sighed. "Whatever, it's a little lame of her to, like, hijack the last three weeks of high school, you know? She's got you all worried, and she's got Lacey all worried, and prom is in like three days, you know? Can't we just have a fun prom?"

"Are you serious? She could be *dead*, Ben."

"She's not dead. She's a drama queen. Wants attention. I mean, I know her parents are assholes, but they know her better than we do, don't they? And they think so, too."

"You can be such a tool," I said.

"Whatever, bro. We both had a long day. Too much drama. I'll TTYS." I wanted to ridicule him for using chatspeak IRL, but I found myself lacking the energy.

After I hung up with Ben, I went back online, looking for a list of pseudovisions in Florida. I couldn't find a list anywhere, but after searching "abandoned subdivisions" and "Grovepoint Acres" and the like for a while, I managed to compile a list of five places within three hours of Jefferson Park. I printed out a map of Central Florida, tacked the map to the wall above my computer, and then added a tack for each of the five locations. Looking at the map, I could detect no pattern among them. They were randomly distributed among the far-flung suburbs, and it would take me at least a week to get to all of them. Why hadn't she left me a specific place? All these scary-as-hell clues. All this intimation of tragedy. But no *place*. Nothing to hold on to. Like trying to climb a mountain of gravel.

Ben gave me permission to borrow RHAPAW the next day, since he was going to be driving around, prom

shopping with Lacey in her SUV. So for once I didn't have to sit outside the band room—the seventh-period bell rang and I raced out to his car. I lacked Ben's talent for getting RHAPAW to start, so I was one of the first people to arrive at the senior parking lot and one of the last to leave, but finally the engine caught, and I was off to Grovepoint Acres.

I drove out of town on Colonial, driving slowly, watching for any other pseudovisions I might have missed online. A long line of cars trailed behind me, and I felt anxious about holding them up; I marveled at how I could still have room to worry about such petty, ridiculous crap as whether the guy in the SUV behind me thought I was an excessively cautious driver. I wanted Margo's disappearance to change me; but it hadn't, not really.

As the line of cars snaked behind me like some kind of unwilling funeral procession, I found myself talking out loud to her. *I will play out the string. I will not betray your trust. I will find you.*

Talking like this to her kept me calm, strangely. It kept me from imagining the possibilities. I came again to the sagging wooden sign for Grovepoint Acres. I could almost hear the sighs of relief from the bottleneck behind me as I turned left onto the dead-end asphalt road. It looked like a driveway without a house. I left RHAPAW running and got out. From close up, I could see that Grovepoint Acres was more finished than it initially appeared. Two dirt roads ending in cul-de-sacs had been cut into the dusty ground, although the roads had eroded so much I could barely see their outlines. As I walked up and down both streets, I could feel the heat in my nose with each breath. The scalding sun made it hard to move, but I knew the beautiful, if morbid, truth: heat made death reek, and Grovepoint Acres smelled like nothing except cooked air and car exhaust—our cumulative exhalations held close to the surface by the humidity.

I looked for evidence she had been there: footprints or something written in the dirt or some memento. But I seemed to be the first person to walk on these unnamed dirt streets in years. The ground was flat, and not much brush had grown back yet, so I could see for a ways in every direction. No tents. No campfires. No Margo.

I got back in RHAPAW and drove to I-4 and then went northeast of town, up to a place called Holly Meadows. I drove past Holly Meadows three times before I finally found it—everything in the area was oak trees and ranch land, and Holly Meadows—lacking a sign at its entrance—didn't stand out much. But once I drove a few feet down a dirt road through the initial roadside stand of oak and pine trees, it was every bit as desolate as Grovepoint Acres. The main dirt road just slowly evaporated into a field of dirt. There were no other roads that I could make out, but as I walked around, I did find a few spray-painted wooden stakes lying on the ground; I guessed that they had once been lot line markers. I couldn't smell or see anything suspicious, but even so I felt a fear standing on my chest, and at first I couldn't understand why, but then I saw it: when they'd clear-cut the area to build, they'd left a solitary live oak tree near the back of the field. And the gnarled tree with its thick-barked branches looked so much like the one where we'd found Robert Joyner in Jefferson Park that I felt sure she was there, on the other side of the tree.

And for the first time, I had to picture it: Margo Roth Spiegelman, slumped against the tree, her eyes silent, the black blood pouring out of her mouth, everything bloated and distorted because I had taken so long to find her. She had trusted me to find her sooner. She had trusted me with her last night. And I had failed her. And even though the air tasted like nothing but it-might-rain-later, I was sure I'd found her.

But no. It was only a tree, alone in the empty silver dirt. I sat down against the tree and let my breath come back. I hated doing this alone. I hated it. If she thought Robert Joyner had prepared me for this, she was wrong. I didn't know Robert Joyner. I didn't love Robert Joyner.

I hit at the dirt with the heels of my fists, and then pounded it again and again, the sand scattering around my hands until I was hitting the bare roots of the tree, and I kept it up, the pain shooting up through my palms and wrists. I had not cried for Margo until then, but now finally I did, pounding against the ground and shouting because there was no one to hear: I missed her I missed her I missed her I miss her.

I stayed there even after my arms got tired and my eyes dried up, sitting there and thinking about her until

the light got gray.

11.

The next morning at school, I found Ben standing beside the band door talking to Lacey, Radar, and Angela in the shade of a tree with low-hanging branches. It was hard for me to listen as they talked about prom, and about how Lacey was feuding with Becca or whatever. I was waiting for a chance to tell them what I'd seen, but then when I had the chance, when I finally said, "I took a pretty long look at the two pseudovisions but didn't find much," I realized that there was nothing new to say, really.

No one even seemed that concerned, except Lacey. She shook her head as I talked about the pseudovisions, and then said, "I was reading online last night that people who are suicidal end relationships with people they're angry with. And they give away their stuff. Margo gave me like five pairs of jeans last week because she said I could wear them better, which isn't even true because she's so much more, like, curvy." I liked Lacey, but I saw Margo's point about the undermining.

Something about telling us that story made her start to cry, and Ben put an arm around her, and she tucked her head into his shoulder, which was hard to do, because in her heels she was actually taller than him.

"Lacey, we just have to find a location. I mean, talk to your friends. Did she ever mention paper towns? Did she ever talk about a specific place? Was there some subdivision somewhere that meant something to her?" She shrugged into Ben's shoulder.

"Bro, don't push her," Ben said. I sighed, but shut up.

"I'm on the online stuff," Radar said, "but her username hasn't logged on to Omnictionary since she left."

And then all at once they were back on the topic of prom. Lacey emerged from Ben's shoulder still looking sad and distracted, but she tried to smile as Radar and Ben swapped tales of corsage purchasing.

The day passed as it always did—in slow motion, with a thousand plaintive glances at the clock. But now it was even more unbearable, because every minute I wasted in school was another minute in which I failed to find her.

My only vaguely interesting class that day was English, when Dr. Holden completely ruined *Moby Dick* for me by incorrectly assuming we'd all read it and talking about Captain Ahab and his obsession with finding and killing this white whale. But it was fun to watch her get more and more excited as she talked. "Ahab's a madman railing against fate. You never see Ahab wanting anything else in this whole novel, do you? He has a singular obsession. And because he is the captain of his ship, no one can stop him. You can argue—indeed, you may argue, if you choose to write about him for your final reaction papers—that Ahab is a fool for being obsessed. But you could also argue that there is something tragically heroic about fighting this battle he is doomed to lose. Is Ahab's hope a kind of insanity, or is it the very definition of humanness?" I wrote down as much as I could of what she said, realizing that I could probably pull off my final reaction paper without actually reading the book. As she talked, it occurred to me that Dr. Holden was unusually good at reading stuff. And she'd said she liked Whitman. So when the bell rang, I took *Leaves of Grass* from my bag and then zipped it back up slowly while everyone raced off either to home or to extracurriculars. I waited behind someone asking for an extension on an already late paper, and then he left.

"It's my favorite Whitman reader," she said.

I forced a smile. "Do you know Margo Roth Spiegelman?" I asked.

She sat down behind her desk and motioned for me to sit. "I never had her in class," Dr. Holden said, "but I've certainly heard of her. I know that she ran away."

"She sort of left me this book of poems before she, uh, disappeared." I handed the book over, and Dr. Holden began paging through it slowly. As she did, I told her, "I've been thinking a lot about the

highlighted parts. If you go to the end of ‘Song of Myself,’ she highlights this stuff about dying. Like, ‘If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.’”

“She left this for you,” Dr. Holden said quietly.

“Yeah,” I said.

She flipped back and tapped at the green highlighted quote with her fingernail. “What is this about the doorjambs? That’s a great moment in the poem, where Whitman—I mean, you can *feel* him shouting at you: ‘Open the doors! In fact, remove the doors!’”

“She actually left me something else inside my doorjamb.”

Dr. Holden laughed. “Wow. Clever. But it’s such a great poem—I hate to see it reduced to such a literal reading. And she seems to have responded very darkly to what is finally a very optimistic poem. The poem is about our connectedness—each of us sharing the same root system like leaves of grass.”

“But, I mean, from what she highlighted, it seems kinda like a suicide note,” I said. Dr. Holden read the last stanzas again and then looked up at me.

“What a mistake it is to distill this poem into something hopeless. I hope that’s not the case, Quentin. If you read the whole poem, I don’t see how you can come to any conclusion except that life is sacred and valuable. But—who knows. Maybe she skimmed it for what she was looking for. We often read poems that way. But if so, she completely misunderstood what Whitman was asking of her.”

“And what’s that?”

She closed the book and looked right at me in a way that made it impossible for me to hold her gaze. “What do you think of it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, staring at a stack of graded papers on her desk. “I’ve tried to read it straight through a bunch of times, but I haven’t gotten very far. Mostly I just read the parts she highlighted. I’m reading it to try to understand Margo, not to try to understand Whitman.”

She picked up a pencil and wrote something on the back of an envelope. “Hold on. I’m writing that down.”

“What?”

“What you just said,” she explained.

“Why?”

“Because I think that is precisely what Whitman would have wanted. For you to see ‘Song of Myself’ not just as a poem but as a way into understanding another. But I wonder if maybe you have to read it as a poem, instead of just reading these fragments for quotes and clues. I do think there are some interesting connections between the poet in ‘Song of Myself’ and Margo Spiegelman—all that wild charisma and wanderlust. But a poem can’t do its work if you only read snippets of it.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said. I took the book and stood up. I didn’t feel much better.

I got a ride home with Ben that afternoon and stayed at his house until he left to go pick up Radar for some pre-prom party being thrown by our friend Jake, whose parents were out of town. Ben asked me to go, but I didn’t feel like it.

I walked back to my house, across the park where Margo and I had found the dead guy. I remembered that morning, and I felt something twist at my gut in the remembering of it—not because of the dead guy, but because I remembered that *she* had found him first. Even in my own neighborhood’s playground, I’d been unable to find a body on my own—how the hell would I do it now?

I tried to read “Song of Myself” again when I got home that night, but despite Dr. Holden’s advice, it still turned into a jumble of nonsensical words.

I woke up early the next morning, just after eight, and went to the computer. Ben was online, so I IM'ed him.

QTHERESURRECTION: *How was the party?*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Lame, of course. Every party I go to is lame.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Sorry I missed it. You're up early. Want to come over, play Resurrection?*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Are you kidding?*

QTHERESURRECTION: *uh . . . no?*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Do you know what day it is?*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Saturday May 15?*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Bro, prom starts in eleven hours and fourteen minutes. I have to pick Lacey up in less than nine hours. I haven't even washed and waxed RHAPAW yet, which by the way you did a nice job of dirtying up. Then after that I have to shower and shave and trim nasal hairs and wash and wax myself. God, don't even get me started. I have a lot to do. Listen, I'll call you later if I have a chance.*

Radar was on, too, so I IM'ed him.

QTHERESURRECTION: *What is Ben's problem?*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Whoa there, cowboy.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Sorry, I'm just pissed that he thinks prom is oh-so important.*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *You're going to be pretty pissed when you hear that the only reason I'm up this early is that I really need to go because I have to pick up my tux, aren't you?*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Jesus Christ. Seriously?*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Q, tomorrow and the next day and the day after that and all the days for the rest of my life, I am happy to participate in your investigation. But I have a girlfriend. She wants to have a nice prom. I want to have a nice prom. It's not my fault that Margo Roth Spiegelman didn't want us to have a nice prom.*

I didn't know what to say. He was right, maybe. Maybe she deserved to be forgotten. But at any rate, I couldn't forget her.

My mom and dad were still in bed, watching an old movie on TV. "Can I take the minivan?" I asked.

"Sure, why?"

"Decided to go to prom," I answered hurriedly. The lie occurred to me as I told it. "Gotta pick out a tux and then get over to Ben's. We're both going stag." My mom sat up, smiling.

"Well, I think that's great, hon. It'll be great for you. Will you come back so we can take pictures?"

"Mom, do you really need pictures of me going to prom stag? I mean, hasn't my life been humiliating enough?" She laughed.

"Call before curfew," my dad said, which was midnight.

"Sure thing," I said. It was so easy to lie to them that I found myself wondering why I'd never much done it before that night with Margo.

I took I-4 west toward Kissimmee and the theme parks, and then passed I-Drive where Margo and I had broken into SeaWorld, and then took Highway 27 down toward Haines City. There are a lot of lakes down there, and wherever there are lakes in Florida, there are rich people to congregate around them, so it seemed an unlikely place for a pseudovision. But the Website I'd found had been very specific about there being

this huge parcel of oft-foreclosed land that no one had ever managed to develop. I recognized the place immediately, because every other subdivision on the access road was walled in, whereas Quail Hollow was just a plastic sign hammered into the ground. As I turned in, little plastic posters read FOR SALE, PRIME LOCATION, and GREAT DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES!

Unlike the previous pseudovisions, someone was keeping up Quail Hollow. No houses had been built, but the lots were marked with surveying stakes, and the grass was freshly mown. All the streets were paved and named with road signs. In the subdivision's center, a perfectly circular lake had been dug and then, for some reason, drained. As I drove up in the minivan, I could see it was about ten feet deep and several hundred feet in diameter. A hose snaked across the bottom of the crater to the middle, where a steel-and-aluminum fountain rose from the bottom to eye level. I found myself feeling thankful the lake was empty, so I wouldn't have to stare into the water and wonder if she was in the bottom somewhere, expecting me to put on scuba gear to find her.

I felt certain Margo could not be in Quail Hollow. It abutted too many subdivisions for it to be a good place to hide, whether you were a person or a body. But I looked anyway, and as I idled down the streets in the minivan, I felt so hopeless. I wanted to be happy that it wasn't here. But if it wasn't Quail Hollow, it would be the next place, or the one after that, or the one after that. Or maybe I'd never find her. Was that the better fate?

I finished my rounds, finding nothing, and headed back toward the highway. I got lunch at a drive-thru and then ate as I drove out west toward the minimall.

12.

As I pulled into the minimall parking lot, I noticed that blue painters' tape had been used to seal our hole in the board. I wondered who could have been there after us.

I drove around to the back and parked the minivan next to a rusted Dumpster that hadn't encountered a garbage truck in decades. I figured I could bust through the painters' tape if I needed to, and I was walking around toward the front when I noticed that the steel back doors to the stores didn't have any visible hinges.

I'd learned a thing or two about hinges thanks to Margo, and I realized why we hadn't had any luck pulling on all those doors: they opened in. I walked up to the door to the mortgage company office and pushed. It opened with no resistance whatsoever. God, we were such idiots. Surely, whoever cared for the building knew about the unlocked door, which made the painters' tape seem even more out of place.

I wiggled out of the backpack I'd packed that morning and pulled out my dad's high-powered Maglite and flashed it around the room. Something sizable in the rafters scurried. I shivered. Little lizards jump-ran through the path of the light.

A single shaft of light from a hole in the ceiling shone in the front corner of the room, and sunlight peeked out from behind the particleboard, but I mostly relied on the flashlight. I walked up and down the rows of desks, looking at the items we'd found in the drawers, which we'd left. It was profoundly creepy to see desktop after desktop with the same unmarked calendar: February 1986. February 1986. February 1986. June 1986. February 1986. I spun around and shone the light on a desk in the very center of the room. The calendar had been changed to June. I leaned in close and looked at the paper of the calendar, hoping to see a jagged edge where previous months had been torn off, or some marks on the page where a pen had pushed through the paper, but there was nothing different from the other calendars, save the date.

With the flashlight crooked between my neck and shoulder, I started to look through desk drawers again, paying special attention to the June desk: some napkins, some still-sharp pencils, memos about mortgages addressed to one Dennis McMahon, an empty pack of Marlboro Lights, and an almost-full bottle of red nail polish.

I took the flashlight in one hand and the nail polish in the other and stared at it closely. So red it was almost black. I'd seen this color before. It had been on the minivan's dash that night. Suddenly, the scurrying in the rafters and the creaking in the building became irrelevant—I felt a perverted euphoria. I couldn't know if it was the same bottle, of course, but it was certainly the same color.

I rotated the bottle around and saw, unambiguously, a tiny smear of blue spray paint on the outside of the bottle. From her spray-painted fingers. I could be sure now. She'd been here *after* we parted ways that morning. Maybe she was still staying here. Maybe she only showed up late at night. Maybe *she* had taped up the particleboard to keep her privacy.

I resolved right then to stay until morning. If Margo had slept here, I could, too. And thus commenced a brief conversation with myself.

Me: But the rats.

Me: Yeah, but they seem to stay in the ceiling.

Me: But the lizards.

Me: Oh, come on. You used to pull their tails off when you were little. You're not scared of lizards.

Me: But the *rats*.

Me: Rats can't really hurt you anyway. They're more scared of you than you are of them.

Me: Okay, but what about the rats?

Me: Shut up.

In the end, the rats didn't matter, not really, because I was in a place where Margo had been alive. I was in a place that saw her after I did, and the warmth of that made the minimall almost comfortable. I mean, I didn't feel like an infant being held by Mommy or anything, but my breath had stopped catching each time I heard a noise. And in becoming comfortable, I found it easier to explore. I knew there was more to find, and now, I felt ready to find it.

I left the office, ducking through a Troll Hole into the room with the labyrinthine shelves. I walked up and down the aisles for a while. At the end of the room I crawled through the next Troll Hole into the empty room. I sat down on the carpet rolled against the far wall. The cracked white paint crunched against my back. I stayed there for a while, long enough that the jagged beam of light coming through a hole in the ceiling crept an inch along the floor as I let myself become accustomed to the sounds.

After a while, I got bored and crawled through the last Troll Hole into the souvenir shop. I rifled through the T-shirts. I pulled the box of tourist brochures out from under the display case and looked through them, looking for some hand-scrawled message from Margo, but I found nothing.

I returned to the room I now found myself calling the library. I thumbed through the *Reader's Digests* and found a stack of *National Geographics* from the 1960s, but the box was covered in so much dust that I knew Margo had never been inside it.

I began to find evidence of human habitation only when I got back to the empty room. On the wall with the rolled-up carpet, I discovered nine thumbtack holes in the cracked and paint-peeled wall. Four of the holes made an approximate square, and then there were five holes inside the square. I thought perhaps Margo had stayed here long enough to hang up some posters, although there were none obviously missing from her room when we searched it.

I unrolled the carpet partway and immediately found something else: a flattened, empty box that had once contained twenty-four nutrition bars. I found myself able to imagine Margo here, leaning against the wall with musty rolled-up carpet for a seat, eating a nutrition bar. She is all alone, with only this to eat. Maybe she drives once a day to a convenience store to buy a sandwich and some Mountain Dew, but most of every day is spent here, on or near this carpet. This image seemed too sad to be true—it all struck me as so lonely and so very *unMargo*. But all the evidence of the past ten days accumulated toward a surprising conclusion: Margo herself was—at least part of the time—very *unMargo*.

I rolled out the carpet farther and found a blue knit blanket, almost newspaper thin. I grabbed it and held it to my face and there, God, yes. Her smell. The lilac shampoo and the almond in her skin lotion and beneath all of that the faint sweetness of the skin itself.

And I could picture her again: she unravels the carpet halfway each night so her hip isn't against bare concrete as she lies on her side. She crawls beneath the blanket, uses the rest of the carpet as a pillow, and sleeps. But why here? How is this better than home? And if it's so great, why leave? These are the things I cannot imagine, and I realize that I cannot imagine them because I didn't know Margo. I knew how she smelled, and I knew how she acted in front of me, and I knew how she acted in front of others, and I knew that she liked Mountain Dew and adventure and dramatic gestures, and I knew that she was funny and smart and just generally *more* than the rest of us. But I didn't know what brought her here, or what kept her here, or what made her leave. I didn't know why she owned thousands of records but never told anyone she even liked music. I didn't know what she did at night, with the shades down, with the door locked, in the sealed privacy of her room.

And maybe this was what I needed to do above all. I needed to discover what Margo was like when she wasn't being Margo.

I lay there with the her-scented blanket for a while, staring up at the ceiling. I could see a sliver of late-afternoon sky through a crack in the roof, like a jagged canvas painted a bright blue. This would be the perfect place to sleep: one could see stars at night without getting rained on.

I called my parents to check in. My dad answered, and I said we were in the car on the way to meet Radar and Angela, and that I was staying with Ben overnight. He told me not to drink, and I told him I wouldn't, and he said he was proud of me for going to prom, and I wondered if he would be proud of me for doing

what I was actually doing.

This place was boring. I mean, once you got past the rodents and the mysterious the-building-is-falling-apart groans in the walls, there wasn't anything to *do*. No Internet, no TV, no music. *I* was bored, so it again confused me that she would pick this place, since Margo always struck me as a person with a very limited tolerance for boredom. Maybe she liked the idea of slumming it? Unlikely. Margo wore designer jeans to break into SeaWorld.

It was the lack of alternative stimuli that led me back to "Song of Myself," the only certain gift I had from her. I moved to a water-stained patch of concrete floor directly beneath the hole in the ceiling, sat down cross-legged, and angled my body so the light shone upon the book. And for some reason, finally, I could read it.

The thing is that the poem starts out really slowly—it's just sort of a long introduction, but around the ninetieth line, Whitman finally starts to tell a bit of a story, and that's where it picked up for me. So Whitman is sitting around (which he calls loafing) on the grass, and then:

*A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.*

There was the hope Dr. Holden had talked about—the grass was a metaphor for his hope. But that's not all. He continues,

*Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,*

Like grass is a metaphor for God's greatness or something....

Or I guess the grass is itself a child

And then soon after that,

*Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white.*

So maybe the grass is a metaphor for our equality and our essential connectedness, as Dr. Holden had said. And then finally, he says of grass,

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

So grass is death, too—it grows out of our buried bodies. The grass was so many different things at once, it was bewildering. So grass is a metaphor for life, and for death, and for equality, and for connectedness, and for children, and for God, and for hope.

I couldn't figure out which of these ideas, if any, was at the core of the poem. But thinking about the grass and all the different ways you can see it made me think about all the ways I'd seen and mis-seen

Margo. There was no shortage of ways to see her. I'd been focused on what had become of her, but now with my head trying to understand the multiplicity of grass and her smell from the blanket still in my throat, I realized that the most important question was *who* I was looking for. If "What is the grass?" has such a complicated answer, I thought, so, too, must "Who is Margo Roth Spiegelman?" Like a metaphor rendered incomprehensible by its ubiquity, there was room enough in what she had left me for endless imaginings, for an infinite set of Margos.

I had to narrow her down, and I figured there had to be things here that I was seeing wrong or not seeing. I wanted to tear off the roof and light up the whole place so that I could see it all at once, instead of one flashlight beam at a time. I put aside Margo's blanket and shouted, loud enough for all the rats to hear, "I Am Going To Find Something Here!"

I went through each desk in the office again, but it seemed more and more obvious that Margo had used only the desk with the nail polish in the drawer and the calendar set to June.

I ducked through a Troll Hole and made my way back to the library, walking again through the abandoned metal shelves. On each shelf I looked for dustless shapes that would tell me Margo had used this space for something, but I couldn't find any. But then my darting flashlight happened across something atop the shelf in a corner of the room, right near the boarded-up store-front window. It was the spine of a book.

The book was called *Roadside America: Your Travel Guide*, and had been published in 1998, *after* this place had been abandoned. I flipped through it with the flashlight crooked between neck and shoulder. The book listed hundreds of attractions you could visit, from the world's largest ball of twine in Darwin, Minnesota, to the world's largest ball of stamps in Omaha, Nebraska. Someone had folded down the corners of several seemingly random pages. The book wasn't too dusty. Maybe SeaWorld was only the first stop on some kind of whirlwind adventure. Yes. That made sense. That was Margo. She found out about this place somehow, came here to gather her supplies, spent a night or two, and then hit the road. I could imagine her pinballing among tourist traps.

As the last light fled from the holes in the ceiling, I found more books above other bookshelves. *The Rough Guide to Nepal; The Great Sights of Canada; America by Car; Fodor's Guide to the Bahamas; Let's Go Bhutan*. There seemed to be no connection at all among the books, except that they were all about traveling and had all been published after the minimall was abandoned. I tucked the Maglite under my chin, scooped up the books into a stack that extended from my waist to my chest, and carried them into the empty room I was now imagining as the bedroom.

So it turned out that I did spend prom night with Margo, just not quite as I'd dreamed. Instead of busting into prom together, I sat against her rolled-up carpet with her ratty blanket draped over my knees, alternately reading travel guides by flashlight and sitting still in the dark as the cicadas hummed above and around me.

Maybe she had sat here in the cacophonous darkness and felt some kind of desperation take her over, and maybe she found it impossible to unthink the thought of death. I could imagine that, of course.

But I could also imagine this: Margo picking these books up at various garage sales, buying every travel guide she could get her hands on for a quarter or less. And then coming here—even before she disappeared—to read the books away from prying eyes. Reading them, trying to decide on destinations. Yes. She would stay on the road and in hiding, a balloon floating through the sky, eating up hundreds of miles a day with the help of a perpetual tailwind. And in this imagining, she was alive. Had she brought me here to give me the clues to piece together an itinerary? Maybe. Of course I was nowhere near an itinerary. Judging from the books, she could be in Jamaica or Namibia, Topeka or Beijing. But I had only just begun to look.

13.

In my dream, her head was on my shoulder as I lay on my back, only the corner of carpet between us and the concrete floors. Her arm was around my rib cage. We were just lying there, sleeping. God help me. The only teenaged guy in America who dreams of sleeping with girls, and *just* sleeping with them. And then my phone rang. It took two more rings before my fumbling hands found the phone lying on the unrolled carpet. It was 3:18 A.M. Ben was calling.

“Good morning, Ben,” I said.

“YESSS!!!!” he answered, screaming, and I could tell right away that now was not the time to try to explain to him all I had learned and imagined about Margo. I could damn near smell the booze on his breath. That one word, in the way it was shouted, contained more exclamation points than anything Ben had ever said to me in his entire life.

“I take it prom is going well?”

“YESSSS! Quentin Jacobsen! The Q! America’s greatest Quentin! Yes!” His voice got distant then but I could still hear him. “Everybody, hey, shut up, hold on, shut up—QUENTIN! JACOBSEN! IS INSIDE MY PHONE!” There was a cheer then, and Ben’s voice returned. “Yes, Quentin! Yes! Bro, you have got to come over here.”

“Where is here?” I asked.

“Becca’s! Do you know where it is?”

As it happened, I knew precisely where it was. I’d been in her basement. “I know where it is, but it’s the middle of the night, Ben. And I’m in—”

“YESSS!!! You have to come right now. Right now!”

“Ben, there are more important things going on,” I answered.

“DESIGNATED DRIVER!”

“What?”

“You’re my designated driver! Yes! You are so designated! I love that you answered! That’s so awesome! I have to be home by six! And I designate you to get me there! YESSSSSSS!”

“Can’t you just spend the night there?” I asked.

“NOOOO! Booooo. Booo on Quentin. Hey, everybody! Boooo Quentin!” And then I was booed. “Everybody’s drunk. Ben drunk. Lacey drunk. Radar drunk. Nobody drive. Home by six. Promised Mom. Boo, Sleepy Quentin! Yay, Designated Driver! YESSSS!”

I took a long breath. If Margo were going to show up, she would have showed up by three. “I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“YES YES YESSSSSSS!!!! YES! YES!”

Ben was still making assertions of affirmation when I hung up the phone. I lay there for a moment, telling myself to get up, and then I did. Still half asleep, I crawled through Troll Holes past the library and into the office, then pulled open the back door and got into the minivan.

I turned in to Becca Arrington’s subdivision just before four. There were dozens of cars parked along both sides of Becca’s street, and I knew there would be more people inside, since many of them had been dropped off via limo. I found a spot a couple cars away from RHAPAW.

I had never seen Ben drunk. In tenth grade, I once drank a bottle of pink “wine” at a band party. It tasted as bad going down as it did coming up. It was Ben who sat with me in Cassie Hiney’s Winnie-the-Pooh-themed bathroom while I projectile-vomited pink liquid all over a painting of Eeyore. I think the experience

soured both of us on alcoholic pursuits. Until tonight, anyway.

Now, I knew Ben was going to be drunk. I'd heard him on the phone. No sober person says "yes" that many times per minute. Nonetheless, when I pushed past some people smoking cigarettes on Becca's front lawn and opened the door to her house, I did not expect to see Jase Worthington and two other baseball players holding a tuxedo-clad Ben upside down above a keg of beer. The spout of the beer keg was in Ben's mouth, and the entire room was transfixed on him. They were all chanting in unison, "Eighteen, nineteen, twenty," and for a moment, I thought Ben was getting—like—hazed or something. But no, as he sucked on that beer spout like it was mother's milk, little trickles of beer spilled from the sides of his mouth, because he was smiling. "Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five," the people shouted, and you could hear their enthusiasm. Apparently, something remarkable was taking place.

It all seemed so trivial, so embarrassing. It all seemed like paper kids having their paper fun. I made my way through the crowd toward Ben, and was surprised to happen across Radar and Angela.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

Radar paused from counting and looked over at me. "Yes!" he said. "The Designated Driver cometh! Yes!"

"Why is everyone saying 'yes' so much tonight?"

"Good question," Angela shouted to me. She puffed out her cheeks and sighed. She looked almost as annoyed as I felt.

"Hell yes, it's a good question!" Radar said, holding a red plastic cup full of beer in each hand.

"They're both his," Angela explained to me calmly.

"Why aren't *you* designated driver?" I asked.

"They wanted you," she said. "Thought it would get you here." I rolled my eyes. She rolled hers back, sympathetically.

"You must really like him," I said, nodding toward Radar, who was holding both beers over his head, joining in the counting. Everybody seemed so proud of the fact that they could count.

"Even now he's sort of adorable," she answered.

"Gross," I said.

Radar nudged me with one of the beer cups. "Look at our boy Ben! He's some kind of autistic savant when it comes to keg stands. Apparently he's like setting a world record right now or something."

"What is a keg stand?" I asked.

Angela pointed at Ben. "That," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Well, it's—I mean, how hard can it be to hang upside down?"

"Apparently, the longest keg stand in Winter Park history is sixty-two seconds," she explained. "And it was set by Tony Yorrick," who's this gigantic guy who'd graduated when we were freshmen and now played for the University of Florida football team.

I was all for Ben setting records, but I couldn't bring myself to join in as everyone shouted, "Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three!" And then Ben pulled the spout out of his mouth and screamed, "YESSS! I MUST BE THE GREATEST! I SHOOK UP THE WORLD!" Jase and some baseball players flipped him right-side-up and carried him around on their shoulders. And then Ben caught sight of me, pointed, and let out the loudest and most passionate "YESSSS!!!!!!" I'd ever heard. I mean, soccer players don't get that excited about winning the World Cup.

Ben jumped off the baseball players' shoulders, landing in an awkward crouch, and then swayed a bit on his way to standing. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "YES!" he said again. "Quentin is here! The Great Man! Let's hear it for Quentin, the best friend of the fucking keg stand world record holder!" Jase rubbed the top of my head and said, "You're the man, Q!" and then I heard Radar in my ear, "By the way,

we are like folk heroes to these people. Angela and I left our afterparty to come here because Ben told me I'd be greeted as a king. I mean, they were chanting my name. Apparently they all think Ben is hilarious or something, and so they like us, too."

To Radar, and also to everyone else, I said, "Wow."

Ben turned away from us, and I watched him grab Cassie Hiney. His hands were on her shoulders, and she put her hands on his shoulders, and he said, "My prom date was almost prom queen," and Cassie said, "I know. That's great," and Ben said, "I've wanted to kiss you every single day for the last three years," and Cassie said, "I think you should," and then Ben said, "YES! That's *awesome!*" But he didn't kiss Cassie. He just turned around to me and said, "Cassie wants to kiss me!" And I said, "Yeah," and he said, "That's so *awesome.*" And then he seemed to forget about Cassie and me both, as if the idea of kissing Cassie Hiney felt better than actually kissing her ever could.

Cassie said to me, "This party is so great, isn't it?" and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "This is like the opposite of band parties, huh?" And I said, "Yeah," and she said, "Ben is a spaz, but I love him." And I said, "Yeah." "Plus he's got really green eyes," she added, and I said, "Uh-huh," and then she said, "Everyone says you're cuter, but I like Ben," and I said, "Okay," and she said, "This party is so great, isn't it?" And I said, "Yeah." Talking to a drunk person was like talking to an extremely happy, severely brain-damaged three-year-old.

Chuck Parson walked up to me just as Cassie walked away. "Jacobsen," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Parson," I answered.

"You shaved my fucking eyebrow, didn't you?"

"I didn't shave it, actually," I said. "I used a depilatory cream."

He poked me quite hard in the middle of my chest. "You're a douche," he said, but he was laughing. "That took such big balls, bro. And now you're all puppet master and shit. I mean, maybe I'm just drunk, but I'm feeling a little love for your douche ass right now."

"Thank you," I said. I felt so detached from all this shit, all this high-school-is-ending-so-we-have-to-reveal-that-deep-down-we-all-love-everybody bullshit. And I imagined her at this party, or at thousands like this one. The life drawn out of her eyes. I imagined her listening to Chuck Parson babble at her and thinking about ways out, about the living ways out and the dead ways out. I could imagine the two paths with equal clarity.

"You want a beer, dicklicker?" Chuck asked. I might have forgotten he was even there, but the smell of booze on his breath made it hard to overlook his presence. I just shook my head, and he wandered off.

I wanted to go home, but I knew I couldn't rush Ben. This was probably the single greatest day of his life. He was entitled to it.

So instead, I found a stairway and headed down to the basement. I'd been in the dark so long I was still craving it, and I just wanted to lie down somewhere halfway quiet and halfway dark and go back to imagining Margo. But as I walked past Becca's bedroom, I heard some muffled noises—specifically, moanish noises—and so I paused outside her door, which was open just a crack.

I could see the top two-thirds of Jase, shirtless, on top of Becca, and she had her legs wrapped around him. Nobody was naked or anything, but they were headed in that direction. And maybe a better person would have turned away, but people like me don't get a lot of chances to see people like Becca Arrington naked, so I stayed there in the doorway, peering into the room. And then they rolled around so Becca was on top of Jason, and she was sighing as she kissed him, and she was reaching down for her shirt. "Do you think I'm hot?" she said.

"God yeah, you are so hot, Margo," Jase said.

"What!?" Becca said, furious, and it became quickly clear to me that I wasn't going to see Becca naked. She started screaming; I backed away from the door; Jase spotted me and screamed, "What's your problem?" And Becca shouted, "Screw him. Who gives a shit about him? What about me?! Why are you

thinking about her and not me!”

That seemed like as good a time as any to take my leave of the situation, so I closed the door and went to the bathroom. I did need to pee, but mostly I just needed to be away from the human voice.

It always takes a few seconds for me to start peeing after all the equipment has been properly set up, and so I stood there for a second, waiting, and then I started peeing. I’d just gotten to the full-stream, shudder-of-relief part of peeing when a girl’s voice from the general area of the bathtub said, “Who’s there?”

And I said, “Uh, Lacey?”

“Quentin? What the hell are you doing here?” I wanted to stop peeing but couldn’t, of course. Peeing is like a good book in that it is very, very hard to stop once you start.

“Um, peeing,” I said.

“How’s it going?” she asked through the curtain.

“Um, fine?” I shook out the last of it, zipped my shorts, and flushed.

“You wanna hang out in the bathtub?” she asked. “That’s not a come-on.”

After a moment, I said, “Sure.” I pulled the shower curtain back. Lacey smiled up at me, and then pulled her knees up to her chest. I sat down across from her, my back against the cold sloping porcelain. Our feet were intertwined. She was wearing shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt and these cute little flip-flops. Her makeup was just a little smeared around her eyes. Her hair was half up, still styled for prom, and her legs were tan. It must be said that Lacey Pemberton was very beautiful. She was not the kind of girl who could make you forget about Margo Roth Spiegelman, but she was the kind of girl who could make you forget about a lot of things.

“How was prom?” I asked.

“Ben is really sweet,” she answered. “I had fun. But then Becca and I had a huge fight and she called me a whore and then she stood up on the couch upstairs and she shushed the entire party and then she told everyone I have an STD.”

I winced. “God,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m sort of ruined. It’s just . . . God. It sucks, honestly, because . . . it’s just so humiliating, and she knew it would be, and . . . it sucks. So then I went to the bathtub and then Ben came down here and I told him to leave me alone. Nothing against Ben, but he wasn’t very good at, like, listening. He’s kinda drunk. I don’t even have it. I *had* it. It’s cured. Whatever. It’s just, I’m not a slut. It was one guy. One lame-ass guy. God, I can’t believe I ever told her. I should have just told Margo when Becca wasn’t around.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The thing is that Becca is just jealous.”

“Why would she be jealous? She’s prom queen. She’s dating Jase. She’s the new Margo.”

My butt was sore against the porcelain, so I tried to rearrange myself. My knees were touching her knees. “No one will ever be the new Margo,” I said. “Anyway, you have what she really wants. People like you. People think you’re cuter.”

Lacey shrugged bashfully. “Do you think I’m superficial?”

“Well, yeah.” I thought of myself standing outside Becca’s bedroom, hoping she’d take her shirt off. “But so am I,” I added. “So is everyone.” I’d often thought, *If only I had the body of Jase Worthington. Walked like I knew how to walk. Kissed like I knew how to kiss.*

“But not in the same way. Ben and I are superficial in the same way. You don’t give a shit if people like you.”

Which was both true and not. “I care more than I’d like to,” I said.

“Everything sucks without Margo,” she said. She was drunk, too, but I didn’t mind her variety of drunk.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I want you to take me to that place,” she said. “That strip mall. Ben told me about it.”

“Yeah, we can go whenever you want,” I said. I told her I’d been there all night, that I’d found Margo’s nail polish and her blanket.

Lacey was quiet for a while, breathing through her open mouth. When she finally said it, she almost whispered it. Worded like a question and spoken like a statement: “She’s dead, isn’t she.”

“I don’t know, Lacey. I thought so until tonight, but now I don’t know.”

“She’s dead and we’re all . . . doing this.”

I thought of the highlighted Whitman: “If no other in the world be aware I sit content, / And if each and all be aware I sit content.” I said, “Maybe that’s what she wanted, for life to go on.”

“That doesn’t sound like my Margo,” she said, and I thought of my Margo, and Lacey’s Margo, and Mrs. Spiegelman’s Margo, and all of us looking at her reflection in different fun house mirrors. I was going to say something, but Lacey’s open mouth became truly slack-jawed, and she leaned her head against the cold gray tile of the bathroom wall, asleep.

It wasn’t until after two people had come into the bathroom to pee that I decided to wake her up. It was almost 5 A.M., and I needed to take Ben home.

“Lace, wake up,” I said, touching her flip-flop with my shoe.

She shook her head. “I like being called that,” she said. “You know that you’re, like, currently my best friend?”

“I’m thrilled,” I said, even though she was drunk and tired and lying. “So listen, we’re going to go upstairs together, and if anybody says anything about you, I will defend your honor.”

“Okay,” she said. And so we went upstairs together, and the party had thinned out a little, but there were still some baseball players, including Jase, over by the keg. Mostly there were people sleeping in sleeping bags all over the floor; some of them were squeezed onto the pullout couch. Angela and Radar were lying together on a love seat, Radar’s legs dangling over the side. They were sleeping over.

Just as I was about to ask the guys by the keg if they’d seen Ben, he ran into the living room. He wore a blue baby bonnet on his head and was wielding a sword made out of eight empty cans of Milwaukee’s Best Light, which had, I assumed, been glued together.

“I SEE YOU!” Ben shouted, pointing at me with the sword. “I SPY QUENTIN JACOBSEN! YESSS! Come here! Get on your knees!” he shouted.

“What? Ben, calm down.”

“KNEES!”

I obediently knelt, looking up at him.

He lowered the beer sword and tapped me on each shoulder. “By the power of the superglue beer sword, I hereby designate you my driver!”

“Thanks,” I said. “Don’t puke in the minivan.”

“YES!” he shouted. And then when I tried to get up, he pushed me back down with his non-beer-sworded hand, and he tapped me again with the beer sword, and he said, “By the power of the superglue beer sword, I hereby announce that you will be naked under your robe at graduation.”

“What?” I stood then.

“YES! Me and you and Radar! Naked under our robes! At graduation! It will be so awesome!”

“Well,” I said, “it *will* be really hot.”

“YES!” he said. “Swear you will do it! I already made Radar swear. RADAR, DIDN’T YOU SWEAR?”

Radar turned his head ever so slightly, and opened his eyes a slit. “I swore,” he mumbled.

“Well then, I swear, too,” I said.

“YES!” Then Ben turned to Lacey. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Ben.”

“No, *I love you*. Not like a sister loves a brother or like a friend loves a friend. I love you like a really drunk guy loves the best girl ever.” She smiled.

I took a step forward, trying to save him from further embarrassment, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “If we’re gonna get you home by six, we should be leaving,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “I just gotta thank Becca for this awesome party.”

So Lacey and I followed Ben downstairs, where he opened the door to Becca’s room and said, “Your party kicked so much ass! Even though you suck so much! It’s like instead of blood, your heart pumps liquid suck! But thanks for the beer!” Becca was alone, lying on top of her covers, staring at the ceiling. She didn’t even glance over at him. She just mumbled, “Oh, go to hell, shit-face. I hope your date gives you her crabs.”

Without a hint of irony in his voice, Ben answered, “Great talking to you!” and then closed the door. I don’t think he had the faintest idea he’d just been insulted.

And then we were upstairs again and getting ready to walk out the door. “Ben,” I said, “you’re going to have to leave the beer sword here.”

“Right,” he said, and then I grabbed the sword’s tip and tugged, but Ben refused to relinquish it. I was about to start screaming at his drunk ass when I realized he *couldn’t* let go of the sword.

Lacey laughed. “Ben, did you glue yourself to the beer sword?”

“No,” Ben answered. “I *superglued*. That way no one can steal it from me!”

“Good thinking,” Lacey deadpanned.

Lacey and I managed to break off all the beer cans except the one that was superglued directly to Ben’s hand. No matter how hard I pulled, Ben’s hand just limply followed along, like the beer was the string and his hand the puppet. Finally, Lacey just said, “We gotta go.” So we did. We strapped Ben into the backseat of the minivan. Lacey sat next to him, because “I should make sure he doesn’t puke or beat himself to death with his beer hand or whatever.”

But he was far enough gone for Lacey to feel comfortable talking about him. As I drove down the interstate, she said, “There’s something to be said for trying hard, you know? I mean, I know he tries too hard, but why is that such a bad thing? And he’s sweet, isn’t he?”

“I guess so,” I said. Ben’s head was lolling around, seemingly unconnected to a spine. He didn’t strike me as particularly sweet, but whatever.

I dropped Lacey off first on the other side of Jefferson Park. When Lacey leaned over and pecked him on the mouth, he perked up enough to mumble, “Yes.”

She walked up to the driver’s-side door on the way to her condo. “Thanks,” she said. I just nodded.

I drove across the subdivision. It wasn’t night and it wasn’t morning. Ben snored quietly in the back. I pulled up in front of his house, got out, opened the sliding door of the minivan, and unfastened his seat belt.

“Time to go home, Benners.”

He sniffed and shook his head, then awoke. He reached up to rub his eyes and seemed surprised to find an empty can of Milwaukee’s Best Light attached to his right hand. He tried to make a fist and dented the can some, but did not dislodge it. He looked at it for a minute, and then nodded. “The Beast is stuck to me,” he noted.

He climbed out of the minivan and staggered up the sidewalk to his house, and when he was standing on the front porch, he turned around, smiling. I waved at him. The beer waved back.

14.

I slept for a few hours and spent the morning poring over the travel guides I'd discovered the day before. I waited until noon to call Ben and Radar. I called Ben first. "Good morning, Sunshine," I said.

"Oh, God," Ben said, his voice dripping abject misery. "Oh, sweet baby Jesus, come and comfort your little bro Ben. Oh, Lord. Shower me with your mercy."

"There've been a lot of Margo developments," I said excitedly, "so you need to come over. I'm gonna call Radar, too."

Ben seemed not to have heard me. "Hey, when my mom came into my room at nine o'clock this morning, why is it that as I reached up to yawn, she and I both discovered a beer can was stuck to my hand?"

"You superglued a bunch of beers together to make a beer sword, and then you superglued your hand to it."

"Oh, yeah. The beer sword. That rings a bell."

"Ben, come over."

"Bro. I feel like shit."

"Then I'll come over to your house. How soon?"

"Bro, you can't come over here. I have to sleep for ten thousand hours. I have to drink ten thousand gallons of water, and take ten thousand Advils. I'll just see you tomorrow at school."

I took a deep breath and tried not to sound pissed. "I drove across Central Florida in the middle of the night to be sober at the world's drunkest party and drive your soggy ass home, and this is—" I would have kept talking, but I noticed that Ben had hung up. He hung up on me. Asshole.

As time passed, I only got more pissed. It's one thing not to give a shit about Margo. But really, Ben didn't give a shit about me, either. Maybe our friendship had always been about convenience—he didn't have anyone cooler than me to play video games with. And now he didn't have to be nice to me, or care about the things I cared about, because he had Jase Worthington. He had the school keg stand record. He had a hot prom date. He'd jumped at his first opportunity to join the fraternity of vapid asshats.

Five minutes after he hung up on me, I called his cell again. He didn't answer, so I left a message. "You want to be cool like Chuck, Bloody Ben? That's what you always wanted? Well, congratulations. You got it. And you deserve him, because you're also a shitbag. Don't call back."

Then I called Radar. "Hey," I said.

"Hey," he answered. "I just threw up in the shower. Can I call you back?"

"Sure," I said, trying not to sound angry. I just wanted *someone* to help me sort through the world according to Margo. But Radar wasn't Ben; he called back just a couple minutes later.

"It was so disgusting that I puked while cleaning it up, and then while cleaning *that* up, I puked again. It's like a perpetual motion machine. If you just kept feeding me, I could have just kept puking forever."

"Can you come over? Or can I come over to your house?"

"Yeah, of course. What's up?"

"Margo was alive and in the minimall for at least one night after her disappearance."

"I'll come to you. Four minutes."

Radar showed up at my window precisely four minutes later. "You should know I'm having a huge fight

with Ben,” I said as he climbed in.

“I’m too hungover to mediate,” Radar answered quietly. He lay down on the bed, his eyes half closed, and rubbed his buzzed hair. “It’s like I got hit by lightning.” He sniffed. “Okay, bring me up-to-date.” I sat down in the desk chair and told Radar about my evening in Margo’s vacation house, trying hard not to leave out any possibly helpful details. I knew Radar was better at puzzles than I, and I was hoping he’d piece together this one.

He waited to talk until I’d said, “And then Ben called me and I left for that party.”

“Do you have that book, the one with the turned-down corners?” he asked. I got up and fished for it under the bed, finally pulling it out. Radar held it above his head, squinting through his headache, and flipped through the pages.

“Write this down,” he said. “Omaha, Nebraska. Sac City, Iowa. Alexandria, Indiana. Darwin, Minnesota. Hollywood, California. Alliance, Nebraska. Okay. Those are the locations of all the things she—well, or whoever read this book—found interesting.” He got up, motioned me out of the chair, and then swiveled to the computer. Radar had an amazing talent for carrying on conversations while typing. “There’s a map mash-up that allows you to enter multiple destinations and it will spit out a variety of itineraries. Not that she’d know about this program. But still, I want to see.”

“How do you know all this shit?” I asked.

“Um, reminder: I. Spend. My. Entire. Life. On. Omnictionary. In the hour between when I got home this morning and when I hurred in the shower, I completely rewrote the page for the Blue-spotted Anglerfish. I have a *problem*. Okay, look at this,” he said. I leaned in and saw several jagged routes drawn onto a map of the United States. All began in Orlando and ended in Hollywood, California.

“Maybe she’ll stay in LA?” Radar suggested.

“Maybe,” I said. “There’s no way to tell her route, though.”

“True. Also nothing else points to LA. What she said to Jase points to New York. The ‘go to the paper towns and never come back’ points to a nearby pseudovision, it seems. The nail polish also points to maybe her still being in the area? I’m just saying we can now add the location of the world’s largest ball of popcorn to our list of possible Margo locales.”

“The traveling would fit with one of the Whitman quotes: ‘I tramp a perpetual journey.’”

Radar stayed hunched over the computer. I went to sit down on the bed. “Hey, will you just print out a map of the U.S. so I can plot the points?” I asked.

“I can just do it online,” he said.

“Yeah, but I want to be able to look at it.” The printer fired up a few seconds later and I placed the U.S. map next to the one with the pseudovisions on the wall. I put a tack in for each of the six locations she (or someone) had marked in the book. I tried to look at them as a constellation, to see if they formed a shape or a letter—but I couldn’t see anything. It was a totally random distribution, like she’d blindfolded herself and thrown darts at the map.

I sighed. “You know what would be nice?” Radar asked. “If we could find some evidence that she was checking her e-mail or anywhere on the Internet. I search for her name every day; I’ve got a bot that will alert me if she ever logs on to Omnictionary with that username. I track IP addresses of people who search for the phrase ‘paper towns.’ It’s incredibly frustrating.”

“I didn’t know you were doing all that stuff,” I said.

“Yeah, well. Only doing what I’d want someone else to do. I know I wasn’t friends with her, but she deserves to be found, you know?”

“Unless she doesn’t want to be,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s possible. It’s all still possible.” I nodded. “Yeah, so—okay,” he said. “Can we brainstorm over video games?”

“I’m not really in the mood.”

“Can we call Ben then?”

“No. Ben’s an asshole.”

Radar looked at me sideways. “Of course he is. You know your problem, Quentin? You keep expecting people not to be themselves. I mean, I could hate you for being massively unpunctual and for never being interested in anything other than Margo Roth Spiegelman, and for, like, never asking me about how it’s going with my girlfriend—but I don’t give a shit, man, because you’re you. My parents have a shit ton of black Santas, but that’s okay. They’re them. I’m too obsessed with a reference Web site to answer my phone sometimes when my friends call, or my girlfriend. That’s okay, too. That’s me. You like me anyway. And I like you. You’re funny, and you’re smart, and you may show up late, but you always show up eventually.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t complimenting you. Just saying: stop thinking Ben should be you, and he needs to stop thinking you should be him, and y’all just chill the hell out.”

“All right,” I said finally, and called Ben. The news that Radar was over and wanted to play video games led to a miraculous hangover recovery.

“So,” I said after hanging up. “How’s Angela?”

Radar laughed. “She’s good, man. She’s real good. Thanks for asking.”

“You still a virgin?” I asked.

“I don’t kiss and tell. Although, yes. Oh, and we had our first fight this morning. We had breakfast at Waffle House, and she was going on about how awesome the black Santas are, and how my parents are great people for collecting them because it’s important for us not to presume that everybody cool in our culture like God and Santa Claus is white, and how the black Santa empowers the whole African-American community.”

“I actually think I kind of agree with her,” I said.

“Yeah, well, it’s a fine idea, but it happens to be bullshit. They’re not trying to spread the black Santa gospel. If they were, they’d *make* black Santas. Instead, they’re trying to buy the entire world supply. There’s this old guy in Pittsburgh with the second-biggest collection, and they’re always trying to buy it off him.”

Ben spoke from the doorway. He’d been there a while, apparently. “Radar, your failure to bop that lovely honeybunny is the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our time.”

“What’s up, Ben?” I said.

“Thanks for the ride last night, bro.”

15.

Even though we only had a week before finals, I spent Monday afternoon reading “Song of Myself.” I’d wanted to go to the last two pseudovisions, but Ben needed his car. I was no longer looking for clues in the poem so much as I was looking for Margo herself. I’d made it about halfway through “Song of Myself” this time when I stumbled into another section that I found myself reading and rereading.

“I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,” Whitman writes. And then for two pages, he’s just hearing: hearing a steam whistle, hearing people’s voices, hearing an opera. He sits on the grass and lets the sound pour through him. And this is what I was trying to do, too, I guess: to listen to all the little sounds of her, because before any of it could make sense, it had to be heard. For so long, I hadn’t really *heard* Margo—I’d seen her screaming and thought her laughing—that now I figured it was my job. To try, even at this great remove, to hear the opera of her.

If I couldn’t hear Margo, I could at least listen to what she once heard, so I downloaded the album of Woody Guthrie covers. I sat at the computer, my eyes closed, elbows against the desk, and listened to a voice singing in a minor key. I tried to hear, inside a song I’d never heard before, the voice I had trouble remembering after twelve days.

I was still listening—but now to another of her favorites, Bob Dylan—when my mom got home. “Dad’s gonna be late,” she said through the closed door. “I thought I might make turkey burgers?”

“Sounds good,” I answered, and then closed my eyes again and listened to the music. I didn’t sit up again until Dad called me for dinner an album and a half later.

At dinner, Mom and Dad were talking about politics in the Middle East. Even though they completely agreed with each other, they still managed to yell about it, saying that so-and-so was a liar, and so-and-so was a liar *and* a thief, and that the lot of them should resign. I focused on the turkey burger, which was excellent, dripping with ketchup and smothered with grilled onions.

“Okay, enough,” my mom said after a while. “Quentin, how was your day?”

“Fine,” I said. “Getting ready for finals, I guess.”

“I can’t believe this is your last week of classes,” Dad said. “It really does just seem like yesterday . . .”

“It does,” Mom said. A voice in my head was like: WARNING NOSTALGIA ALERT WARNING WARNING WARNING. Great people, my parents, but prone to bouts of crippling sentimentality.

“We’re just very proud of you,” she said. “But, God, we’ll miss you next fall.”

“Yeah, well, don’t speak too soon. I could still fail English.”

My mom laughed, and then said, “Oh, guess who I saw at the YMCA yesterday? Betty Parson. She said Chuck was going to the University of Georgia next fall. I was pleased for him; he’s always struggled.”

“He’s an asshole,” I said.

“Well,” my dad said, “he was a bully. And his behavior was deplorable.” This was typical of my parents: in their minds, no one was just an asshole. There was always something wrong with people other than just sucking: they had socialization disorders, or borderline personality syndrome, or whatever.

My mom picked up the thread. “But Chuck has learning difficulties. He has all kinds of problems—just like anyone. I know it’s impossible for you to see peers this way, but when you’re older, you start to see them—the bad kids and the good kids and all kids—as people. They’re just people, who deserve to be cared for. Varying degrees of sick, varying degrees of neurotic, varying degrees of self-actualized. But you know, I always liked Betty, and I always had hopes for Chuck. So it’s good that he’s going to college, don’t you think?”

“Honestly, Mom, I don’t really care about him one way or another.” But I did think, if everyone is such a

person, how come Mom and Dad still hated all the politicians in Israel and Pales-tine? They didn't talk about *them* like they were people.

My dad finished chewing something and then put his fork down and looked at me. "The longer I do my job," he said, "the more I realize that humans lack good mirrors. It's so hard for anyone to show us how we look, and so hard for us to show anyone how we feel."

"That is really lovely," my mom said. I liked that they liked each other. "But isn't it also that on some fundamental level we find it difficult to understand that other people are human beings in the same way that we are? We idealize them as gods or dismiss them as animals."

"True. Consciousness makes for poor windows, too. I don't think I'd ever thought about it quite that way."

I was sitting back. I was listening. And I was hearing something about her and about windows and mirrors. Chuck Parson was a person. Like me. Margo Roth Spiegelman was a person, too. And I had never quite thought of her that way, not really; it was a failure of all my previous imaginings. All along—not only since she left, but for a decade before—I had been imagining her without listening, without knowing that she made as poor a window as I did. And so I could not imagine her as a person who could feel fear, who could feel isolated in a roomful of people, who could be shy about her record collection because it was too personal to share. Someone who might read travel books to escape having to live in the town that so many people escape to. Someone who—because no one thought she was a person—had no one to really talk to.

And all at once I knew how Margo Roth Spiegelman felt when she wasn't being Margo Roth Spiegelman: she felt empty. She felt the unscaleable wall surrounding her. I thought of her asleep on the carpet with only that jagged sliver of sky above her. Maybe Margo felt comfortable there because Margo the person lived like that all the time: in an abandoned room with blocked-out windows, the only light pouring in through holes in the roof. Yes. The fundamental mistake I had always made—and that she had, in fairness, always led me to make—was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl.

16.

The clock was always punishing, but feeling like I was closer to unraveling the knots made time seem to stop entirely on Tuesday. We'd all decided to go to the minimall right after school, and the waiting was unbearable. When the bell finally rang for the end of English, I raced downstairs and was almost out the door when I realized we couldn't leave until Ben and Radar finished band practice. I sat down outside the band room and took a personal pizza wrapped in napkins from my backpack, where I'd had it since lunch. I was through the first quarter when Lacey Pemberton sat down next to me. I offered her a piece. She declined.

We talked about Margo, of course. The hole we had in common. "What I need to figure out," I said, rubbing pizza grease onto my jeans, "is a place. But I don't even know if I'm close with the pseudovisions. Sometimes I think we're just entirely off track."

"Yeah, I don't know. Honestly, everything else aside, I like finding stuff out about her. I mean, that I didn't know before. I had no idea who she really was. I honestly never thought of her as anything but my crazy beautiful friend who does all the crazy beautiful things."

"Right, but she didn't come up with these things *on the fly*," I said. "I mean, all of her adventures had a certain . . . I don't know."

"Elegance," Lacey said. "She is the only person I know who's not, like, grown up who has total elegance."

"Yeah."

"So it's hard to imagine her in some gross unlit dusty room."

"Yeah," I said. "With rats."

Lacey pulled her knees to her chest and assumed the fetal position. "Ick. That's so not Margo."

Somehow Lacey got shotgun, although she was the shortest of us. Ben was driving. I sighed quite loudly as Radar, seated next to me, pulled out his handheld and started working on Omnictionary.

"Just deleting vandalism on the Chuck Norris page," he said. "For instance, while I do think Chuck Norris specializes in the roundhouse kick, I don't think it's accurate to say, 'Chuck Norris's tears can cure cancer, but unfortunately he has never cried.' Anyway, vandalism-deletion only takes like four percent of my brain."

I understood Radar was trying to make me laugh, but I only wanted to talk about one thing. "I'm not convinced she's in a pseudovision. Maybe that's not even what she meant by 'paper towns,' you know? There are so many place hints, but nothing *specific*."

Radar looked up for a second and then back down at the screen. "Personally, I think she's far away, doing some ridiculous roadside attraction tour that she wrongly thinks she left enough clues to explain. So I think she's currently in, like, Omaha, Nebraska, visiting the world's largest ball of stamps, or in Minnesota checking out the world's largest ball of twine."

With a glance into the rearview mirror, Ben said, "So you think that Margo is on a national tour in search of various World's Largest Balls?" Radar nodded.

"Well," Ben went on, "someone should just tell her to come on home, because she can find the world's largest balls right here in Orlando, Florida. They're located in a special display case known as 'my scrotum.'"

Radar laughed, and Ben continued. "I mean, seriously. My balls are so big that when you order french fries from McDonald's, you can choose one of four sizes: small, medium, large, and my balls."

Lacey cut her eyes at Ben and said, "Not. Appropriate."

“Sorry,” Ben mumbled. “I think she’s in Orlando,” he said. “Watching us look. And watching her parents not look.”

“I’m still for New York,” Lacey said.

“All still possible,” I said. A Margo for each of us—and each more mirror than window.

The minimall looked as it had a couple days before. Ben parked, and I took them through the push-open door to the office. Once everyone was inside, I said softly, “Don’t turn on the flashlight yet. Give your eyes a chance to adjust.” I felt fingernails dig at my forearm. I whispered, “It’s okay, Lacey.”

“Whoops,” she said. “Wrong arm.” She’d been searching, I realized, for Ben.

Slowly, the room came into a hazy gray focus. I could see the desks lined up, still waiting for workers. I turned on my flashlight, and then everyone else turned theirs on as well. Ben and Lacey stayed together, walking toward the Troll Hole to explore the other rooms. Radar walked with me to Margo’s desk. He knelt down to look closely at the paper calendar frozen on June.

I was leaning in next to him when I heard fast footsteps coming toward us.

“*People*,” Ben whispered urgently. He ducked down behind Margo’s desk, pulling Lacey with him.

“What? Where?”

“Next room!” he said. “Wearing masks. Official-looking. Gotta go.”

Radar shone his flashlight in the direction of the Troll Hole but Ben knocked it down forcefully. “We. Have. To. Get. Out. Of. Here.” Lacey was looking up at me, big-eyed and probably a little bit pissed off that I’d falsely promised her safety.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Okay, everybody out, through the door. Very cool, very quick.” I had just started to walk when I heard a booming voice shout, “WHO GOES THERE!”

Shit. “Um,” I said, “we’re just visiting.” What an outlandishly lame thing to say. Through the Troll Hole, a white light blinded me. It might have been God Himself.

“What are your intentions?” The voice had a slight faked Britishness to it.

I watched Ben stand up next to me. It felt good not to be alone. “We’re here investigating a disappearance,” he said with great confidence. “We weren’t going to break anything.” The light snapped off, and I blinked away the blindness until I saw three figures, each wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a mask with two circular filters. One of them pulled the mask up to his forehead and looked at us. I recognized the goatee and flat, wide mouth.

“Gus?” asked Lacey. She stood up. The SunTrust security guard.

“Lacey Pemberton. Jesus. What are you doing here? With no mask? This place has a ton of asbestos.”

“What are *you* doing here?”

“Exploring,” he said. Somehow Ben was emboldened with enough confidence to walk up to the other guys and offer hand-shakes. They introduced themselves as Ace and the Carpenter. I would venture to guess that these were pseudonyms.

We pulled around some rolling desk chairs and sat in an approximate circle. “Did you guys break the particleboard?” Gus asked.

“Well, I did,” Ben explained.

“We taped that up because we didn’t want anyone else in. If people can see a way in from the road, you get a lot of people coming in who don’t know shit about exploring. Bums and crack addicts and everything.”

I stepped forward toward them and said, “So, you, uh, knew that Margo came here?”

Before Gus answered, Ace spoke through the mask. His voice was slightly modulated but easy to

understand. “Man, Margo was here all the damned time. We only come here a few times a year; it’s got asbestos, and anyway, it’s not even that good. But we probably saw her, like, what, like more than half the time we came here in the last couple years. She was hot, huh?”

“Was?” asked Lacey pointedly.

“She ran away, right?”

“What do you know about that?” Lacey asked.

“Nothing, Jesus. I saw Margo with him,” Gus said, nodding toward me, “a couple weeks ago. And then I heard that she ran away. It occurred to me a few days later she might be here, so we visited.”

“I never got why she liked this place so much. There’s not much here,” said the Carpenter. “It’s not great exploring.”

“What do you mean *exploring*?” Lacey asked Gus.

“Urban exploring. We enter abandoned buildings, explore them, photograph them. We take nothing; we leave nothing. We’re just observers.”

“It’s a hobby,” said Ace. “Gus used to let Margo tag along on exploring trips when we were still in school.”

“She had a great eye, even though she was only, like, thirteen,” Gus said. “She could figure a way into anywhere. It was just occasional back then, but now we go out like three times a week. There’s places all over. There’s an abandoned mental hospital over in Clearwater. It’s amazing. You can see where they strapped down the crazies and gave them electroshock. And there’s an old jail out west of here. But she wasn’t really into it. She liked to break into the places, but then she just wanted to *stay*.”

“Yeah, God that was annoying,” added Ace.

The Carpenter said, “She wouldn’t even, like, take pictures. Or run around and find stuff. She just wanted to go inside and, like, sit. Remember, she had that black notebook? And she would just sit in the corner and write, like she was in her house, doing homework or something.”

“Honestly,” Gus said, “she never really got what it’s all about. The adventure. She seemed pretty depressed, actually.”

I wanted to let them keep talking, because I figured everything they said would help me imagine Margo. But all of a sudden, Lacey stood up and kicked her chair behind her. “And you never thought to ask her about how she was pretty depressed actually? Or why she hung out in these sketch-ass places? That never bothered you?” She was standing above him now, shouting, and he stood up, too, half a foot taller than her, and then the Carpenter said, “Jesus, somebody calm that bitch down.”

“Oh no you didn’t!” Ben yelled, and before I even knew what was going on, Ben tackled the Carpenter, who fell awkwardly out of his chair onto his shoulder. Ben straddled the guy and started pounding on him, furiously and awkwardly smacking and punching his mask, shouting, “SHE’S NOT THE BITCH, YOU ARE!” I scrambled up and grabbed one of Ben’s arms as Radar grabbed the other. We pulled him away, but he was still shouting, “I have a lot of anger right now! I was enjoying punching the guy! I want to go back to punching him!”

“Ben,” I said, trying to sound calm, trying to sound like my mom. “Ben, it’s okay. You made your point.”

Gus and Ace picked up the Carpenter, and Gus said, “Jesus Christ, we’re getting out of here, okay? It’s all yours.”

Ace picked up their camera equipment, and they hustled out the back door. Lacey started to explain to me how she knew him, saying, “He was a senior when we were fr—.” But I waved it off. None of it mattered anyway.

Radar knew what mattered. He returned immediately to the calendar, his eyes an inch away from the paper. “I don’t think anything was written on the May page,” he says. “The paper is pretty thin and I can’t see any marks. But it’s impossible to say for sure.” He went off to search for more clues, and I saw Lacey’s

and Ben's flashlights dipping as they went through a Troll Hole, but I just stood there in the office, imagining her. I thought of her following these guys, four years older than her, into abandoned buildings. That was Margo as I'd seen her. But then, inside the buildings, she is not the Margo I'd always imagined. While everyone else walks off to explore and take pictures and bounce around the walls, Margo sits on the floor, writing something.

From next door, Ben shouted, "Q! We got something!"

I wiped sweat from my face with both sleeves and used Margo's desk to pull myself up. I walked across the room, ducked through the Troll Hole, and headed toward the three flashlights scanning the wall above the rolled-up carpet.

"Look," Ben said, using the beam to draw a square on the wall. "You know those little holes you mentioned?"

"Yeah?"

"They had to have been mementos tacked up there. Postcards or pictures, we think, from the spacing of the holes. Which maybe she took with her," Ben said.

"Yeah, maybe," I said. "I wish we could find that notebook Gus was talking about."

"Yeah, when he said that, I remembered that notebook," Lacey said, the beam of my flashlight lighting up only her legs. "She had one with her all the time. I never saw her write in it, but I just figured it was like a day planner or whatever. God, I never asked about it. I get pissed at Gus, who wasn't even her friend. But what did I ever ask her?"

"She wouldn't have answered anyway," I said. It was dishonest to act like Margo hadn't participated in her own obfuscation.

We walked around for another hour, and just when I felt sure the trip had been a waste, my flashlight happened over the subdivision brochures that had been built into a house of cards when we first came here. One of the brochures was for Grovepoint Acres. My breath caught as I spread out the other brochures. I jogged to my backpack by the door and came back with a pen and a notebook and wrote down the names of all the advertised subdivisions. I recognized one immediately: Collier Farms—one of the two pseudodivisions on my list I hadn't yet visited. I finished copying the subdivision names and returned my notebook to my backpack. Call me selfish, but if I found her, I wanted it to be alone.

17.

The moment Mom got home from work on Friday, I told her that I was going to a concert with Radar and then proceeded to drive out to rural Seminole County to see Collier Farms. All the other subdivisions from the brochures turned out to exist—most of them on the north side of town, which had been totally developed a long time ago.

I only recognized the turnoff for Collier Farms because I'd become something of an expert in hard-to-see dirt access roads. But Collier Farms was like none of the other pseudovisions I'd seen, because it was wildly overgrown, as if it had been abandoned for fifty years. I didn't know if it was older than the other pseudovisions, or if the low-lying, swamp-wet land made everything grow faster, but the Collier Farms access road became impassable just after I turned in because a thick grove of brambly brush had sprouted across the entire road.

I got out and walked. The overgrown grass scraped at my shins, and my sneakers sunk into the mud with each step. I couldn't help but hope she had a tent pitched out here somewhere on some little piece of land two feet higher than everything else, keeping the rain off. I walked slowly, because there was more to see than at any of the others, more places to hide, and because I knew this pseudovision had a direct connection to the minimall. The ground was so thick I had to walk slowly as I let myself take in each new landscape, checking each place big enough to fit a person. At the end of the street I saw a blue-and-white cardboard box in the mud, and for a second it looked like the same nutrition bars I'd found in the minimall. But, no. A rotting container for a twelve-pack of beer. I trudged back to the minivan and headed for a place called Logan Pines farther to the north.

It took an hour to get there, and by now I was up near the Ocala National Forest, not really even the Orlando metro area anymore. I was a few miles away when Ben called.

"What's up?"

"You hittin' those paper towns?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm almost to the last one I know of. Nothing yet."

"So listen, bro, Radar's parents had to leave town real suddenly."

"Is everything okay?" I asked. I knew Radar's grandparents were really old and lived in a nursing home down in Miami.

"Yeah, get this: you know the guy in Pittsburgh with the world's second-largest collection of black Santas?"

"Yeah?"

"He just bit it."

"You're kidding."

"Bro, I don't kid about the demise of black Santa collectors. This guy had an aneurysm, and so Radar's folks are flying to Pennsylvania to try to buy his entire collection. So we're having a few people over."

"Who's we?"

"You and me and Radar. We're the hosts."

"I don't know," I said.

There was a pause, and then Ben used my full name. "Quentin," he said, "I know you want to find her. I know she is the most important thing to you. And that's cool. But we graduate in, like, a week. I'm not asking you to abandon the search. I'm asking you to come to a party with your two best friends who you have known for half your life. I'm asking you to spend two to three hours drinking sugary wine coolers like the pretty little girl you are, and then another two to three hours vomiting the aforementioned wine coolers through your nose. And then you can go back to poking around abandoned housing projects."

It bothered me that Ben only wanted to talk about Margo when it involved an adventure that appealed to him, that he thought there was something wrong with me for focusing on her over my friends, even though she was missing and they weren't. But Ben was Ben, like Radar said. And I had nothing left to search after Logan Pines anyway. "I've got to go to this last place and then I'll be over."

Because Logan Pines was the last pseudovision in Central Florida—or at least the last one I knew about—I had placed so much hope in it. But as I walked around its single dead-end street with a flashlight, I saw no tent. No campfire. No food wrappers. No sign of people. No Margo. At the end of the road, I found a single concrete foundation dug into the dirt. But there was nothing built atop it, just the hole cut into the earth like a dead mouth agape, tangles of briars and waist-high grass growing up all around. If she'd wanted me to see these places, I could not understand why. And if Margo had gone to the pseudovisions never to come back, she knew about a place I hadn't uncovered in all my research.

It took an hour and a half to drive back to Jefferson Park. I parked the minivan at home, changed into a polo shirt and my only nice pair of jeans, and walked down Jefferson Way to Jefferson Court, and then took a right onto Jefferson Road. A few cars were already lined up on both sides of Jefferson Place, Radar's street. It was only eight-forty-five.

I opened the door and was greeted by Radar, who had an armful of plaster black Santas. "Gotta put away all of the nice ones," he said. "God forbid one of them breaks."

"Need any help?" I asked. Radar nodded toward the living room, where the tables on either side of the couch held three sets of unnnested black Santa nesting dolls. As I renested them, I couldn't help but notice that they were really very beautiful—hand-painted and extraordinarily detailed. I didn't say this to Radar, though, for fear that he would beat me to death with the black Santa lamp in the living room.

I carried the matryoshka dolls into the guest bedroom, where Radar was carefully stashing Santas into a dresser. "You know, when you see them all together, it really does make you question the way we imagine our myths."

Radar rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I always find myself questioning the way I imagine my myths when I'm eating my Lucky Charms every morning with a goddamned black Santa spoon."

I felt a hand on my shoulder spinning me around. It was Ben, his feet fidgeting in fast-motion like he needed to pee or something. "We kissed. Like, she kissed me. About ten minutes ago. On Radar's parents' bed."

"That's disgusting," Radar said. "Don't make out in my parents' bed."

"Wow, I figured you'd already gotten past that," I said. "What with you being such a pimp and everything."

"Shut up, bro. I'm freaked out," he said, looking at me, his eyes almost crossed. "I don't think I'm very good."

"At what?"

"At kissing. And, I mean, she's done a lot more kissing than me over the years. I don't want to suck so bad she dumps me. Girls dig you," he said to me, which was at best true only if you defined the word *girls* as "girls in the marching band." "Bro, I'm asking for advice."

I was tempted to bring up all Ben's endless blather about the various ways in which he would rock various bodies, but I just said, "As far as I can tell, there are two basic rules: 1. Don't bite anything without permission, and 2. The human tongue is like wasabi: it's very powerful, and should be used sparingly."

Ben's eyes suddenly grew bright with panic. I winced, and said, "She's standing behind me, isn't she?"

"The human tongue is like wasabi," Lacey mimicked in a deep, goofy voice that I hoped didn't really resemble mine. I wheeled around. "I actually think Ben's tongue is like sunscreen," she said. "It's good for your health and should be applied liberally."

“I just threw up in my mouth,” Radar said.

“Lacey, you just kind of took away my will to go on,” I added.

“I wish I could stop imagining that,” Radar said.

I said, “The very idea is so offensive that it’s actually illegal to say the words ‘Ben Starling’s tongue’ on television.”

“The penalty for violating that law is either ten years in prison or one Ben Starling tongue bath,” Radar said.

“Everyone,” I said.

“Chooses,” Radar said, smiling.

“Prison,” we finished together.

And then Lacey kissed Ben in front of us. “Oh God,” Radar said, waving his arms in front of his face. “Oh, God. I’m blind. I’m blind.”

“Please stop,” I said. “You’re upsetting the black Santas.”

The party ended up in the formal living room on the second floor of Radar’s house, all twenty of us. I leaned against a wall, my head inches from a black Santa portrait painted on velvet. Radar had one of those sectional couches, and everyone was crowded onto it. There was beer in a cooler by the TV, but no one was drinking. Instead, they were telling stories about one another. I’d heard most of them before—band camp stories and Ben Starling stories and first kiss stories—but Lacey hadn’t heard any of them, and anyway, they were still entertaining. I stayed mostly out of it until Ben said, “Q, how are we going to graduate?”

I smirked. “Naked but for our robes,” I said.

“Yes!” Ben sipped a Dr Pepper.

“I’m not even *bringing* clothes, so I don’t wuss out,” Radar said.

“Me neither! Q, swear not to bring clothes.”

I smiled. “Duly sworn,” I said.

“I’m in!” said our friend Frank. And then more and more of the guys got behind the idea. The girls, for some reason, were resistant.

Radar said to Angela, “Your refusal to do this makes me question the whole foundation of our love.”

“You don’t get it,” Lacey said. “It’s not that we’re *afraid*. It’s just that we already have our dresses picked out.”

Angela pointed at Lacey. “*Exactly*.” Angela added, “Y’all better hope it’s not windy.”

“I hope it *is* windy,” Ben said. “The world’s largest balls benefit from fresh air.”

Lacey put a hand to her face, ashamed. “You’re a challenging boyfriend,” she said. “Rewarding, but challenging.” We laughed.

This was what I liked most about my friends: just sitting around and telling stories. Window stories and mirror stories. I only listened—the stories on my mind weren’t that funny.

I couldn’t help but think about school and everything else ending. I liked standing just outside the couches and watching them—it was a kind of sad I didn’t mind, and so I just listened, letting all the happiness and the sadness of this ending swirl around in me, each sharpening the other. For the longest time, it felt kind of like my chest was cracking open, but not precisely in an unpleasant way.

I left just before midnight. Some people were staying later, but it was my curfew, and plus I didn’t feel like staying. Mom was half asleep on the couch, but she perked up when she saw me. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was pretty chill.”

“Just like you,” she said, smiling. This sentiment struck me as hilarious, but I didn’t say anything. She stood up and pulled me into her, kissing me on the cheek. “I really like being your mom,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said.

I went to bed with the Whitman, flipping to the part I’d liked before, where he spends all the time hearing the opera and the people.

After all that hearing, he writes, “I am exposed . . . cut by bitter and poisoned hail.” That was perfect, I thought: you listen to people so that you can imagine them, and you hear all the terrible and wonderful things people do to themselves and to one another, but in the end the listening exposes *you* even more than it exposes the people you’re trying to listen to.

Walking through pseudovisions and trying to listen to her does not crack the Margo Roth Spiegelman case so much as it cracks me. Pages later—hearing and exposed—Whitman starts to write about all the travel he can do by imagining, and lists all the places he can visit while loafing on the grass. “My palms cover continents,” he writes.

I kept thinking about maps, like the way sometimes when I was a kid I would look at atlases, and just the looking was kind of like being somewhere else. This is what I had to do. I had to hear and imagine my way into *her* map.

But hadn’t I been trying to do that? I looked up at the maps above my computer. I had tried to plot her possible travels, but just as the grass stood for too much, so Margo stood for too much. It seemed impossible to pin her down with maps. She was too small and the space covered by the maps too big. They were more than a waste of time—they were the physical representation of the total fruitlessness of all of it, my absolute inability to develop the kinds of palms that cover continents, to have the kind of mind that correctly imagines.

I got up and walked over to the maps and tore them off the wall, the pins and tacks flying out with the paper and falling to the ground. I balled up the maps and threw them in the garbage can. On my way back to bed I stepped on a tack, like an idiot, and even though I was annoyed and exhausted and out of pseudovisions and ideas, I had to pick up all the thumbtacks scattered around the carpet so I didn’t step on them later. I just wanted to punch the wall, but I had to pick up those stupid goddamned thumbtacks. When I finished, I got back into bed and socked my pillow, my teeth clenched.

I started trying to read the Whitman again, but between it and thinking of Margo, I felt exposed enough for this night. So finally I put the book down. I couldn’t be bothered to get up and turn off the light. I just stared at the wall, my blinks growing longer. And every time I opened my eyes, I saw where each map had been—the four holes marking the rectangle, and the pinholes seemingly randomly distributed inside the rectangle. I’d seen a similar pattern before. In the empty room above the rolled-up carpet.

A map. With plotted points.

18.

I woke up with the sunlight just before seven on Saturday morning. Amazingly, Radar was online.

QTHERESURRECTION: *I thought you'd be sleeping for sure.*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Nah, man. I've been up since six, expanding the article on this Malaysian pop singer. Angela's still in bed, though.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Ooh she stayed over?*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Yeah but my purity is still intact. Graduation night, though . . . I think maybe.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Hey, I thought of something last night. The little holes in that wall in the strip mall—maybe a map that plotted points with thumbtacks?*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Like a route.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Exactly.*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Wanna go over? I have to wait till Ange gets up, though.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Sounds good.*

He called at ten. I picked him up in the minivan and then we drove to Ben's house, figuring that a surprise attack would be the only way to wake him up. But even singing "You Are My Sunshine" outside his window only resulted in him opening the window and spitting at us. "I'm not doing anything until noon," he said authoritatively.

So it was just Radar and me on the drive out. He talked a little about Angela and how much he liked her and how weird it was to fall in love just a few months before they would leave for different colleges, but I found it hard to listen very well. I wanted that map. I wanted to see the places she'd pinpointed. I wanted to get those tacks back into the wall.

We walked in through the office, hustled through the library, paused briefly to examine the holes in the bedroom wall, and entered the souvenir shop. The place didn't scare me at all anymore. Once we'd been in each room and established we were alone, I felt as safe as I did at home. Beneath a display counter, I found the box of maps and brochures I'd rifled through on prom night. I lifted it out and balanced it on the corners of a broken glass counter. Radar sorted through them initially, looking for anything with a map, and then I unfolded them, scanning for pinholes.

We were getting near the bottom of the box when Radar pulled out a black-and-white brochure entitled FIVE THOUSAND AMERICAN CITIES. It was copyrighted 1972 by the Esso company. As I carefully unfolded the map, trying to smooth the creases, I saw a pinhole in a corner. "This is it," I said, my voice rising. There was a small rip around the pinhole, like it'd been torn off the wall. It was a yellowing, brittle, classroom-size map of the United States printed thick with potential destinations. The rips in the map told me that she had not intended this as a clue—Margo was too precise and assured with her clues to muddy the waters. Somehow or another, we'd stumbled into something she *hadn't* planned, and in seeing what she hadn't planned, I thought again of how much she *had* planned. And maybe, I thought, that's what she did in the quiet dark here. Traveling while loafing, like Whitman had, as she prepared for the real thing.

I ran all the way back to the office and found a bunch of thumbtacks in a desk adjacent to Margo's, before Radar and I carefully carried the unfurled map back to Margo's room. I held it up against the wall while Radar tried to get the tacks into the corners, but three of the four corners had ripped, as had three of the five locations, presumably when the map was taken off the wall. "Higher and to the left," he said. "No, down. Yeah. Don't move." Finally we got the map on the wall, and then we started lining up the holes in the map with the ones on the wall. We got all five pins in pretty easily. But some of these pinholes were

also ripped, so it was impossible to tell their EXACT location. And exact location mattered in a map blackened with the names of five thousand places. The lettering was so small and exact that I had to stand up on the carpet and put my bare eyeballs inches away from the map even to guess each location. As I suggested town names, Radar pulled out his handheld and looked them up on Omnictionary.

There were two unripped dots: one looked like Los Angeles, although there were a bunch of towns clustered so close together in Southern California that the type overlapped. The other unripped hole was over Chicago. There was a ripped one in New York that, judging from the location of the hole in the wall, was one of the five boroughs of New York City.

“That makes sense with what we know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But God, *where* in New York? That’s the question.”

“We’re missing something,” he says. “Some locational hint. What’re the other dots?”

“There’s another in New York State, but not near the city. I mean, look, all the towns are tiny. It might be Poughkeepsie or Woodstock or the Catskill Park.”

“Woodstock,” Radar said. “That’d be interesting. She’s not much of a hippie, but she has that whole free-spirit vibe.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The last one is either Washington, D.C., or else maybe Annapolis or Chesapeake Bay. That one could be a bunch of things, actually.”

“It’d be helpful if there was only one point on the map,” Radar said sullenly.

“But she’s probably going from place to place,” I said. Tramping her perpetual journey.

I sat on the carpet for a while as Radar read to me more about New York, about the Catskill Mountains, about the nation’s capital, about the concert at Woodstock in 1969. Nothing seemed to help. I felt as if we’d played out the string and found nothing.

After I dropped Radar off that afternoon, I sat around the house reading “Song of Myself” and halfheartedly studying for finals. I had calc and Latin on Monday, probably my two toughest subjects, and I couldn’t afford to ignore them completely. I studied most of Saturday night and throughout the day Sunday, but then a Margo idea popped into my head just after dinner, so I took a break from practicing Ovid translations and logged onto IM. I saw Lacey online. I’d only just gotten her screen name from Ben, but I figured I knew her well enough to IM her.

Q*THERESURRECTION: Hey, it’s Q.*

S*ACKCLOTHANDASHES: Hi!*

Q*THERESURRECTION: Did you ever think about how much time Margo must have spent planning everything?*

S*ACKCLOTHANDASHES: Yeah, like leaving the letters in the alphabet soup before Mississippi and leading you to the minimall, you mean?*

Q*THERESURRECTION: Yeah, these aren’t things you think up in ten minutes.*

S*ACKCLOTHANDASHES: Maybe the notebook.*

Q*THERESURRECTION: Exactly.*

S*ACKCLOTHANDASHES: Yeah. I was thinking about it today because I remembered one time when we were shopping, she kept sticking the notebook into purses she liked, to make sure it fit.*

Q*THERESURRECTION: I wish I had that notebook.*

S*ACKCLOTHANDASHES: Yeah, probably with her, though.*

Q*THERESURRECTION: Yeah. It wasn’t in her locker?*

SACKCLOTHANDASHES: *No, just textbooks, stacked neat like they always were.*

I studied at my desk and waited for other people to come online. Ben did after a while, and I invited him into a chat room with me and Lacey. They did most of the talking—I was still sort of translating—until Radar logged in and joined the room. Then I put down my pencil for the night.

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Someone from New York City searched Omnictionary for Margo Roth Spiegelman today.*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Can you tell where in New York City?*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Unfortunately, no.*

SACKCLOTHANDASHES: *Also there are still some posters up in record stores there. It was probably just someone trying to find out about her.*

OMNITIONARIAN96: *Oh, right. I forgot about that. Suck.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Hey, I'm in and out because I'm using that site Radar showed me to map routes between the places she pinholed.*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Link?*

QTHERESURRECTION: thelongwayround.com

OMNITIONARIAN96: *I have a new theory. She's going to show up for graduation, sitting in the audience.*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *I have an old theory, that she is somewhere in Orlando, screwing with us and making sure that she's the center of our universe.*

SACKCLOTHANDASHES: *Ben!*

ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION: *Sorry, but I'm totally right.*

They went on like that, talking about their Margos, as I tried to map her route. If she hadn't intended the map as a clue—and the ripped tack holes told me she hadn't—I figured we'd gotten all the clues she'd intended for us and now much more. Surely I had what I needed, then. But I still felt very far away from her.

19.

After three long hours alone with eight hundred words from Ovid on Monday morning, I walked through the halls feeling as if my brain might drip out of my ears. But I'd done okay. We had an hour and a half for lunch, to give our minds time to firm back up before the second exam period of the day. Radar was waiting for me at my locker.

"I just bombed me some Spanish," Radar said.

"I'm sure you did okay." He was going to Dartmouth on a huge scholarship. He was plenty smart.

"Dude, I don't know. I kept falling asleep during the oral part. But listen, I was up half the night building this program. It's so awesome. What it does is it allows you to enter a category—it can be a geographical area or like a family in the animal kingdom—and then you can read the first sentences of up to a hundred Omnictionary articles about your topic on a single page. So, like, say you are trying to find a particular kind of rabbit but can't remember its name. You can read an introduction to all twenty-one species of rabbits on the same page in, like, three minutes."

"You did this the night before finals?" I asked.

"Yeah, I know, right? Anyway I'll e-mail it to you. It's nerdtastic."

Ben showed up then. "I swear to God, Q, Lacey and I were up on IM until two o'clock in the morning playing on that site, the-longwayround? And having now plotted every single possible trip that Margo could have taken between Orlando and those five points, I realize I was wrong all this time. She's not in Orlando. Radar's right. She's coming back here for graduation day."

"Why?"

"The timing is *perfect*. To drive from Orlando to New York to the mountains to Chicago to Los Angeles back to Orlando is like *exactly* a twenty-three-day trip. Plus, it's a totally retarded joke, but it's a Margo joke. You make everyone think you offed yourself. Surround yourself with an air of mystery so that everyone pays attention. And then right as all the attention starts to go away, you show up at graduation."

"No," I said. "No way." I knew Margo better than that by now. She did want attention. I believed that. But Margo didn't play life for laughs. She didn't get off on mere trickery.

"I'm telling you, bro. Look for her at graduation. She's gonna be there." I just shook my head. Since everyone had the same lunch period, the cafeteria was beyond packed, so we exercised our rights as seniors and drove to Wendy's. I tried to stay focused on my coming calc exam, but I was starting to feel like maybe there was more string to the story. If Ben was right about the twenty-three-day trip, that was very interesting, indeed. Maybe that's what she'd been planning in her black notebook, a long and lonesome road trip. It didn't explain everything, but it did fit with Margo as a planner. Not that this brought me closer to her. As hard as it is to pinpoint a dot inside a ripped segment of a map, it only becomes harder when the dot is moving.

After a long day of finals, returning to the comfortable impenetrability of "Song of Myself" was almost a relief. I had reached a weird part of the poem—after all this time listening and hearing people, and then traveling alongside them, Whitman stops hearing and he stops visiting, and he starts to *become* other people. Like, actually inhabit them. He tells the story of a ship's captain who saved everyone on his boat except himself. The poet can tell the story, he argues, because he has become the captain. As he writes, "I am the man . . . I suffered . . . I was there." A few lines later, it becomes even more clear that Whitman no longer needs to listen to become another: "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels . . . I myself become the wounded person."

I put the book down and lay on my side, staring out the window that had always been between us. It is not enough just to see her or hear her. To find Margo Roth Spiegelman, you must become Margo Roth Spiegelman.

And I had done many of the things she might have done: I had engineered a most unlikely prom coupling. I had quieted the hounds of caste warfare. I had come to feel comfortable inside the rat-infested haunted house where she did her best thinking. I had seen. I had listened. But I could not yet become the wounded person.

I limped through my physics and government finals the next day and then stayed up till 2 A.M. on Tuesday finishing my final reaction paper for English about *Moby Dick*. Ahab was a hero, I decided. I had no particular reason for having decided this—particularly given that I hadn't read the book—but I decided it and reacted thusly.

The abbreviated exam week meant that Wednesday was the last day of school for us. And all day long, it was hard not to walk around, thinking about the lastness of it all: The last time I stand in a circle outside the band room in the shade of this oak tree that has protected generations of band geeks. The last time I eat pizza in the cafeteria with Ben. The last time I sit in this school scrawling an essay with a cramped hand into a blue book. The last time I glance up at the clock. The last time I see Chuck Parson prowling the halls, his smile half a sneer. God. I was becoming nostalgic for Chuck Parson. Something sick was happening inside of me.

It must have been like this for Margo, too. With all the planning she'd done, she must have known she was leaving, and even she couldn't have been totally immune to the feeling. She'd had good days here. And on the last day, the bad days become so difficult to recall, because one way or another, she had made a life here, just as I had. The town was paper, but the memories were not. All the things I'd done here, all the love and pity and compassion and violence and spite, kept welling up inside me. These whitewashed cinder-block walls. My white walls. Margo's white walls. We'd been captive in them for so long, stuck in their belly like Jonah.

Throughout the day, I found myself thinking that maybe this feeling was why she'd planned everything so intricately and precisely: even if you want to leave, it is so hard. It took preparation, and maybe sitting in that minimally scrawling her plans was both intellectual and emotional practice—Margo's way of imagining herself into her fate.

Ben and Radar both had a marathon band practice to make sure they would rock "Pomp and Circumstance" at graduation. Lacey offered me a ride, but I decided to clean out my locker, because I didn't really want to come back here and again have to feel like my lungs were drowning in this perverse nostalgia.

My locker was an unadulterated crap hole—half trash can, half book storage. Her locker had been neatly stacked with textbooks when Lacey opened it, I remembered, as if she intended to come to school the next day. I pulled a garbage can over to the bank of lockers and opened mine up. I began by pulling off a picture of Radar and Ben and me goofing off. I put it inside my backpack and then started the disgusting process of picking through a year's worth of accumulated filth—gum wrapped in scraps of notebook paper, pens out of ink, greasy napkins—and scraping it all into the garbage. All along, I kept thinking, *I will never do this again, I will never be here again, this will never be my locker again, Radar and I will never write notes in calculus again, I will never see Margo across the hall again*. This was the first time in my life that so many things would never happen again.

And finally it was too much. I could not talk myself down from the feeling, and the feeling became unbearable. I reached in deep to the recesses of my locker. I pushed everything—photographs and notes and books—into the trash can. I left the locker open and walked away. As I walked past the band room, I could hear through the walls the muffled sounds of "Pomp and Circumstance." I kept walking. It was hot outside, but not as hot as usual. It was bearable. *There are sidewalks most of the way home*, I thought. So I kept walking.

And as paralyzing and upsetting as all the never agains were, the final leaving felt perfect. Pure. The most distilled possible form of liberation. Everything that mattered except one lousy picture was in the trash, but it felt so great. I started jogging, wanting to put even more distance between myself and school.

It is so hard to leave—until you leave. And then it is the easiest goddamned thing in the world.

As I ran, I felt myself for the first time becoming Margo. I knew: *she is not in Orlando. She is not in Florida.* Leaving feels too good, once you leave. If I'd been in a car, and not on foot, I might have kept going, too. She was gone and not coming back for graduation or anything else. I felt sure of that now.

I leave, and the leaving is so exhilarating I know I can never go back. But then what? Do I just keep leaving places, and leaving them, and leaving them, tramping a perpetual journey?

Ben and Radar drove past me a quarter mile from Jefferson Park, and Ben brought RHAPAW to a screeching halt right on Lakemont in spite of traffic everywhere, and I ran up to the car and got in. They wanted to play Resurrection at my house, but I had to tell them no, because I was closer than I'd ever been before.

20.

All night Wednesday, and all day Thursday, I tried to use my new understanding of her to figure out some meaning to the clues I had—some relationship between the map and the travel books, or else some link between the Whitman and the map that would allow me to understand her travelogue. But increasingly I felt like maybe she had become too enthralled with the pleasure of leaving to construct a proper bread crumb trail. And if that were the case, the map she had never intended for us to see might be our best chance to find her. But no site on the map was adequately specific. Even the Catskill Park dot, which interested me because it was the only location not in or near a big city, was far too big and populous to find a single person. “Song of Myself” made references to places in New York City, but there were too many locations to track them all down. How do you pinpoint a spot on the map when the spot seems to be moving from metropolis to metropolis?

I was already up and paging through travel guides when my parents came into my room on Friday morning. They rarely both entered the room at the same time, and I felt a ripple of nausea—maybe they had bad news about Margo—before I remembered it was my graduation day.

“Ready, bud?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not that big of a deal, but it’ll be fun.”

“You only graduate from high school once,” Mom said.

“Yeah,” I said. They sat down on the bed across from me. I noticed them share a glance and giggle. “What?” I asked.

“Well, we want to give you your graduation present,” Mom said. “We’re really proud of you, Quentin. You’re the greatest accomplishment of our lives, and this is just such a great day for you, and we’re—You’re just a great young man.”

I smiled and looked down. And then my dad produced a very small gift wrapped in blue wrapping paper.

“No,” I said, snatching it from him.

“Go ahead and open it.”

“No way,” I said, staring at it. It was the size of a key. It was the weight of a key. When I shook the box, it rattled like a key.

“Just open it, sweetie,” my mom urged.

I tore off the wrapping paper. A KEY! I examined it closely. A Ford key! Neither of our cars was a Ford. “You got me a car?!”

“We did,” my dad said. “It’s not brand-new—but only two years old and just twenty thousand miles on it.” I jumped up and hugged both of them.

“It’s mine?”

“Yeah!” my mom almost shouted. I had a car! A car! Of my own!

I disentangled myself from my parents and shouted “*thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you*” as I raced through the living room, and yanked open the front door wearing only an old T-shirt and boxer shorts. There, parked in the driveway with a huge blue bow on it, was a Ford minivan.

They’d given me a minivan. They could have picked any car, and they picked a minivan. A minivan. O God of Vehicular Justice, why dost thou mock me? Minivan, you albatross around my neck! You mark of Cain! You wretched beast of high ceilings and few horsepower!

I put on a brave face when I turned around. “Thank you thank you thank you!” I said, although surely I didn’t sound quite as effusive now that I was completely faking it.

“Well, we just knew how much you loved driving mine,” Mom said. She and Dad were beaming—clearly convinced they’d landed me the transportation of my dreams. “It’s great for getting around with your friends!” added my dad. And to think: these people specialize in the analysis and understanding of the human psyche.

“Listen,” Dad said, “we should get going pretty soon if we want to get good seats.”

I hadn’t showered or dressed or anything. Well, not that I would technically be *dressing*, but still. “I don’t have to be there until twelve-thirty,” I said. “I need to, like, get ready.”

Dad frowned. “Well, I really want to have a good sight line so I can take some pic—”

I interrupted him. “I can just take MY CAR,” I said. “I can drive MYSELF in MY CAR.” I smiled broadly.

“I know!” my mom said excitedly. And what the hell—a car’s a car, after all. Driving my own minivan was surely a step up from driving someone else’s.

I went back to my computer then and informed Radar and Lacey (Ben wasn’t online) about the minivan.

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Actually that’s really good news. Can I stop by and put a cooler in your trunk? I gotta drive my parents to graduation and don’t want them to see.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *Sure, it’s unlocked. Cooler for what?*

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *Well, since no one drank at my party, there were 212 beers left over, and we’re taking them over to Lacey’s for her party tonight.*

QTHERESURRECTION: *212 beers?*

OMNICTIONARIAN96: *It’s a big cooler.*

Ben came online then, SHOUTING about how he was already showered and naked and just needed to put on the cap and gown. We were all talking back and forth about our naked graduation. After everyone logged off to get ready, I got in the shower and stood up straight so that the water shot directly at my face, and I started thinking as the water pounded away at me. New York or California? Chicago or D.C.? I could go now, too, I thought. I had a car just as much as she did. I could go to the five spots on the map, and even if I didn’t find her, it would be more fun than another boiling summer in Orlando. But no. It’s like breaking into SeaWorld. It takes an immaculate plan, and then you execute it brilliantly, and then—nothing. And then it’s just SeaWorld, except darker. She’d told me: the pleasure isn’t in doing the thing; the pleasure is in planning it.

And that’s what I thought about as I stood beneath the showerhead: the planning. She sits in the minivan with her notebook, planning. Maybe she’s planning a road trip, using the map to imagine routes. She reads the Whitman and highlights “I tramp a perpetual journey,” because that’s the kind of thing she likes to imagine herself doing, the kind of thing she likes to plan.

But is it the kind of thing she likes to actually *do*? No. Because Margo knows the secret of leaving, the secret I have only just now learned: leaving feels good and pure only when you leave something important, something that mattered to you. Pulling life out by the roots. But you can’t do that until your life has grown roots.

And so when she left, she left for good. But I could not believe she had left for a perpetual journey. She had, I felt sure, left for a place—a place where she could stay long enough for it to matter, long enough for the next leaving to feel as good as the last one had. *There is a corner of the world somewhere far away from here where no one knows what “Margo Roth Spiegelman” means. And Margo is sitting in that corner, scrawling in her black notebook.*

The water began to get cold. I hadn’t so much as touched a bar of soap, but I got out, wrapped a towel around my waist, and sat down at the computer.

I dug up Radar's e-mail about his Omnictionary program and downloaded the plug-in. It really was pretty cool. First, I entered a zip code in downtown Chicago, clicked "location," and asked for a radius of twenty miles. It spit back a hundred responses, from Navy Pier to Deerfield. The first sentence of each entry came up on my screen, and I read through them in about five minutes. Nothing stood out. Then I tried a zip code near the Catskill Park in New York. Fewer responses this time, eighty-two, organized by the date on which the Omnictionary page had been created. I started to read.

Woodstock, New York, is a town in Ulster County, New York, perhaps best known for the eponymous Woodstock concert [see Woodstock Concert] in 1969, a three-day event featuring acts from Jimi Hendrix to Janis Joplin, which actually occurred in a nearby town.

Lake Katrine is a small lake in Ulster County, New York, often visited by Henry David Thoreau.

The Catskill Park comprises 700,000 acres of land in the Catskill Mountains owned jointly by state and local governments, including a 5 percent share held by New York City, which gets much of its water from reservoirs partly inside the park.

Roscoe, New York, is a hamlet in New York State, which according to a recent census contains 261 households.

Agloe, New York, is a fictitious village created by the Esso company in the early 1930s and inserted into tourist maps as a copyright trap, or paper town.

I clicked on the link and it took me to the full article, which continued:

Located at the intersection of two dirt roads just north of Roscoe, NY, Agloe was the creation of mapmakers Otto G. Lindberg and Ernest Alpers, who invented the town name by anagramming their initials. Copyright traps have featured in mapmaking for centuries. Cartographers create fictional landmarks, streets, and municipalities and place them obscurely into their maps. If the fictional entry is found on another cartographer's map, it becomes clear a map has been plagiarized. Copyright traps are also sometimes known as key traps, paper streets, and paper towns [see also fictitious entries]. Although few cartographic corporations acknowledge their existence, copyright traps remain a common feature even in contemporary maps.

In the 1940s, Agloe, New York, began appearing on maps created by other companies. Esso suspected copyright infringement and prepared several lawsuits, but in fact, an unknown resident had built "The Agloe General Store" at the intersection that appeared on the Esso map.

The building, which still stands [needs citation], is the only structure in Agloe, which continues to appear on many maps and is traditionally recorded as having a population of zero.

Every Omnictionary entry contains subpages where you can view all the edits ever made to the page and any discussion by Omnictionary members about it. The Agloe page hadn't been edited by anyone in almost a year, but there was one recent comment on the talk page by an anonymous user:

fyi, whoever Edits this—the Population of agloe Will actually be One until may 29th at Noon.

I recognized the capitalization immediately. *The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle of a sentence.* My throat tightened, but I forced myself to calm down. The comment had been left fifteen days ago. It had been sitting there all that time, waiting for me. I looked at the clock on the computer. I had

just under twenty-four hours.

For the first time in weeks, she seemed completely and undeniably alive to me. She was alive. For one more day at least, she was alive. I had focused on her whereabouts for so long in an attempt to keep me from obsessively wondering whether she was alive that I had no idea how terrified I'd been until now, but oh, my God. She was alive.

I jumped up, let the towel drop, and called Radar. I cradled the phone in the crook of my neck while pulling on boxers and then shorts. "I know what paper towns means! Do you have your handheld?"

"Yeah. You should really be here, dude. They're about to make us line up."

I heard Ben shout into the phone, "Tell him he better be naked!"

"Radar," I said, trying to convey the importance of it. "Look up the page for Agloe, New York. Got it?"

"Yes. Reading. Hold on. Wow. Wow. This could be the Catskills spot on the map?"

"Yes, I think so. It's pretty close. Go to the discussion page."

". . ."

"Radar?"

"Jesus Christ."

"I know, I know!" I shouted. I didn't hear his response because I was pulling my shirt on, but when the phone got back to my ear, I could hear him talking to Ben. I just hung up.

Online, I searched for driving directions from Orlando to Agloe, but the map system had never heard of Agloe, so instead I searched for Roscoe. Averaging sixty-five miles per hour, the computer said it would be a nineteen-hour-and-four-minute trip. It was two-fifteen. I had twenty-one hours and forty-five minutes to get there. I printed the directions, grabbed the keys to the minivan, and locked the front door behind me.

"It's nineteen hours and four minutes away," I said into the cell phone. It was Radar's cell phone, but Ben had answered it.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked. "Are you flying there?"

"No, I don't have enough money, and anyway it's like eight hours away from New York City. So I'm driving."

Suddenly Radar had the phone back. "How long is the trip?"

"Nineteen hours and four minutes."

"According to who?"

"Google maps."

"Crap," Radar said. "None of those map programs calculate for traffic. I'll call you back. And hurry. We've got to line up like right now!"

"I'm not going. Can't risk the time," I said, but I was talking to dead air. Radar called back a minute later. "If you average sixty-five miles per hour, don't stop, and account for average traffic patterns, it's going to take you twenty-three hours and nine minutes. Which puts you there just after one P.M., so you're going to have to make up time when you can."

"What? But the—"

Radar said, "I don't want to criticize, but maybe on this particular topic, the person who is chronically late needs to listen to the person who is always punctual. But you gotta come here at least for a second because otherwise your parents will freak out when you don't show when your name is called, and also, not that it is the most important consideration or anything, but I'm just saying—you have all our beer in there."

"I obviously don't have time," I answered.

Ben leaned into the phone. "Don't be an asshat. It'll cost you five minutes."

“Okay, fine.” I hooked a right on red and gunned the minivan—it had better pickup than Mom’s but only just barely—toward school. I made it to the gym parking lot in three minutes. I did not park the minivan so much as I stopped it in the middle of the parking lot and jumped out. As I sprinted toward the gym I saw three robed individuals running toward me. I could see Radar’s spindly dark legs as his robe blew up around him, and next to him Ben, wearing sneakers without socks. Lacey was just behind them.

“You get the beer,” I said as I ran past them. “I gotta talk to my parents.”

The families of graduates were spread out across the bleachers, and I ran back and forth across the basketball court a couple times before I spotted Mom and Dad about halfway up. They were waving at me. I ran up the stairs two at a time, and so was a little out of breath when I knelt down next to them and said, “Okay, so I’m not going [breath] to walk, because I [breath] think I found Margo and [breath] I just have to go, and I’ll have my cell phone on [breath] and please don’t be pissed at me and thank you again for the car.”

And my mom wrapped her hand around my wrist and said, “What? Quentin, what are you talking about? Slow down.”

I said, “I’m going to Agloe, New York, and I have to go *right now*. That’s the whole story. Okay, I gotta go. I’m crunched for time here. I have my cell. Okay, love you.”

I had to pull free from her light grasp. Before they could say anything, I bounded down the stairs and took off, sprinting back toward the minivan. I was inside and had the thing in gear and was starting to move when I looked over and saw Ben sitting in the passenger’s seat.

“Get the beer and get out of the car!” I shouted.

“We’re coming with,” he said. “You’d fall asleep if you tried to drive for that long anyway.”

I turned back, and Lacey and Radar were both holding cell phones to their ears. “Gotta tell my parents,” Lacey explained, tapping the phone. “C’mon, Q. Go go go go go go.”



PART THREE

The Vessel

The First Hour

It takes a little while for everyone to explain to their parents that 1. We're all going to miss graduation, and 2. We're driving to New York, to 3. See a town that may or may not technically exist, and hopefully 4. Intercept the Omnictionary poster, who according to the Randomly capitalized Evidence is 5. Margo Roth Spiegelman.

Radar is the last to get off the phone, and when he finally does, he says, "I'd like to make an announcement. My parents are very annoyed that I'm missing graduation. My girlfriend is also annoyed, because we were scheduled to do something *very special* in about eight hours. I don't want to get into details about it, but this had better be one fun road trip."

"Your ability to not lose your virginity is an inspiration to us all," Ben says next to me.

I glance at Radar through the rearview mirror. "WOOHOO ROAD TRIP!" I tell him. In spite of himself, a smile creeps across his face. The pleasure of leaving.

By now we are on I-4, and traffic is fairly light, which in and of itself is borderline miraculous. I'm in the far left lane driving eight miles an hour over the fifty-five-miles-per-hour speed limit, because I heard once that you don't get pulled over until you're going nine miles an hour over the speed limit.

Very quickly, we all settle into our roles.

In the wayback, Lacey is the provisioner. She lists aloud everything we currently have for the trip: the half of a Snickers that Ben was eating when I called about Margo; the 212 beers in the back; the directions I printed out; and the following items from her purse: eight sticks of wintergreen gum, a pencil, some tissue, three tampons, one pair of sunglasses, some ChapStick, her house keys, a YMCA membership card, a library card, some receipts, thirty-five dollars, and a BP card.

From the back, Lacey says, "This is exciting! We're like under-provisioned pioneers! I wish we had more money, though."

"At least we have the BP card," I say. "We can get gas and food."

I look up into the rearview mirror and see Radar, wearing his graduation gown, looking over into Lacey's purse. The graduation gown has a bit of a low-cut neck, so I can see some curled chest hairs. "You got any boxers in there?" he asks.

"Seriously, we better be stopping at the Gap," Ben adds.

Radar's job, which he begins with the calculator on his handheld, is Research and Calculations. He's alone in the row of seats behind me, with the directions and the minivan's owner's manual spread out next to him. He's figuring out how fast we need to travel in order to make it by noon tomorrow, how many times we'll need to stop in order to keep the car from running out of gas, the locations of BP stations on our route and how long each stop will be, and how much time we'll lose in the process of slowing down to exit.

"We gotta stop four times for gas. The stops will have to be very very short. Six minutes at the most off-highway. We're looking at three long areas of construction, plus traffic in Jacksonville, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, although it will help that we're driving through D.C. around three in the morning. According to my calculations, our average cruising speed should be around seventy-two. How fast are you going?"

"Sixty-three," I say. "The speed limit is fifty-five."

"Go seventy-two," he says.

"I can't; it's dangerous, and I'll get a ticket."

"Go seventy-two," he says again. I press my foot down hard on the gas. The difficulty is partly that I am hesitant to go seventy-two and partly that the minivan itself is hesitant to go seventy-two. It begins to shake in a way that implies it might fall apart. I stay in the far left lane, even though I'm still not the fastest car on

the road, and I feel bad that people are passing me on the right, but I need clear road ahead, because unlike everyone else on this road, I can't slow down. And this is my role: my role is to drive, and to be nervous. It occurs to me that I have played this role before.

And Ben? Ben's role is to need to pee. At first it seems like his main role is going to be complaining about how we don't have any CDs and that all the radio stations in Orlando suck except for the college radio station, which is already out of range. But soon enough, he abandons that role for his true and faithful calling: needing to pee.

"I need to pee," he says at 3:06. We've been on the road for forty-three minutes. We have approximately a day left in our drive.

"Well," says Radar, "the good news is that we will be stopping. The bad news is that it won't be for another four hours and thirty minutes."

"I think I can hold it," Ben says. At 3:10, he announces, "Actually, I really need to pee. Really."

The chorus responds, "Hold it." He says, "But I—" And the chorus responds again, "Hold it!" It is fun, for now, Ben needing to pee and us needing him to hold it. He is laughing, and complaining that laughing makes him need to pee more. Lacey jumps forward and leans in behind him and starts tickling at his sides. He laughs and whines and I laugh, too, keeping the speedometer on seventy-two. I wonder if she created this journey for us on purpose or by accident—regardless, it's the most fun I've had since the last time I spent hours behind the wheel of a minivan.

Hour Two

I'm still driving. We turn north, onto I-95, snaking our way up Florida, near the coast but not quite on it. It is all pine trees here, too skinny for their height, built like I am. But there is mostly just the road, passing cars and occasionally being passed by them, always having to remember who is in front of you and who behind, who is approaching and who is drifting away.

Lacey and Ben are sitting together on the bench seat now, and Radar is in the wayback, and they're all playing a retarded version of I Spy in which they are only allowed to spy things that cannot physically be seen.

"I Spy with my little eye something tragically hip," Radar says.

"Is it the way Ben smiles mostly with the right side of his mouth?" asks Lacey.

"No," says Radar. "Also don't be so gooey about Ben. It's gross."

"Is it the idea of wearing nothing under your graduation gown and then having to drive to New York while all the people in passing cars assume you're wearing a dress?"

"No," says Radar. "That's just tragic."

Lacey smiles. "You'll learn to like dresses. You get to enjoy the breeze."

"Oh, I know!" I say from the front. "You spy a twenty-four-hour road trip in a minivan. Hip because road trips always are; tragic because the gas we're guzzling will destroy the planet."

Radar says no, and they keep guessing. I am driving and going seventy-two and praying not to get a ticket and playing Metaphysical I Spy. The tragically hip thing turns out to be failing to turn in your rented graduation robes on time. I blow past a cop parked on the grass median. I grip the steering wheel hard with both hands, feeling sure he'll race up to pull us over. But he doesn't. Maybe he knows I'm only speeding because I have to.

Hour Three

Ben is sitting shotgun again. I'm still driving. We're all hungry. Lacey distributes one piece of wintergreen gum to each of us, but it's cold comfort. She's writing a gigantic list of everything we're going to buy at the BP when we stop for the first time. This had better be one extraordinarily well-stocked BP station, because we are going to clear the bitch out.

Ben keeps bouncing his legs up and down.

"Will you stop that?"

"I've had to pee for three hours."

"You've mentioned that."

"I can feel the pee all the way up to my rib cage," he says. "I am honestly full of pee. Bro, right now, seventy percent of my body weight is pee."

"Uh-huh," I say, barely cracking a smile. It's funny and all, but I'm tired.

"I feel like I might start crying, and that I'm going to cry pee."

That gets me. I laugh a little.

The next time I glance over, a few minutes later, Ben has a hand tight around his crotch, the fabric of the gown bunched up.

"What the hell?" I ask.

"Dude, I have to *go*. I'm pinching off the flow." He turns around then. "Radar, how long till we stop?"

"We have to go at least a hundred forty-three more miles in order to keep it down to four stops, which means about one hour and fifty-eight-point-five minutes if Q keeps pace."

"I'm keeping up!" I shout. We are just north of Jacksonville, getting close to Georgia.

"I can't make it, Radar. Get me something to pee in."

The chorus erupts: NO. Absolutely not. Just hold it like a man. Hold it like a Victorian lady holds on to her maidenhead. Hold it with dignity and grace, like the president of the United States is supposed to hold the fate of the free world.

"GIVE ME SOMETHING OR I WILL PEE ON THIS SEAT. AND HURRY!"

"Oh, Christ," Radar says as he unbuckles his seat belt. He climbs into the wayback, and then reaches down and opens the cooler. He returns to his seat, leans forward, and hands Ben a beer.

"Thank God it's a twist off," Ben says, gathering a handful of robe and then opening the bottle. Ben rolls down the window, and I watch out the side-view mirror as the beer floats past the car and splashes onto the interstate. Ben manages to get the bottle underneath his robe without showing us the world's purportedly largest balls, and then we all sit and wait, too disgusted to look.

Lacey is just saying, "Can't you just hold it," when we all hear it. I have never heard the sound before, but I recognize it anyway: it is the sound of pee hitting the bottom of a beer bottle. It sounds almost like music. Revolting music with a very fast beat. I glance over and I can see the relief in Ben's eyes. He is smiling, staring into the middle distance.

"The longer you wait, the better it feels," he says. The sound soon changes from the clinking of pee-on-bottle to the blopping of pee-on-pee. And then, slowly, Ben's smile fades.

"Bro, I think I need another bottle," he says suddenly.

"Another bottle STAT," I shout.

"Another bottle coming up!" In a flash, I can see Radar bent over the backseat, his head in the cooler, digging a bottle out of the ice. He opens it with his bare hand, cracks one of the back windows open, and

pours the beer out through the crack. Then he leaps to the front, his head between Ben and me, and holds the bottle out for Ben, whose eyes are darting around in panic.

“The, uh, exchange is going to be, uh, complicated,” Ben says. There’s a lot of fumbling going on beneath that robe, and I’m trying not to imagine what’s happening when out from underneath a robe comes a Miller Lite bottle filled with pee (which looks astoundingly similar to Miller Lite). Ben deposits the full bottle in the cup holder, grabs the new one from Radar, and then sighs with relief.

The rest of us, meanwhile, are left to contemplate the pee in the cup holder. The road is not particularly bumpy, but the shocks on the minivan leave something to be desired, so the pee swishes back and forth at the top of the bottle.

“Ben, if you get pee in my brand-new car, I am going to cut your balls off.”

Still peeing, Ben looks over at me, smirking. “You’re gonna need a hell of a big knife, bro.” And then finally I hear the stream slow. He’s soon finished, and then in one swift motion he throws the new bottle out the window. The full one follows.

Lacey is fake-gagging—or maybe really gagging. Radar says, “God, did you wake up this morning and drink eighteen gallons of water?”

But Ben is beaming. He is holding his fists in the air, triumphant, and he is shouting, “Not a drop on the seat! I’m Ben Starling. First clarinet, WPHS Marching Band. Keg Stand Record Holder. Pee-in-the-car champion. I shook up the world! I must be the greatest!”

Thirty-five minutes later, as our third hour comes to a close, he asks in a small voice, “When are we stopping again?”

“One hour and three minutes, if Q keeps pace,” Radar answers.

“Okay,” Ben says. “Okay. Good. Because I have to pee.”

Hour Four

For the first time, Lacey asks, “Are we there yet?” We laugh. We *are*, however, in Georgia, a state I love and adore for this reason and this reason only: the speed limit here is seventy, which means I can up my speed to seventy-seven. Aside from that, Georgia reminds me of Florida.

We spend the hour preparing for our first stop. This is an important stop, because I am very, very, very, very hungry and dehydrated. For some reason, talking about the food we’ll buy at the BP eases the pangs. Lacey prepares a grocery list for each of us, written in small letters on the backs of receipts she found in her purse. She makes Ben lean out the passenger-side window to see which side the gas cap is on. She forces us to memorize our grocery lists and then quizzes us. We talk through our visit to the gas station several times; it needs to be as well-executed as a stock car pit stop.

“One more time,” Lacey says.

“I’m the gas man,” Radar says. “After I start the fill-up, I run inside while the pump is pumping even though I’m supposed to stay near the pump at all times, and I give you the card. Then I return to the gas.”

“I take the card to the guy behind the counter,” Lacey says.

“Or girl,” I add.

“Not relevant,” Lacey answers.

“I’m just saying—don’t be so sexist.”

“Oh whatever, Q. I take the card to the person behind the counter. I tell her or him to ring up everything we bring. Then I pee.”

I add, “Meanwhile, I’m getting everything on my list and bringing it up to the front.”

Ben says, “And I’m peeing. Then when I finish peeing, I’ll get the stuff on my list.”

“Most importantly shirts,” Radar says. “People keep looking at me funny.”

Lacey says, “I sign the receipt when I get out of the bathroom.”

“And then the moment the tank is full, I’m going to get in the minivan and drive away, so y’all had better be in there. I will seriously leave your asses. You have six minutes,” Radar says.

“Six minutes,” I say, nodding my head. And Lacey and Ben repeat it also. “Six minutes.” “Six minutes.” At 5:35 P.M., with nine hundred miles to go, Radar informs us that, according to his handheld, the next exit will have a BP.

As I pull into the gas station, Lacey and Radar are crouched behind the sliding door in the back. Ben, seat belt unbuckled, has one hand on the passenger-door handle and the other on the dashboard. I maintain as much speed as I can for as long as I can, and then slam on the brakes right in front of the gas tank. The minivan jolts to a halt, and we fly out the doors. Radar and I cross in front of the car; I toss him the keys and then run all out to the food mart. Lacey and Ben have beat me to the doors, but only just barely. While Ben bolts for the bathroom, Lacey explains to the gray-haired woman (it *is* a woman!) that we’re going to be buying a lot of stuff, and that we’re in a huge hurry, and that she should just ring items up as we deliver them and that it will all go on her BP card, and the woman seems a little bewildered but agrees. Radar runs in, his robe aflutter, and hands Lacey the card.

Meanwhile, I’m running through the aisles getting everything on my list. Lacey’s on liquids; Ben’s on nonperishable supplies; I’m on food. I sweep through the place like I’m a cheetah and the tortilla chips are injured gazelles. I run an armful of chips and beef jerky and peanuts to the front counter, then jog to the candy aisle. A handful of Mentos, a handful of Snickers, and—Oh, it’s not on the list, but screw it, I love Nerds, so I add three packages of Nerds. I run back and then head over to the “deli” counter, which consists of ancient turkey sandwiches wherein the turkey strongly resembles ham. I grab two of those. On my way

back to the cash register, I stop for a couple Starbursts, a package of Twinkies, and an indeterminate number of GoFast nutrition bars. I run back. Ben's standing there in his graduation gown, handing the woman T-shirts and four-dollar sunglasses. Lacey runs up with gallons of soda, energy drinks, and bottles of water. Big bottles, the kind of bottles that even Ben's pee can't fill.

"ONE MINUTE!" Lacey shouts, and I panic. I'm turning in circles, my eyes darting around the store, trying to remember what I'm forgetting. I glance down at my list. I seem to have everything, but I feel like there's something important I've forgotten. Something. *Come on, Jacobsen.* Chips, candy, turkey-that-looks-like-ham, pbj, and—what? What are the other food groups? Meat, chips, candy, and, and, and, and cheese! "CRACKERS!" I say, much too loud, and then I dart to the crackers, grabbing cheese crackers and peanut butter crackers and some of Grandma's peanut butter cookies for good measure, and then I run back and toss them across the counter. The woman has already bagged up four plastic bags of groceries. Almost a hundred dollars total, not even counting gas; I'll be paying back Lacey's parents all summer.

There's only one moment of pause, and it's after the woman behind the counter swipes Lacey's BP card. I glance at my watch. We're supposed to leave in twenty seconds. Finally, I hear the receipt printing. The woman tears it out of the machine, Lacey scribbles her name, and then Ben and I grab the bags and dash for the car. Radar revs the engine as if to say *hustle*, and we are running through the parking lot, Ben's robe flowing in the wind so that he looks vaguely like a dark wizard, except that his pale skinny legs are visible, and his arms hug plastic bags. I can see the back of Lacey's legs beneath her dress, her calves tight in midstride. I don't know how I look, but I know how I feel: Young. Goofy. Infinite. I watch as Lacey and Ben pile in through the open sliding door. I follow, landing on plastic bags and Lacey's torso. Radar guns the car as I slam the sliding door shut, and then he peels out of the parking lot, marking the first time in the long and storied history of the minivan that anyone anywhere has ever used one to burn rubber. Radar turns left onto the highway at a somewhat unsafe speed, and then merges back onto the interstate. We're four seconds ahead of schedule. And just like with the NASCAR pit stops, we share high-fives and backslaps. We are well supplied. Ben has plenty of containers into which he can urinate. I have adequate beef jerky rations. Lacey has her Mentos. Radar and Ben have T-shirts to wear over their robes. The minivan has become a biosphere—give us gas, and we can keep going forever.

Hour Five

Okay, maybe we are not that well provisioned after all. In the rush of the moment, it turns out that Ben and I made some moderate (although not fatal) mistakes. With Radar alone up front, Ben and I sit in the first bench, unpacking each bag and handing the items to Lacey in the wayback. Lacey, in turn, is sorting items into piles based on an organizational schema only she understands.

“Why is the NyQuil not in the same pile as the NoDoz?” I ask. “Shouldn’t all the medicines be together?”

“Q. Sweetie. You’re a boy. You don’t know how to do these things. The NoDoz is with the chocolate and the Mountain Dew, because those things all contain caffeine and help you stay *up*. The NyQuil is with the beef jerky because eating meat makes you feel tired.”

“Fascinating,” I say. After I’ve handed Lacey the last of the food from my bags, Lacey asks, “Q, where is the food that is—you know—good?”

“Huh?”

Lacey produces a copy of the grocery list she wrote for me and reads from it. “Bananas. Apples. Dried cranberries. Raisins.”

“Oh.” I say. “Oh, right. The fourth food group *wasn’t* crackers.”

“Q!” she says, furious. “I can’t eat any of this!”

Ben puts a hand on her elbow. “Well, but you can eat Grandma’s cookies. They’re not bad for you. They were made by *Grandma*. Grandma wouldn’t hurt you.”

Lacey blows a strand of hair out of her face. She seems genuinely annoyed. “Plus,” I tell her, “there are GoFast bars. They’re fortified with vitamins!”

“Yeah, vitamins and like thirty grams of fat,” she says.

From the front Radar announces, “Don’t you go talking bad about GoFast bars. Do you want me to stop this car?”

“Whenever I eat a GoFast bar,” Ben says, “I’m always like, ‘So this is what blood tastes like to mosquitoes.’”

I half unwrap a fudge brownie GoFast bar and hold it in front of Lacey’s mouth. “Just smell it,” I say. “Smell the vitaminy deliciousness.”

“You’re going to make me fat.”

“Also zitty,” Ben said. “Don’t forget zitty.”

Lacey takes the bar from me and reluctantly bites into it. She has to close her eyes to hide the orgasmic pleasure inherent in GoFast-tasting. “Oh. My. God. That tastes like hope feels.”

Finally, we unpack the last bag. It contains two large T-shirts, which Radar and Ben are very excited about, because it means they can be guys-wearing-gigantic-shirts-over-silly-robos instead of just guys-wearing-silly-robos.

But when Ben unfurls the T-shirts, there are two small problems. First, it turns out that a large T-shirt in a Georgia gas station is not the same size as a large T-shirt at, say, Old Navy. The gas station shirt is gigantic—more garbage bag than shirt. It is smaller than the graduation robes, but not by much. But this problem rather pales in comparison to the other problem, which is that both T-shirts are embossed with huge Confederate flags. Printed over the flag are the words HERITAGE NOT HATE.

“Oh no you didn’t,” Radar says when I show him why we’re laughing. “Ben Starling, you better not have bought your token black friend a racist shirt.”

“I just grabbed the first shirts I saw, bro.”

“Don’t bro me right now,” Radar says, but he’s shaking his head and laughing. I hand him his shirt and he wiggles into it while driving with his knees. “I hope I get pulled over,” he says. “I’d like to see how the cop responds to a black man wearing a Confederate T-shirt over a black dress.”

Hour Six

For some reason, the stretch of I-95 just south of Florence, South Carolina, is *the* place to drive a car on a Friday evening. We get bogged down in traffic for several miles, and even though Radar is desperate to violate the speed limit, he's lucky when he can go thirty. Radar and I sit up front, and we try to keep from worrying by playing a game we've just invented called That Guy Is a Gigolo. In the game, you imagine the lives of people in the cars around you.

We're driving alongside a Hispanic woman in a beat-up old Toyota Corolla. I watch her through the early darkness. "Left her family to move here," I say. "Illegal. Sends money back home on the third Tuesday of every month. She's got two little kids—her husband is a migrant. He's in Ohio right now—he only spends three or four months a year at home, but they still get along really well."

Radar leans in front of me and glances over at her for half a second. "Christ, Q, it's not so melodramatic as that. She's a secretary at a law firm—look how she's dressed. It has taken her five years, but she's now close to getting a law degree of her own. And she doesn't have kids, or a husband. She's got a boyfriend, though. He's a little flighty. Scared of commitment. White guy, a little nervous about the Jungle Fever angle of the whole thing."

"She's wearing a wedding ring," I point out. In Radar's defense, I've been able to stare at her. She is to my right, just below me. I can see through her tinted windows, and I watch as she sings along to some song, her unblinking eyes on the road. There are so many people. It is easy to forget how full the world is of people, full to bursting, and each of them imaginable and consistently misimagined. I feel like this is an important idea, one of those ideas that your brain must wrap itself around slowly, the way pythons eat, but before I can get any further, Radar speaks.

"She's just wearing that so pervs like you don't come on to her," Radar explains.

"Maybe." I smile, pick up the half-finished GoFast bar sitting on my lap, and take a bite. It's quiet again for a while, and I am thinking about the way you can and cannot see people, about the tinted windows between me and this woman who is still driving right beside us, both of us in cars with all these windows and mirrors everywhere, as she crawls along with us on this packed highway. When Radar starts talking again, I realize that he has been thinking, too.

"The thing about That Guy Is a Gigolo," Radar says, "I mean, the thing about it as a game, is that in the end it reveals a lot more about the person doing the imagining than it does about the person being imagined."

"Yeah," I say. "I was just thinking that." And I can't help but feel that Whitman, for all his blustering beauty, might have been just a bit too optimistic. We can hear others, and we can travel to them without moving, and we can imagine them, and we are all connected one to the other by a crazy root system like so many leaves of grass—but the game makes me wonder whether we can really ever fully *become* another.

Hour Seven

We finally pass a jackknifed truck and get back up to speed, but Radar calculates in his head that we'll need to average seventy-seven from here to Agloe. It has been one entire hour since Ben announced that he needed to pee, and the reason for this is simple: he is sleeping. At six o'clock exactly, he took NyQuil. He lay down in the wayback, and then Lacey and I strapped both seat belts around him. This made him even more uncomfortable, but 1. It was for his own good, and 2. We all knew that in twenty minutes, no discomfort would matter to him at all, because he would be dead asleep. And so he is now. He will be awoken at midnight. I have just put Lacey to bed now, at 9 P.M., in the same position in the backseat. We will wake her at 2 A.M. The idea is that everybody sleeps for a shift so we won't be taping our eyelids open by tomorrow morning, when we come rolling into Agloe.

The minivan has become a kind of very small house: I am sitting in the passenger seat, which is the den. This is, I think, the best room in the house: there is plenty of space, and the chair is quite comfortable.

Scattered about the carpet beneath the passenger seat is the office, which contains a map of the United States Ben got at the BP, the directions I printed out, and the scrap paper onto which Radar has scrawled his calculations about speed and distance.

Radar sits in the driver's seat. The living room. It is a lot like the den, only you can't be as relaxed when you're there. Also, it's cleaner.

Between the living room and the den, we have the center console, or kitchen. Here we keep a plentiful supply of beef jerky and GoFast bars and this magical energy drink called Bluefin, which Lacey put on the shopping list. Bluefin comes in small, fancily contoured glass bottles, and it tastes like blue cotton candy. It also keeps you awake better than anything in all of human history, although it makes you a bit twitchy. Radar and I have agreed to keep drinking it until two hours before our rest periods. Mine starts at midnight, when Ben gets up.

This first bench seat is the first bedroom. It's the less desirable bedroom, because it is close to the kitchen and the living room, where people are awake and talking, and sometimes there is music on the radio.

Behind that is the second bedroom, which is darker and quieter and altogether superior to the first bedroom.

And behind that is the refrigerator, or cooler, which currently contains the 210 beers that Ben has not yet peed into, the turkey-that-looks-like-ham sandwiches, and some Coke.

There is much to recommend this house. It is carpeted throughout. It has central air-conditioning and heating. The whole place is wired for surround sound. Admittedly, it contains only fifty-five square feet of living space. But you can't beat the open floor plan.

Hour Eight

Just after we pass into South Carolina, I catch Radar yawning and insist upon a driver switch. I like driving, anyway—this vehicle may be a minivan, but it's *my* minivan. Radar scoots out of his seat and into the first bedroom, while I grab the steering wheel and hold it steady, quickly stepping over the kitchen and into the driver's seat.

Traveling, I am finding, teaches you a lot of things about yourself. For instance, I never thought myself to be the kind of person who pees into a mostly empty bottle of Bluefin energy drink while driving through South Carolina at seventy-seven miles per hour—but in fact I am that kind of person. Also, I never previously knew that if you mix a lot of pee with a little Bluefin energy drink, the result is this amazing incandescent turquoise color. It looks so pretty that I want to put the cap on the bottle and leave it in the cup holder so Lacey and Ben can see it when they wake up.

But Radar feels differently. "If you don't throw that shit out the window right now, I'm ending our eleven-year friendship," he says.

"It's not *shit*," I say. "It's *pee*."

"Out," he says. And so I litter. In the side-view mirror, I can see the bottle hit the asphalt and burst open like a water balloon. Radar sees it, too.

"Oh, my God," Radar says. "I hope that's like one of those traumatic events that is so damaging to my psyche that I just forget it ever happened."

Hour Nine

I never previously knew that it is possible to become tired of eating GoFast nutrition bars. But it is possible. I'm only two bites into my fourth of the day when my stomach turns. I pull open the center console and stick it back inside. We refer to this part of the kitchen as the pantry.

"I wish we had some apples," Radar said. "God, wouldn't an apple taste good right now?"

I sigh. Stupid fourth food group. Also, even though I stopped drinking Bluefin a few hours ago, I still feel exceedingly twitchy.

"I still feel kinda twitchy," I say.

"Yeah," Radar says. "I can't stop tapping my fingers." I look down. He is drumming his fingers silently against his knees. "I mean," he says, "I actually cannot stop."

"Okay, yeah I'm not tired, so we'll stay up till four and then we'll get them up and we'll sleep till eight."

"Okay," he says. There is a pause. The road has emptied out now; there is only me and the semitrucks, and I feel like my brain is processing information at eleven thousand times its usual pace, and it occurs to me that what I'm doing is very easy, that driving on the interstate is the easiest and most pleasant thing in the world: all I have to do is stay in between the lines and make sure that no one is too close to me and I am not too close to anyone and keep leaving. Maybe it felt like this for her, too, but I could never feel like this alone.

Radar breaks the silence. "Well, if we're not going to sleep until four . . ."

I finish his sentence. "Yeah, then we should probably just open another bottle of Bluefin."

And so we do.

Hour Ten

It is time for our second stop. It is 12:13 in the morning. My fingers do not feel like they are made of fingers; they feel like they are made of motion. I am tickling the steering wheel as I drive.

After Radar finds the nearest BP on his handheld, we decide to wake up Lacey and Ben.

I say, "Hey, guys, we're about to stop." No reaction.

Radar turns around and puts a hand on Lacey's shoulder. "Lace, time to get up." Nothing.

I turn on the radio. I find an oldies station. It's the Beatles. The song is "Good Morning." I turn it up some. No response. So Radar turns it up more. And then more. And then the chorus comes, and he starts singing along. And then I start singing along. I think it is finally my atonal screeching that awakes them.

"MAKE IT STOP!" Ben shouts. We turn down the music.

"Ben, we're stopping. Do you have to pee?"

He pauses, and there's a kerfuffle in the darkness back there, and I wonder if he has some physical strategy for checking the fullness of his bladder. "I think I'm okay, actually," he says.

"Okay, then you're on gas."

"As the only boy who has not yet peed inside this car, I call first bathroom," says Radar.

"Shhh," mumbles Lacey. "Shhh. Everybody stop talking."

"Lacey, you have to get up and pee," Radar says. "We're stopping."

"You can buy apples," I tell her.

"Apples," she mumbles happily in a cute little girl voice. "I likey the apples."

"And then after that you get to *drive*," Radar says. "So you really gotta wake up."

She sits up, and in her regular Lacey voice, she says, "I don't so much likey that."

We take the exit and it's .9 miles to the BP, which doesn't seem like much but Radar says that it's probably going to cost us four minutes, and the South Carolina traffic hurt us, so it could be real trouble with the construction Radar says is an hour ahead of us. But I am not allowed to worry. Lacey and Ben have now shaken off their sleep well enough to line up together by the sliding door, just like last time, and when we come to a stop in front of the pump, everybody flies out, and I flip the keys to Ben, who catches them in midair.

As Radar and I walk briskly past the white man behind the counter, Radar stops when he notices the guy is staring. "Yes," Radar says without embarrassment. "I'm wearing a HERITAGE NOT HATE shirt over my graduation gown," he says. "By the way, do you sell pants here?"

The guy looks nonplussed. "We got some camo pants over by the motor oil."

"Excellent," Radar says. And then he turns to me and says, "Be a dear and pick me out some camo pants. And maybe a better T-shirt?"

"Done and done," I answer. Camo pants, it turns out, do not come in regular numbered sizes. They come in medium and large. I grab a pair of medium pants, and then a large pink T-SHIRT that reads WORLD'S BEST GRANDMA. I also grab three bottles of Bluefin.

I hand everything to Lacey when she comes out of the bathroom and then walk into the girls' room, since Radar is still in the guys'. I don't know that I've ever been inside a girls' bathroom in a gas station before.

Differences:

No condom machine

Less graffiti

No urinal

The smell is more or less the same, which is rather disappointing.

When I come out, Lacey is paying and Ben is honking the horn, and after a moment of confusion, I jog toward the car.

“We lost a minute,” Ben says from the passenger seat. Lacey is turning onto the road that will take us back to the interstate.

“Sorry,” Radar answers from the back, where he is sitting next to me, wiggling into his new camo pants beneath his robe. “On the upside, I got pants. And a new T-shirt. Where’s the shirt, Q?” Lacey hands it to him. “Very funny.” He pulls off the robe and replaces it with the grandma shirt while Ben complains that no one got *him* any pants. His ass itches, he says. And on second thought, he kind of does need to pee.

Hour Eleven

We hit the construction. The highway narrows to one lane, and we're stuck behind a tractor-trailer driving the *precise* road-work speed limit of thirty-five mph. Lacey is the right driver for the situation; I'd be pounding the steering wheel, but she's just amiably chatting with Ben until she turns half around and says, "Q, I really need to go to the bathroom, and we're losing time behind this truck anyway."

I just nod. I can't blame her. I would have forced us to stop long ago had it been impossible for me to pee in a bottle. It was heroic of her to make it as long as she did.

She pulls into an all-night gas station, and I get out to stretch my rubbery legs. When Lacey comes racing back to the minivan, I'm sitting in the driver's seat. I don't even really know how I came to be sitting in the driver's seat, why I end up there and not Lacey. She comes around to the front door, and she sees me there, and the window is open, and I say to her, "I can drive." It's my car, after all, and my mission. And she says, "Really, you're sure?" and I say, "Yeah, yeah, I'm good to go," and she just throws open the sliding door and lies down in the first row.

Hour Twelve

It is 2:40 in the morning. Lacey is sleeping. Radar is sleeping. I drive. The road is deserted. Even most of the truck drivers have gone to bed. We go minutes without seeing headlights coming in the opposite direction. Ben keeps me awake, chattering next to me. We are talking about Margo.

“Have you given any thought to how we will actually, like, *find* Agloe?” he asks me.

“Uh, I have an approximate idea of the intersection,” I say. “And it’s nothing but an intersection.”

“And she’s just gonna be sitting at the corner on the trunk of her car, chin in her hands, waiting for you?”

“That would certainly be helpful,” I answered.

“Bro, I gotta say I’m a little worried that you might, like—if it doesn’t go as you’re planning it—you might be really disappointed.”

“I just want to find her,” I say, because I do. I want her to be safe, alive, found. The string played out. The rest is secondary.

“Yeah, but—I don’t know,” Ben says. I can feel him looking over at me, being Serious Ben. “Just—Just remember that sometimes, the way you think about a person isn’t the way they actually are. Like, I always thought Lacey was so hot and so awesome and so cool, but now when it actually comes to being with her . . . it’s not the exact same. People are different when you can smell them and see them up close, you know?”

“I know that,” I say. I know how long, and how badly, I wrongly imagined her.

“I’m just saying that it was easy for me to like Lacey before. It’s easy to like someone from a distance. But when she stopped being this amazing unattainable thing or whatever, and started being, like, just a regular girl with a weird relationship with food and frequent crankiness who’s kinda bossy—then I had to basically start liking a whole different person.”

I can feel my cheeks warming. “You’re saying I don’t *really* like Margo? After all this—I’m twelve hours inside this car already and you don’t think I care about her because I don’t—” I cut myself off. “You think that since you have a girlfriend you can stand atop the lofty mountain and lecture me? You can be such a—”

I stop talking because I see in the outer reaches of the headlights the thing that will shortly kill me.

Two cows stand oblivious in the highway. They come into view all at once, a spotted cow in the left lane, and in our lane an immense creature, the entire width of our car, standing stock-still, her head turned back as she appraises us with blank eyes. The cow is flawlessly white, a great white wall of cow that cannot be climbed or ducked or dodged. It can only be hit. I know that Ben sees it, too, because I hear his breath stop.

They say that your life flashes before your eyes, but for me that is not the case. Nothing flashes before my eyes except this impossibly vast expanse of snowy fur, now only a second from us. I don’t know what to do. No, that’s not the problem. The problem is that there is nothing to do, except to hit this white wall and kill it and us, both. I slam on the brakes, but out of habit not expectation: there is absolutely no avoiding this. I raise my hands off the steering wheel. I do not know why I am doing this, but I raise my hands up, as if I am surrendering. I’m thinking the most banal thing in the world: I am thinking that I don’t want this to happen. I don’t want to die. I don’t want my friends to die. And to be honest, as the time slows down and my hands are in the air, I am afforded the chance to think one more thought, and I think about her. I blame her for this ridiculous, fatal chase—for putting us at risk, for making me into the kind of jackass who would stay up all night and drive too fast. I would not be dying were it not for her. I would have stayed home, as I have always stayed home, and I would have been safe, and I would have done the one thing I have always wanted to do, which is to grow up.

Having surrendered control of the vessel, I am surprised to see a hand on the steering wheel. We are turning before I realize why we are turning, and then I realize that Ben is pulling the wheel toward him,

turning us in a hopeless attempt to miss the cow, and then we are on the shoulder and then on the grass. I can hear the tires spinning as Ben turns the wheel hard and fast in the opposite direction. I stop watching. I don't know if my eyes close or if they just cease to see. My stomach and my lungs meet in the middle and crush each other. Something sharp hits my cheek. We stop.

I don't know why, but I touch my face. I pull my hand back and there is a streak of blood. I touch my arms with my hands, hugging my arms to myself, but I am only checking to make sure that they are there, and they are. I look at my legs. They are there. There is some glass. I look around. Bottles are broken. Ben is looking at me. Ben is touching his face. He looks okay. He holds himself as I held myself. His body still works. He is just looking at me. In the rearview mirror, I can see the cow. And now, belatedly, Ben screams. He is staring at me and screaming, his mouth all the way open, the scream low and guttural and terrified. He stops screaming. Something is wrong with me. I feel faint. My chest is burning. And then I gulp air. I had forgotten to breathe. I had been holding my breath the whole time. I feel much better when I start up again. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.*

"Who is hurt?!" Lacey shouts. She's unbuckled herself from her sleeping position and she's leaning into the wayback. When I turn around, I can see that the back door has popped open, and for a moment I think that Radar has been thrown from the car, but then he sits up. He is running his hands over his face, and he says, "I'm okay. I'm okay. Is everyone okay?"

Lacey doesn't even respond; she just jumps forward, between Ben and me. She is leaning over the apartment's kitchen, and she looks at Ben. She says, "Sweetie, where are you hurt?" Her eyes are overfull of water like a swimming pool on a rainy day. And Ben says, "I'm fine! I'm fine! I'm bleeding."

She turns to me, and I shouldn't cry but I do, not because it hurts, but because I am scared, and I raised my hands, and Ben saved us, and now there is this girl looking at me, and she looks at me kind of the way a mom does, and that shouldn't crack me open, but it does. I know the cut on my cheek isn't bad, and I'm trying to say so, but I keep crying. Lacey is pressing against the cut with her fingers, thin and soft, and shouting at Ben for something to use as a bandage, and then I've got a small swath of the Confederate flag pressed against my cheek just to the right of my nose. She says, "Just hold it there tight; you're fine does anything else hurt?" and I say no. That's when I realize that the car is still running, and still in gear, stopped only because I'm still standing on the brakes. I put it into park and turn it off. When I turn it off, I can hear liquid leaking—not dripping so much as pouring.

"We should probably get out," Radar says. I hold the Confederate flag to my face. The sound of liquid pouring out of the car continues.

"It's gas! It's gonna blow!" Ben shouts. He throws open the passenger door and takes off, running in a panic. He hurdles a split-rail fence and tears across a hay field. I get out as well, but not in quite the same hurry. Radar is outside, too, and as Ben hauls ass, Radar is laughing. "It's the beer," he says.

"What?"

"The beers all broke," he says again, and nods toward the split-open cooler, gallons of foamy liquid pouring out from inside it.

We try to call Ben but he can't hear us because he's too busy screaming, "IT'S GONNA BLOW!" as he races across the field. His graduation robe flies up in the gray dawn, his bony bare ass exposed.

I turn and look out at the highway as I hear a car coming. The white beast and her spotted friend have successfully ambled to the safety of the opposite shoulder, still impassive. Turning back, I realize the minivan is against the fence.

I'm assessing damage when Ben finally schleps back to the car. As we spun, we must have grazed the fence, because there is a deep gouge on the sliding door, deep enough that if you look closely, you can just see inside the van. But other than that, it looks immaculate. No other dents. No windows broken. No flat tires. I walk around to close the back door and appraise the 210 broken bottles of beer, still bubbling. Lacey finds me and puts an arm around me. We are both staring at the rivulet of foaming beer flowing into the drainage ditch beneath us. "What happened?" she asks.

I tell her: we were dead, and then Ben managed to spin the car in just the right way, like some kind of brilliant vehicular ballerina.

Ben and Radar have crawled underneath the minivan. Neither of them knows shit about cars, but I suppose it makes them feel better. The hem of Ben's robe and his naked calves peek out.

"Dude," Radar shouts. "It looks, like, *fine*."

"Radar," I say, "the car spun around like eight times. Surely it's not *fine*."

"Well it *seems* fine," Radar says.

"Hey," I say, grabbing at Ben's New Balances. "Hey, come out here." He scoots his way out, and I offer him my hand and help him up. His hands are black with car gunk. I grab him and hug him. If I had not ceded control of the wheel, and if he had not assumed control of the vessel so deftly, I'm sure I'd be dead. "Thank you," I say, pounding his back probably too hard. "That was the best damned passenger-seat driving I've ever seen in my life."

He pats my uninjured cheek with a greasy hand. "I did it to save myself, not you," he says. "Believe me when I say that you did not once cross my mind."

I laugh. "Nor you mine," I say.

Ben looks at me, his mouth on the edge of smiling, and then says, "I mean, that was a big damned cow. It wasn't even a cow so much as it was a land whale." I laugh.

Radar scoots out then. "Dude, I really think it's fine. I mean, we've only lost like five minutes. We don't even have to push up the cruising speed."

Lacey is looking at the gouge in the minivan, her lips pursed. "What do you think?" I ask her.

"Go," she says.

"Go," Radar votes.

Ben puffs out his cheeks and exhales. "Mostly because I'm prone to peer pressure: go."

"Go," I say. "But I'm sure as hell not driving anymore."

Ben takes the keys from me. We get into the minivan. Radar guides us up a slow-sloping embankment and back onto the interstate. We're 542 miles from Agloe.

Hour Thirteen

Every couple minutes, Radar says, “Do you guys remember that time when we were all definitely going to die and then Ben grabbed the steering wheel and dodged a ginormous freaking cow and spun the car like the teacups at Disney World and we didn’t die?”

Lacey leans across the kitchen, her hand on Ben’s knee, and says, “I mean, you are a *hero*, do you realize that? They give out *medals* for this stuff.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I wasn’t thinking about none of y’all. I. Wanted. To. Save. My. Ass.”

“You liar. You heroic, adorable liar,” she says, and then plants a kiss on his cheek.

Radar says, “Hey guys, do you remember that time I was double-seat-belted in the wayback and the door flew open and the beer fell out but I survived completely uninjured? How is that even *possible*?”

“Let’s play metaphysical I Spy,” Lacey says. “I Spy with my little eye a hero’s heart, a heart that beats not for itself but for all humanity.”

“I’M NOT BEING MODEST. I JUST DIDN’T WANT TO DIE,” Ben exclaims.

“Do you guys remember that one time, in the minivan, twenty minutes ago, that we somehow didn’t die?”

Hour Fourteen

Once the initial shock passes, we clean. We try to shepherd as much glass from the broken Bluefin bottles as possible onto pieces of paper and then gather them into a single bag for later disposal. The minivan's carpet is soaked with sticky Mountain Dew and Bluefin and Diet Coke, and we try to sop it up with the few napkins we've collected. But this will require a serious car wash, at the very least, and there's no time for that before Agloe. Radar has looked up the side panel replacement I'll need: \$300 plus paint. The cost of this trip keeps going up, but I'll make it back this summer working in my dad's office, and anyway, it's a small ransom to pay for Margo.

The sun is rising to our right. My cheek is still bleeding. The Confederate flag is stuck to the wound now, so I no longer need to hold it there.

Hour Fifteen

A thin stand of oak trees obscures the cornfields that stretch out to the horizon. The landscape changes, but nothing else. Big interstates like this one make the country into a single place: McDonald's, BP, Wendy's. I know I should probably hate that about interstates and yearn for the halcyon days of yore, back when you could be drenched in local color at every turn—but whatever. I like this. I like the consistency. I like that I can drive fifteen hours from home without the world changing too much. Lacey double-belts me down in the wayback. “You need the rest,” she says. “You’ve been through a lot.” It’s amazing that no one has yet blamed me for not being more proactive in the battle against the cow.

As I trail off, I hear them making one another laugh—not the words exactly, but the cadence, the rising and falling pitches of banter. I like just listening, just loafing on the grass. And I decide that if we get there on time but don’t find her, that’s what we’ll do: we’ll drive around the Catskills and find a place to sit around and hang out, loafing on the grass, talking, telling jokes. Maybe the sure knowledge that she is alive makes all of that possible again—even if I never see proof of it. I can almost imagine a happiness without her, the ability to let her go, to feel our roots are connected even if I never see that leaf of grass again.

Hour Sixteen

I sleep.

Hour Seventeen

I sleep.

Hour Eighteen

I sleep.

Hour Nineteen

When I wake up, Radar and Ben are loudly debating the name of the car. Ben would like to name it Muhammad Ali, because, just like Muhammad Ali, the minivan takes a punch and keeps going. Radar says you can't name a car after a historical figure. He thinks the car ought to be called Lurlene, because it sounds right.

"You want to name it *Lurlene*?" Ben asks, his voice rising with the horror of it all. "Hasn't this poor vehicle been through enough?!"

I unbuckle one seat belt and sit up. Lacey turns around to me. "Good morning," she says. "Welcome to the great state of New York."

"What time is it?"

"Nine-forty-two." Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, but the shorter strands have strayed. "How's it going?" she asks.

I tell her. "I'm scared."

Lacey smiles at me and nods. "Yeah, me, too. It's like there's too many things that could happen to prepare for all of them."

"Yeah," I say.

"I hope you and me stay friends this summer," she says. And that helps, for some reason. You can never tell what is going to help.

Radar is now saying that the car should be called the Gray Goose. I lean forward a little so everyone can hear me and say, "The Dreidel. The harder you spin it, the better it performs."

Ben nods. Radar turns around. "I think you should be the official stuff-namer."

Hour Twenty

I'm sitting in the first bedroom with Lacey. Ben drives. Radar's navigating. I was asleep when they last stopped, but they picked up a map of New York. Agloe isn't marked, but there are only five or six intersections north of Roscoe. I always thought of New York as being a sprawling and endless metropolis, but here it is just lush rolling hills that the minivan heroically strains its way up. When there's a lull in the conversation and Ben reaches for the radio knob, I say, "Metaphysical I Spy!"

Ben starts. "I Spy with my little eye something I really like."

"Oh, I know," Radar says. "It's the taste of balls."

"No."

"Is it the taste of penises?" I guess.

"No, dumbass," Ben says.

"Hmm," says Radar. "Is it the *smell* of balls?"

"The *texture* of balls?" I guess.

"Come on, asshats, it has nothing to do with genitalia. Lace?"

"Um, is it the feeling of knowing you just saved three lives?"

"No. And I think you guys are out of guesses."

"Okay, what is it?"

"Lacey," he says, and I can see him looking at her through the rearview.

"Dumbass," I say, "it's supposed to be *metaphysical* I Spy. It has to be things that can't be seen."

"And it is," he says. "That's what I really like—Lacey but not the visible Lacey."

"Oh, hurl," Radar says, but Lacey unbuckles her seat belt and leans forward over the kitchen to whisper something in his ear. Ben blushes in response.

"Okay, I promise not to be a cheese ball," Radar says. "I Spy with my little eye something we're all feeling."

I guess, "Extraordinary fatigue?"

"No, although excellent guess."

Lacey says, "Is it that weird feeling you get from so much caffeine that, like, your heart isn't beating so much as your whole body is beating?"

"No. Ben?"

"Um, are we feeling the need to pee, or is that just me?"

"That is, as usual, just you. More guesses?" We are silent. "The correct answer is that we are all feeling like we will be happier after an a cappella rendition of 'Blister in the Sun.'"

And so it is. Tone deaf as I may be, I sing as loud as anybody. And when we finish, I say, "I Spy with my little eye a great story."

No one says anything for a while. There's just the sound of the Dreidel devouring the blacktop as she speeds downhill. And then after a while Ben says, "It's this, isn't it?"

I nod.

"Yeah," Radar says. "As long as we don't die, this is gonna be one hell of a story."

It will help if we can find her, I think, but I don't say anything. Ben turns on the radio finally and finds a rock station with ballads we can sing along to.

Hour Twenty-one

After more than 1,100 miles on interstates, it's finally time to exit. It's entirely impossible to drive seventy-seven miles per hour on the two-lane state highway that takes us farther north, up toward the Catskills. But we'll be okay. Radar, ever the brilliant tactician, has banked an extra thirty minutes without telling us. It's beautiful up here, the late-morning sunlight pouring down on old-growth forest. Even the brick buildings in the ramshackle little downtowns we drive past seem crisp in this light.

Lacey and I are telling Ben and Radar everything we can think of in hopes of helping them find Margo. Reminding them of her. Reminding ourselves of her. Her silver Honda Civic. Her chestnut hair, stick straight. Her fascination with abandoned buildings.

"She has a black notebook with her," I say.

Ben wheels around to me. "Okay, Q. If I see a girl who looks exactly like Margo in Agloe, New York, I'm not going to do anything. Unless she has a *notebook*. That'll be the giveaway."

I shrug him off. I just want to remember her. One last time, I want to remember her while still hoping to see her again.

Agloe

The speed limit drops from fifty-five to forty-five and then to thirty-five. We cross some railroad tracks, and we're in Roscoe. We drive slowly through a sleepy downtown with a café, a clothing store, a dollar store, and a couple boarded-up storefronts.

I lean forward and say, "I can imagine her in there."

"Yeah," Ben allows. "Man, I really don't want to break into buildings. I don't think I would do well in New York prisons."

The thought of exploring these buildings doesn't strike me as particularly scary, though, since the whole town seems deserted. Nothing's open here. Past downtown, a single road bisects the highway, and on that road sits Roscoe's lone neighborhood and an elementary school. Modest wood-frame houses are dwarfed by the trees, which grow thick and tall here.

We turn onto a different highway, and the speed limit goes back up incrementally, but Radar is driving slowly anyway. We haven't gone a mile when we see a dirt road on our left with no street sign to tell us its name.

"This may be it," I say.

"That's a *driveway*," Ben answers, but Radar turns in anyway. But it *does* seem to be a driveway, actually, cut into the hard-packed dirt. To our left, uncut grass grows as high as the tires; I don't see anything, although I worry that it'd be easy for a person to hide anywhere in that field. We drive for a while and the road dead-ends into a Victorian farmhouse. We turn around and head back up the two-lane highway, farther north. The highway turns into Cat Hollow Road, and we drive until we see a dirt road identical to the previous one, this time on the right side of the street, leading to a crumbling barnlike structure with grayed wood. Huge cylindrical bales of hay line the fields on either side of us, but the grass has begun to grow up again. Radar drives no faster than five miles an hour. We are looking for something unusual. Some crack in the perfectly idyllic landscape.

"Do you think that could have been the Agloe General Store?" I ask.

"That barn?"

"Yeah."

"I dunno," Radar says. "Did general stores look like barns?"

I blow a long breath from between pursed lips. "Dunno."

"Is that—shit, that's her car!" Lacey shouts next to me. "Yes yes yes yes her car her car!"

Radar stops the minivan as I follow Lacey's finger back across the field, behind the building. A glint of silver. Leaning down so my face is next to hers, I can see the arc of the car's roof. God knows how it got there, since no road leads in that direction.

Radar pulls over, and I jump out and run back toward her car. Empty. Unlocked. I pop the trunk. Empty, too, except for an open and empty suitcase. I look around, and take off toward what I now believe to be the remnants of Agloe's General Store. Ben and Radar pass me as I run through the mown field. We enter the barn not through a door but through one of several gaping holes where the wooden wall has simply fallen away.

Inside the building, the sun lights up segments of the rotting wooden floor through the many holes in the roof. As I look for her, I register things: the soggy floorboards. The smell of almonds, like her. An old claw-footed bathtub in a corner. So many holes everywhere that this place is simultaneously inside and outside.

I feel someone pull hard on my shirt. I spin my head and see Ben, his eyes shooting back and forth between me and a corner of the room. I have to look past a wide beam of bright white light shining down from the ceiling, but I can see into that corner. Two long panes of chest-high, dirty, gray-tinted Plexiglas

lean against each other at an acute angle, held up on the other side by the wooden wall. It's a triangular cubicle, if such a thing is possible.

And here's the thing about tinted windows: the light still gets through. So I can see the jarring scene, albeit in gray scale: Margo Roth Spiegelman sits in a black leather office chair, hunched over a school desk, writing. Her hair is much shorter—she has choppy bangs above her eyebrows and everything is mussed-up, as if to emphasize the asymmetry—but it is her. She is alive. She has relocated her offices from an abandoned minimall in Florida to an abandoned barn in New York, and I have found her.

We walk toward Margo, all four of us, but she doesn't seem to see us. She just keeps writing. Finally, someone—Radar, maybe—says, “Margo. Margo?”

She stands up on her tiptoes, her hands resting atop the make-shift cubicle's walls. If she is surprised to see us, her eyes do not give it away. Here is Margo Roth Spiegelman, five feet away from me, her lips chapped to cracking, makeup-less, dirt in her fingernails, her eyes silent. I've never seen her eyes dead like that, but then again, maybe I've never seen her eyes before. She stares at me. I feel certain she is staring at me and not at Lacey or Ben or Radar. I haven't felt so stared at since Robert Joyner's dead eyes watched me in Jefferson Park.

She stands there in silence for a long time, and I am too scared of her eyes to keep walking forward. “I and this mystery here we stand,” Whitman wrote.

Finally, she says, “Give me like five minutes,” and then sits back down and resumes her writing.

I watch her write. Except for being a little grimy, she looks like she has always looked. I don't know why, but I always thought she would look different. Older. That I would barely recognize her when I finally saw her again. But there she is, and I am watching her through the Plexiglas, and she looks like Margo Roth Spiegelman, this girl I have known since I was two—this girl who was an idea that I loved.

And it is only now, when she closes her notebook and places it inside a backpack next to her and then stands up and walks toward us, that I realize that the idea is not only wrong but dangerous. What a treacherous thing it is to believe that a person is more than a person.

“Hey,” she says to Lacey, smiling. She hugs Lacey first, then shakes Ben's hand, then Radar's. She raises her eyebrows and says, “Hi, Q,” and then hugs me, quickly and not hard. I want to hold on. I want an event. I want to feel her heaving sobs against my chest, tears running down her dusty cheeks onto my shirt. But she just hugs me quickly and sits down on the floor. I sit down across from her, with Ben and Radar and Lacey following in a line, so that we are all facing Margo.

“It's good to see you,” I say after a while, feeling like I'm breaking a silent prayer.

She pushes her bangs to the side. She seems to be deciding exactly what to say before she says it. “I, uh. Uh. I'm rarely at a loss for words, huh? Not much talking to people lately. Um. I guess maybe we should start with, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Margo,” Lacey says. “Christ, we were so worried.”

“No need to worry,” Margo answers cheerfully. “I'm good.” She gives us two thumbs-up. “I am A-OK.”

“You could have called us and let us know that,” Ben says, his voice tinged with frustration. “Saved us a hell of a drive.”

“In my experience, Bloody Ben, when you leave a place, it's best to *leave*. Why are you wearing a dress, by the way?”

Ben blushes. “Don't call him that,” Lacey snaps.

Margo cuts a look at Lacey. “Oh, my God, are you *hooking up* with him?” Lacey says nothing. “You're not *actually* hooking up with him,” Margo says.

“Actually, yes,” Lacey says. “And actually he's great. And actually you're a bitch. And actually, I'm leaving. It's nice to see you again, Margo. Thanks for terrifying me and making me feel like shit for the entire last month of my senior year, and then being a bitch when we track you down to make sure you're

okay. It's been a real pleasure knowing you."

"You, too. I mean, without you, how would I have ever known how fat I was?" Lacey gets up and stomps off, her footfalls vibrating through the crumbling floor. Ben follows. I look over, and Radar has stood up, too.

"I never knew you until I got to know you through your clues," he says. "I like the clues more than I like you."

"What the hell is he talking about?" Margo asks me. Radar doesn't answer. He just leaves.

I should, too, of course. They're my friends—more than Margo, certainly. But I have questions. As Margo stands and starts to walk back toward her cubicle, I start with the obvious one. "Why are you acting like such a brat?"

She spins around and grabs a fistful of my shirt and shouts into my face, "Where do you get off showing up here without any kind of warning?!"

"How could I have warned you when you completely dropped off the face of the planet?!" I see a long blink and know she has no response for this, so I keep going. I'm so pissed at her. For . . . for, I don't know. Not being the Margo I had expected her to be. Not being the Margo I thought I had finally imagined correctly. "I thought for sure there was a good reason why you never got in touch with anyone after that night. And . . . this is your good reason? So you can live like a bum?"

She lets go of my shirt and pushes away from me. "Now who's being a brat? I left the only way you can leave. You pull your life off all at once—like a Band-Aid. And then you get to be you and Lace gets to be Lace and everybody gets to be everybody and I get to be me."

"Except I didn't get to be me, Margo, because I thought you were *dead*. For the longest time. So I had to do all kinds of crap that I would never do."

She screams at me now, pulling herself up by my shirt so she can get in my face. "Oh, bullshit. You didn't come here to make sure I was okay. You came here because you wanted to save poor little Margo from her troubled little self, so that I would be oh-so-thankful to my knight in shining armor that I would strip my clothes off and beg you to ravage my body."

"Bullshit!" I shout, which it mostly is. "You were just playing with us, weren't you? You just wanted to make sure that even after you left to go have your fun, you were still the axis we spun around."

She's screaming back, louder than I thought possible. "You're not even pissed at me, Q! You're pissed at this idea of me you keep inside your brain from when we were little!"

She tries to turn away from me, but I grab her shoulders and hold her in front of me and say, "Did you ever even think about what your leaving meant? About Ruthie? About me or Lacey or any of the other people who cared about you? No. Of course you didn't. Because if it doesn't happen to you, it doesn't happen at all. Isn't that it, Margo? Isn't it?"

She doesn't fight me now. She just slumps her shoulders, turns, and walks back to her office. She kicks down both of the Plexiglas walls, and they clamor against the desk and chair before sliding onto the ground. "SHUT UP SHUT UP YOU ASSHOLE."

"Okay," I say. Something about Margo completely losing her temper allows me to regain mine. I try to talk like my mom. "I'll shut up. We're both upset. Lots of, uh, unresolved issues on my side."

She sits down in the desk chair, her feet on what had been the wall of her office. She's looking into a corner of the barn. At least ten feet between us. "How the hell did you even find me?"

"I thought you wanted us to," I answer. My voice is so small I'm surprised she even hears me, but she spins the chair to glare at me.

"I sure as shit did not."

"Song of Myself," I say. "Guthrie took me to Whitman. Whitman took me to the door. The door took me to the minimall. We figured out how to read the painted-over graffiti. I didn't understand 'paper towns';

it can also mean subdivisions that never got built, and so I thought you had gone to one and were never coming back. I thought you were dead in one of these places, that you had killed yourself and wanted me to find you for whatever reason. So I went to a bunch of them, looking for you. But then I matched the map in the gift shop to the thumbtack holes. I started reading the poem more closely, figured out you weren't running probably, just holed up, planning. Writing in that notebook. I found Agloe from the map, saw your comment on the talk page of Omnictionary, skipped graduation, and drove here."

She brushes her hair down, but it isn't long enough to fall over her face anymore. "I hate this haircut," she says. "I wanted to look different, but—it looks ridiculous."

"I like it," I say. "It frames your face nicely."

"I'm sorry I was being so bitchy," she says. "You just have to understand—I mean, you guys walk in here out of nowhere and you scare the shit out of me—"

"You could have just said, like, 'Guys, you are scaring the shit out of me,'" I said.

She scoffs. "Yeah, right, 'cause that's the Margo Roth Spiegelman everybody knows and loves." Margo is quiet for a moment, and then says, "I knew I shouldn't have said that on Omnictionary. I just thought it would be funny for them to find it later. I thought the cops might trace it somehow, but not soon enough. There's like a billion pages on Omnictionary or whatever. I never thought ..."

"What?"

"I thought about you a lot, to answer your question. And Ruthie. And my parents. Of course, okay? Maybe I am the most horribly self-centered person in the history of the world. But God, do you think I would have done it if I didn't *need* to?" She shakes her head. Now, finally, she leans toward me, elbows on knees, and we are talking. At a distance, but still. "I couldn't figure out any other way that I could leave without getting dragged back."

"I'm happy you're not dead," I say to her.

"Yeah. Me, too," she says. She smirks, and it's the first time I've seen that smile I have spent so much time missing. "That's why I had to leave. As much as life can suck, it always beats the alternative."

My phone rings. It's Ben. I answer it.

"Lacey wants to talk to Margo," he tells me.

I walk over to Margo, hand her the phone, and linger there as she sits with her shoulders hunched, listening. I can hear the noises coming through the phone, and then I hear Margo cut her off and say, "Listen, I'm really sorry. I was just so scared." And then silence. Lacey starts talking again finally, and Margo laughs, and says something. I feel like they should have some privacy, so I do some exploring. Against the same wall as the office, but in the opposite corner of the barn, Margo has set up a kind of bed—four forklift pallets beneath an orange air mattress. Her small, neatly folded collection of clothes sits next to the bed on a pallet of its own. There's a toothbrush and toothpaste, along with a large plastic cup from Subway. Those items sit atop two books: *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. I can't believe she's been living like this, this irreconcilable mix of tidy suburbanality and creepy decay. But then again, I can't believe how much time I wasted believing she was living any other way.

"They're staying at a motel in the park. Lacey said to tell you they're leaving in the morning, with or without you," Margo says from behind me. It is when she says *you* and not *us* that I think for the first time of what comes after this.

"I'm mostly self-sufficient," she says, standing next to me now. "There's an outhouse here, but it's not in great shape, so I usually go to the bathroom at this truck stop east of Roscoe. They have showers there, too, and the girls' shower is pretty clean because there aren't a lot of female truckers. Plus, they have Internet there. It's like this is my house, and the truck stop is my beach house." I laugh.

She walks past me and kneels down, looking inside the pallets beneath the bed. She pulls out a flashlight and a square, thin piece of plastic. "These are the only two things I've purchased in the whole month except gas and food. I've only spent about three hundred dollars." I take the square thing from her and finally

realize that it's a battery-powered record player. "I brought a couple albums," she says. "I'm gonna get more in the City, though."

"The City?"

"Yeah. I'm leaving for New York City today. Hence the Omnictionary thing. I'm going to start really traveling. Originally, this was the day I was going to leave Orlando—I was going to go to graduation and then do all of these elaborate pranks on graduation night with you, and then I was going to leave the next morning. But I just couldn't take it anymore. I seriously could not take it for one more hour. And when I heard about Jase—I was like, 'I have it all planned; I'm just changing the day.' I'm sorry I scared you, though. I was trying *not* to scare you, but that last part was so rushed. Not my best work."

As dashed-together escape plans replete with clues go, I thought it was pretty impressive. But mostly I was surprised that she'd wanted me involved in her original plan, too. "Maybe you'll fill me in," I said, managing a smile. "I have, you know, been wondering. What was planned and what wasn't? What meant what? Why the clues went to me, why you left, that kind of thing."

"Um, okay. Okay. For that story, we have to start with a different story." She gets up and I follow her footsteps as she nimbly avoids the rotting patches of floor. Returning to her office, she digs into the backpack and pulls out the black moleskin notebook. She sits down on the floor, her legs crossed, and pats a patch of wood next to her. I sit. She taps the closed book. "So this," she says, "this goes back a long way. When I was in, like, fourth grade, I started writing a story in this notebook. It was kind of a detective story."

I think that if I grab this book from her, I can use it as blackmail. I can use it to get her back to Orlando, and she can get a summer job and live in an apartment till college starts, and at least we'll have the summer. But I just listen.

"I mean, I don't like to brag, but this is an unusually brilliant piece of literature. Just kidding. It's the retarded wish-fulfilling magical-thinking ramblings of ten-year-old me. It stars this girl, named Margo Spiegelman, who is just like ten-year-old me in every way except her parents are nice and rich and buy her anything she wants. Margo has a crush on this boy named Quentin, who is just like you in every way except all fearless and heroic and willing to die to protect me and everything. Also, it stars Myrna Mountweazel, who is exactly like Myrna Mountweazel except with magical powers. Like, for example, in the story, anyone who pets Myrna Mountweazel finds it impossible to tell a lie for ten minutes. Also, she can talk. Of course she can talk. Has a ten-year-old ever written a book about a dog that *can't* talk?"

I laugh, but I'm still thinking about ten-year-old Margo having a crush on ten-year-old me.

"So, in the story," she continues, "Quentin and Margo and Myrna Mountweazel are investigating the death of Robert Joyner, whose death is exactly like his real-life death except instead of having obviously shot himself in the face, *someone else* shot him in the face. And the story is about us finding out who did it."

"Who did it?"

She laughs. "You want me to spoil the entire story for you?"

"Well," I say, "I'd rather read it." She pulls open the book and shows me a page. The writing is indecipherable, not because Margo's handwriting is bad, but because on top of the horizontal lines of text, writing also goes vertically down the page. "I write crosshatch," she says. "Very hard for non-Margo readers to decode. So, okay, I'm going to spoil the story for you, but first you have to promise not to get mad."

"Promise," I say.

"It turns out that the crime was committed by Robert Joyner's alcoholic ex-wife's sister's brother, who was insane because he'd been possessed by the spirit of an evil ancient Egyptian house cat. Like I said, really top-notch storytelling. But anyway, in the story, you and me and Myrna Mountweazel go and confront the killer, and he tries to shoot me, but you jump in front of the bullet, and you die very heroically in my arms."

I laugh. "Great. This story was all promising with the beautiful girl who has a crush on me and the

mystery and the intrigue, and then I get whacked.”

“Well, yeah.” She smiles. “But I had to kill you, because the only other possible ending was us doing it, which I wasn’t really emotionally ready to write about at ten.”

“Fair enough,” I say. “But in the revision, I want to get some action.”

“After you get shot up by the bad guy, maybe. A kiss before dying.”

“How kind of you.” I could stand up and go to her and kiss her. I could. But there is still too much to be ruined.

“So anyway, I finished this story in fifth grade. A few years later, I decide I’m going to run away to Mississippi. And then I write all my plans for this epic event into this notebook on top of the old story, and then I finally do it—take Mom’s car and put a thousand miles on it and leave these clues in the soup. I didn’t even *like* the road trip, really—it was incredibly lonely—but I love having done it, right? So I start crosshatching more schemes—pranks and ideas for matching up certain girls with certain guys and huge TPing campaigns and more secret road trips and whatever else. The notebook is half full by the start of junior year, and that’s when I decide that I’m going to do one more thing, one big thing, and then leave.”

She’s about to start talking again, but I have to stop her. “I guess I’m wondering if it was the place or the people. Like, what if the people around you had been different?”

“How can you separate those things, though? The people are the place is the people. And anyway, I didn’t think there *was* anybody else to be friends with. I thought everyone was either scared, like you, or oblivious, like Lacey. And th—”

“I’m not as scared as you think,” I say. Which is true. I only realize it’s true after saying it. But still.

“I’m *getting* to that,” she says, almost whiningly. “So when I’m a freshman, Gus takes me to the Osprey —” I tilt my head, confused. “The minimall. And I start going there by myself all the time, just hanging out and writing plans. And by last year, all the plans started to be about this last escape. And I don’t know if it’s because I was reading my old story as I went, but I put you into the plans early on. The idea was that we were going to do all these things together—like break into SeaWorld, that was in the original plan—and I was going to push you toward being a badass. This one night would, like, liberate you. And then I could disappear and you’d always remember me for that.

“So this plan eventually gets like seventy pages long, and then it’s about to happen, and the plan has come together really well. But then I find out about Jase, and I just decide to leave. Immediately. I don’t need to graduate. What’s the point of graduating? But first I have to tie up loose ends. So all that day in school I have my notebook out, and I’m trying like crazy to adapt the plan to Becca and Jase and Lacey and everyone who wasn’t a friend to me like I thought they were, trying to come up with ideas for letting everyone know just how pissed off I am before I ditch them forever.

“But I still wanted to do it with you; I still liked that idea of maybe being able to create in you at least an echo of the kick-ass hero of my little-kid story.

“And then you surprise me,” she says. “You had been a paper boy to me all these years—two dimensions as a character on the page and two different, but still flat, dimensions as a person. But that night you turned out to be real. And it ends up being so odd and fun and magical that I go back to my room in the morning and I just *miss* you. I want to come over and hang out and talk, but I’ve already decided to leave, so I have to leave. And then at the last second, I have this idea to will you the Osprey. To leave it for you so that it can help you make even further progress in the field of not-being-such-a-scaredy-cat.

“So, yeah. That’s it. I come up with something real quick. Tape the Woody poster to the back of the blinds, circle the song on the record, highlight those two lines from “Song of Myself” in a different color than I’d highlighted stuff when I was actually reading it. Then after you leave for school, I climb in through your window and put the scrap of newspaper in your door. Then I go to the Osprey that morning, partly because I just don’t feel ready to leave yet, and partly because I want to clean the place up for you. I mean, the thing is, I *didn’t* want you to worry. That’s why I painted over the graffiti; I didn’t know you’d be able to see through it. I ripped off the pages of the desk calendar I’d been using, and I took down the map, too,

which I'd had up there ever since I saw that it contained Agloe. Then because I'm tired and don't have anyplace to go, I sleep there. I end up there for two nights, actually, just trying to get my courage up, I guess. And also, I don't know, I thought maybe you would find it really quickly somehow. Then I go. Took two days to get here. I've been here since."

She seemed finished, but I had one more question. "And why here of all places?"

"A paper town for a paper girl," she says. "I read about Agloe in this book of 'amazing facts' when I was ten or eleven. And I never stopped thinking about it. The truth is that whenever I went up to the top of the SunTrust Building—including that last time with you—I didn't really look down and think about how everything was made of paper. I looked down and thought about how *I* was made of paper. I was the flimsy-foldable person, not everyone else. And here's the thing about it. People love the idea of a paper girl. They always have. And the worst thing is that *I* loved it, too. I cultivated it, you know?"

"Because it's kind of great, being an idea that everybody likes. But I could never be the idea to myself, not all the way. And Agloe is a place where a paper creation became real. A dot on the map became a real place, more real than the people who created the dot could ever have imagined. I thought maybe the paper cutout of a girl could start becoming real here also. And it seemed like a way to tell that paper girl who cared about popularity and clothes and everything else: 'You are going to the paper towns. And you are *never* coming back.' "

"That graffiti," I said. "God, Margo, I walked through so many of those abandoned subdivisions looking for your body. I really thought—I really thought you were dead."

She gets up and searches around her backpack for a moment, and then reaches over and grabs *The Bell Jar*, and reads to me. "'But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.' " She sits back down next to me, close, facing me, the fabric of our jeans touching without our knees actually touching. Margo says, "I know what she's talking about. The something deeper and more secret. It's like cracks inside of you. Like there are these fault lines where things don't meet up right."

"I like that," I say. "Or it's like cracks in the hull of a ship."

"Right, right."

"Brings you down eventually."

"Exactly," she says. We're talking back and forth so fast now.

"I can't believe you didn't want me to find you."

"Sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I'm impressed. Also, it's nice to have you here. You're a good traveling companion."

"Is that a proposal?" I ask.

"Maybe." She smiles.

My heart has been fluttering around my chest for so long now that this variety of intoxication almost seems sustainable—but only almost. "Margo, if you just come home for the summer—my parents said you can live with us, or you can get a job and an apartment for the summer, and then school will start, and you'll never have to live with your parents again."

"It's not just them. I'd get sucked right back in," she says, "and I'd never get out. It's not just the gossip and the parties and all that crap, but the whole allure of a life rightly lived—college and job and husband and babies and all that bullshit."

The thing is that I *do* believe in college, and jobs, and maybe even babies one day. I believe in the future. Maybe it's a character flaw, but for me it is a congenital one. "But college expands your opportunities," I say finally. "It doesn't limit them."

She smirks. "Thank you, College Counselor Jacobsen," she says, and then changes the subject. "I kept

thinking about you inside the Osprey. Whether you would get used to it. Stop worrying about the rats.”

“I did,” I say. “I started to like it there. I spent prom night there, actually.”

She smiles. “Awesome. I imagined you would like it eventually. It never got boring in the Osprey, but that was because I had to go home at some point. When I got here, I did get bored. There’s nothing to do; I’ve read so much since I got here. I got more and more nervous here, too, not knowing anybody. And I kept waiting for that loneliness and nervousness to make me want to go back. But it never did. It’s the one thing I can’t do, Q.”

I nod. I understand this. I imagine it is hard to go back once you’ve felt the continents in your palm. But I still try one more time. “But what about after the summer? What about college? What about the rest of your life?”

She shrugged. “What about it?”

“Aren’t you worried about, like, *forever*?”

“Forever is composed of nows,” she says. I have nothing to say to that; I am just chewing through it when Margo says, “Emily Dickinson. Like I said, I’m doing a lot of reading.”

I think the future deserves our faith. But it is hard to argue with Emily Dickinson. Margo stands up, slings her backpack over one shoulder, and reaches her hand down for me. “Let’s take a walk.” As we’re walking outside, Margo asks for my phone. She punches in a number, and I start to walk away to let her talk, but she grabs my forearm and keeps me with her. So I walk beside her out into the field as she talks to her parents.

“Hey, it’s Margo. . . . I’m in Agloe, New York, with Quentin. . . . Uh. . . . well, no, Mom, I’m just trying to think of a way to answer your question honestly. . . . Mom, come on. . . . I don’t know, Mom . . . I decided to move to a fictitious place. That’s what happened. . . . Yeah, well, I don’t think I’m headed that way, regardless. . . . Can I talk to Ruthie? . . . Hey, buddy. . . . Yeah, well, I loved you first. . . . Yeah, I’m sorry. It was a mistake. I thought—I don’t know what I thought, Ruthie, but anyway it was a mistake and I’ll call now. I may not call Mom, but I’ll call you. . . . Wednesdays? . . . You’re busy on Wednesdays. Hmm. Okay. What’s a good day for you? . . . Tuesday it is. . . . Yeah, every Tuesday. . . . Yeah, including this Tuesday.” Margo closes her eyes tight, her teeth clenched. “Okay, Ruthers, can you put Mom back on? . . . I love you, Mom. I’ll be okay. I swear. . . . Yeah, okay, you, too. Bye.”

She stops walking and closes the phone but holds it a minute. I can see her fingertips pinkening with the tightness of her grip, and then she drops it onto the ground. Her scream is short but deafening, and in its wake I am aware for the first time of Agloe’s abject silence. “It’s like she thinks my job is to please her, and that should be my dearest wish, and when I don’t please her—I get shut out. She changed the locks. That’s the first thing she said. Jesus.”

“Sorry,” I say, pushing aside some knee-high yellow-green grass to pick up the phone. “Nice to talk to Ruthie, though?”

“Yeah, she’s pretty adorable. I kind of hate myself for—you know—not talking to her.”

“Yeah,” I say. She shoves me playfully.

“You’re supposed to make me feel better, not worse!” she says. “That’s your whole gig!”

“I didn’t realize my job was to please you, Mrs. Spiegelman.”

She laughs. “Ooh, the Mom comparison. What a burn. But fair enough. So how have you been? If Ben is dating Lacey, surely you are having nightly orgies with dozens of cheerleaders.”

We walk slowly through the uneven dirt of this field. It doesn’t look big, but as we walk, I realize that we do not seem to be getting closer to the stand of trees in the distance. I tell her about leaving graduation, about the miraculous spinning of the Dreidel. I tell her about prom, Lacey’s fight with Becca, and my night in the Osprey. “That was the night I really knew you’d definitely been there,” I tell her. “That blanket still smelled like you.”

And when I say that her hand brushes up against mine, and I just grab hers because it feels like there is less to ruin now. She looks at me. “I had to leave. I didn’t have to scare you and that was stupid and I should have done a better job leaving, but I did have to leave. Do you see that yet?”

“Yeah,” I say, “but I think you can come back now. I really do.”

“No, you don’t,” she answers, and she’s right. She can see it in my face—I understand now that I can’t be her and she can’t be me. Maybe Whitman had a gift I don’t have. But as for me: I must ask the wounded man where he is hurt, because I cannot become the wounded man. The only wounded man I can be is me.

I stomp down some grass and sit. She lies down next to me, her backpack a pillow. I lay back, too. She digs a couple of books out of her backpack and hands them to me so I can have a pillow, too. *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* and *Leaves of Grass*. “I had two copies,” she says, smiling.

“It’s a hell of a good poem,” I tell her. “You couldn’t have picked a better one.”

“Really, it was an impulse decision that morning. I remembered the bit about the doors and thought that was perfect. But then when I got here I reread it. I hadn’t read it since sophomore English, and yeah, I liked it. I tried to read a bunch of poetry. I was trying to figure out—like, what was it that surprised me about you that night? And for a long time I thought it was when you quoted T. S. Eliot.”

“But it wasn’t,” I say. “You were surprised by the size of my biceps and my graceful window-exiting.”

She smirks. “Shut up and let me compliment you, dillhole. It wasn’t the poetry or your biceps. What surprised me was that, in spite of your anxiety attacks and everything, you *were* like the Quentin in my story. I mean, I’ve been crosshatching over that story for years now, and whenever I write over it, I also read that page, and I would always laugh, like—don’t get offended, but, like, ‘God I can’t believe I used to think *Quentin Jacobsen* was like a superhot, superloyal defender of justice.’ But then—you know—you kind of *were*.”

I could turn on my side, and she might turn on her side, too. And then we could kiss. But what’s the point of kissing her now, anyway? It won’t go anywhere. We are both staring at the cloudless sky. “Nothing ever happens like you imagine it will,” she says.

The sky is like a monochromatic contemporary painting, drawing me in with its illusion of depth, pulling me up. “Yeah, that’s true,” I say. But then after I think about it for a second, I add, “But then again, if you don’t imagine, nothing ever happens at all.” Imagining isn’t perfect. You can’t get all the way inside someone else. I could never have imagined Margo’s anger at being found, or the story she was writing over. But imagining being someone else, or the world being something else, is the only way in. It is the machine that kills fascists.

She turns over toward me and puts her head onto my shoulder, and we lie there, as I long ago imagined lying on the grass at SeaWorld. It has taken us thousands of miles and many days, but here we are: her head on my shoulder, her breath on my neck, the fatigue thick inside both of us. We are now as I wished we could be then.

When I wake up, the dying light of the day makes everything seem to matter, from the yellowing sky to the stalks of grass above my head, waving in slow motion like a beauty queen. I roll onto my side and see Margo Roth Spiegelman on her hands and knees a few feet from me, the jeans tight against her legs. It takes me a moment to realize that she is digging. I crawl over to her and start to dig beside her, the dirt beneath the grass dry as dust in my fingers. She smiles at me. My heart beats at the speed of sound.

“What are we digging to?” I ask her.

“That’s not the right question,” she says. “The question is, Who are we digging for?”

“Okay, then. Who are we digging for?”

“We are digging graves for Little Margo and Little Quentin and puppy Myrna Mountweazel and poor dead Robert Joyner,” she says.

“I can get behind those burials, I think,” I say. The dirt is clumpy and dry, drilled through with the paths of insects like an abandoned ant farm. We dig our bare hands into the ground over and over again, each fistful of earth accompanied by a little cloud of dust. We dig the hole wide and deep. This grave must be proper. Soon I’m reaching in as deep as my elbows. The sleeve of my shirt gets dusty when I wipe the sweat from my cheek. Margo’s cheeks are reddening. I can smell her, and she smells like that night right before we jumped into the moat at SeaWorld.

“I never really thought of him as a real person,” she says.

When she speaks, I take the opportunity to take a break, and sit back on my haunches. “Who, Robert Joyner?”

She keeps digging. “Yeah. I mean, he was something that happened to *me*, you know? But before he was this minor figure in the drama of my life, he was—you know, the central figure in the drama of his own life.”

I have never really thought of him as a person, either. A guy who played in the dirt like me. A guy who fell in love like me. A guy whose strings were broken, who didn’t feel the root of his leaf of grass connected to the field, a guy who was cracked. Like me. “Yeah,” I say after a while as I return to digging. “He was always just a body to me.”

“I wish we could have done something,” she says. “I wish we could have proven how heroic we were.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It would have been nice to tell him that, whatever it was, that it didn’t have to be the end of the world.”

“Yeah, although in the end *something* kills you.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I know. I’m not saying that everything is survivable. Just that everything except the last thing is.” I dig my hand in again, the dirt here so much blacker than back home. I toss a handful into the pile behind us, and sit back. I feel on the edge of an idea, and I try to talk my way into it. I have never spoken this many words in a row to Margo in our long and storied relationship, but here it is, my last play for her.

“When I’ve thought about him dying—which admittedly isn’t that much—I always thought of it like you said, that all the strings inside him broke. But there are a thousand ways to look at it: maybe the strings break, or maybe our ships sink, or maybe we’re grass—our roots so interdependent that no one is dead as long as someone is still alive. We don’t suffer from a shortage of metaphors, is what I mean. But you have to be careful which metaphor you choose, because it matters. If you choose the strings, then you’re imagining a world in which you can become irreparably broken. If you choose the grass, you’re saying that we are all infinitely interconnected, that we can use these root systems not only to understand one another but to become one another. The metaphors have implications. Do you know what I mean?”

She nods.

“I like the strings. I always have. Because that’s how it *feels*. But the strings make pain seem more fatal than it is, I think. We’re not as frail as the strings would make us believe. And I like the grass, too. The grass got me to you, helped me to imagine you as an actual person. But we’re not different sprouts from the same plant. I can’t be you. You can’t be me. You can imagine another well—but never quite perfectly, you know?”

“Maybe it’s more like you said before, all of us being cracked open. Like, each of starts out as a watertight vessel. And these things happen—these people leave us, or don’t love us, or don’t get us, or we don’t get them, and we lose and fail and hurt one another. And the vessel starts to crack open in places. And I mean, yeah, once the vessel cracks open, the end becomes inevitable. Once it starts to rain inside the Osprey, it will never be remodeled. But there is all this time between when the cracks start to open up and when we finally fall apart. And it’s only in that time that we can see one another, because we see out of ourselves through our cracks and into others through theirs. When did we see each other face-to-face? Not until you saw into my cracks and I saw into yours. Before that, we were just looking at ideas of each other, like looking at your window shade but never seeing inside. But once the vessel cracks, the light can get in. The light can get out.”

She raises her fingers to her lips, as if concentrating, or as if hiding her mouth from me, or as if to feel the words she speaks. “You’re pretty something,” she says finally. She stares at me, my eyes and her eyes and nothing between them. I have nothing to gain from kissing her. But I am no longer looking to gain anything. “There’s something I have to do,” I say, and she nods very slightly, as if she knows the something, and I kiss her.

It ends quite a while later when she says, “You can come to New York. It will be fun. It will be like kissing.”

And I say, “Kissing is pretty something.”

And she says, “You’re saying no.”

And I say, “Margo, I have a whole life there, and I’m not you, and I—” But I can’t say anything because she kisses me again, and it’s in the moment that she kisses me that I know without question that we’re headed in different directions. She stands up and walks over to where we were sleeping, to her backpack. She pulls out the moleskin notebook, walks back to the grave, and places it in the ground.

“I’ll miss you,” she whispers, and I don’t know if she’s talking to me or to the notebook. Nor do I know to whom I’m talking when I say, “As will I.”

“Godspeed, Robert Joyner,” I say, and drop a handful of dirt onto the notebook.

“Godspeed, young and heroic Quentin Jacobsen,” she says, tossing in dirt of her own.

Another handful as I say, “Godspeed, fearless Orlandoan Margo Roth Spiegelman.”

And another as she says, “Godspeed, magical puppy Myrna Mountweazel.” We shove the dirt over the book, tamping down the disturbed soil. The grass will grow back soon enough. It will be for us the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

We hold hands rough with dirt as we walk back to the Agloe General Store. I help Margo carry her belongings—an armful of clothes, her toiletries, and the desk chair—to her car. The preciousness of the moment, which should make it easier to talk, makes it harder.

We’re standing outside in the parking lot of a single-story motel when the good-byes become unavoidable. “I’m gonna get a cell, and I’ll call you,” she says. “And e-mail. And post mysterious statements on Omnictionary’s Paper Towns talk page.”

I smile. “I’ll e-mail you when we get home,” I say, “and I expect a response.”

“You have my word. And I’ll see you. We’re not done seeing each other.”

“At the end of the summer, maybe, I can meet you somewhere before school,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.” I smile and nod. She turns away, and I am wondering if she means any of it when I see her shoulders collapse. She is crying.

“I’ll see you then. And I’ll write in the meantime,” I say.

“Yes,” she says without turning around, her voice thick. “I’ll write you, too.”

It is saying these things that keeps us from falling apart. And maybe by imagining these futures we can make them real, and maybe not, but either way we must imagine them. The light rushes out and floods in.

I stand in this parking lot, realizing that I’ve never been this far from home, and here is this girl I love and cannot follow. I hope this is the hero’s errand, because not following her is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I keep thinking she will get into the car, but she doesn’t, and she finally turns around to me and I see her soaked eyes. The physical space between us evaporates. We play the broken strings of our instruments one last time.

I feel her hands on my back. And it is dark as I kiss her, but I have my eyes open and so does Margo. She

is close enough to me that I can see her, because even now there is the outward sign of the invisible light, even at night in this parking lot on the outskirts of Agloe. After we kiss, our foreheads touch as we stare at each other. Yes, I can see her almost perfectly in this cracked darkness.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



I learned about paper towns by coming across one during a road trip my junior year of college. My traveling companion and I kept driving up and down the same desolate stretch of highway in South Dakota, searching for this town the map promised existed—as I recall, the town was called Holen. Finally, we pulled into a driveway and knocked on a door. The friendly woman who answered had been asked the question before. She explained that the town we were seeking existed only on the map.

The story of Agloe, New York—as outlined in this book—is mostly true. Agloe began as a paper town created to protect against copyright infringement. But then people with those old Esso maps kept looking for it, and so someone built a store, making Agloe real. The business of cartography has changed a lot since Otto G. Lindberg and Ernest Alpers invented Agloe. But many mapmakers still include paper towns as copyright traps, as my bewildering experience in South Dakota attests.

The store that was Agloe no longer stands. But I believe that if we were to put it back on our maps, someone would eventually rebuild it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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—Sarah Urist Green, my first reader and first editor and best friend and favorite teammate.

"ELECTRIC...
FILLED WITH STACCATO BURSTS
OF HUMOR AND
TRAGEDY."
-JODI PICOULT

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

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BESTSELLER

JOHN GREEN

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AUTHOR
OF
LOOKING
FOR
ALASKA

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“Green proves through his characters that lasting love requires the risk of losing it. This is not a morbid book. Hazel and Gus invite us to laugh and live life to the fullest for as long as we can.”

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“John Green is one of the best writers alive.”

—**E. Lockhart**, National Book Award Finalist and
Printz Honor-winning author of *The Disreputable History of
Frankie Landau-Banks* and *The Boyfriend List*

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS



THE FAULT
IN OUR STARS

JOHN GREEN

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TO ESTHER EARL

As the tide washed in, the Dutch Tulip Man faced the ocean: “Conjoiner rejoinder poisoner concealer revelator. Look at it, rising up and rising down, taking everything with it.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Water,” the Dutchman said. “Well, and time.”

—PETER VAN HOUTEN, *An Imperial Affliction*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is not so much an author's note as an author's reminder of what was printed in small type a few pages ago: This book is a work of fiction. I made it up.

Neither novels nor their readers benefit from attempts to divine whether any facts hide inside a story. Such efforts attack the very idea that made-up stories can matter, which is sort of the foundational assumption of our species.

I appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

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CHAPTER ONE

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.

Whenever you read a cancer booklet or website or whatever, they always list depression among the side effects of cancer. But, in fact, depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.) But my mom believed I required treatment, so she took me to see my Regular Doctor Jim, who agreed that I was veritably swimming in a paralyzing and totally clinical depression, and that therefore my meds should be adjusted and also I should attend a weekly Support Group.

This Support Group featured a rotating cast of characters in various states of tumor-driven unwellness. Why did the cast rotate? A side effect of dying.

The Support Group, of course, was depressing as hell. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone-walled Episcopal church shaped like a cross. We all sat in a circle right in the middle of the cross, where the two boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been.

I noticed this because Patrick, the Support Group Leader and only person over eighteen in the room, talked about the heart of Jesus every freaking meeting, all about how we, as young cancer survivors, were sitting right in Christ's very sacred heart and whatever.

So here's how it went in God's heart: The six or seven or ten of us walked/wheeled in, grazed at a decrepit selection of cookies and lemonade, sat down in the Circle of Trust, and listened to Patrick recount for the thousandth time his depressingly miserable life story—how he had cancer in his balls and they thought he was going to die but he didn't die and now here he is, a full-

grown adult in a church basement in the 137th nicest city in America, divorced, addicted to video games, mostly friendless, eking out a meager living by exploiting his concertastic past, slowly working his way toward a master's degree that will not improve his career prospects, waiting, as we all do, for the sword of Damocles to give him the relief that he escaped lo those many years ago when cancer took both of his nuts but spared what only the most generous soul would call his life.

AND YOU TOO MIGHT BE SO LUCKY!

Then we introduced ourselves: Name. Age. Diagnosis. And how we're doing today. I'm Hazel, I'd say when they'd get to me. Sixteen. Thyroid originally but with an impressive and long-settled satellite colony in my lungs. And I'm doing okay.

Once we got around the circle, Patrick always asked if anyone wanted to share. And then began the circle jerk of support: everyone talking about fighting and battling and winning and shrinking and scanning. To be fair to Patrick, he let us talk about dying, too. But most of them weren't dying. Most would live into adulthood, as Patrick had.

(Which meant there was quite a lot of competitiveness about it, with everybody wanting to beat not only cancer itself, but also the other people in the room. Like, I realize that this is irrational, but when they tell you that you have, say, a 20 percent chance of living five years, the math kicks in and you figure that's one in five...so you look around and think, as any healthy person would: I gotta outlast four of these bastards.)

The only redeeming facet of Support Group was this kid named Isaac, a long-faced, skinny guy with straight blond hair swept over one eye.

And his eyes were the problem. He had some fantastically improbable eye cancer. One eye had been cut out when he was a kid, and now he wore the kind of thick glasses that made his eyes (both the real one and the glass one) preternaturally huge, like his whole head was basically just this fake eye and this real eye staring at you. From what I could gather on the rare occasions when Isaac shared with the group, a recurrence had placed his remaining eye in mortal peril.

Isaac and I communicated almost exclusively through sighs. Each time someone discussed anticancer diets or snorting ground-up shark fin or whatever, he'd glance over at me and sigh ever so slightly. I'd shake my head microscopically and exhale in response.

...

“I love you,” she said as I got out.

“You too, Mom. See you at six.”

“Make friends!” she said through the rolled-down window as I walked away.

I didn’t want to take the elevator because taking the elevator is a Last Days kind of activity at Support Group, so I took the stairs. I grabbed a cookie and poured some lemonade into a Dixie cup and then turned around.

A boy was staring at me.

I was quite sure I’d never seen him before. Long and leanly muscular, he dwarfed the molded plastic elementary school chair he was sitting in. Mahogany hair, straight and short. He looked my age, maybe a year older, and he sat with his tailbone against the edge of the chair, his posture aggressively poor, one hand half in a pocket of dark jeans.

I looked away, suddenly conscious of my myriad insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, and a yellow T-shirt advertising a band I didn’t even like anymore. Also my hair: I had this pageboy haircut, and I hadn’t even bothered to, like, brush it. Furthermore, I had ridiculously fat chipmunked cheeks, a side effect of treatment. I looked like a normally proportioned person with a balloon for a head. This was not even to mention the cankle situation. And yet—I cut a glance to him, and his eyes were still on me.

It occurred to me why they call it *eye contact*.

I walked into the circle and sat down next to Isaac, two seats away from the boy. I glanced again. He was still watching me.

Look, let me just say it: He was hot. A nonhot boy stares at you relentlessly and it is, at best, awkward and, at worst, a form of assault. But a hot boy...well.

I pulled out my phone and clicked it so it would display the time: 4:59. The circle filled in with the unlucky twelve-to-eighteens, and then Patrick started us out with the serenity prayer: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference*. The guy was still staring at me. I felt rather blushy.

Finally, I decided that the proper strategy was to stare back. Boys do not have a monopoly on the Staring Business, after all. So I looked him over as Patrick acknowledged for the thousandth time his ball-lessness etc., and soon it was a staring contest. After a while the boy smiled, and then finally his blue eyes glanced away. When he looked back at me, I flicked my eyebrows up to say, *I win*.

He shrugged. Patrick continued and then finally it was time for the introductions. “Isaac, perhaps you’d like to go first today. I know you’re facing a challenging time.”

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “I’m Isaac. I’m seventeen. And it’s looking like I have to get surgery in a couple weeks, after which I’ll be blind. Not to complain or anything because I know a lot of us have it worse, but yeah, I mean, being blind does sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. And friends like Augustus.” He nodded toward the boy, who now had a name. “So, yeah,” Isaac continued. He was looking at his hands, which he’d folded into each other like the top of a tepee. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“We’re here for you, Isaac,” Patrick said. “Let Isaac hear it, guys.” And then we all, in a monotone, said, “We’re here for you, Isaac.”

Michael was next. He was twelve. He had leukemia. He’d always had leukemia. He was okay. (Or so he said. He’d taken the elevator.)

Lida was sixteen, and pretty enough to be the object of the hot boy’s eye. She was a regular—in a long remission from appendiceal cancer, which I had not previously known existed. She said—as she had every other time I’d attended Support Group—that she felt *strong*, which felt like bragging to me as the oxygen-drizzling nubs tickled my nostrils.

There were five others before they got to him. He smiled a little when his turn came. His voice was low, smoky, and dead sexy. “My name is Augustus Waters,” he said. “I’m seventeen. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year and a half ago, but I’m just here today at Isaac’s request.”

“And how are you feeling?” asked Patrick.

“Oh, I’m grand.” Augustus Waters smiled with a corner of his mouth. “I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend.”

When it was my turn, I said, “My name is Hazel. I’m sixteen. Thyroid with mets in my lungs. I’m okay.”

The hour proceeded apace: Fights were recounted, battles won amid wars sure to be lost; hope was clung to; families were both celebrated and denounced; it was agreed that friends just didn’t get it; tears were shed; comfort proffered. Neither Augustus Waters nor I spoke again until Patrick said, “Augustus, perhaps you’d like to share your fears with the group.”

“My fears?”

“Yes.”

“I fear oblivion,” he said without a moment’s pause. “I fear it like the proverbial blind man who’s afraid of the dark.”

“Too soon,” Isaac said, cracking a smile.

“Was that insensitive?” Augustus asked. “I can be pretty blind to other people’s feelings.”

Isaac was laughing, but Patrick raised a chastening finger and said, “Augustus, please. Let’s return to *you* and *your* struggles. You said you fear

oblivion?”

“I did,” Augustus answered.

Patrick seemed lost. “Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?”

I hadn’t been in proper school in three years. My parents were my two best friends. My third best friend was an author who did not know I existed. I was a fairly shy person—not the hand-raising type.

And yet, just this once, I decided to speak. I half raised my hand and Patrick, his delight evident, immediately said, “Hazel!” I was, I’m sure he assumed, opening up. *Becoming Part Of The Group*.

I looked over at Augustus Waters, who looked back at me. You could almost see through his eyes they were so blue. “There will come a time,” I said, “when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this”—I gestured encompassingly—“will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does.”

I’d learned this from my aforementioned third best friend, Peter Van Houten, the reclusive author of *An Imperial Affliction*, the book that was as close a thing as I had to a Bible. Peter Van Houten was the only person I’d ever come across who seemed to (a) understand what it’s like to be dying, and (b) not have died.

After I finished, there was quite a long period of silence as I watched a smile spread all the way across Augustus’s face—not the little crooked smile of the boy trying to be sexy while he stared at me, but his real smile, too big for his face. “Goddamn,” Augustus said quietly. “Aren’t you something else.”

Neither of us said anything for the rest of Support Group. At the end, we all had to hold hands, and Patrick led us in a prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, *literally in Your heart*, as cancer survivors. You and You alone know us as we know ourselves. Guide us to life and the Light through our times of trial. We pray for Isaac’s eyes, for Michael’s and Jamie’s blood, for Augustus’s bones, for Hazel’s lungs, for James’s throat. We pray that You might heal us and that we might feel Your love, and Your peace, which passes all understanding. And we remember in our hearts those whom we knew and loved who have gone home to you: Maria and Kade and Joseph and Haley and Abigail and Angelina and Taylor and Gabriel and...”

It was a long list. The world contains a lot of dead people. And while Patrick droned on, reading the list from a sheet of paper because it was too long to memorize, I kept my eyes closed, trying to think prayerfully but mostly imagining the day when my name would find its way onto that list, all the way at the end when everyone had stopped listening.

When Patrick was finished, we said this stupid mantra together—LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY—and it was over. Augustus Waters pushed himself out of his chair and walked over to me. His gait was crooked like his smile. He towered over me, but he kept his distance so I wouldn't have to crane my neck to look him in the eye. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Hazel."

"No, your full name."

"Um, Hazel Grace Lancaster." He was just about to say something else when Isaac walked up. "Hold on," Augustus said, raising a finger, and turned to Isaac. "That was actually worse than you made it out to be."

"I told you it was bleak."

"Why do you bother with it?"

"I don't know. It kind of helps?"

Augustus leaned in so he thought I couldn't hear. "She's a regular?" I couldn't hear Isaac's comment, but Augustus responded, "I'll say." He clasped Isaac by both shoulders and then took a half step away from him. "Tell Hazel about clinic."

Isaac leaned a hand against the snack table and focused his huge eye on me. "Okay, so I went into clinic this morning, and I was telling my surgeon that I'd rather be deaf than blind. And he said, 'It doesn't work that way,' and I was, like, 'Yeah, I realize it doesn't work that way; I'm just saying I'd rather be deaf than blind if I had the choice, which I realize I don't have,' and he said, 'Well, the good news is that you won't be deaf,' and I was like, 'Thank you for explaining that my eye cancer isn't going to make me deaf. I feel so fortunate that an intellectual giant like yourself would deign to operate on me.'"

"He sounds like a winner," I said. "I'm gonna try to get me some eye cancer just so I can make this guy's acquaintance."

"Good luck with that. All right, I should go. Monica's waiting for me. I gotta look at her a lot while I can."

"Counterinsurgency tomorrow?" Augustus asked.

"Definitely." Isaac turned and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Augustus Waters turned to me. "Literally," he said.

"Literally?" I asked.

"We are literally in the heart of Jesus," he said. "I thought we were in a

church basement, but we are literally in the heart of Jesus.”

“Someone should tell Jesus,” I said. “I mean, it’s gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.”

“I would tell Him myself,” Augustus said, “but unfortunately I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me.” I laughed. He shook his head, just looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Augustus half smiled. “Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, and I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.” A brief awkward silence ensued. Augustus plowed through: “I mean, particularly given that, as you so deliciously pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion and everything.”

I kind of scoffed or sighed or exhaled in a way that was vaguely coughy and then said, “I’m not beau—”

“You’re like a millennial Natalie Portman. Like *V for Vendetta* Natalie Portman.”

“Never seen it,” I said.

“Really?” he asked. “Pixie-haired gorgeous girl dislikes authority and can’t help but fall for a boy she knows is trouble. It’s your autobiography, so far as I can tell.”

His every syllable flirted. Honestly, he kind of turned me on. I didn’t even know that guys *could* turn me on—not, like, in real life.

A younger girl walked past us. “How’s it going, Alisa?” he asked. She smiled and mumbled, “Hi, Augustus.” “Memorial people,” he explained. Memorial was the big research hospital. “Where do you go?”

“Children’s,” I said, my voice smaller than I expected it to be. He nodded. The conversation seemed over. “Well,” I said, nodding vaguely toward the steps that led us out of the Literal Heart of Jesus. I tilted my cart onto its wheels and started walking. He limped beside me. “So, see you next time, maybe?” I asked.

“You should see it,” he said. “*V for Vendetta*, I mean.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll look it up.”

“No. With me. At my house,” he said. “Now.”

I stopped walking. “I hardly know you, Augustus Waters. You could be an ax murderer.”

He nodded. “True enough, Hazel Grace.” He walked past me, his shoulders filling out his green knit polo shirt, his back straight, his steps lilting just slightly to the right as he walked steady and confident on what I had determined was a

prosthetic leg. Osteosarcoma sometimes takes a limb to check you out. Then, if it likes you, it takes the rest.

I followed him upstairs, losing ground as I made my way up slowly, stairs not being a field of expertise for my lungs.

And then we were out of Jesus's heart and in the parking lot, the spring air just on the cold side of perfect, the late-afternoon light heavenly in its hurtfulness.

Mom wasn't there yet, which was unusual, because Mom was almost always waiting for me. I glanced around and saw that a tall, curvy brunette girl had Isaac pinned against the stone wall of the church, kissing him rather aggressively. They were close enough to me that I could hear the weird noises of their mouths together, and I could hear him saying, "Always," and her saying, "Always," in return.

Suddenly standing next to me, Augustus half whispered, "They're big believers in PDA."

"What's with the 'always'?" The slurping sounds intensified.

"Always is their thing. They'll *always* love each other and whatever. I would conservatively estimate they have texted each other the word *always* four million times in the last year."

A couple more cars drove up, taking Michael and Alisa away. It was just Augustus and me now, watching Isaac and Monica, who proceeded apace as if they were not leaning against a place of worship. His hand reached for her boob over her shirt and pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt good. Didn't seem like it would, but I decided to forgive Isaac on the grounds that he was going blind. The senses must feast while there is yet hunger and whatever.

"Imagine taking that last drive to the hospital," I said quietly. "The last time you'll ever drive a car."

Without looking over at me, Augustus said, "You're killing my vibe here, Hazel Grace. I'm trying to observe young love in its many-splendored awkwardness."

"I think he's hurting her boob," I said.

"Yes, it's difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam." Then Augustus Waters reached into a pocket and pulled out, of all things, a pack of cigarettes. He flipped it open and put a cigarette between his lips.

"Are you *serious*?" I asked. "You think that's cool? Oh, my God, you just ruined *the whole thing*."

"Which whole thing?" he asked, turning to me. The cigarette dangled unlit

from the unsmiling corner of his mouth.

“The whole thing where a boy who is not unattractive or unintelligent or seemingly in any way unacceptable stares at me and points out incorrect uses of literality and compares me to actresses and asks me to watch a movie at his house. But of course there is always a *hamartia* and yours is that oh, my God, even though you HAD FREAKING CANCER you give money to a company in exchange for the chance to acquire YET MORE CANCER. Oh, my God. Let me just assure you that not being able to breathe? SUCKS. Totally disappointing. *Totally.*”

“A *hamartia*?” he asked, the cigarette still in his mouth. It tightened his jaw. He had a hell of a jawline, unfortunately.

“A fatal flaw,” I explained, turning away from him. I stepped toward the curb, leaving Augustus Waters behind me, and then I heard a car start down the street. It was Mom. She’d been waiting for me to, like, make friends or whatever.

I felt this weird mix of disappointment and anger welling up inside of me. I don’t even know what the feeling was, really, just that there was a *lot* of it, and I wanted to smack Augustus Waters and also replace my lungs with lungs that didn’t suck at being lungs. I was standing with my Chuck Taylors on the very edge of the curb, the oxygen tank ball-and-chaining in the cart by my side, and right as my mom pulled up, I felt a hand grab mine.

I yanked my hand free but turned back to him.

“They don’t kill you unless you light them,” he said as Mom arrived at the curb. “And I’ve never lit one. It’s a metaphor, see: You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don’t give it the power to do its killing.”

“It’s a metaphor,” I said, dubious. Mom was just idling.

“It’s a metaphor,” he said.

“You choose your behaviors based on their metaphorical resonances...” I said.

“Oh, yes.” He smiled. The big, goofy, real smile. “I’m a big believer in metaphor, Hazel Grace.”

I turned to the car. Tapped the window. It rolled down. “I’m going to a movie with Augustus Waters,” I said. “Please record the next several episodes of the *ANTM* marathon for me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Augustus Waters drove horrifically. Whether stopping or starting, everything happened with a tremendous JOLT. I flew against the seat belt of his Toyota SUV each time he braked, and my neck snapped backward each time he hit the gas. I might have been nervous—what with sitting in the car of a strange boy on the way to his house, keenly aware that my crap lungs complicate efforts to fend off unwanted advances—but his driving was so astonishingly poor that I could think of nothing else.

We'd gone perhaps a mile in jagged silence before Augustus said, "I failed the driving test three times."

"You don't say."

He laughed, nodding. "Well, I can't feel pressure in old Prosty, and I can't get the hang of driving left-footed. My doctors say most amputees can drive with no problem, but...yeah. Not me. Anyway, I go in for my fourth driving test, and it goes about like this is going." A half mile in front of us, a light turned red. Augustus slammed on the brakes, tossing me into the triangular embrace of the seat belt. "Sorry. I swear to God I am trying to be gentle. Right, so anyway, at the end of the test, I totally thought I'd failed again, but the instructor was like, 'Your driving is unpleasant, but it isn't technically unsafe.'"

"I'm not sure I agree," I said. "I suspect Cancer Perk." Cancer Perks are the little things cancer kids get that regular kids don't: basketballs signed by sports heroes, free passes on late homework, unearned driver's licenses, etc.

"Yeah," he said. The light turned green. I braced myself. Augustus slammed the gas.

"You know they've got hand controls for people who can't use their legs," I pointed out.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe someday." He sighed in a way that made me wonder whether he was confident about the existence of *someday*. I knew

osteosarcoma was highly curable, but still.

There are a number of ways to establish someone's approximate survival expectations without actually *asking*. I used the classic: "So, are you in school?" Generally, your parents pull you out of school at some point if they expect you to bite it.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm at North Central. A year behind, though: I'm a sophomore. You?"

I considered lying. No one likes a corpse, after all. But in the end I told the truth. "No, my parents withdrew me three years ago."

"Three *years*?" he asked, astonished.

I told Augustus the broad outline of my miracle: diagnosed with Stage IV thyroid cancer when I was thirteen. (I didn't tell him that the diagnosis came three months after I got my first period. Like: Congratulations! You're a woman. Now die.) It was, we were told, incurable.

I had a surgery called *radical neck dissection*, which is about as pleasant as it sounds. Then radiation. Then they tried some chemo for my lung tumors. The tumors shrank, then grew. By then, I was fourteen. My lungs started to fill up with water. I was looking pretty dead—my hands and feet ballooned; my skin cracked; my lips were perpetually blue. They've got this drug that makes you not feel so completely terrified about the fact that you can't breathe, and I had a lot of it flowing into me through a PICC line, and more than a dozen other drugs besides. But even so, there's a certain unpleasantness to drowning, particularly when it occurs over the course of several months. I finally ended up in the ICU with pneumonia, and my mom knelt by the side of my bed and said, "Are you ready, sweetie?" and I told her I was ready, and my dad just kept telling me he loved me in this voice that was not breaking so much as already broken, and I kept telling him that I loved him, too, and everyone was holding hands, and I couldn't catch my breath, and my lungs were acting desperate, gasping, pulling me out of the bed trying to find a position that could get them air, and I was embarrassed by their desperation, disgusted that they wouldn't just *let go*, and I remember my mom telling me it was okay, that I was okay, that I would be okay, and my father was trying so hard not to sob that when he did, which was regularly, it was an earthquake. And I remember wanting not to be awake.

Everyone figured I was finished, but my Cancer Doctor Maria managed to get some of the fluid out of my lungs, and shortly thereafter the antibiotics they'd given me for the pneumonia kicked in.

I woke up and soon got into one of those experimental trials that are famous in the Republic of Cancervania for Not Working. The drug was Phalanxifor, this molecule designed to attach itself to cancer cells and slow their growth. It didn't

work in about 70 percent of people. But it worked in me. The tumors shrank.

And they stayed shrunk. Huzzah, Phalanxifor! In the past eighteen months, my mets have hardly grown, leaving me with lungs that suck at being lungs but could, conceivably, struggle along indefinitely with the assistance of drizzled oxygen and daily Phalanxifor.

Admittedly, my Cancer Miracle had only resulted in a bit of purchased time. (I did not yet know the size of the bit.) But when telling Augustus Waters, I painted the rosiest possible picture, embellishing the miraculousness of the miracle.

“So now you gotta go back to school,” he said.

“I actually *can't*,” I explained, “because I already got my GED. So I’m taking classes at MCC,” which was our community college.

“A college girl,” he said, nodding. “That explains the aura of sophistication.” He smirked at me. I shoved his upper arm playfully. I could feel the muscle right beneath the skin, all tense and amazing.

We made a wheels-screeching turn into a subdivision with eight-foot-high stucco walls. His house was the first one on the left. A two-story colonial. We jerked to a halt in his driveway.

I followed him inside. A wooden plaque in the entryway was engraved in cursive with the words *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, and the entire house turned out to be festooned in such observations. *Good Friends Are Hard to Find and Impossible to Forget* read an illustration above the coatrack. *True Love Is Born from Hard Times* promised a needlepointed pillow in their antique-furnished living room. Augustus saw me reading. “My parents call them Encouragements,” he explained. “They’re everywhere.”

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His mom and dad called him Gus. They were making enchiladas in the kitchen (a piece of stained glass by the sink read in bubbly letters *Family Is Forever*). His mom was putting chicken into tortillas, which his dad then rolled up and placed in a glass pan. They didn’t seem too surprised by my arrival, which made sense: The fact that Augustus made me *feel* special did not necessarily indicate that I was special. Maybe he brought home a different girl every night to show her movies and feel her up.

“This is Hazel Grace,” he said, by way of introduction.

“Just Hazel,” I said.

“How’s it going, Hazel?” asked Gus’s dad. He was tall—almost as tall as Gus—and skinny in a way that parentally aged people usually aren’t.

“Okay,” I said.

“How was Isaac’s Support Group?”

“It was incredible,” Gus said.

“You’re such a Debbie Downer,” his mom said. “Hazel, do you enjoy it?”

I paused a second, trying to figure out if my response should be calibrated to please Augustus or his parents. “Most of the people are really nice,” I finally said.

“That’s exactly what we found with families at Memorial when we were in the thick of it with Gus’s treatment,” his dad said. “Everybody was so kind. Strong, too. In the darkest days, the Lord puts the best people into your life.”

“Quick, give me a throw pillow and some thread because that needs to be an Encouragement,” Augustus said, and his dad looked a little annoyed, but then Gus wrapped his long arm around his dad’s neck and said, “I’m just kidding, Dad. I like the freaking Encouragements. I really do. I just can’t admit it because I’m a teenager.” His dad rolled his eyes.

“You’re joining us for dinner, I hope?” asked his mom. She was small and brunette and vaguely mousy.

“I guess?” I said. “I have to be home by ten. Also I don’t, um, eat meat?”

“No problem. We’ll vegetarianize some,” she said.

“Animals are just too cute?” Gus asked.

“I want to minimize the number of deaths I am responsible for,” I said.

Gus opened his mouth to respond but then stopped himself.

His mom filled the silence. “Well, I think that’s wonderful.”

They talked to me for a bit about how the enchiladas were Famous Waters Enchiladas and Not to Be Missed and about how Gus’s curfew was also ten, and how they were inherently distrustful of anyone who gave their kids curfews *other* than ten, and was I in school—“she’s a college student,” Augustus interjected—and how the weather was truly and absolutely extraordinary for March, and how in spring all things are new, and they didn’t even once ask me about the oxygen or my diagnosis, which was weird and wonderful, and then Augustus said, “Hazel and I are going to watch *V for Vendetta* so she can see her filmic doppelgänger, mid-two thousands Natalie Portman.”

“The living room TV is yours for the watching,” his dad said happily.

“I think we’re actually gonna watch it in the basement.”

His dad laughed. “Good try. Living room.”

“But I want to show Hazel Grace the basement,” Augustus said.

“Just Hazel,” I said.

“So show Just Hazel the basement,” said his dad. “And then come upstairs and watch your movie in the living room.”

Augustus puffed out his cheeks, balanced on his leg, and twisted his hips, throwing the prosthetic forward. “Fine,” he mumbled.

I followed him down carpeted stairs to a huge basement bedroom. A shelf at my eye level reached all the way around the room, and it was stuffed solid with basketball memorabilia: dozens of trophies with gold plastic men mid-jump shot or dribbling or reaching for a layup toward an unseen basket. There were also lots of signed balls and sneakers.

“I used to play basketball,” he explained.

“You must’ve been pretty good.”

“I wasn’t bad, but all the shoes and balls are Cancer Perks.” He walked toward the TV, where a huge pile of DVDs and video games were arranged into a vague pyramid shape. He bent at the waist and snatched up *V for Vendetta*. “I was, like, the prototypical white Hoosier kid,” he said. “I was all about resurrecting the lost art of the midrange jumper, but then one day I was shooting free throws—just standing at the foul line at the North Central gym shooting from a rack of balls. All at once, I couldn’t figure out why I was methodically tossing a spherical object through a toroidal object. It seemed like the stupidest thing I could possibly be doing.

“I started thinking about little kids putting a cylindrical peg through a circular hole, and how they do it over and over again for months when they figure it out, and how basketball was basically just a slightly more aerobic version of that same exercise. Anyway, for the longest time, I just kept sinking free throws. I hit eighty in a row, my all-time best, but as I kept going, I felt more and more like a two-year-old. And then for some reason I started to think about hurdlers. Are you okay?”

I’d taken a seat on the corner of his unmade bed. I wasn’t trying to be suggestive or anything; I just got kind of tired when I had to stand a lot. I’d stood in the living room and then there had been the stairs, and then more standing, which was quite a lot of standing for me, and I didn’t want to faint or anything. I was a bit of a Victorian Lady, fainting-wise. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just listening. Hurlers?”

“Yeah, hurdlers. I don’t know why. I started thinking about them running their hurdle races, and jumping over these totally arbitrary objects that had been set in their path. And I wondered if hurdlers ever thought, you know, *This would go faster if we just got rid of the hurdles.*”

“This was before your diagnosis?” I asked.

“Right, well, there was that, too.” He smiled with half his mouth. “The day of the existentially fraught free throws was coincidentally also my last day of dual leggedness. I had a weekend between when they scheduled the amputation

and when it happened. My own little glimpse of what Isaac is going through.”

I nodded. I liked Augustus Waters. I really, really, really liked him. I liked the way his story ended with someone else. I liked his voice. I liked that he took *existentially fraught* free throws. I liked that he was a tenured professor in the Department of Slightly Crooked Smiles with a dual appointment in the Department of Having a Voice That Made My Skin Feel More Like Skin. And I liked that he had two names. I’ve always liked people with two names, because you get to make up your mind what you call them: Gus or Augustus? Me, I was always just Hazel, univalent Hazel.

“Do you have siblings?” I asked.

“Huh?” he answered, seeming a little distracted.

“You said that thing about watching kids play.”

“Oh, yeah, no. I have nephews, from my half sisters. But they’re older. They’re like—DAD, HOW OLD ARE JULIE AND MARTHA?”

“Twenty-eight!”

“They’re like twenty-eight. They live in Chicago. They are both married to very fancy lawyer dudes. Or banker dudes. I can’t remember. You have siblings?”

I shook my head no. “So what’s your story?” he asked, sitting down next to me at a safe distance.

“I already told you my story. I was diagnosed when—”

“No, not your cancer story. *Your* story. Interests, hobbies, passions, weird fetishes, etcetera.”

“Um,” I said.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that. It’s disheartening. Like, cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven’t let it succeed prematurely.”

It occurred to me that perhaps I had. I struggled with how to pitch myself to Augustus Waters, which enthusiasms to embrace, and in the silence that followed it occurred to me that I wasn’t very interesting. “I am pretty unextraordinary.”

“I reject that out of hand. Think of something you like. The first thing that comes to mind.”

“Um. Reading?”

“What do you read?”

“Everything. From, like, hideous romance to pretentious fiction to poetry. Whatever.”

“Do you write poetry, too?”

“No. I don’t write.”

“There!” Augustus almost shouted. “Hazel Grace, you are the only teenager in America who prefers reading poetry to writing it. This tells me so much. You read a lot of capital-G great books, don’t you?”

“I guess?”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Um,” I said.

My favorite book, by a wide margin, was *An Imperial Affliction*, but I didn’t like to tell people about it. Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book. And then there are books like *An Imperial Affliction*, which you can’t tell people about, books so special and rare and *yours* that advertising your affection feels like a betrayal.

It wasn’t even that the book was so good or anything; it was just that the author, Peter Van Houten, seemed to understand me in weird and impossible ways. *An Imperial Affliction* was *my* book, in the way my body was my body and my thoughts were my thoughts.

Even so, I told Augustus. “My favorite book is probably *An Imperial Affliction*,” I said.

“Does it feature zombies?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Stormtroopers?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that kind of book.”

He smiled. “I am going to read this terrible book with the boring title that does not contain stormtroopers,” he promised, and I immediately felt like I shouldn’t have told him about it. Augustus spun around to a stack of books beneath his bedside table. He grabbed a paperback and a pen. As he scribbled an inscription onto the title page, he said, “All I ask in exchange is that you read this brilliant and haunting novelization of my favorite video game.” He held up the book, which was called *The Price of Dawn*. I laughed and took it. Our hands kind of got muddled together in the book handoff, and then he was holding my hand. “Cold,” he said, pressing a finger to my pale wrist.

“Not cold so much as underoxygenated,” I said.

“I love it when you talk medical to me,” he said. He stood, and pulled me up with him, and did not let go of my hand until we reached the stairs.

...

We watched the movie with several inches of couch between us. I did the totally middle-schooly thing wherein I put my hand on the couch about halfway between us to let him know that it was okay to hold it, but he didn't try. An hour into the movie, Augustus's parents came in and served us the enchiladas, which we ate on the couch, and they were pretty delicious.

The movie was about this heroic guy in a mask who died heroically for Natalie Portman, who's pretty badass and very hot and does not have anything approaching my puffy steroid face.

As the credits rolled, he said, "Pretty great, huh?"

"Pretty great," I agreed, although it wasn't, really. It was kind of a boy movie. I don't know why boys expect us to like boy movies. We don't expect them to like girl movies. "I should get home. Class in the morning," I said.

I sat on the couch for a while as Augustus searched for his keys. His mom sat down next to me and said, "I just love this one, don't you?" I guess I had been looking toward the Encouragement above the TV, a drawing of an angel with the caption *Without Pain, How Could We Know Joy?*

(This is an old argument in the field of Thinking About Suffering, and its stupidity and lack of sophistication could be plumbed for centuries, but suffice it to say that the existence of broccoli does not in any way affect the taste of chocolate.) "Yes," I said. "A lovely thought."

I drove Augustus's car home with Augustus riding shotgun. He played me a couple songs he liked by a band called The Hectic Glow, and they were good songs, but because I didn't know them already, they weren't as good to me as they were to him. I kept glancing over at his leg, or the place where his leg had been, trying to imagine what the fake leg looked like. I didn't want to care about it, but I did a little. He probably cared about my oxygen. Illness repulses. I'd learned that a long time ago, and I suspected Augustus had, too.

As I pulled up outside of my house, Augustus clicked the radio off. The air thickened. He was probably thinking about kissing me, and I was definitely thinking about kissing him. Wondering if I wanted to. I'd kissed boys, but it had been a while. Pre-Miracle.

I put the car in park and looked over at him. He really was beautiful. I know boys aren't supposed to be, but he was.

"Hazel Grace," he said, my name new and better in his voice. "It has been a real pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Ditto, Mr. Waters," I said. I felt shy looking at him. I could not match the intensity of his waterblue eyes.

"May I see you again?" he asked. There was an endearing nervousness in his voice.

I smiled. "Sure."

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

"Patience, grasshopper," I counseled. "You don't want to seem overeager."

"Right, that's why I said tomorrow," he said. "I want to see you again tonight. But I'm willing to wait *all night and much of tomorrow*." I rolled my eyes. "I'm *serious*," he said.

"You don't even know me," I said. I grabbed the book from the center console. "How about I call you when I finish this?"

"But you don't even have my phone number," he said.

"I strongly suspect you wrote it in the book."

He broke out into that goofy smile. "And you say we don't know each other."

CHAPTER THREE

I stayed up pretty late that night reading *The Price of Dawn*. (Spoiler alert: The price of dawn is blood.) It wasn't *An Imperial Affliction*, but the protagonist, Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, was vaguely likable despite killing, by my count, no fewer than 118 individuals in 284 pages.

So I got up late the next morning, a Thursday. Mom's policy was never to wake me up, because one of the job requirements of Professional Sick Person is sleeping a lot, so I was kind of confused at first when I jolted awake with her hands on my shoulders.

"It's almost ten," she said.

"Sleep fights cancer," I said. "I was up late reading."

"It must be some book," she said as she knelt down next to the bed and unscrewed me from my large, rectangular oxygen concentrator, which I called Philip, because it just kind of looked like a Philip.

Mom hooked me up to a portable tank and then reminded me I had class. "Did that boy give it to you?" she asked out of nowhere.

"By *it*, do you mean herpes?"

"You are too much," Mom said. "The book, Hazel. I mean the book."

"Yeah, he gave me the book."

"I can tell you like him," she said, eyebrows raised, as if this observation required some uniquely maternal instinct. I shrugged. "I told you Support Group would be worth your while."

"Did you just wait outside the entire time?"

"Yes. I brought some paperwork. Anyway, time to face the day, young lady."

"Mom. Sleep. Cancer. Fighting."

"I know, love, but there is class to attend. Also, today is..." The glee in Mom's voice was evident.

“Thursday?”

“Did you seriously forget?”

“Maybe?”

“It’s Thursday, March twenty-ninth!” she basically screamed, a demented smile plastered to her face.

“You are really excited about knowing the date!” I yelled back.

“HAZEL! IT’S YOUR THIRTY-THIRD HALF BIRTHDAY!”

“Ohhhhhh,” I said. My mom was really super into celebration maximization. IT’S ARBOR DAY! LET’S HUG TREES AND EAT CAKE! COLUMBUS BROUGHT SMALLPOX TO THE NATIVES; WE SHALL RECALL THE OCCASION WITH A PICNIC!, etc. “Well, Happy thirty-third Half Birthday to me,” I said.

“What do you want to do on your very special day?”

“Come home from class and set the world record for number of episodes of *Top Chef* watched consecutively?”

Mom reached up to this shelf above my bed and grabbed Bluie, the blue stuffed bear I’d had since I was, like, one—back when it was socially acceptable to name one’s friends after their hue.

“You don’t want to go to a movie with Kaitlyn or Matt or someone?” who were my friends.

That was an idea. “Sure,” I said. “I’ll text Kaitlyn and see if she wants to go to the mall or something after school.”

Mom smiled, hugging the bear to her stomach. “Is it still cool to go to the mall?” she asked.

“I take quite a lot of pride in not knowing what’s cool,” I answered.

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I texted Kaitlyn, took a shower, got dressed, and then Mom drove me to school. My class was American Literature, a lecture about Frederick Douglass in a mostly empty auditorium, and it was incredibly difficult to stay awake. Forty minutes into the ninety-minute class, Kaitlyn texted back.

Awesomesauce. Happy Half Birthday. Castleton at 3:32?

Kaitlyn had the kind of packed social life that needs to be scheduled down to the minute. I responded:

Sounds good. I’ll be at the food court.

Mom drove me directly from school to the bookstore attached to the mall, where I purchased both *Midnight Dawns* and *Requiem for Mayhem*, the first two sequels to *The Price of Dawn*, and then I walked over to the huge food court and bought a Diet Coke. It was 3:21.

I watched these kids playing in the pirate-ship indoor playground while I read. There was this tunnel that these two kids kept crawling through over and over and they never seemed to get tired, which made me think of Augustus Waters and the existentially fraught free throws.

Mom was also in the food court, alone, sitting in a corner where she thought I couldn't see her, eating a cheesesteak sandwich and reading through some papers. Medical stuff, probably. The paperwork was endless.

At 3:32 precisely, I noticed Kaitlyn striding confidently past the Wok House. She saw me the moment I raised my hand, flashed her very white and newly straightened teeth at me, and headed over.

She wore a knee-length charcoal coat that fit perfectly and sunglasses that dominated her face. She pushed them up onto the top of her head as she leaned down to hug me.

"Darling," she said, vaguely British. "How *are* you?" People didn't find the accent odd or off-putting. Kaitlyn just happened to be an extremely sophisticated twenty-five-year-old British socialite stuck inside a sixteen-year-old body in Indianapolis. Everyone accepted it.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"I don't even know anymore. Is that diet?" I nodded and handed it to her. She sipped through the straw. "I do wish you were at school these days. Some of the boys have become downright *edible*."

"Oh, yeah? Like who?" I asked. She proceeded to name five guys we'd attended elementary and middle school with, but I couldn't picture any of them.

"I've been dating Derek Wellington for a bit," she said, "but I don't think it will last. He's such a *boy*. But enough about me. What is new in the Hazelverse?"

"Nothing, really," I said.

"Health is good?"

"The same, I guess?"

"Phalanxifor!" she enthused, smiling. "So you could just live forever, right?"

"Probably not forever," I said.

"But basically," she said. "What else is new?"

I thought of telling her that I was seeing a boy, too, or at least that I'd watched a movie with one, just because I knew it would surprise and amaze her that anyone as disheveled and awkward and stunted as me could even briefly

win the affections of a boy. But I didn't really have much to brag about, so I just shrugged.

"What in heaven is *that*?" asked Kaitlyn, gesturing to the book.

"Oh, it's sci-fi. I've gotten kinda into it. It's a series."

"I am alarmed. Shall we shop?"

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We went to this shoe store. As we were shopping, Kaitlyn kept picking out all these open-toed flats for me and saying, "These would look cute on *you*," which reminded me that Kaitlyn never wore open-toed shoes on account of how she hated her feet because she felt her second toes were too long, as if the second toe was a window into the soul or something. So when I pointed out a pair of sandals that would suit her skin tone, she was like, "Yeah, but..." the but being *but they will expose my hideous second toes to the public*, and I said, "Kaitlyn, you're the only person I've ever known to have toe-specific dysmorphia," and she said, "What is that?"

"You know, like when you look in the mirror and the thing you see is not the thing as it really is."

"Oh. Oh," she said. "Do you like these?" She held up a pair of cute but unspectacular Mary Janes, and I nodded, and she found her size and tried them on, pacing up and down the aisle, watching her feet in the knee-high angled mirrors. Then she grabbed a pair of strappy hooker shoes and said, "Is it even possible to walk in these? I mean, I would just *die*—" and then stopped short, looking at me as if to say *I'm sorry*, as if it were a crime to mention death to the dying. "You should try them on," Kaitlyn continued, trying to paper over the awkwardness.

"I'd sooner die," I assured her.

I ended up just picking out some flip-flops so that I could have something to buy, and then I sat down on one of the benches opposite a bank of shoes and watched Kaitlyn snake her way through the aisles, shopping with the kind of intensity and focus that one usually associates with professional chess. I kind of wanted to take out *Midnight Dawns* and read for a while, but I knew that'd be rude, so I just watched Kaitlyn. Occasionally she'd circle back to me clutching some closed-toe prey and say, "This?" and I would try to make an intelligent comment about the shoe, and then finally she bought three pairs and I bought my flip-flops and then as we exited she said, "Anthropologie?"

"I should head home actually," I said. "I'm kinda tired."

"Sure, of course," she said. "I have to see you more often, darling." She

placed her hands on my shoulders, kissed me on both cheeks, and marched off, her narrow hips swishing.

I didn't go home, though. I'd told Mom to pick me up at six, and while I figured she was either in the mall or in the parking lot, I still wanted the next two hours to myself.

I liked my mom, but her perpetual nearness sometimes made me feel weirdly nervous. And I liked Kaitlyn, too. I really did. But three years removed from proper full-time schoolic exposure to my peers, I felt a certain unbridgeable distance between us. I think my school friends wanted to help me through my cancer, but they eventually found out that they couldn't. For one thing, there was no *through*.

So I excused myself on the grounds of pain and fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. In truth, it always hurt. It always hurt not to breathe like a normal person, incessantly reminding your lungs to be lungs, forcing yourself to accept as unsolvable the clawing scraping inside-out ache of underoxygenation. So I wasn't lying, exactly. I was just choosing among truths.

I found a bench surrounded by an Irish Gifts store, the Fountain Pen Emporium, and a baseball-cap outlet—a corner of the mall even Kaitlyn would never shop, and started reading *Midnight Dawns*.

It featured a sentence-to-corpse ratio of nearly 1:1, and I tore through it without ever looking up. I liked Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, even though he didn't have much in the way of a technical personality, but mostly I liked that his adventures *kept happening*. There were always more bad guys to kill and more good guys to save. New wars started even before the old ones were won. I hadn't read a real series like that since I was a kid, and it was exciting to live again in an infinite fiction.

Twenty pages from the end of *Midnight Dawns*, things started to look pretty bleak for Mayhem when he was shot seventeen times while attempting to rescue a (blond, American) hostage from the Enemy. But as a reader, I did not despair. The war effort would go on without him. There could—and would—be sequels starring his cohorts: Specialist Manny Loco and Private Jasper Jacks and the rest.

I was just about to the end when this little girl with barretted braids appeared in front of me and said, "What's in your nose?"

And I said, "Um, it's called a cannula. These tubes give me oxygen and help me breathe." Her mother swooped in and said, "Jackie," disapprovingly, but I said, "No no, it's okay," because it totally was, and then Jackie asked, "Would they help me breathe, too?"

“I dunno. Let’s try.” I took it off and let Jackie stick the cannula in her nose and breathe. “Tickles,” she said.

“I know, right?”

“I think I’m breathing better,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” I said, “I wish I could give you my cannula but I kind of really need the help.” I already felt the loss. I focused on my breathing as Jackie handed the tubes back to me. I gave them a quick swipe with my T-shirt, laced the tubes behind my ears, and put the nubbins back in place.

“Thanks for letting me try it,” she said.

“No problem.”

“Jackie,” her mother said again, and this time I let her go.

I returned to the book, where Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem was regretting that he had but one life to give for his country, but I kept thinking about that little kid, and how much I liked her.

The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never again feel natural to talk to her. Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward and self-conscious around me, except maybe kids like Jackie who just didn’t know any better.

Anyway, I really did like being alone. I liked being alone with poor Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, who—oh, come on, he’s not going to *survive* these seventeen bullet wounds, is he?

(Spoiler alert: He lives.)

CHAPTER FOUR

I went to bed a little early that night, changing into boy boxers and a T-shirt before crawling under the covers of my bed, which was queen size and pillow topped and one of my favorite places in the world. And then I started reading *An Imperial Affliction* for the millionth time.

AIA is about this girl named Anna (who narrates the story) and her one-eyed mom, who is a professional gardener obsessed with tulips, and they have a normal lower-middle-class life in a little central California town until Anna gets this rare blood cancer.

But it's not a *cancer book*, because cancer books suck. Like, in cancer books, the cancer person starts a charity that raises money to fight cancer, right? And this commitment to charity reminds the cancer person of the essential goodness of humanity and makes him/her feel loved and encouraged because s/he will leave a cancer-curing legacy. But in *AIA*, Anna decides that being a person with cancer who starts a cancer charity is a bit narcissistic, so she starts a charity called The Anna Foundation for People with Cancer Who Want to Cure Cholera.

Also, Anna is honest about all of it in a way no one else really is: Throughout the book, she refers to herself as *the side effect*, which is just totally correct. Cancer kids are essentially side effects of the relentless mutation that made the diversity of life on earth possible. So as the story goes on, she gets sicker, the treatments and disease racing to kill her, and her mom falls in love with this Dutch tulip trader Anna calls the Dutch Tulip Man. The Dutch Tulip Man has lots of money and very eccentric ideas about how to treat cancer, but Anna thinks this guy might be a con man and possibly not even Dutch, and then just as the possibly Dutch guy and her mom are about to get married and Anna is about to start this crazy new treatment regimen involving wheatgrass and low doses of arsenic, the book ends right in the middle of a

I know it's a very *literary* decision and everything and probably part of the

reason I love the book so much, but there is something to recommend a story that *ends*. And if it can't end, then it should at least continue into perpetuity like the adventures of Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem's platoon.

I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to write and this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life really ends and whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, and it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. I'd written, care of his publisher, a dozen letters to Peter Van Houten, each asking for some answers about what happens after the end of the story: whether the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, whether Anna's mother ends up married to him, what happens to Anna's stupid hamster (which her mom hates), whether Anna's friends graduate from high school—all that stuff. But he'd never responded to any of my letters.

AIA was the only book Peter Van Houten had written, and all anyone seemed to know about him was that after the book came out he moved from the United States to the Netherlands and became kind of reclusive. I imagined that he was working on a sequel set in the Netherlands—maybe Anna's mom and the Dutch Tulip Man end up moving there and trying to start a new life. But it had been ten years since *An Imperial Affliction* came out, and Van Houten hadn't published so much as a blog post. I couldn't wait forever.

As I reread that night, I kept getting distracted imagining Augustus Waters reading the same words. I wondered if he'd like it, or if he'd dismiss it as pretentious. Then I remembered my promise to call him after reading *The Price of Dawn*, so I found his number on its title page and texted him.

Price of Dawn review: Too many bodies. Not enough adjectives. How's *AIA*?

He replied a minute later:

As I recall, you promised to CALL when you finished the book, not text.

So I called.

"Hazel Grace," he said upon picking up.

"So have you read it?"

"Well, I haven't finished it. It's six hundred fifty-one pages long and I've had twenty-four hours."

"How far are you?"

"Four fifty-three."

"And?"

“I will withhold judgment until I finish. However, I will say that I’m feeling a bit embarrassed to have given you *The Price of Dawn*.”

“Don’t be. I’m already on *Requiem for Mayhem*.”

“A sparkling addition to the series. So, okay, is the tulip guy a crook? I’m getting a bad vibe from him.”

“No spoilers,” I said.

“If he is anything other than a total gentleman, I’m going to gouge his eyes out.”

“So you’re into it.”

“Withholding judgment! When can I see you?”

“Certainly not until you finish *An Imperial Affliction*.” I enjoyed being coy.

“Then I’d better hang up and start reading.”

“You’d better,” I said, and the line clicked dead without another word.

Flirting was new to me, but I liked it.

•••

The next morning I had Twentieth-Century American Poetry at MCC. This old woman gave a lecture wherein she managed to talk for ninety minutes about Sylvia Plath without ever once quoting a single word of Sylvia Plath.

When I got out of class, Mom was idling at the curb in front of the building.

“Did you just wait here the entire time?” I asked as she hurried around to help me haul my cart and tank into the car.

“No, I picked up the dry cleaning and went to the post office.”

“And then?”

“I have a book to read,” she said.

“And *I’m* the one who needs to get a life.” I smiled, and she tried to smile back, but there was something flimsy in it. After a second, I said, “Wanna go to a movie?”

“Sure. Anything you’ve been wanting to see?”

“Let’s just do the thing where we go and see whatever starts next.” She closed the door for me and walked around to the driver’s side. We drove over to the Castleton theater and watched a 3-D movie about talking gerbils. It was kind of funny, actually.

•••

When I got out of the movie, I had four text messages from Augustus.

Tell me my copy is missing the last twenty pages or something.

Hazel Grace, tell me I have not reached the end of this book.

OH MY GOD DO THEY GET MARRIED OR NOT OH MY GOD
WHAT IS THIS

I guess Anna died and so it just ends? CRUEL. Call me when you can.
Hope all's okay.

So when I got home I went out into the backyard and sat down on this rusting latticed patio chair and called him. It was a cloudy day, typical Indiana: the kind of weather that boxes you in. Our little backyard was dominated by my childhood swing set, which was looking pretty waterlogged and pathetic.

Augustus picked up on the third ring. "Hazel Grace," he said.

"So welcome to the sweet torture of reading *An Imperial*—" I stopped when I heard violent sobbing on the other end of the line. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm grand," Augustus answered. "I am, however, with Isaac, who seems to be decompensating." More wailing. Like the death cries of some injured animal. Gus turned his attention to Isaac. "Dude. Dude. Does Support Group Hazel make this better or worse? Isaac. Focus. On. Me." After a minute, Gus said to me, "Can you meet us at my house in, say, twenty minutes?"

"Sure," I said, and hung up.

...

If you could drive in a straight line, it would only take like five minutes to get from my house to Augustus's house, but you can't drive in a straight line because Holliday Park is between us.

Even though it was a geographic inconvenience, I really liked Holliday Park. When I was a little kid, I would wade in the White River with my dad and there was always this great moment when he would throw me up in the air, just toss me away from him, and I would reach out my arms as I flew and he would reach out his arms, and then we would both see that our arms were not going to touch and no one was going to catch me, and it would kind of scare the shit out of both of us in the best possible way, and then I would legs-flailingly hit the water and then come up for air uninjured and the current would bring me back to him as I said *again, Daddy, again*.

I pulled into the driveway right next to an old black Toyota sedan I figured

was Isaac's car. Carting the tank behind me, I walked up to the door. I knocked. Gus's dad answered.

"Just Hazel," he said. "Nice to see you."

"Augustus said I could come over?"

"Yeah, he and Isaac are in the basement." At which point there was a wail from below. "That would be Isaac," Gus's dad said, and shook his head slowly. "Cindy had to go for a drive. The sound..." he said, drifting off. "Anyway, I guess you're wanted downstairs. Can I carry your, uh, tank?" he asked.

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks, though, Mr. Waters."

"Mark," he said.

I was kind of scared to go down there. Listening to people howl in misery is not among my favorite pastimes. But I went.

"Hazel Grace," Augustus said as he heard my footsteps. "Isaac, Hazel from Support Group is coming downstairs. Hazel, a gentle reminder: Isaac is in the midst of a psychotic episode."

Augustus and Isaac were sitting on the floor in gaming chairs shaped like lazy *Ls*, staring up at a gargantuan television. The screen was split between Isaac's point of view on the left, and Augustus's on the right. They were soldiers fighting in a bombed-out modern city. I recognized the place from *The Price of Dawn*. As I approached, I saw nothing unusual: just two guys sitting in the lightwash of a huge television pretending to kill people.

Only when I got parallel to them did I see Isaac's face. Tears streamed down his reddened cheeks in a continual flow, his face a taut mask of pain. He stared at the screen, not even glancing at me, and howled, all the while pounding away at his controller. "How are you, Hazel?" asked Augustus.

"I'm okay," I said. "Isaac?" No response. Not even the slightest hint that he was aware of my existence. Just the tears flowing down his face onto his black T-shirt.

Augustus glanced away from the screen ever so briefly. "You look nice," he said. I was wearing this just-past-the-knees dress I'd had forever. "Girls think they're only allowed to wear dresses on formal occasions, but I like a woman who says, you know, *I'm going over to see a boy who is having a nervous breakdown, a boy whose connection to the sense of sight itself is tenuous, and gosh dang it, I am going to wear a dress for him.*"

"And yet," I said, "Isaac won't so much as glance over at me. Too in love with Monica, I suppose," which resulted in a catastrophic sob.

"Bit of a touchy subject," Augustus explained. "Isaac, I don't know about you, but I have the vague sense that we are being outflanked." And then back to me, "Isaac and Monica are no longer a going concern, but he doesn't want to

talk about it. He just wants to cry and play *Counterinsurgency 2: The Price of Dawn*.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

“Isaac, I feel a growing concern about our position. If you agree, head over to that power station, and I’ll cover you.” Isaac ran toward a nondescript building while Augustus fired a machine gun wildly in a series of quick bursts, running behind him.

“Anyway,” Augustus said to me, “it doesn’t hurt to *talk* to him. If you have any sage words of feminine advice.”

“I actually think his response is probably appropriate,” I said as a burst of gunfire from Isaac killed an enemy who’d peeked his head out from behind the burned-out husk of a pickup truck.

Augustus nodded at the screen. “Pain demands to be felt,” he said, which was a line from *An Imperial Affliction*. “You’re sure there’s no one behind us?” he asked Isaac. Moments later, tracer bullets started whizzing over their heads. “Oh, goddamn it, Isaac,” Augustus said. “I don’t mean to criticize you in your moment of great weakness, but you’ve allowed us to be outflanked, and now there’s nothing between the terrorists and the school.” Isaac’s character took off running toward the fire, zigging and zagging down a narrow alleyway.

“You could go over the bridge and circle back,” I said, a tactic I knew about thanks to *The Price of Dawn*.

Augustus sighed. “Sadly, the bridge is already under insurgent control due to questionable strategizing by my bereft cohort.”

“Me?” Isaac said, his voice breathy. “Me?! You’re the one who suggested we hole up in the freaking power station.”

Gus turned away from the screen for a second and flashed his crooked smile at Isaac. “I knew you could talk, buddy,” he said. “Now let’s go save some fictional schoolchildren.”

Together, they ran down the alleyway, firing and hiding at the right moments, until they reached this one-story, single-room schoolhouse. They crouched behind a wall across the street and picked off the enemy one by one.

“Why do they want to get into the school?” I asked.

“They want the kids as hostages,” Augustus answered. His shoulders rounded over his controller, slamming buttons, his forearms taut, veins visible. Isaac leaned toward the screen, the controller dancing in his thin-fingered hands. “Get it get it get it,” Augustus said. The waves of terrorists continued, and they mowed down every one, their shooting astonishingly precise, as it had to be, lest they fire into the school.

“Grenade! Grenade!” Augustus shouted as something arced across the

screen, bounced in the doorway of the school, and then rolled against the door.

Isaac dropped his controller in disappointment. “If the bastards can’t take hostages, they just kill them and claim we did it.”

“Cover me!” Augustus said as he jumped out from behind the wall and raced toward the school. Isaac fumbled for his controller and then started firing while the bullets rained down on Augustus, who was shot once and then twice but still ran, Augustus shouting, “*YOU CAN’T KILL MAX MAYHEM!*” and with a final flurry of button combinations, he dove onto the grenade, which detonated beneath him. His dismembered body exploded like a geyser and the screen went red. A throaty voice said, “MISSION FAILURE,” but Augustus seemed to think otherwise as he smiled at his remnants on the screen. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and shoved it between his teeth. “Saved the kids,” he said.

“Temporarily,” I pointed out.

“All salvation is temporary,” Augustus shot back. “I bought them a minute. Maybe that’s the minute that buys them an hour, which is the hour that buys them a year. No one’s gonna buy them forever, Hazel Grace, but my life bought them a minute. And that’s not nothing.”

“Whoa, okay,” I said. “We’re just talking about pixels.”

He shrugged, as if he believed the game might be really real. Isaac was wailing again. Augustus snapped his head back to him. “Another go at the mission, corporal?”

Isaac shook his head no. He leaned over Augustus to look at me and through tightly strung vocal cords said, “She didn’t want to do it after.”

“She didn’t want to dump a blind guy,” I said. He nodded, the tears not like tears so much as a quiet metronome—steady, endless.

“She said she couldn’t handle it,” he told me. “I’m about to lose my eyesight and *she* can’t handle it.”

I was thinking about the word *handle*, and all the unholdable things that get handled. “I’m sorry,” I said.

He wiped his sopping face with a sleeve. Behind his glasses, Isaac’s eyes seemed so big that everything else on his face kind of disappeared and it was just these disembodied floating eyes staring at me—one real, one glass. “It’s unacceptable,” he told me. “It’s totally unacceptable.”

“Well, to be fair,” I said, “I mean, she probably *can’t* handle it. Neither can you, but she doesn’t *have* to handle it. And you do.”

“I kept saying ‘always’ to her today, ‘always always always,’ and she just kept talking over me and not saying it back. It was like I was already gone, you know? ‘Always’ was a promise! How can you just break the promise?”

“Sometimes people don’t understand the promises they’re making when they

make them,” I said.

Isaac shot me a look. “Right, of course. But you keep the promise anyway. That’s what love *is*. Love is keeping the promise anyway. Don’t you believe in true love?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have an answer. But I thought that if true love *did* exist, that was a pretty good definition of it.

“Well, I believe in true love,” Isaac said. “And I love her. And she promised. She *promised me always*.” He stood and took a step toward me. I pushed myself up, thinking he wanted a hug or something, but then he just spun around, like he couldn’t remember why he’d stood up in the first place, and then Augustus and I both saw this rage settle into his face.

“Isaac,” Gus said.

“What?”

“You look a little...Pardon the double entendre, my friend, but there’s something a little worrisome in your eyes.”

Suddenly Isaac started kicking the crap out of his gaming chair, which somersaulted back toward Gus’s bed. “Here we go,” said Augustus. Isaac chased after the chair and kicked it again. “Yes,” Augustus said. “Get it. Kick the shit out of that chair!” Isaac kicked the chair again, until it bounced against Gus’s bed, and then he grabbed one of the pillows and started slamming it against the wall between the bed and the trophy shelf above.

Augustus looked over at me, cigarette still in his mouth, and half smiled. “I can’t stop thinking about that book.”

“I know, right?”

“He never said what happens to the other characters?”

“No,” I told him. Isaac was still throttling the wall with the pillow. “He moved to Amsterdam, which makes me think maybe he is writing a sequel featuring the Dutch Tulip Man, but he hasn’t published anything. He’s never interviewed. He doesn’t seem to be online. I’ve written him a bunch of letters asking what happens to everyone, but he never responds. So...yeah.” I stopped talking because Augustus didn’t appear to be listening. Instead, he was squinting at Isaac.

“Hold on,” he mumbled to me. He walked over to Isaac and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Dude, pillows don’t break. Try something that breaks.”

Isaac reached for a basketball trophy from the shelf above the bed and then held it over his head as if waiting for permission. “Yes,” Augustus said. “Yes!” The trophy smashed against the floor, the plastic basketball player’s arm splintering off, still grasping its ball. Isaac stomped on the trophy. “Yes!” Augustus said. “Get it!”

And then back to me, “I’ve been looking for a way to tell my father that I actually sort of hate basketball, and I think we’ve found it.” The trophies came down one after the other, and Isaac stomped on them and screamed while Augustus and I stood a few feet away, bearing witness to the madness. The poor, mangled bodies of plastic basketballers littered the carpeted ground: here, a ball palmed by a disembodied hand; there, two torsoless legs caught midjump. Isaac kept attacking the trophies, jumping on them with both feet, screaming, breathless, sweaty, until finally he collapsed on top of the jagged trophic remnants.

Augustus stepped toward him and looked down. “Feel better?” he asked.

“No,” Isaac mumbled, his chest heaving.

“That’s the thing about pain,” Augustus said, and then glanced back at me. “It demands to be felt.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I did not speak to Augustus again for about a week. I had called him on the Night of the Broken Trophies, so per tradition it was his turn to call. But he didn't. Now, it wasn't as if I held my phone in my sweaty hand all day, staring at it while wearing my Special Yellow Dress, patiently waiting for my gentleman caller to live up to his sobriquet. I went about my life: I met Kaitlyn and her (cute but frankly not Augustinian) boyfriend for coffee one afternoon; I ingested my recommended daily allowance of Phalanxifor; I attended classes three mornings that week at MCC; and every night, I sat down to dinner with my mom and dad.

Sunday night, we had pizza with green peppers and broccoli. We were seated around our little circular table in the kitchen when my phone started singing, but I wasn't allowed to check it because we have a strict no-phones-during-dinner rule.

So I ate a little while Mom and Dad talked about this earthquake that had just happened in Papua New Guinea. They met in the Peace Corps in Papua New Guinea, and so whenever anything happened there, even something terrible, it was like all of a sudden they were not large sedentary creatures, but the young and idealistic and self-sufficient and rugged people they had once been, and their rapture was such that they didn't even glance over at me as I ate faster than I'd ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed and ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs were again swimming in a rising pool of fluid. I banished the thought as best I could. I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple weeks. If something was wrong, I'd find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now and then.

And yet still I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying.

Finally I finished and said, “Can I be excused?” and they hardly even paused from their conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of Guinean infrastructure. I grabbed my phone from my purse on the kitchen counter and checked my recent calls. *Augustus Waters*.

I went out the back door into the twilight. I could see the swing set, and I thought about walking out there and swinging while I talked to him, but it seemed pretty far away given that *eating* tired me.

Instead, I lay down in the grass on the patio’s edge, looked up at Orion, the only constellation I could recognize, and called him.

“Hazel Grace,” he said.

“Hi,” I said. “How are you?”

“Grand,” he said. “I have been wanting to call you on a nearly minutely basis, but I have been waiting until I could form a coherent thought in re *An Imperial Affliction*.” (He said “in re.” He really did. That boy.)

“And?” I said.

“I think it’s, like. Reading it, I just kept feeling like, like.”

“Like?” I asked, teasing him.

“Like it was a gift?” he said askingly. “Like you’d given me something important.”

“Oh,” I said quietly.

“That’s cheesy,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I said. “No. Don’t apologize.”

“But it doesn’t end.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Torture. I totally *get it*, like, I get that she died or whatever.”

“Right, I assume so,” I said.

“And okay, fair enough, but there is this unwritten contract between author and reader and I think not ending your book kind of violates that contract.”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling defensive of Peter Van Houten. “That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do—God, I do really want to know what happens to everyone else. That’s what I asked him in my letters. But he, yeah, he never answers.”

“Right. You said he is a recluse?”

“Correct.”

“Impossible to track down.”

“Correct.”

“Utterly unreachable,” Augustus said.

“Unfortunately so,” I said.

“Dear Mr. Waters,” he answered. “I am writing to thank you for your electronic correspondence, received via Ms. Vliegenthart this sixth of April, from the United States of America, insofar as geography can be said to exist in our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity.”

“Augustus, what the hell?”

“He has an assistant,” Augustus said. “Lidewij Vliegenthart. I found her. I emailed her. She gave him the email. He responded via her email account.”

“Okay, okay. Keep reading.”

“My response is being written with ink and paper in the glorious tradition of our ancestors and then transcribed by Ms. Vliegenthart into a series of 1s and 0s to travel through the insipid web which has lately ensnared our species, so I apologize for any errors or omissions that may result.

“Given the entertainment bacchanalia at the disposal of young men and women of your generation, I am grateful to anyone anywhere who sets aside the hours necessary to read my little book. But I am particularly indebted to you, sir, both for your kind words about *An Imperial Affliction* and for taking the time to tell me that the book, and here I quote you directly, “meant a great deal” to you.

“This comment, however, leads me to wonder: What do you mean by *meant*? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate, Augustus? A ringing alarm? A call to arms? A morphine drip? Of course, like all interrogation of the universe, this line of inquiry inevitably reduces us to asking what it means to be human and whether—to borrow a phrase from the angst-encumbered sixteen-year-olds you no doubt revile—*there is a point to it all*.

“I fear there is not, my friend, and that you would receive scant encouragement from further encounters with my writing. But to answer your question: No, I have not written anything else, nor will I. I do not feel that continuing to share my thoughts with readers would benefit either them or me. Thank you again for your generous email.

“Yours most sincerely, Peter Van Houten, via Lidewij Vliegenthart.”

“Wow,” I said. “Are you making this up?”

“Hazel Grace, could I, with my meager intellectual capacities, make up a letter from Peter Van Houten featuring phrases like ‘our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity’?”

“You could not,” I allowed. “Can I, can I have the email address?”

“Of course,” Augustus said, like it was not the best gift ever.

•••

I spent the next two hours writing an email to Peter Van Houten. It seemed to get worse each time I rewrote it, but I couldn't stop myself.

Dear Mr. Peter Van Houten
(c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart),

My name is Hazel Grace Lancaster. My friend Augustus Waters, who read *An Imperial Affliction* at my recommendation, just received an email from you at this address. I hope you will not mind that Augustus shared that email with me.

Mr. Van Houten, I understand from your email to Augustus that you are not planning to publish any more books. In a way, I am disappointed, but I'm also relieved: I never have to worry whether your next book will live up to the magnificent perfection of the original. As a three-year survivor of Stage IV cancer, I can tell you that you got everything right in *An Imperial Affliction*. Or at least you got *me* right. Your book has a way of telling me what I'm feeling before I even feel it, and I've reread it dozens of times.

I wonder, though, if you would mind answering a couple questions I have about what happens after the end of the novel. I understand the book ends because Anna dies or becomes too ill to continue writing it, but I would really like to know what happens to Anna's mom—whether she married the Dutch Tulip Man, whether she ever has another child, and whether she stays at 917 W. Temple, etc. Also, is the Dutch Tulip Man a fraud or does he really love them? What happens to Anna's friends—particularly Claire and Jake? Do they stay together? And lastly—I realize that this is the kind of deep and thoughtful question you always hoped your readers would ask—what becomes of Sisyphus the Hamster? These questions have haunted me for years—and I don't know how long I have left to get answers to them.

I know these are not important literary questions and that your book is full of important literary questions, but I would just really like to know.

And of course, if you ever do decide to write anything else, even if you don't want to publish it, I'd love to read it. Frankly, I'd read your grocery lists.

Yours with great admiration,
Hazel Grace Lancaster

(age 16)

After I sent it, I called Augustus back, and we stayed up late talking about *An Imperial Affliction*, and I read him the Emily Dickinson poem that Van Houten had used for the title, and he said I had a good voice for reading and didn't pause too long for the line breaks, and then he told me that the sixth *Price of Dawn* book, *The Blood Approves*, begins with a quote from a poem. It took him a minute to find the book, but finally he read the quote to me. "Say your life broke down. The last good kiss / You had was years ago."

"Not bad," I said. "Bit pretentious. I believe Max Mayhem would refer to that as 'sissy shit.'"

"Yes, with his teeth gritted, no doubt. God, Mayhem grits his teeth a lot in these books. He's definitely going to get TMJ, if he survives all this combat." And then after a second, Gus asked, "When was the last good kiss you had?"

I thought about it. My kissing—all prediagnosis—had been uncomfortable and slobbery, and on some level it always felt like kids playing at being grown. But of course it had been a while. "Years ago," I said finally. "You?"

"I had a few good kisses with my ex-girlfriend, Caroline Mathers."

"Years ago?"

"The last one was just less than a year ago."

"What happened?"

"During the kiss?"

"No, with you and Caroline."

"Oh," he said. And then after a second, "Caroline is no longer suffering from personhood."

"Oh," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said. I'd known plenty of dead people, of course. But I'd never dated one. I couldn't even imagine it, really.

"Not your fault, Hazel Grace. We're all just side effects, right?"

"Barnacles on the container ship of consciousness," I said, quoting *AIA*.

"Okay," he said. "I gotta go to sleep. It's almost one."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he said.

I giggled and said, "Okay." And then the line was quiet but not dead. I almost felt like he was there in my room with me, but in a way it was better, like I was not in my room and he was not in his, but instead we were together in some invisible and tenuous third space that could only be visited on the phone.

“Okay,” he said after forever. “Maybe *okay* will be our *always*.”

“Okay,” I said.

It was Augustus who finally hung up.

...

Peter Van Houten replied to Augustus’s email four hours after he sent it, but two days later, Van Houten still hadn’t replied to me. Augustus assured me it was because my email was better and required a more thoughtful response, that Van Houten was busy writing answers to my questions, and that brilliant prose took time. But still I worried.

On Wednesday during American Poetry for Dummies 101, I got a text from Augustus:

Isaac out of surgery. It went well. He’s officially NEC.

NEC meant “no evidence of cancer.” A second text came a few seconds later.

I mean, he’s blind. So that’s unfortunate.

That afternoon, Mom consented to loan me the car so I could drive down to Memorial to check in on Isaac.

I found my way to his room on the fifth floor, knocking even though the door was open, and a woman’s voice said, “Come in.” It was a nurse who was doing something to the bandages on Isaac’s eyes. “Hey, Isaac,” I said.

And he said, “Mon?”

“Oh, no. Sorry. No, it’s, um, Hazel. Um, Support Group Hazel? Night-of-the-broken-trophies Hazel?”

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but CLEARLY NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Hazel. Come over here so I can examine your face with my hands and see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could.”

“He’s kidding,” the nurse said.

“Yes,” I said. “I realize.”

I took a few steps toward the bed. I pulled a chair up and sat down, took his hand. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said back. Then nothing for a while.

“How you feeling?” I asked.

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?” I asked. I looked at his hand because I didn’t want to look at his face blindfolded by bandages. Isaac bit his nails, and I could see some blood on the corners of a couple of his cuticles.

“She hasn’t even visited,” he said. “I mean, we were together fourteen months. Fourteen months is a long time. God, that hurts.” Isaac let go of my hand to fumble for his pain pump, which you hit to give yourself a wave of narcotics.

The nurse, having finished the bandage change, stepped back. “It’s only been a day, Isaac,” she said, vaguely condescending. “You’ve gotta give yourself time to heal. And fourteen months *isn’t* that long, not in the scheme of things. You’re just getting started, buddy. You’ll see.”

The nurse left. “Is she gone?”

I nodded, then realized he couldn’t see me nod. “Yeah,” I said.

“I’ll *see*? Really? Did she seriously say that?”

“Qualities of a Good Nurse: Go,” I said.

“1. Doesn’t pun on your disability,” Isaac said.

“2. Gets blood on the first try,” I said.

“Seriously, that is huge. I mean is this my freaking arm or a dartboard? 3. No condescending voice.”

“How are you doing, sweetie?” I asked, cloying. “I’m going to stick you with a needle now. There might be a little ouchie.”

“Is my wittle fuffywump sickywicky?” he answered. And then after a second, “Most of them are good, actually. I just want the hell out of this place.”

“This place as in the hospital?”

“That, too,” he said. His mouth tightened. I could see the pain. “Honestly, I think a hell of a lot more about Monica than my eye. Is that crazy? That’s crazy.”

“It’s a little crazy,” I allowed.

“But I believe in true love, you know? I don’t believe that everybody gets to keep their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody *should* have true love, and it should last at least as long as your life does.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I just wish the whole thing hadn’t happened sometimes. The whole cancer thing.” His speech was slowing down. The medicine working.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Gus was here earlier. He was here when I woke up. Took off school. He...” His head turned to the side a little. “It’s better,” he said quietly.

“The pain?” I asked. He nodded a little.

“Good,” I said. And then, like the bitch I am: “You were saying something

about Gus?” But he was gone.

I went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop and asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the strongest.

“They all smell the same. They get sprayed with Super Scent,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, they just squirt ’em with it.”

I opened the cooler to her left and sniffed at a dozen roses, and then leaned over some carnations. Same smell, and lots of it. The carnations were cheaper, so I grabbed a dozen yellow ones. They cost fourteen dollars. I went back into the room; his mom was there, holding his hand. She was young and really pretty.

“Are you a friend?” she asked, which struck me as one of those unintentionally broad and unanswerable questions.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “I’m from Support Group. These are for him.”

She took them and placed them in her lap. “Do you know Monica?” she asked.

I shook my head no.

“Well, he’s sleeping,” she said.

“Yeah. I talked to him a little before, when they were doing the bandages or whatever.”

“I hated leaving him for that but I had to pick up Graham at school,” she said.

“He did okay,” I told her. She nodded. “I should let him sleep.” She nodded again. I left.

...

The next morning I woke up early and checked my email first thing.

lidewij.vliegenthart@gmail.com had finally replied.

Dear Ms. Lancaster,

I fear your faith has been misplaced—but then, faith usually is. I cannot answer your questions, at least not in writing, because to write out such answers would constitute a sequel to *An Imperial Affliction*, which you might publish or otherwise share on the network that has replaced the brains of your generation. There is the telephone, but then you might record the conversation. Not that I don’t trust you, of course, but I don’t

trust you. Alas, dear Hazel, I could never answer such questions except in person, and you are there, while I am here.

That noted, I must confess that the unexpected receipt of your correspondence via Ms. Vliegenthart has delighted me: What a wondrous thing to know that I made something useful to you—even if that book seems so distant from me that I feel it was written by a different man altogether. (The author of that novel was so thin, so frail, so comparatively optimistic!)

Should you find yourself in Amsterdam, however, please do pay a visit at your leisure. I am usually home. I would even allow you a peek at my grocery lists.

Yours most sincerely,
Peter Van Houten
c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart

“WHAT?!” I shouted aloud. “WHAT IS THIS LIFE?”

Mom ran in. “What’s wrong?”

“*Nothing*,” I assured her.

Still nervous, Mom knelt down to check on Philip to ensure he was condensing oxygen appropriately. I imagined sitting at a sun-drenched café with Peter Van Houten as he leaned across the table on his elbows, speaking in a soft voice so no one else would hear the truth of what happened to the characters I’d spent years thinking about. He’d said he couldn’t tell me *except in person*, and then *invited me to Amsterdam*. I explained this to Mom, and then said, “I have to go.”

“Hazel, I love you, and you know I’d do anything for you, but we don’t—we don’t have the money for international travel, and the expense of getting equipment over there—love, it’s just not—”

“Yeah,” I said, cutting her off. I realized I’d been silly even to consider it.

“Don’t worry about it.” But she looked worried.

“It’s really important to you, yeah?” she asked, sitting down, a hand on my calf.

“It would be pretty amazing,” I said, “to be the only person who knows what happens besides him.”

“That would be amazing,” she said. “I’ll talk to your father.”

“No, don’t,” I said. “Just, seriously, don’t spend any money on it please. I’ll think of something.”

It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with Phalanxifor copays, and Mom couldn't work because she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering Over Me. I didn't want to put them even further into debt.

I told Mom I wanted to call Augustus to get her out of the room, because I couldn't handle her I-can't-make-my-daughter's-dreams-come-true sad face.

Augustus Waters-style, I read him the letter in lieu of saying hello.

"Wow," he said.

"I know, right?" I said. "How am I going to get to Amsterdam?"

"Do you have a Wish?" he asked, referring to this organization, The Genie Foundation, which is in the business of granting sick kids one wish.

"No," I said. "I used my Wish pre-Miracle."

"What'd you do?"

I sighed loudly. "I was thirteen," I said.

"Not Disney," he said.

I said nothing.

"You did not go to Disney World."

I said nothing.

"Hazel GRACE!" he shouted. "You *did not* use your one dying Wish to go to Disney World with your parents."

"Also Epcot Center," I mumbled.

"Oh, my God," Augustus said. "I can't believe I have a crush on a girl with such cliché wishes."

"I was *thirteen*," I said again, although of course I was only thinking *crush crush crush crush*. I was flattered but changed the subject immediately. "Shouldn't you be in school or something?"

"I'm playing hooky to hang out with Isaac, but he's sleeping, so I'm in the atrium doing geometry."

"How's he doing?" I asked.

"I can't tell if he's just not ready to confront the seriousness of his disability or if he really does care more about getting dumped by Monica, but he won't talk about anything else."

"Yeah," I said. "How long's he gonna be in the hospital?"

"Few days. Then he goes to this rehab or something for a while, but he gets to sleep at home, I think."

"Sucks," I said.

"I see his mom. I gotta go."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he answered. I could hear his crooked smile.

...

On Saturday, my parents and I went down to the farmers' market in Broad Ripple. It was sunny, a rarity for Indiana in April, and everyone at the farmers' market was wearing short sleeves even though the temperature didn't quite justify it. We Hoosiers are excessively optimistic about summer. Mom and I sat next to each other on a bench across from a goat-soap maker, a man in overalls who had to explain to every single person who walked by that yes, they were his goats, and no, goat soap does not smell like goats.

My phone rang. "Who is it?" Mom asked before I could even check.

"I don't know," I said. It was Gus, though.

"Are you currently at your house?" he asked.

"Um, no," I said.

"That was a trick question. I knew the answer, because I am currently at your house."

"Oh. Um. Well, we are on our way, I guess?"

"Awesome. See you soon."

...

Augustus Waters was sitting on the front step as we pulled into the driveway. He was holding a bouquet of bright orange tulips just beginning to bloom, and wearing an Indiana Pacers jersey under his fleece, a wardrobe choice that seemed utterly out of character, although it did look quite good on him. He pushed himself up off the stoop, handed me the tulips, and asked, "Wanna go on a picnic?" I nodded, taking the flowers.

My dad walked up behind me and shook Gus's hand.

"Is that a Rik Smits jersey?" my dad asked.

"Indeed it is."

"God, I loved that guy," Dad said, and immediately they were engrossed in a basketball conversation I could not (and did not want to) join, so I took my tulips inside.

"Do you want me to put those in a vase?" Mom asked as I walked in, a huge smile on her face.

"No, it's okay," I told her. If we'd put them in a vase in the living room, they would have been everyone's flowers. I wanted them to be my flowers.

I went to my room but didn't change. I brushed my hair and teeth and put on some lip gloss and the smallest possible dab of perfume. I kept looking at the flowers. They were *aggressively* orange, almost too orange to be pretty. I didn't

have a vase or anything, so I took my toothbrush out of my toothbrush holder and filled it halfway with water and left the flowers there in the bathroom.

When I reentered my room, I could hear people talking, so I sat on the edge of my bed for a while and listened through my hollow bedroom door:

Dad: “So you met Hazel at Support Group.”

Augustus: “Yes, sir. This is a lovely house you’ve got. I like your artwork.”

Mom: “Thank you, Augustus.”

Dad: “You’re a survivor yourself, then?”

Augustus: “I am. I didn’t cut this fella off for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of it, although it is an excellent weight-loss strategy. Legs are heavy!”

Dad: “And how’s your health now?”

Augustus: “NEC for fourteen months.”

Mom: “That’s wonderful. The treatment options these days—it really is remarkable.”

Augustus: “I know. I’m lucky.”

Dad: “You have to understand that Hazel is still sick, Augustus, and will be for the rest of her life. She’ll want to keep up with you, but her lungs—”

At which point I emerged, silencing him.

“So where are you going?” asked Mom. Augustus stood up and leaned over to her, whispering the answer, and then held a finger to his lips. “Shh,” he told her. “It’s a secret.”

Mom smiled. “You’ve got your phone?” she asked me. I held it up as evidence, tilted my oxygen cart onto its front wheels, and started walking. Augustus hustled over, offering me his arm, which I took. My fingers wrapped around his biceps.

Unfortunately, he insisted upon driving, so the surprise could be a surprise. As we shuddered toward our destination, I said, “You nearly charmed the pants off my mom.”

“Yeah, and your dad is a Smits fan, which helps. You think they liked me?”

“Sure they did. Who cares, though? They’re just parents.”

“They’re *your* parents,” he said, glancing over at me. “Plus, I like being liked. Is that crazy?”

“Well, you don’t have to rush to hold doors open or smother me in compliments for me to like you.” He slammed the brakes, and I flew forward hard enough that my breathing felt weird and tight. I thought of the PET scan. *Don’t worry. Worry is useless.* I worried anyway.

We burned rubber, roaring away from a stop sign before turning left onto the misnomered Grandview (there’s a view of a golf course, I guess, but nothing *grand*). The only thing I could think of in this direction was the cemetery.

Augustus reached into the center console, flipped open a full pack of cigarettes, and removed one.

“Do you ever throw them away?” I asked him.

“One of the many benefits of not smoking is that packs of cigarettes last *forever*,” he answered. “I’ve had this one for almost a year. A few of them are broken near the filters, but I think this pack could easily get me to my eighteenth birthday.” He held the filter between his fingers, then put it in his mouth. “So, okay,” he said. “Okay. Name some things that you never see in Indianapolis.”

“Um. Skinny adults,” I said.

He laughed. “Good. Keep going.”

“Mmm, beaches. Family-owned restaurants. Topography.”

“All excellent examples of things we lack. Also, culture.”

“Yeah, we are a bit short on culture,” I said, finally realizing where he was taking me. “Are we going to the museum?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Oh, are we going to that park or whatever?”

Gus looked a bit deflated. “Yes, we are going to that park or whatever,” he said. “You’ve figured it out, haven’t you?”

“Um, figured what out?”

“Nothing.”

...

There was this park behind the museum where a bunch of artists had made big sculptures. I’d heard about it but had never visited. We drove past the museum and parked right next to this basketball court filled with huge blue and red steel arcs that imagined the path of a bouncing ball.

We walked down what passes for a hill in Indianapolis to this clearing where kids were climbing all over this huge oversize skeleton sculpture. The bones were each about waist high, and the thighbone was longer than me. It looked like a child’s drawing of a skeleton rising up out of the ground.

My shoulder hurt. I worried the cancer had spread from my lungs. I imagined the tumor metastasizing into my own bones, boring holes into my skeleton, a slithering eel of insidious intent. “*Funky Bones*,” Augustus said. “Created by Joep Van Lieshout.”

“Sounds Dutch.”

“He is,” Gus said. “So is Rik Smits. So are tulips.” Gus stopped in the middle of the clearing with the bones right in front of us and slipped his backpack off one shoulder, then the other. He unzipped it, producing an orange

blanket, a pint of orange juice, and some sandwiches wrapped in plastic wrap with the crusts cut off.

“What’s with all the orange?” I asked, still not wanting to let myself imagine that all this would lead to Amsterdam.

“National color of the Netherlands, of course. You remember William of Orange and everything?”

“He wasn’t on the GED test.” I smiled, trying to contain my excitement.

“Sandwich?” he asked.

“Let me guess,” I said.

“Dutch cheese. And tomato. The tomatoes are from Mexico. Sorry.”

“You’re always such a *disappointment*, Augustus. Couldn’t you have at least gotten orange tomatoes?”

He laughed, and we ate our sandwiches in silence, watching the kids play on the sculpture. I couldn’t very well *ask* him about it, so I just sat there surrounded by Dutchness, feeling awkward and hopeful.

In the distance, soaked in the unblemished sunlight so rare and precious in our hometown, a gaggle of kids made a skeleton into a playground, jumping back and forth among the prosthetic bones.

“Two things I love about this sculpture,” Augustus said. He was holding the unlit cigarette between his fingers, flicking at it as if to get rid of the ash. He placed it back in his mouth. “First, the bones are just far enough apart that if you’re a kid, you *cannot resist the urge* to jump between them. Like, you just *have* to jump from rib cage to skull. Which means that, second, the sculpture essentially *forces children to play on bones*. The symbolic resonances are endless, Hazel Grace.”

“You do love symbols,” I said, hoping to steer the conversation back toward the many symbols of the Netherlands at our picnic.

“Right, about that. You are probably wondering why you are eating a bad cheese sandwich and drinking orange juice and why I am wearing the jersey of a Dutchman who played a sport I have come to loathe.”

“It has crossed my mind,” I said.

“Hazel Grace, like so many children before you—and I say this with great affection—you spent your Wish hastily, with little care for the consequences. The Grim Reaper was staring you in the face and the fear of dying with your Wish still in your proverbial pocket, ungranted, led you to rush toward the first Wish you could think of, and you, like so many others, chose the cold and artificial pleasures of the theme park.”

“I actually had a great time on that trip. I met Goofy and Minn—”

“I am in the midst of a soliloquy! I wrote this out and memorized it and if

you interrupt me I will completely screw it up,” Augustus interrupted. “Please to be eating your sandwich and listening.” (The sandwich was inedibly dry, but I smiled and took a bite anyway.) “Okay, where was I?”

“The artificial pleasures.”

He returned the cigarette to its pack. “Right, the cold and artificial pleasures of the theme park. But let me submit that the real heroes of the Wish Factory are the young men and women who wait like Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot and good Christian girls wait for marriage. These young heroes wait stoically and without complaint for their one true Wish to come along. Sure, it may never come along, but at least they can rest easily in the grave knowing that they’ve done their little part to preserve the integrity of the Wish as an idea.

“But then again, maybe it *will* come along: Maybe you’ll realize that your one true Wish is to visit the brilliant Peter Van Houten in his Amsterdamian exile, and you will be glad indeed to have saved your Wish.”

Augustus stopped speaking long enough that I figured the soliloquy was over. “But I didn’t save my Wish,” I said.

“Ah,” he said. And then, after what felt like a practiced pause, he added, “But I saved mine.”

“Really?” I was surprised that Augustus was Wish-eligible, what with being still in school and a year into remission. You had to be pretty sick for the Genies to hook you up with a Wish.

“I got it in exchange for the leg,” he explained. There was all this light on his face; he had to squint to look at me, which made his nose crinkle adorably.

“Now, I’m not going to *give* you my Wish or anything. But I also have an interest in meeting Peter Van Houten, and it wouldn’t make sense to meet him without the girl who introduced me to his book.”

“It definitely wouldn’t,” I said.

“So I talked to the Genies, and they are in total agreement. They said Amsterdam is lovely in the beginning of May. They proposed leaving May third and returning May seventh.”

“Augustus, really?”

He reached over and touched my cheek and for a moment I thought he might kiss me. My body tensed, and I think he saw it, because he pulled his hand away.

“Augustus,” I said. “Really. You don’t have to do this.”

“Sure I do,” he said. “I found my Wish.”

“God, you’re the best,” I told him.

“I bet you say that to all the boys who finance your international travel,” he answered.

CHAPTER SIX

Mom was folding my laundry while watching this TV show called *The View* when I got home. I told her that the tulips and the Dutch artist and everything were all because Augustus was using his Wish to take me to Amsterdam. “That’s too much,” she said, shaking her head. “We can’t accept that from a virtual stranger.”

“He’s not a stranger. He’s easily my second best friend.”

“Behind Kaitlyn?”

“Behind you,” I said. It was true, but I’d mostly said it because I wanted to go to Amsterdam.

“I’ll ask Dr. Maria,” she said after a moment.

...

Dr. Maria said I couldn’t go to Amsterdam without an adult intimately familiar with my case, which more or less meant either Mom or Dr. Maria herself. (My dad understood my cancer the way I did: in the vague and incomplete way people understand electrical circuits and ocean tides. But my mom knew more about differentiated thyroid carcinoma in adolescents than most oncologists.)

“So you’ll come,” I said. “The Genies will pay for it. The Genies are loaded.”

“But your father,” she said. “He would miss us. It wouldn’t be fair to him, and he can’t get time off work.”

“Are you kidding? You don’t think Dad would enjoy a few days of watching TV shows that are not about aspiring models and ordering pizza every night, using paper towels as plates so he doesn’t have to do the dishes?”

Mom laughed. Finally, she started to get excited, typing tasks into her phone: She’d have to call Gus’s parents and talk to the Genies about my medical needs and do they have a hotel yet and what are the best guidebooks and we should do

our research if we only have three days, and so on. I kind of had a headache, so I downed a couple Advil and decided to take a nap.

But I ended up just lying in bed and replaying the whole picnic with Augustus. I couldn't stop thinking about the little moment when I'd tensed up as he touched me. The gentle familiarity felt wrong, somehow. I thought maybe it was how orchestrated the whole thing had been: Augustus was amazing, but he'd overdone everything at the picnic, right down to the sandwiches that were metaphorically resonant but tasted terrible and the memorized soliloquy that prevented conversation. It all felt Romantic, but not romantic.

But the truth is that I had never wanted him to kiss me, not in the way you are supposed to want these things. I mean, he was gorgeous. I was attracted to him. I thought about him *in that way*, to borrow a phrase from the middle school vernacular. But the actual touch, the realized touch...it was all wrong.

Then I found myself worrying I would *have* to make out with him to get to Amsterdam, which is not the kind of thing you want to be thinking, because (a) It shouldn't've even been a *question* whether I wanted to kiss him, and (b) Kissing someone so that you can get a free trip is perilously close to full-on hooking, and I have to confess that while I did not fancy myself a particularly good person, I never thought my first real sexual action would be prostitutional.

But then again, he hadn't tried to kiss me; he'd only touched my face, which is not even *sexual*. It was not a move designed to elicit arousal, but it was certainly a designed move, because Augustus Waters was no improviser. So what had he been trying to convey? And why hadn't I wanted to accept it?

At some point, I realized I was Kaitlyning the encounter, so I decided to text Kaitlyn and ask for some advice. She called immediately.

"I have a boy problem," I said.

"DELICIOUS," Kaitlyn responded. I told her all about it, complete with the awkward face touching, leaving out only Amsterdam and Augustus's name.

"You're sure he's hot?" she asked when I was finished.

"Pretty sure," I said.

"Athletic?"

"Yeah, he used to play basketball for North Central."

"Wow. How'd you meet him?"

"This hideous Support Group."

"Huh," Kaitlyn said. "Out of curiosity, how many legs does this guy have?"

"Like, 1.4," I said, smiling. Basketball players were famous in Indiana, and although Kaitlyn didn't go to North Central, her social connectivity was endless.

"Augustus Waters," she said.

"Um, maybe?"

“Oh, my God. I’ve seen him at parties. The things I would do to that boy. I mean, not now that I know you’re interested in him. But, oh, sweet holy Lord, I would ride that one-legged pony all the way around the corral.”

“Kaitlyn,” I said.

“Sorry. Do you think you’d have to be on top?”

“Kaitlyn,” I said.

“What were we talking about. Right, you and Augustus Waters. Maybe...are you gay?”

“I don’t think so? I mean, I definitely like him.”

“Does he have ugly hands? Sometimes beautiful people have ugly hands.”

“No, he has kind of amazing hands.”

“Hmm,” she said.

“Hmm,” I said.

After a second, Kaitlyn said, “Remember Derek? He broke up with me last week because he’d decided there was something fundamentally incompatible about us deep down and that we’d only get hurt more if we played it out. He called it *preemptive dumping*. So maybe you have this premonition that there is something fundamentally incompatible and you’re preempting the preemption.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“I’m just thinking out loud here.”

“Sorry about Derek.”

“Oh, I got over it, darling. It took me a sleeve of Girl Scout Thin Mints and forty minutes to get over that boy.”

I laughed. “Well, thanks, Kaitlyn.”

“In the event you do hook up with him, I expect lascivious details.”

“But of course,” I said, and then Kaitlyn made a kissy sound into the phone and I said, “Bye,” and she hung up.

...

I realized while listening to Kaitlyn that I didn’t have a premonition of hurting him. I had a postmonition.

I pulled out my laptop and looked up Caroline Mathers. The physical similarities were striking: same steroidally round face, same nose, same approximate overall body shape. But her eyes were dark brown (mine are green) and her complexion was much darker—Italian or something.

Thousands of people—literally thousands—had left condolence messages for her. It was an endless scroll of people who missed her, so many that it took me an hour of clicking to get past the *I’m sorry you’re dead* wall posts to the *I’m*

praying for you wall posts. She'd died a year ago of brain cancer. I was able to click through to some of her pictures. Augustus was in a bunch of the earlier ones: pointing with a thumbs-up to the jagged scar across her bald skull; arm in arm at Memorial Hospital's playground, with their backs facing the camera; kissing while Caroline held the camera out, so you could only see their noses and closed eyes.

The most recent pictures were all of her before, when she was healthy, uploaded postmortem by friends: a beautiful girl, wide-hipped and curvy, with long, straight deadblack hair falling over her face. My healthy self looked very little like her healthy self. But our cancer selves might've been sisters. No wonder he'd stared at me the first time he saw me.

I kept clicking back to this one wall post, written two months ago, nine months after she died, by one of her friends. *We all miss you so much. It just never ends. It feels like we were all wounded in your battle, Caroline. I miss you. I love you.*

After a while, Mom and Dad announced it was time for dinner. I shut down the computer and got up, but I couldn't get the wall post out of my mind, and for some reason it made me nervous and unhungry.

I kept thinking about my shoulder, which hurt, and also I still had the headache, but maybe only because I'd been thinking about a girl who'd died of brain cancer. I kept telling myself to compartmentalize, to be here now at the circular table (arguably too large in diameter for three people and definitely too large for two) with this soggy broccoli and a black-bean burger that all the ketchup in the world could not adequately moisten. I told myself that imagining a met in my brain or my shoulder would not affect the invisible reality going on inside of me, and that therefore all such thoughts were wasted moments in a life composed of a definitionally finite set of such moments. I even tried to tell myself to live my best life today.

For the longest time I couldn't figure out why something a stranger had written on the Internet to a different (and deceased) stranger was bothering me so much and making me worry that there was something inside my brain—which really did hurt, although I knew from years of experience that pain is a blunt and nonspecific diagnostic instrument.

Because there had not been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea that day, my parents were all hyperfocused on me, and so I could not hide this flash flood of anxiety.

"Is everything all right?" asked Mom as I ate.

"Uh-huh," I said. I took a bite of burger. Swallowed. Tried to say something that a normal person whose brain was not drowning in panic would say. "Is there

broccoli in the burgers?”

“A little,” Dad said. “Pretty exciting that you might go to Amsterdam.”

“Yeah,” I said. I tried not to think about the word *wounded*, which of course is a way of thinking about it.

“Hazel,” Mom said. “Where are you right now?”

“Just thinking, I guess,” I said.

“Twitterpated,” my dad said, smiling.

“I am not a bunny, and I am not in love with Gus Waters or anyone,” I answered, way too defensively. *Wounded*. Like Caroline Mathers had been a bomb and when she blew up everyone around her was left with embedded shrapnel.

Dad asked me if I was working on anything for school. “I’ve got some very advanced Algebra homework,” I told him. “So advanced that I couldn’t possibly explain it to a layperson.”

“And how’s your friend Isaac?”

“Blind,” I said.

“You’re being very teenagery today,” Mom said. She seemed annoyed about it.

“Isn’t this what you wanted, Mom? For me to be teenagery?”

“Well, not necessarily *this* kinda teenagery, but of course your father and I are excited to see you become a young woman, making friends, going on dates.”

“I’m not going on dates,” I said. “I don’t want to go on dates with anyone. It’s a terrible idea and a huge waste of time and—”

“Honey,” my mom said. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m like. Like. I’m like a *grenade*, Mom. I’m a grenade and at some point I’m going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay?”

My dad tilted his head a little to the side, like a scolded puppy.

“I’m a grenade,” I said again. “I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there’s nothing I can do about hurting you; you’re too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I’m not depressed. I don’t need to get out more. And I can’t be a regular teenager, because I’m a grenade.”

“Hazel,” Dad said, and then choked up. He cried a lot, my dad.

“I’m going to go to my room and read for a while, okay? I’m fine. I really am fine; I just want to go read for a while.”

I started out trying to read this novel I’d been assigned, but we lived in a tragically thin-walled home, so I could hear much of the whispered conversation that ensued. My dad saying, “It kills me,” and my mom saying, “That’s exactly what she *doesn’t* need to hear,” and my dad saying, “I’m sorry but—” and my

mom saying, “Are you not grateful?” And him saying, “God, of course I’m grateful.” I kept trying to get into this story but I couldn’t stop hearing them.

So I turned on my computer to listen to some music, and with Augustus’s favorite band, The Hectic Glow, as my sound track, I went back to Caroline Mathers’s tribute pages, reading about how heroic her fight was, and how much she was missed, and how she was in a better place, and how she would live *forever* in their memories, and how everyone who knew her—everyone—was laid low by her leaving.

Maybe I was supposed to hate Caroline Mathers or something because she’d been with Augustus, but I didn’t. I couldn’t see her very clearly amid all the tributes, but there didn’t seem to be much to hate—she seemed to be mostly a professional sick person, like me, which made me worry that when I died they’d have nothing to say about me except that I fought heroically, as if the only thing I’d ever done was Have Cancer.

Anyway, eventually I started reading Caroline Mathers’s little notes, which were mostly actually written by her parents, because I guess her brain cancer was of the variety that makes you not you before it makes you not alive.

So it was all like, *Caroline continues to have behavioral problems. She’s struggling a lot with anger and frustration over not being able to speak (we are frustrated about these things, too, of course, but we have more socially acceptable ways of dealing with our anger). Gus has taken to calling Caroline HULK SMASH, which resonates with the doctors. There’s nothing easy about this for any of us, but you take your humor where you can get it. Hoping to go home on Thursday. We’ll let you know...*

She didn’t go home on Thursday, needless to say.

...

So of course I tensed up when he touched me. To be with him was to hurt him—inevitably. And that’s what I’d felt as he reached for me: I’d felt as though I were committing an act of violence against him, because I was.

I decided to text him. I wanted to avoid a whole conversation about it.

Hi, so okay, I don’t know if you’ll understand this but I can’t kiss you or anything. Not that you’d necessarily want to, but I can’t.

When I try to look at you like that, all I see is what I’m going to put you through. Maybe that doesn’t make sense to you.

Anyway, sorry.

He responded a few minutes later.

Okay.

I wrote back.

Okay.

He responded:

Oh, my God, stop flirting with me!

I just said:

Okay.

My phone buzzed moments later.

I was kidding, Hazel Grace. I understand. (But we both know that okay is a very flirty word. Okay is BURSTING with sensuality.)

I was very tempted to respond *Okay* again, but I pictured him at my funeral, and that helped me text properly.

Sorry.

...

I tried to go to sleep with my headphones still on, but then after a while my mom and dad came in, and my mom grabbed Blueie from the shelf and hugged him to her stomach, and my dad sat down in my desk chair, and without crying he said, "You are not a grenade, not to us. Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Hazel, but you are not a grenade. You are amazing. You can't know, sweetie, because you've never had a baby become a brilliant young reader with a side interest in horrible television shows, but the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness."

"Okay," I said.

“Really,” my dad said. “I wouldn’t bullshit you about this. If you were more trouble than you’re worth, we’d just toss you out on the streets.”

“We’re not sentimental people,” Mom added, deadpan. “We’d leave you at an orphanage with a note pinned to your pajamas.”

I laughed.

“You don’t have to go to Support Group,” Mom added. “You don’t have to do anything. Except go to school.” She handed me the bear.

“I think Bluie can sleep on the shelf tonight,” I said. “Let me remind you that I am more than thirty-three half years old.”

“Keep him tonight,” she said.

“Mom,” I said.

“He’s *lonely*,” she said.

“Oh, my God, Mom,” I said. But I took stupid Bluie and kind of cuddled with him as I fell asleep.

I still had one arm draped over Bluie, in fact, when I awoke just after four in the morning with an apocalyptic pain fingering out from the unreachable center of my head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I screamed to wake up my parents, and they burst into the room, but there was nothing they could do to dim the supernovae exploding inside my brain, an endless chain of intracranial firecrackers that made me think that I was once and for all going, and I told myself—as I’ve told myself before—that the body shuts down when the pain gets too bad, that consciousness is temporary, that this will pass. But just like always, I didn’t slip away. I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown.

Dad drove, talking on the phone with the hospital, while I lay in the back with my head in Mom’s lap. There was nothing to do: Screaming made it worse. All stimuli made it worse, actually.

The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black and silent and uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning when there was the Word, and to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word.

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, and I do not deny that courage. I had been poked and stabbed and poisoned for years, and still I trod on. But make no mistake: In that moment, I would have been very, very happy to die.

...

I woke up in the ICU. I could tell I was in the ICU because I didn’t have my own room, and because there was so much beeping, and because I was alone: They don’t let your family stay with you 24/7 in the ICU at Children’s because it’s an infection risk. There was wailing down the hall. Somebody’s kid had died. I was alone. I hit the red call button.

A nurse came in seconds later. “Hi,” I said.

“Hello, Hazel. I’m Alison, your nurse,” she said.

“Hi, Alison My Nurse,” I said.

Whereupon I started to feel pretty tired again. But I woke up a bit when my parents came in, crying and kissing my face repeatedly, and I reached up for them and tried to squeeze, but my everything hurt when I squeezed, and Mom and Dad told me that I did not have a brain tumor, but that my headache was caused by poor oxygenation, which was caused by my lungs swimming in fluid, a liter and a half (!!!!) of which had been successfully drained from my chest, which was why I might feel a slight discomfort in my side, where there was, *hey look at that*, a tube that went from my chest into a plastic bladder half full of liquid that for all the world resembled my dad’s favorite amber ale. Mom told me I was going to go home, that I really was, that I would just have to get this drained every now and again and get back on the BiPAP, this nighttime machine that forces air in and out of my crap lungs. But I’d had a total body PET scan on the first night in the hospital, they told me, and the news was good: no tumor growth. No new tumors. My shoulder pain had been lack-of-oxygen pain. Heart-working-too-hard pain.

“Dr. Maria said this morning that she remains optimistic,” Dad said. I liked Dr. Maria, and she didn’t bullshit you, so that felt good to hear.

“This is just a thing, Hazel,” my mom said. “It’s a thing we can live with.”

I nodded, and then Alison My Nurse kind of politely made them leave. She asked me if I wanted some ice chips, and I nodded, and then she sat at the bed with me and spooned them into my mouth.

“So you’ve been gone a couple days,” Alison said. “Hmm, what’d you miss...A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection. A team won a sporting event, but another team lost.” I smiled. “You can’t go disappearing on everybody like this, Hazel. You miss too much.”

“More?” I asked, nodding toward the white Styrofoam cup in her hand.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, “but I’m a rebel.” She gave me another plastic spoonful of crushed ice. I mumbled a thank-you. Praise God for good nurses. “Getting tired?” she asked. I nodded. “Sleep for a while,” she said. “I’ll try to run interference and give you a couple hours before somebody comes in to check vitals and the like.” I said Thanks again. You say thanks a lot in a hospital. I tried to settle into the bed. “You’re not gonna ask about your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Don’t have one,” I told her.

“Well, there’s a kid who has hardly left the waiting room since you got here,” she said.

“He hasn’t seen me like this, has he?”

“No. Family only.”

I nodded and sank into an aqueous sleep.

...

It would take me six days to get home, six undays of staring at acoustic ceiling tile and watching television and sleeping and pain and wishing for time to pass. I did not see Augustus or anyone other than my parents. My hair looked like a bird's nest; my shuffling gait like a dementia patient's. I felt a little better each day, though: Each sleep ended to reveal a person who seemed a bit more like me. Sleep fights cancer, Regular Dr. Jim said for the thousandth time as he hovered over me one morning surrounded by a coterie of medical students.

“Then I am a cancer-fighting machine,” I told him.

“That you are, Hazel. Keep resting, and hopefully we'll get you home soon.”

...

On Tuesday, they told me I'd go home on Wednesday. On Wednesday, two minimally supervised medical students removed my chest tube, which felt like getting stabbed in reverse and generally didn't go very well, so they decided I'd have to stay until Thursday. I was beginning to think that I was the subject of some existentialist experiment in permanently delayed gratification when Dr. Maria showed up on Friday morning, sniffed around me for a minute, and told me I was good to go.

So Mom opened her oversize purse to reveal that she'd had my Go Home Clothes with her all along. A nurse came in and took out my IV. I felt untethered even though I still had the oxygen tank to carry around with me. I went into the bathroom, took my first shower in a week, got dressed, and when I got out, I was so tired I had to lie down and get my breath. Mom asked, “Do you want to see Augustus?”

“I guess,” I said after a minute. I stood up and shuffled over to one of the molded plastic chairs against the wall, tucking my tank beneath the chair. It wore me out.

Dad came back with Augustus a few minutes later. His hair was messy, sweeping down over his forehead. He lit up with a real Augustus Waters Goofy Smile when he saw me, and I couldn't help but smile back. He sat down in the blue faux-leather recliner next to my chair. He leaned in toward me, seemingly incapable of stifling the smile.

Mom and Dad left us alone, which felt awkward. I worked hard to meet his

eyes, even though they were the kind of pretty that's hard to look at. "I missed you," Augustus said.

My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be. "Thanks for not trying to see me when I looked like hell."

"To be fair, you still look pretty bad."

I laughed. "I missed you, too. I just don't want you to see...all this. I just want, like...It doesn't matter. You don't always get what you want."

"Is that so?" he asked. "I'd always thought the world was a wish-granting factory."

"Turns out that is not the case," I said. He was so beautiful. He reached for my hand but I shook my head. "No," I said quietly. "If we're gonna hang out, it has to be, like, not that."

"Okay," he said. "Well, I have good news and bad news on the wish-granting front."

"Okay?" I said.

"The bad news is that we obviously can't go to Amsterdam until you're better. The Genies will, however, work their famous magic when you're well enough."

"That's the good news?"

"No, the good news is that while you were sleeping, Peter Van Houten shared a bit more of his brilliant brain with us."

He reached for my hand again, but this time to slip into it a heavily folded sheet of stationery on the letterhead of *Peter Van Houten, Novelist Emeritus*.

...

I didn't read it until I got home, situated in my own huge and empty bed with no chance of medical interruption. It took me forever to decode Van Houten's sloped, scratchy script.

Dear Mr. Waters,

I am in receipt of your electronic mail dated the 14th of April and duly impressed by the Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy. Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid *hamartia*: hers, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Were she better or you sicker, then the stars would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of stars to cross, and never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves." Easy enough to say when

you're a Roman nobleman (or Shakespeare!), but there is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars.

While we're on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Hazel reminds me of the Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time." (Off topic, but: What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It's a fine poem but a deceitful one: We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates? Nothing. We're pretty sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus. (Witness also that when we talk about literature, we do so in the present tense. When we speak of the dead, we are not so kind.) You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries, but does not resurrect. (Full disclosure: I am not the first to make this observation. cf, the MacLeish poem "Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments," which contains the heroic line "I shall say you will die and none will remember you.")

I digress, but here's the rub: The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of memory. The living, thank heaven, retain the ability to surprise and to disappoint. Your Hazel is alive, Waters, and you mustn't impose your will upon another's decision, particularly a decision arrived at thoughtfully. She wishes to spare you pain, and you should let her. You may not find young Hazel's logic persuasive, but I have trod through this vale of tears longer than you, and from where I'm sitting, she's not the lunatic.

Yours truly,
Peter Van Houten

...

It was really written by him. I licked my finger and dabbed the paper and the ink bled a little, so I knew it was really real.

"Mom," I said. I did not say it loudly, but I didn't have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"Can we call Dr. Maria and ask if international travel would kill me?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

We had a big Cancer Team Meeting a couple days later. Every so often, a bunch of doctors and social workers and physical therapists and whoever else got together around a big table in a conference room and discussed my situation. (Not the Augustus Waters situation or the Amsterdam situation. The cancer situation.)

Dr. Maria led the meeting. She hugged me when I got there. She was a hugger.

I felt a little better, I guess. Sleeping with the BiPAP all night made my lungs feel almost normal, although, then again, I did not really remember lung normality.

Everyone got there and made a big show of turning off their pagers and everything so it would be *all about me*, and then Dr. Maria said, “So the great news is that Phalanxifor continues to control your tumor growth, but obviously we’re still seeing serious problems with fluid accumulation. So the question is, how should we proceed?”

And then she just looked at me, like she was waiting for an answer. “Um,” I said, “I feel like I am not the most qualified person in the room to answer that question?”

She smiled. “Right, I was waiting for Dr. Simons. Dr. Simons?” He was another cancer doctor of some kind.

“Well, we know from other patients that most tumors eventually evolve a way to grow in spite of Phalanxifor, but if that were the case, we’d see tumor growth on the scans, which we don’t see. So it’s not that yet.”

Yet, I thought.

Dr. Simons tapped at the table with his forefinger. “The thought around here is that it’s possible the Phalanxifor is worsening the edema, but we’d face far more serious problems if we discontinued its use.”

Dr. Maria added, “We don’t really understand the long-term effects of Phalanxifor. Very few people have been on it as long as you have.”

“So we’re gonna do nothing?”

“We’re going to stay the course,” Dr. Maria said, “but we’ll need to do more to keep that edema from building up.” I felt kind of sick for some reason, like I was going to throw up. I hated Cancer Team Meetings in general, but I hated this one in particular. “Your cancer is not going away, Hazel. But we’ve seen people live with your level of tumor penetration for a long time.” (I did not ask what constituted a long time. I’d made that mistake before.) “I know that coming out of the ICU, it doesn’t feel this way, but this fluid is, at least for the time being, manageable.”

“Can’t I just get like a lung transplant or something?” I asked.

Dr. Maria’s lips shrank into her mouth. “You would not be considered a strong candidate for a transplant, unfortunately,” she said. I understood: No use wasting good lungs on a hopeless case. I nodded, trying not to look like that comment hurt me. My dad started crying a little. I didn’t look over at him, but no one said anything for a long time, so his hiccuping cry was the only sound in the room.

I hated hurting him. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the inexorable truth is this: They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and the omega of my parents’ suffering.

...

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU and it looked like I was going to die and Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, and I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad’s chest that I wish I hadn’t heard, and that I hope she never finds out that I did hear. She said, “I won’t be a mom anymore.” It gutted me pretty badly.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn’t get it out of my head, how she sounded when she said that, like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn’t.

...

Anyway, eventually we decided to keep things the same only with more frequent fluid drainings. At the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, and Dr. Simons actually and literally laughed, but then Dr. Maria said, “Why not?” And Simons said, dubiously, “Why not?” And Dr. Maria said, “Yeah, I don’t see why

not. They've got oxygen on the planes, after all." Dr. Simons said, "Are they just going to gate-check a BiPAP?" And Maria said, "Yeah, or have one waiting for her."

"Placing a patient—one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less—an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That's a recipe for disaster."

Dr. Maria shrugged. "It would increase some risks," she acknowledged, but then turned to me and said, "But it's your life."

•••

Except not really. On the car ride home, my parents agreed: I would not be going to Amsterdam unless and until there was medical agreement that it would be safe.

•••

Augustus called that night after dinner. I was already in bed—after dinner had become my bedtime for the moment—propped up with a gajillion pillows and also Blueie, with my computer on my lap.

I picked up, saying, "Bad news," and he said, "Shit, what?"

"I can't go to Amsterdam. One of my doctors thinks it's a bad idea."

He was quiet for a second. "God," he said. "I should've just paid for it myself. Should've just taken you straight from the *Funky Bones* to Amsterdam."

"But then I would've had a probably fatal episode of deoxygenation in Amsterdam, and my body would have been shipped home in the cargo hold of an airplane," I said.

"Well, yeah," he said. "But before that, my grand romantic gesture would have totally gotten me laid."

I laughed pretty hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

"You laugh because it's true," he said.

I laughed again.

"It's true, isn't it!"

"Probably not," I said, and then after a moment added, "although you never know."

He moaned in misery. "I'm gonna die a virgin," he said.

"You're a virgin?" I asked, surprised.

"Hazel Grace," he said, "do you have a pen and a piece of paper?" I said I did. "Okay, please draw a circle." I did. "Now draw a smaller circle within that

circle.” I did. “The larger circle is virgins. The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg.”

I laughed again, and told him that having most of your social engagements occur at a children’s hospital also did not encourage promiscuity, and then we talked about Peter Van Houten’s amazingly brilliant comment about the sluttiness of time, and even though I was in bed and he was in his basement, it really felt like we were back in that uncreated third space, which was a place I really liked visiting with him.

Then I got off the phone and my mom and dad came into my room, and even though it was really not big enough for all three of us, they lay on either side of the bed with me and we all watched *ANTM* on the little TV in my room. This girl I didn’t like, Selena, got kicked off, which made me really happy for some reason. Then Mom hooked me up to the BiPAP and tucked me in, and Dad kissed me on the forehead, the kiss all stubble, and then I closed my eyes.

The BiPAP essentially took control of my breathing away from me, which was intensely annoying, but the great thing about it was that it made all this noise, rumbling with each inhalation and whirring as I exhaled. I kept thinking that it sounded like a dragon breathing in time with me, like I had this pet dragon who was cuddled up next to me and cared enough about me to time his breaths to mine. I was thinking about that as I sank into sleep.

•••

I got up late the next morning. I watched TV in bed and checked my email and then after a while started crafting an email to Peter Van Houten about how I couldn’t come to Amsterdam but I swore upon the life of my mother that I would never share any information about the characters with anyone, that I didn’t even *want* to share it, because I was a terribly selfish person, and could he please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real and if Anna’s mom marries him and also about Sisyphus the Hamster.

But I didn’t send it. It was too pathetic even for me.

Around three, when I figured Augustus would be home from school, I went into the backyard and called him. As the phone rang, I sat down on the grass, which was all overgrown and dandeliony. That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I’d created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys “R” Us and building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He’d insisted on swinging on it first to test it, and the thing damn near broke.

The sky was gray and low and full of rain but not yet raining. I hung up

when I got Augustus's voice mail and then put the phone down in the dirt beside me and kept looking at the swing set, thinking that I would give up all the sick days I had left for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish-granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn't let it kill me before it kills me, and then I just started muttering *stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid* over and over again until the sound unhinged from its meaning. I was still saying it when he called back.

"Hi," I said.

"Hazel Grace," he said.

"Hi," I said again.

"Are you crying, Hazel Grace?"

"Kind of?"

"Why?" he asked.

"'Cause I'm just—I want to go to Amsterdam, and I want him to tell me what happens after the book is over, and I just don't want my particular life, and also the sky is depressing me, and there is this old swing set out here that my dad made for me when I was a kid."

"I must see this old swing set of tears immediately," he said. "I'll be over in twenty minutes."

...

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always really smothery and concerned when I was crying, because I did not cry often, and I knew she'd want to *talk* and discuss whether I shouldn't consider adjusting my medication, and the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up.

It's not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child and the child saying *higher higher higher* or some other metaphorically resonant moment. The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings hanging still and sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid's drawing of a smile.

Behind me, I heard the sliding-glass door open. I turned around. It was Augustus, wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeve plaid button-down. I wiped my face with my sleeve and smiled. "Hi," I said.

It took him a second to sit down on the ground next to me, and he grimaced as he landed rather ungracefully on his ass. "Hi," he said finally. I looked over at him. He was looking past me, into the backyard. "I see your point," he said as he put an arm around my shoulder. "That is one sad goddamned swing set."

I nudged my head into his shoulder. "Thanks for offering to come over."

“You realize that trying to keep your distance from me will not lessen my affection for you,” he said.

“I guess?” I said.

“All efforts to save me from you will fail,” he said.

“Why? Why would you even like me? Haven’t you put yourself through enough of this?” I asked, thinking of Caroline Mathers.

Gus didn’t answer. He just held on to me, his fingers strong against my left arm. “We gotta do something about this frigging swing set,” he said. “I’m telling you, it’s ninety percent of the problem.”

•••

Once I’d recovered, we went inside and sat down on the couch right next to each other, the laptop half on his (fake) knee and half on mine. “Hot,” I said of the laptop’s base.

“Is it now?” He smiled. Gus loaded this giveaway site called Free No Catch and together we wrote an ad.

“Headline?” he asked.

“Swing Set Needs Home,” I said.

“Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home,” he said.

“Lonely, Vaguely Pedophilic Swing Set Seeks the Butts of Children,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s why.”

“What?”

“That’s why I like you. Do you realize how rare it is to come across a hot girl who creates an adjectival version of the word *pedophile*? You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are.”

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was never enough air in the world, but the shortage was particularly acute in that moment.

We wrote the ad together, editing each other as we went. In the end, we settled upon this:

Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home

One swing set, well worn but structurally sound, seeks new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she or they will look into the backyard and feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It’s all fragile and fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your child(ren) will be introduced to the ups and downs of

human life gently and safely, and may also learn the most important lesson of all: No matter how hard you kick, no matter how high you get, you can't go all the way around.

Swing set currently resides near 83rd and Spring Mill.

•••

After that, we turned on the TV for a little while, but we couldn't find anything to watch, so I grabbed *An Imperial Affliction* off the bedside table and brought it back into the living room and Augustus Waters read to me while Mom, making lunch, listened in.

“*Mother's glass eye turned inward,*” Augustus began. As he read, I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once.

•••

When I checked my email an hour later, I learned that we had plenty of swing-set suitors to choose from. In the end, we picked a guy named Daniel Alvarez who'd included a picture of his three kids playing video games with the subject line *I just want them to go outside*. I emailed him back and told him to pick it up at his leisure.

Augustus asked if I wanted to go with him to Support Group, but I was really tired from my busy day of Having Cancer, so I passed. We were sitting there on the couch together, and he pushed himself up to go but then fell back down onto the couch and sneaked a kiss onto my cheek.

“Augustus!” I said.

“Friendly,” he said. He pushed himself up again and really stood this time, then took two steps over to my mom and said, “Always a pleasure to see you,” and my mom opened her arms to hug him, whereupon Augustus leaned in and kissed my mom on the cheek. He turned back to me. “See?” he asked.

I went to bed right after dinner, the BiPAP drowning out the world beyond my room.

I never saw the swing set again.

•••

I slept for a long time, ten hours, possibly because of the slow recovery and possibly because sleep fights cancer and possibly because I was a teenager with

no particular wake-up time. I wasn't strong enough yet to go back to classes at MCC. When I finally felt like getting up, I removed the BiPAP snout from my nose, put my oxygen nubbins in, turned them on, and then grabbed my laptop from beneath my bed, where I'd stashed it the night before.

I had an email from Lidewij Vliegenthart.

Dear Hazel,

I have received word via the Genies that you will be visiting us with Augustus Waters and your mother beginning on 4th of May. Only a week away! Peter and I are delighted and cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Your hotel, the Filosoof, is just one street away from Peter's home. Perhaps we should give you one day for the jet lag, yes? So if convenient, we will meet you at Peter's home on the morning of 5th May at perhaps ten o'clock for a cup of coffee and for him to answer questions you have about his book. And then perhaps afterward we can tour a museum or the Anne Frank House?

With all best wishes,

Lidewij Vliegenthart

Executive Assistant to Mr. Peter Van Houten, author of *An Imperial Affliction*

...

"Mom," I said. She didn't answer. "MOM!" I shouted. Nothing. Again, louder, "MOM!"

She ran in wearing a threadbare pink towel under her armpits, dripping, vaguely panicked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sorry, I didn't know you were in the shower," I said.

"Bath," she said. "I was just..." She closed her eyes. "Just trying to take a bath for five seconds. Sorry. What's going on?"

"Can you call the Genies and tell them the trip is off? I just got an email from Peter Van Houten's assistant. She thinks we're coming."

She pursed her lips and squinted past me.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to tell you until your father gets home."

"What?" I asked again.

"Trip's on," she said finally. "Dr. Maria called us last night and made a convincing case that you need to live your—"

“MOM, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!” I shouted, and she came to the bed and let me hug her.

I texted Augustus because I knew he was in school:

Still free May three? :-)

He texted back immediately.

Everything’s coming up Waters.

...

If I could just stay alive for a week, I’d know the unwritten secrets of Anna’s mom and the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest.

“Keep your shit together,” I whispered to my lungs.

CHAPTER NINE

The day before we left for Amsterdam, I went back to Support Group for the first time since meeting Augustus. The cast had rotated a bit down there in the Literal Heart of Jesus. I arrived early, enough time for perennially strong appendiceal cancer survivor Lida to bring me up-to-date on everyone as I ate a grocery-store chocolate chip cookie while leaning against the dessert table.

Twelve-year-old leukemic Michael had passed away. He'd fought hard, Lida told me, as if there were another way to fight. Everyone else was still around. Ken was NEC after radiation. Lucas had relapsed, and she said it with a sad smile and a little shrug, the way you might say an alcoholic had relapsed.

A cute, chubby girl walked over to the table and said hi to Lida, then introduced herself to me as Susan. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but she had a scar extending from the side of her nose down her lip and across her cheek. She had put makeup over the scar, which only served to emphasize it. I was feeling a little out of breath from all the standing, so I said, "I'm gonna go sit," and then the elevator opened, revealing Isaac and his mom. He wore sunglasses and clung to his mom's arm with one hand, a cane in the other.

"Support Group Hazel not Monica," I said when he got close enough, and he smiled and said, "Hey, Hazel. How's it going?"

"Good. I've gotten *really hot* since you went blind."

"I bet," he said. His mom led him to a chair, kissed the top of his head, and shuffled back toward the elevator. He felt around beneath him and then sat. I sat down in the chair next to him. "So how's it going?"

"Okay. Glad to be home, I guess. Gus told me you were in the ICU?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Sucks," he said.

"I'm a lot better now," I said. "I'm going to Amsterdam tomorrow with Gus."

“I know. I’m pretty well up-to-date on your life, because Gus never. Talks. About. Anything. Else.”

I smiled. Patrick cleared his throat and said, “If we could all take a seat?” He caught my eye. “Hazel!” he said. “I’m so glad to see you!”

Everyone sat and Patrick began his retelling of his ball-lessness, and I fell into the routine of Support Group: communicating through sighs with Isaac, feeling sorry for everyone in the room and also everyone outside of it, zoning out of the conversation to focus on my breathlessness and the aching. The world went on, as it does, without my full participation, and I only woke up from the reverie when someone said my name.

It was Lida the Strong. Lida in remission. Blond, healthy, stout Lida, who swam on her high school swim team. Lida, missing only her appendix, saying my name, saying, “Hazel is such an inspiration to me; she really is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning and going to war without complaint. She’s so strong. She’s so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength.”

“Hazel?” Patrick asked. “How does that make you feel?”

I shrugged and looked over at Lida. “I’ll give you my strength if I can have your remission.” I felt guilty as soon as I said it.

“I don’t think that’s what Lida meant,” Patrick said. “I think she...” But I’d stopped listening.

After the prayers for the living and the endless litany of the dead (with Michael tacked on to the end), we held hands and said, “Living our best life today!”

Lida immediately rushed up to me full of apology and explanation, and I said, “No, no, it’s really fine,” waving her off, and I said to Isaac, “Care to accompany me upstairs?”

He took my arm, and I walked with him to the elevator, grateful to have an excuse to avoid the stairs. I’d almost made it all the way to the elevator when I saw his mom standing in a corner of the Literal Heart. “I’m here,” she said to Isaac, and he switched from my arm to hers before asking, “You want to come over?”

“Sure,” I said. I felt bad for him. Even though I hated the sympathy people felt toward me, I couldn’t help but feel it toward him.

...

Isaac lived in a small ranch house in Meridian Hills next to this fancy private school. We sat down in the living room while his mom went off to the kitchen to

make dinner, and then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

“Sure,” I said. So he asked for the remote. I gave it to him, and he turned on the TV and then a computer attached to it. The TV screen stayed black, but after a few seconds a deep voice spoke from it.

“Deception,” the voice said. “One player or two?”

“Two,” Isaac said. “Pause.” He turned to me. “I play this game with Gus all the time, but it’s infuriating because he is a completely suicidal video-game player. He’s, like, way too aggressive about saving civilians and whatnot.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering the night of the broken trophies.

“Unpause,” Isaac said.

“Player one, identify yourself.”

“This is player one’s sexy sexy voice,” Isaac said.

“Player two, identify yourself.”

“I would be player two, I guess,” I said.

Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem and Private Jasper Jacks awake in a dark, empty room approximately twelve feet square.

Isaac pointed toward the TV, like I should talk to it or something. “Um,” I said. “Is there a light switch?”

No.

“Is there a door?”

Private Jacks locates the door. It is locked.

Isaac jumped in. “There’s a key above the door frame.”

Yes, there is.

“Mayhem opens the door.”

The darkness is still complete.

“Take out knife,” Isaac said.

“Take out knife,” I added.

A kid—Isaac’s brother, I assume—darted out from the kitchen. He was maybe ten, wiry and overenergetic, and he kind of skipped across the living room before shouting in a really good imitation of Isaac’s voice, “KILL MYSELF.”

Sergeant Mayhem places his knife to his neck. Are you sure you—

“No,” Isaac said. “Pause. Graham, don’t make me kick your ass.” Graham laughed giddily and skipped off down a hallway.

As Mayhem and Jacks, Isaac and I felt our way forward in the cavern until we bumped into a guy whom we stabbed after getting him to tell us that we were in a Ukrainian prison cave, more than a mile beneath the ground. As we continued, sound effects—a raging underground river, voices speaking in Ukrainian and accented English—led you through the cave, but there was

nothing to see in this game. After playing for an hour, we began to hear the cries of a desperate prisoner, pleading, “God, help me. God, help me.”

“Pause,” Isaac said. “This is when Gus always insists on finding the prisoner, even though that keeps you from winning the game, and the only way to *actually free* the prisoner is to win the game.”

“Yeah, he takes video games too seriously,” I said. “He’s a bit too enamored with metaphor.”

“Do you like him?” Isaac asked.

“Of course I like him. He’s great.”

“But you don’t want to hook up with him?”

I shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You don’t want to give him something he can’t handle. You don’t want him to Monica you,” he said.

“Kinda,” I said. But it wasn’t that. The truth was, I didn’t want to Isaac him. “To be fair to Monica,” I said, “what you did to her wasn’t very nice either.”

“What’d *I* do to her?” he asked, defensive.

“You know, going blind and everything.”

“But that’s not my fault,” Isaac said.

“I’m not saying it was your *fault*. I’m saying it wasn’t *nice*.”

CHAPTER TEN

We could only take one suitcase. I couldn't carry one, and Mom insisted that she couldn't carry two, so we had to jockey for space in this black suitcase my parents had gotten as a wedding present a million years ago, a suitcase that was supposed to spend its life in exotic locales but ended up mostly going back and forth to Dayton, where Morris Property, Inc., had a satellite office that Dad often visited.

I argued with Mom that I should have slightly more than half of the suitcase, since without me and my cancer, we'd never be going to Amsterdam in the first place. Mom countered that since she was twice as large as me and therefore required more physical fabric to preserve her modesty, she deserved at least two-thirds of the suitcase.

In the end, we both lost. So it goes.

Our flight didn't leave until noon, but Mom woke me up at five thirty, turning on the light and shouting, "AMSTERDAM!" She ran around all morning making sure we had international plug adapters and quadruple-checking that we had the right number of oxygen tanks to get there and that they were all full, etc., while I just rolled out of bed, put on my Travel to Amsterdam Outfit (jeans, a pink tank top, and a black cardigan in case the plane was cold).

The car was packed by six fifteen, whereupon Mom insisted that we eat breakfast with Dad, although I had a moral opposition to eating before dawn on the grounds that I was not a nineteenth-century Russian peasant fortifying myself for a day in the fields. But anyway, I tried to stomach down some eggs while Mom and Dad enjoyed these homemade versions of Egg McMuffins they liked.

"Why are breakfast foods breakfast foods?" I asked them. "Like, why don't we have curry for breakfast?"

"Hazel, eat."

“But *why?*” I asked. “I mean, seriously: How did scrambled eggs get stuck with breakfast exclusivity? You can put bacon on a sandwich without anyone freaking out. But the moment your sandwich has an egg, boom, it’s a *breakfast* sandwich.”

Dad answered with his mouth full. “When you come back, we’ll have breakfast for dinner. Deal?”

“I don’t want to have ‘breakfast for dinner,’” I answered, crossing knife and fork over my mostly full plate. “I want to have scrambled eggs for dinner without this ridiculous construction that a scrambled egg–inclusive meal is *breakfast* even when it occurs at dinnertime.”

“You’ve gotta pick your battles in this world, Hazel,” my mom said. “But if this is the issue you want to champion, we will stand behind you.”

“Quite a bit behind you,” my dad added, and Mom laughed.

Anyway, I knew it was stupid, but I felt kind of *bad* for scrambled eggs.

After they finished eating, Dad did the dishes and walked us to the car. Of course, he started crying, and he kissed my cheek with his wet stubbly face. He pressed his nose against my cheekbone and whispered, “I love you. I’m so proud of you.” (*For what*, I wondered.)

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’ll see you in a few days, okay, sweetie? I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Dad.” I smiled. “And it’s only three days.”

As we backed out of the driveway, I kept waving at him. He was waving back, and crying. It occurred to me that he was probably thinking he might never see me again, which he probably thought every single morning of his entire weekday life as he left for work, which probably sucked.

Mom and I drove over to Augustus’s house, and when we got there, she wanted me to stay in the car to rest, but I went to the door with her anyway. As we approached the house, I could hear someone crying inside. I didn’t think it was Gus at first, because it didn’t sound anything like the low rumble of his speaking, but then I heard a voice that was definitely a twisted version of his say, “BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE, MOM. IT BELONGS TO ME.” And quickly my mom put her arm around my shoulders and spun me back toward the car, walking quickly, and I was like, “Mom, what’s wrong?”

And she said, “We can’t eavesdrop, Hazel.”

We got back into the car and I texted Augustus that we were outside whenever he was ready.

We stared at the house for a while. The weird thing about houses is that they almost always look like nothing is happening inside of them, even though they contain most of our lives. I wondered if that was sort of the point of architecture.

“Well,” Mom said after a while, “we are pretty early, I guess.”

“Almost as if I didn’t have to get up at five thirty,” I said. Mom reached down to the console between us, grabbed her coffee mug, and took a sip. My phone buzzed. A text from Augustus.

Just CAN’T decide what to wear. Do you like me better in a polo or a button-down?

I replied:

Button-down.

Thirty seconds later, the front door opened, and a smiling Augustus appeared, a roller bag behind him. He wore a pressed sky-blue button-down tucked into his jeans. A Camel Light dangled from his lips. My mom got out to say hi to him. He took the cigarette out momentarily and spoke in the confident voice to which I was accustomed. “Always a pleasure to see you, ma’am.”

I watched them through the rearview mirror until Mom opened the trunk. Moments later, Augustus opened a door behind me and engaged in the complicated business of entering the backseat of a car with one leg.

“Do you want shotgun?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “And hello, Hazel Grace.”

“Hi,” I said. “Okay?” I asked.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

My mom got in and closed the car door. “Next stop, Amsterdam,” she announced.

...

Which was not quite true. The next stop was the airport parking lot, and then a bus took us to the terminal, and then an open-air electric car took us to the security line. The TSA guy at the front of the line was shouting about how our bags had better not contain explosives or firearms or anything liquid over three ounces, and I said to Augustus, “Observation: Standing in line is a form of oppression,” and he said, “Seriously.”

Rather than be searched by hand, I chose to walk through the metal detector without my cart or my tank or even the plastic nubbins in my nose. Walking through the X-ray machine marked the first time I’d taken a step without oxygen

in some months, and it felt pretty amazing to walk unencumbered like that, stepping across the Rubicon, the machine's silence acknowledging that I was, however briefly, a nonmetallicized creature.

I felt a bodily sovereignty that I can't really describe except to say that when I was a kid I used to have a really heavy backpack that I carried everywhere with all my books in it, and if I walked around with the backpack for long enough, when I took it off I felt like I was floating.

After about ten seconds, my lungs felt like they were folding in upon themselves like flowers at dusk. I sat down on a gray bench just past the machine and tried to catch my breath, my cough a rattling drizzle, and I felt pretty miserable until I got the cannula back into place.

Even then, it hurt. The pain was always there, pulling me inside of myself, demanding to be felt. It always felt like I was waking up from the pain when something in the world outside of me suddenly required my comment or attention. Mom was looking at me, concerned. She'd just said something. What had she just said? Then I remembered. She'd asked what was wrong.

"Nothing," I said.

"Amsterdam!" she half shouted.

I smiled. "Amsterdam," I answered. She reached her hand down to me and pulled me up.

...

We got to the gate an hour before our scheduled boarding time. "Mrs. Lancaster, you are an impressively punctual person," Augustus said as he sat down next to me in the mostly empty gate area.

"Well, it helps that I am not technically very busy," she said.

"You're plenty busy," I told her, although it occurred to me that Mom's business was mostly me. There was also the business of being married to my dad—he was kind of clueless about, like, banking and hiring plumbers and cooking and doing things other than working for Morris Property, Inc.—but it was mostly me. Her primary reason for living and my primary reason for living were awfully entangled.

As the seats around the gate started to fill, Augustus said, "I'm gonna get a hamburger before we leave. Can I get you anything?"

"No," I said, "but I really appreciate your refusal to give in to breakfasty social conventions."

He tilted his head at me, confused. "Hazel has developed an issue with the ghettoization of scrambled eggs," Mom said.

“It’s embarrassing that we all just walk through life blindly accepting that scrambled eggs are fundamentally associated with mornings.”

“I want to talk about this more,” Augustus said. “But I am starving. I’ll be right back.”

•••

When Augustus hadn’t showed up after twenty minutes, I asked Mom if she thought something was wrong, and she looked up from her awful magazine only long enough to say, “He probably just went to the bathroom or something.”

A gate agent came over and switched my oxygen container out with one provided by the airline. I was embarrassed to have this lady kneeling in front of me while everyone watched, so I texted Augustus while she did it.

He didn’t reply. Mom seemed unconcerned, but I was imagining all kinds of Amsterdam trip–ruining fates (arrest, injury, mental breakdown) and I felt like there was something noncancerous wrong with my chest as the minutes ticked away.

And just when the lady behind the ticket counter announced they were going to start preboarding people who might need a bit of extra time and every single person in the gate area turned squarely to me, I saw Augustus fast-limping toward us with a McDonald’s bag in one hand, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Where were you?” I asked.

“Line got superlong, sorry,” he said, offering me a hand up. I took it, and we walked side by side to the gate to preboard.

I could feel everybody watching us, wondering what was wrong with us, and whether it would kill us, and how heroic my mom must be, and everything else. That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes: The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other, and never was it more obvious than when the three of us walked through the empty plane, the stewardess nodding sympathetically and gesturing us toward our row in the distant back. I sat in the middle of our three-person row with Augustus in the window seat and Mom in the aisle. I felt a little hemmed in by Mom, so of course I scooted over toward Augustus. We were right behind the plane’s wing. He opened up his bag and unwrapped his burger.

“The thing about eggs, though,” he said, “is that breakfastization gives the scrambled egg a certain *sacrality*, right? You can get yourself some bacon or Cheddar cheese anywhere anytime, from tacos to breakfast sandwiches to grilled cheese, but scrambled eggs—they’re *important*.”

“Ludicrous,” I said. The people were starting to file into the plane now. I didn’t want to look at them, so I looked away, and to look away was to look at Augustus.

“I’m just saying: Maybe scrambled eggs are ghettoized, but they’re also special. They have a place and a time, like church does.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” I said. “You are buying into the cross-stitched sentiments of your parents’ throw pillows. You’re arguing that the fragile, rare thing is beautiful simply because it is fragile and rare. But that’s a lie, and you know it.”

“You’re a hard person to comfort,” Augustus said.

“Easy comfort isn’t comforting,” I said. “You were a rare and fragile flower once. You remember.”

For a moment, he said nothing. “You do know how to shut me up, Hazel Grace.”

“It’s my privilege and my responsibility,” I answered.

Before I broke eye contact with him, he said, “Listen, sorry I avoided the gate area. The McDonald’s line wasn’t really that long; I just...I just didn’t want to sit there with all those people looking at us or whatever.”

“At me, mostly,” I said. You could glance at Gus and never know he’d been sick, but I carried my disease with me on the outside, which is part of why I’d become a homebody in the first place. “Augustus Waters, noted charismatist, is embarrassed to sit next to a girl with an oxygen tank.”

“Not embarrassed,” he said. “They just piss me off sometimes. And I don’t want to be pissed off today.” After a minute, he dug into his pocket and flipped open his pack of smokes.

About nine seconds later, a blond stewardess rushed over to our row and said, “Sir, you can’t smoke on this plane. Or any plane.”

“I don’t smoke,” he explained, the cigarette dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

“But—”

“It’s a metaphor,” I explained. “He puts the killing thing in his mouth but doesn’t give it the power to kill him.”

The stewardess was flummoxed for only a moment. “Well, that metaphor is prohibited on today’s flight,” she said. Gus nodded and rejoined the cigarette to its pack.

...

We finally taxied out to the runway and the pilot said, *Flight attendants, prepare*

for departure, and then two tremendous jet engines roared to life and we began to accelerate. “This is what it feels like to drive in a car with you,” I said, and he smiled, but kept his jaw clenched tight and I said, “Okay?”

We were picking up speed and suddenly Gus’s hand grabbed the armrest, his eyes wide, and I put my hand on top of his and said, “Okay?” He didn’t say anything, just stared at me wide-eyed, and I said, “Are you scared of flying?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” he said. The nose of the plane rose up and we were aloft. Gus stared out the window, watching the planet shrink beneath us, and then I felt his hand relax beneath mine. He glanced at me and then back out the window. “We are *flying*,” he announced.

“You’ve never been on a plane before?”

He shook his head. “LOOK!” he half shouted, pointing at the window.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I see it. It looks like we’re in an airplane.”

“NOTHING HAS EVER LOOKED LIKE THAT EVER IN ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY,” he said. His enthusiasm was adorable. I couldn’t resist leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

“Just so you know, I’m right here,” Mom said. “Sitting next to you. Your mother. Who held your hand as you took your first infantile steps.”

“It’s friendly,” I reminded her, turning to kiss her on the cheek.

“Didn’t feel too friendly,” Gus mumbled just loud enough for me to hear. When surprised and excited and innocent Gus emerged from Grand Gesture Metaphorically Inclined Augustus, I literally could not resist.

•••

It was a quick flight to Detroit, where the little electric car met us as we disembarked and drove us to the gate for Amsterdam. That plane had TVs in the back of each seat, and once we were above the clouds, Augustus and I timed it so that we started watching the same romantic comedy at the same time on our respective screens. But even though we were perfectly synchronized in our pressing of the play button, his movie started a couple seconds before mine, so at every funny moment, he’d laugh just as I started to hear whatever the joke was.

•••

Mom had this big plan that we would sleep for the last several hours of the flight, so when we landed at eight A.M., we’d hit the city ready to suck the marrow out of life or whatever. So after the movie was over, Mom and Augustus and I all took sleeping pills. Mom conked out within seconds, but Augustus and I

stayed up to look out the window for a while. It was a clear day, and although we couldn't see the sun setting, we could see the sky's response.

"God, that is beautiful," I said mostly to myself.

"The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes," he said, a line from *An Imperial Affliction*.

"But it's not rising," I said.

"It's rising somewhere," he answered, and then after a moment said, "Observation: It would be awesome to fly in a superfast airplane that could chase the sunrise around the world for a while."

"Also I'd live longer." He looked at me askew. "You know, because of relativity or whatever." He still looked confused. "We age slower when we move quickly versus standing still. So right now time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground."

"College chicks," he said. "They're so smart."

I rolled my eyes. He hit his (real) knee with my knee and I hit his knee back with mine. "Are you sleepy?" I asked him.

"Not at all," he answered.

"Yeah," I said. "Me neither." Sleeping meds and narcotics didn't do for me what they did for normal people.

"Want to watch another movie?" he asked. "They've got a Portman movie from her Hazel Era."

"I want to watch something you haven't seen."

In the end we watched *300*, a war movie about 300 Spartans who protect Sparta from an invading army of like a billion Persians. Augustus's movie started before mine again, and after a few minutes of hearing him go, "Dang!" or "Fatality!" every time someone was killed in some badass way, I leaned over the armrest and put my head on his shoulder so I could see his screen and we could actually watch the movie together.

300 featured a sizable collection of shirtless and well-oiled strapping young lads, so it was not particularly difficult on the eyes, but it was mostly a lot of sword wielding to no real effect. The bodies of the Persians and the Spartans piled up, and I couldn't quite figure out why the Persians were so evil or the Spartans so awesome. "Contemporaneity," to quote *AIA*, "specializes in the kind of battles wherein no one loses anything of any value, except arguably their lives." And so it was with these titans clashing.

Toward the end of the movie, almost everyone is dead, and there is this insane moment when the Spartans start stacking the bodies of the dead up to form a wall of corpses. The dead become this massive roadblock standing between the Persians and the road to Sparta. I found the gore a bit gratuitous, so

I looked away for a second, asking Augustus, “How many dead people do you think there are?”

He dismissed me with a wave. “*Shh. Shh.* This is getting awesome.”

When the Persians attacked, they had to climb up the wall of death, and the Spartans were able to occupy the high ground atop the corpse mountain, and as the bodies piled up, the wall of martyrs only became higher and therefore harder to climb, and everybody swung swords/shot arrows, and the rivers of blood poured down Mount Death, etc.

I took my head off his shoulder for a moment to get a break from the gore and watched Augustus watch the movie. He couldn’t contain his goofy grin. I watched my own screen through squinted eyes as the mountain grew with the bodies of Persians and Spartans. When the Persians finally overran the Spartans, I looked over at Augustus again. Even though the good guys had just lost, Augustus seemed downright *joyful*. I nuzzled up to him again, but kept my eyes closed until the battle was finished.

As the credits rolled, he took off his headphones and said, “Sorry, I was awash in the nobility of sacrifice. What were you saying?”

“How many dead people do you think there are?”

“Like, how many fictional people died in that fictional movie? Not enough,” he joked.

“No, I mean, like, ever. Like, how many people do you think have ever died?”

“I happen to know the answer to that question,” he said. “There are seven billion living people, and about ninety-eight billion dead people.”

“Oh,” I said. I’d thought that maybe since population growth had been so fast, there were more people alive than all the dead combined.

“There are about fourteen dead people for every living person,” he said. The credits continued rolling. It took a long time to identify all those corpses, I guess. My head was still on his shoulder. “I did some research on this a couple years ago,” Augustus continued. “I was wondering if everybody could be remembered. Like, if we got organized, and assigned a certain number of corpses to each living person, would there be enough living people to remember all the dead people?”

“And are there?”

“Sure, anyone can name fourteen dead people. But we’re disorganized mourners, so a lot of people end up remembering Shakespeare, and no one ends up remembering the person he wrote Sonnet Fifty-five about.”

“Yeah,” I said.

It was quiet for a minute, and then he asked, “You want to read or

something?” I said sure. I was reading this long poem called *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg for my poetry class, and Gus was rereading *An Imperial Affliction*.

After a while he said, “Is it any good?”

“The poem?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, it’s great. The guys in this poem take even more drugs than I do. How’s *AIA*?”

“Still perfect,” he said. “Read to me.”

“This isn’t really a poem to read aloud when you are sitting next to your sleeping mother. It has, like, sodomy and angel dust in it,” I said.

“You just named two of my favorite pastimes,” he said. “Okay, read me something else then?”

“Um,” I said. “I don’t *have* anything else?”

“That’s too bad. I am so in the mood for poetry. Do you have anything memorized?”

“Let us go then, you and I,” I started nervously, “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table.”

“Slower,” he said.

I felt bashful, like I had when I’d first told him of *An Imperial Affliction*. “Um, okay. Okay. ‘Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells: / Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question... / Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit.’”

“I’m in love with you,” he said quietly.

“Augustus,” I said.

“I am,” he said. He was staring at me, and I could see the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I’m in love with you, and I’m not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things. I’m in love with you, and I know that love is just a shout into the void, and that oblivion is inevitable, and that we’re all doomed and that there will come a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, and I know the sun will swallow the only earth we’ll ever have, and I am in love with you.”

“Augustus,” I said again, not knowing what else to say. It felt like everything was rising up in me, like I was drowning in this weirdly painful joy, but I couldn’t say it back. I couldn’t say anything back. I just looked at him and let him look at me until he nodded, lips pursed, and turned away, placing the side of his head against the window.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I think he must have fallen asleep. I did, eventually, and woke to the landing gear coming down. My mouth tasted horrible, and I tried to keep it shut for fear of poisoning the airplane.

I looked over at Augustus, who was staring out the window, and as we dipped below the low-hung clouds, I straightened my back to see the Netherlands. The land seemed sunk into the ocean, little rectangles of green surrounded on all sides by canals. We landed, in fact, parallel to a canal, like there were two runways: one for us and one for waterfowl.

After getting our bags and clearing customs, we all piled into a taxi driven by this doughy bald guy who spoke perfect English—like better English than I do. “The Hotel Filosoof?” I said.

And he said, “You are Americans?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “We’re from *Indiana*.”

“Indiana,” he said. “They steal the land from the Indians and leave the name, yes?”

“Something like that,” Mom said. The cabbie pulled out into traffic and we headed toward a highway with lots of blue signs featuring double vowels: Oosthuizen, Haarlem. Beside the highway, flat empty land stretched for miles, interrupted by the occasional huge corporate headquarters. In short, Holland looked like Indianapolis, only with smaller cars. “This is Amsterdam?” I asked the cabdriver.

“Yes and no,” he answered. “Amsterdam is like the rings of a tree: It gets older as you get closer to the center.”

It happened all at once: We exited the highway and there were the row houses of my imagination leaning precariously toward canals, ubiquitous bicycles, and coffeeshops advertising LARGE SMOKING ROOM. We drove over a canal and from atop the bridge I could see dozens of houseboats moored

along the water. It looked nothing like America. It looked like an old painting, but real—everything achingly idyllic in the morning light—and I thought about how wonderfully strange it would be to live in a place where almost everything had been built by the dead.

“Are these houses very old?” asked my mom.

“Many of the canal houses date from the Golden Age, the seventeenth century,” he said. “Our city has a rich history, even though many tourists are only wanting to see the Red Light District.” He paused. “Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth it is a city of freedom. And in freedom, most people find sin.”

•••

All the rooms in the Hotel Filosoof were named after filosoofers: Mom and I were staying on the ground floor in the Kierkegaard; Augustus was on the floor above us, in the Heidegger. Our room was small: a double bed pressed against a wall with my BiPAP machine, an oxygen concentrator, and a dozen refillable oxygen tanks at the foot of the bed. Past the equipment, there was a dusty old paisley chair with a sagging seat, a desk, and a bookshelf above the bed containing the collected works of Søren Kierkegaard. On the desk we found a wicker basket full of presents from the Genies: wooden shoes, an orange Holland T-shirt, chocolates, and various other goodies.

The Filosoof was right next to the Vondelpark, Amsterdam’s most famous park. Mom wanted to go on a walk, but I was supertired, so she got the BiPAP working and placed its snout on me. I hated talking with that thing on, but I said, “Just go to the park and I’ll call you when I wake up.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sleep tight, honey.”

•••

But when I woke up some hours later, she was sitting in the ancient little chair in the corner, reading a guidebook.

“Morning,” I said.

“Actually late afternoon,” she answered, pushing herself out of the chair with a sigh. She came to the bed, placed a tank in the cart, and connected it to the tube while I took off the BiPAP snout and placed the nubbins into my nose. She set it for 2.5 liters a minute—six hours before I’d need a change—and then I got up.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good,” I said. “Great. How was the Vondelpark?”

“I skipped it,” she said. “Read all about it in the guidebook, though.”

“Mom,” I said, “you didn’t have to stay here.”

She shrugged. “I know. I wanted to. I like watching you sleep.”

“Said the creeper.” She laughed, but I still felt bad. “I just want you to have fun or whatever, you know?”

“Okay. I’ll have fun tonight, okay? I’ll go do crazy mom stuff while you and Augustus go to dinner.”

“Without you?” I asked.

“Yes without me. In fact, you have reservations at a place called Oranje,” she said. “Mr. Van Houten’s assistant set it up. It’s in this neighborhood called the Jordaan. Very fancy, according to the guidebook. There’s a tram station right around the corner. Augustus has directions. You can eat outside, watch the boats go by. It’ll be lovely. Very romantic.”

“Mom.”

“I’m just saying,” she said. “You should get dressed. The sundress, maybe?”

One might marvel at the insanity of the situation: A mother sends her sixteen-year-old daughter alone with a seventeen-year-old boy out into a foreign city famous for its permissiveness. But this, too, was a side effect of dying: I could not run or dance or eat foods rich in nitrogen, but in the city of freedom, I was among the most liberated of its residents.

I did indeed wear the sundress—this blue print, flowey knee-length Forever 21 thing—with tights and Mary Janes because I liked being quite a lot shorter than him. I went into the hilariously tiny bathroom and battled my bedhead for a while until everything looked suitably mid-2000s Natalie Portman. At six P.M. on the dot (noon back home), there was a knock.

“Hello?” I said through the door. There was no peephole at the Hotel Filosoof.

“Okay,” Augustus answered. I could hear the cigarette in his mouth. I looked down at myself. The sundress offered the most in the way of my rib cage and collarbone that Augustus had seen. It wasn’t obscene or anything, but it was as close as I ever got to showing some skin. (My mother had a motto on this front that I agreed with: “Lancasters don’t bare midriffs.”)

I pulled the door open. Augustus wore a black suit, narrow lapels, perfectly tailored, over a light blue dress shirt and a thin black tie. A cigarette dangled from the unsmiling corner of his mouth. “Hazel Grace,” he said, “you look gorgeous.”

“I,” I said. I kept thinking the rest of my sentence would emerge from the air passing through my vocal cords, but nothing happened. Then finally, I said, “I feel underdressed.”

“Ah, this old thing?” he said, smiling down at me.

“Augustus,” my mom said behind me, “you look *extremely* handsome.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said. He offered me his arm. I took it, glancing back to Mom.

“See you by eleven,” she said.

•••

Waiting for the number one tram on a wide street busy with traffic, I said to Augustus, “The suit you wear to funerals, I assume?”

“Actually, no,” he said. “That suit isn’t nearly this nice.”

The blue-and-white tram arrived, and Augustus handed our cards to the driver, who explained that we needed to wave them at this circular sensor. As we walked through the crowded tram, an old man stood up to give us seats together, and I tried to tell him to sit, but he gestured toward the seat insistently. We rode the tram for three stops, me leaning over Gus so we could look out the window together.

Augustus pointed up at the trees and asked, “Do you see that?”

I did. There were elm trees everywhere along the canals, and these seeds were blowing out of them. But they didn’t look like seeds. They looked for all the world like miniaturized rose petals drained of their color. These pale petals were gathering in the wind like flocking birds—thousands of them, like a spring snowstorm.

The old man who’d given up his seat saw us noticing and said, in English, “Amsterdam’s spring snow. The *iepen* throw confetti to greet the spring.”

We switched trams, and after four more stops we arrived at a street split by a beautiful canal, the reflections of the ancient bridge and picturesque canal houses rippling in water.

Oranje was just steps from the tram. The restaurant was on one side of the street; the outdoor seating on the other, on a concrete outcropping right at the edge of the canal. The hostess’s eyes lit up as Augustus and I walked toward her. “Mr. and Mrs. Waters?”

“I guess?” I said.

“Your table,” she said, gesturing across the street to a narrow table inches from the canal. “The champagne is our gift.”

Gus and I glanced at each other, smiling. Once we’d crossed the street, he pulled out a seat for me and helped me scoot it back in. There were indeed two flutes of champagne at our white-tableclothed table. The slight chill in the air was balanced magnificently by the sunshine; on one side of us, cyclists pedaled

past—well-dressed men and women on their way home from work, improbably attractive blond girls riding sidesaddle on the back of a friend’s bike, tiny helmetless kids bouncing around in plastic seats behind their parents. And on our other side, the canal water was choked with millions of the confetti seeds. Little boats were moored at the brick banks, half full of rainwater, some of them near sinking. A bit farther down the canal, I could see houseboats floating on pontoons, and in the middle of the canal, an open-air, flat-bottomed boat decked out with lawn chairs and a portable stereo idled toward us. Augustus took his flute of champagne and raised it. I took mine, even though I’d never had a drink aside from sips of my dad’s beer.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and we clinked glasses. I took a sip. The tiny bubbles melted in my mouth and journeyed northward into my brain. Sweet. Crisp. Delicious. “That is really good,” I said. “I’ve never drunk champagne.”

A sturdy young waiter with wavy blond hair appeared. He was maybe even taller than Augustus. “Do you know,” he asked in a delicious accent, “what Dom Pérignon said after inventing champagne?”

“No?” I said.

“He called out to his fellow monks, ‘Come quickly: I am tasting the stars.’ Welcome to Amsterdam. Would you like to see a menu, or will you have the chef’s choice?”

I looked at Augustus and he at me. “The chef’s choice sounds lovely, but Hazel is a vegetarian.” I’d mentioned this to Augustus precisely once, on the first day we met.

“This is not a problem,” the waiter said.

“Awesome. And can we get more of this?” Gus asked, of the champagne.

“Of course,” said our waiter. “We have bottled all the stars this evening, my young friends. Gah, the confetti!” he said, and lightly brushed a seed from my bare shoulder. “It hasn’t been so bad in many years. It’s everywhere. Very annoying.”

The waiter disappeared. We watched the confetti fall from the sky, skip across the ground in the breeze, and tumble into the canal. “Kind of hard to believe anyone could ever find that annoying,” Augustus said after a while.

“People always get used to beauty, though.”

“I haven’t gotten used to you just yet,” he answered, smiling. I felt myself blushing. “Thank you for coming to Amsterdam,” he said.

“Thank you for letting me hijack your wish,” I said.

“Thank you for wearing that dress which is like whoa,” he said. I shook my head, trying not to smile at him. I didn’t want to be a grenade. But then again, he

knew what he was doing, didn't he? It was his choice, too. "Hey, how's that poem end?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"The one you recited to me on the plane."

"Oh, 'Prufrock'? It ends, 'We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.'"

Augustus pulled out a cigarette and tapped the filter against the table.

"Stupid human voices always ruining everything."

The waiter arrived with two more glasses of champagne and what he called "Belgian white asparagus with a lavender infusion."

"I've never had champagne either," Gus said after he left. "In case you were wondering or whatever. Also, I've never had white asparagus."

I was chewing my first bite. "It's amazing," I promised.

He took a bite, swallowed. "God. If asparagus tasted like that all the time, I'd be a vegetarian, too." Some people in a lacquered wooden boat approached us on the canal below. One of them, a woman with curly blond hair, maybe thirty, drank from a beer then raised her glass toward us and shouted something.

"We don't speak Dutch," Gus shouted back.

One of the others shouted a translation: "The beautiful couple is beautiful."

...

The food was so good that with each passing course, our conversation devolved further into fragmented celebrations of its deliciousness: "I want this dragon carrot risotto to become a person so I can take it to Las Vegas and marry it." "Sweet-pea sorbet, you are so unexpectedly magnificent." I wish I'd been hungrier.

After green garlic gnocchi with red mustard leaves, the waiter said, "Dessert next. More stars first?" I shook my head. Two glasses was enough for me. Champagne was no exception to my high tolerance for depressants and pain relievers; I felt warm but not intoxicated. But I didn't want to get drunk. Nights like this one didn't come along often, and I wanted to remember it.

"Mmmm," I said after the waiter left, and Augustus smiled crookedly as he stared down the canal while I stared up it. We had plenty to look at, so the silence didn't feel awkward really, but I wanted everything to be perfect. It was perfect, I guess, but it felt like someone had tried to stage the Amsterdam of my imagination, which made it hard to forget that this dinner, like the trip itself, was a cancer perk. I just wanted us to be talking and joking comfortably, like we

were on the couch together back home, but some tension underlay everything.

“It’s not my funeral suit,” he said after a while. “When I first found out I was sick—I mean, they told me I had like an eighty-five percent chance of cure. I know those are great odds, but I kept thinking it was a game of Russian roulette. I mean, I was going to have to go through hell for six months or a year and lose my leg and then at the end, it *still* might not work, you know?”

“I know,” I said, although I didn’t, not really. I’d never been anything but terminal; all my treatment had been in pursuit of extending my life, not curing my cancer. Phalanxifor had introduced a measure of ambiguity to my cancer story, but I was different from Augustus: My final chapter was written upon diagnosis. Gus, like most cancer survivors, lived with uncertainty.

“Right,” he said. “So I went through this whole thing about wanting to be ready. We bought a plot in Crown Hill, and I walked around with my dad one day and picked out a spot. And I had my whole funeral planned out and everything, and then right before the surgery, I asked my parents if I could buy a suit, like a really nice suit, just in case I bit it. Anyway, I’ve never had occasion to wear it. Until tonight.”

“So it’s your death suit.”

“Correct. Don’t you have a death outfit?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a dress I bought for my fifteenth birthday party. But I don’t wear it on dates.”

His eyes lit up. “We’re on a date?” he asked.

I looked down, feeling bashful. “Don’t push it.”

...

We were both really full, but dessert—a succulently rich *crèmeux* surrounded by passion fruit—was too good not to at least nibble, so we lingered for a while over dessert, trying to get hungry again. The sun was a toddler insistently refusing to go to bed: It was past eight thirty and still light.

Out of nowhere, Augustus asked, “Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“I think forever is an incorrect concept,” I answered.

He smirked. “You’re an incorrect concept.”

“I know. That’s why I’m being taken out of the rotation.”

“That’s not funny,” he said, looking at the street. Two girls passed on a bike, one riding sidesaddle over the back wheel.

“Come on,” I said. “That was a joke.”

“The thought of you being removed from the rotation is not funny to me,” he said. “Seriously, though: afterlife?”

“No,” I said, and then revised. “Well, maybe I wouldn’t go so far as no. You?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice full of confidence. “Yes, absolutely. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, and live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes. I believe in Something with a capital S. Always have.”

“Really?” I asked. I was surprised. I’d always associated belief in heaven with, frankly, a kind of intellectual disengagement. But Gus wasn’t dumb.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I believe in that line from *An Imperial Affliction*. ‘The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes.’ That’s God, I think, the rising sun, and the light is too bright and her eyes are losing but they aren’t lost. I don’t believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but I think something becomes of us.”

“But you fear oblivion.”

“Sure, I fear earthly oblivion. But, I mean, not to sound like my parents, but I believe humans have souls, and I believe in the conservation of souls. The oblivion fear is something else, fear that I won’t be able to give anything in exchange for my life. If you don’t live a life in service of a greater good, you’ve gotta at least die a death in service of a greater good, you know? And I fear that I won’t get either a life or a death that means anything.”

I just shook my head.

“What?” he asked.

“Your obsession with, like, dying for something or leaving behind some great sign of your heroism or whatever. It’s just weird.”

“Everyone wants to lead an extraordinary life.”

“Not everyone,” I said, unable to disguise my annoyance.

“Are you mad?”

“It’s just,” I said, and then couldn’t finish my sentence. “Just,” I said again. Between us flickered the candle. “It’s really mean of you to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for something. That’s a really mean thing to say to me.”

I felt like a little kid for some reason, and I took a bite of dessert to make it appear like it was not that big of a deal to me. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was just thinking about myself.”

“Yeah, you were,” I said. I was too full to finish. I worried I might puke, actually, because I often puked after eating. (Not bulimia, just cancer.) I pushed my dessert plate toward Gus, but he shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, reaching across the table for my hand. I let him take it. “I could be worse, you know.”

“How?” I asked, teasing.

“I mean, I have a work of calligraphy over my toilet that reads, ‘Bathe Yourself Daily in the Comfort of God’s Words,’ Hazel. I could be way worse.”

“Sounds unsanitary,” I said.

“I could be worse.”

“You could be worse.” I smiled. He really did like me. Maybe I was a narcissist or something, but when I realized it there in that moment at Oranje, it made me like him even more.

When our waiter appeared to take dessert away, he said, “Your meal has been paid for by Mr. Peter Van Houten.”

Augustus smiled. “This Peter Van Houten fellow ain’t half bad.”

•••

We walked along the canal as it got dark. A block up from Oranje, we stopped at a park bench surrounded by old rusty bicycles locked to bike racks and to each other. We sat down hip to hip facing the canal, and he put his arm around me.

I could see the halo of light coming from the Red Light District. Even though it was the *Red* Light District, the glow coming from up there was an eerie sort of green. I imagined thousands of tourists getting drunk and stoned and pinballing around the narrow streets.

“I can’t believe he’s going to tell us tomorrow,” I said. “Peter Van Houten is going to tell us the famously unwritten end of the best book ever.”

“Plus he paid for our dinner,” Augustus said.

“I keep imagining that he is going to search us for recording devices before he tells us. And then he will sit down between us on the couch in his living room and whisper whether Anna’s mom married the Dutch Tulip Man.”

“Don’t forget Sisyphus the Hamster,” Augustus added.

“Right, and also of course what fate awaited Sisyphus the Hamster.” I leaned forward, to see into the canal. There were so many of those pale elm petals in the canals, it was ridiculous. “A sequel that will exist just for us,” I said.

“So what’s your guess?” he asked.

“I really don’t know. I’ve gone back and forth like a thousand times about it all. Each time I reread it, I think something different, you know?” He nodded.

“You have a theory?”

“Yeah. I don’t think the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, but he’s also not rich like he leads them to believe. And I think after Anna dies, Anna’s mom goes to Holland with him and thinks they will live there forever, but it doesn’t work out, because she wants to be near where her daughter was.”

I hadn’t realized he’d thought about the book so much, that *An Imperial*

Affliction mattered to Gus independently of me mattering to him.

The water lapped quietly at the stone canal walls beneath us; a group of friends biked past in a clump, shouting over each other in rapid-fire, guttural Dutch; the tiny boats, not much longer than me, half drowned in the canal; the smell of water that had stood too still for too long; his arm pulling me in; his real leg against my real leg all the way from hip to foot. I leaned in to his body a little. He winced. "Sorry, you okay?"

He breathed out a *yeah* in obvious pain.

"Sorry," I said. "Bony shoulder."

"It's okay," he said. "Nice, actually."

We sat there for a long time. Eventually his hand abandoned my shoulder and rested against the back of the park bench. Mostly we just stared into the canal. I was thinking a lot about how they'd made this place exist even though it should've been underwater, and how I was for Dr. Maria a kind of Amsterdam, a half-drowned anomaly, and that made me think about dying. "Can I ask you about Caroline Mathers?"

"And you say there's no afterlife," he answered without looking at me. "But yeah, of course. What do you want to know?"

I wanted to know that he would be okay if I died. I wanted to not be a grenade, to not be a malevolent force in the lives of people I loved. "Just, like, what happened."

He sighed, exhaling for so long that to my crap lungs it seemed like he was bragging. He popped a fresh cigarette into his mouth. "You know how there is famously no place less played in than a hospital playground?" I nodded. "Well, I was at Memorial for a couple weeks when they took off the leg and everything. I was up on the fifth floor and I had a view of the playground, which was always of course utterly desolate. I was all awash in the metaphorical resonance of the empty playground in the hospital courtyard. But then this girl started showing up alone at the playground, every day, swinging on a swing completely alone, like you'd see in a movie or something. So I asked one of my nicer nurses to get the skinny on the girl, and the nurse brought her up to visit, and it was Caroline, and I used my immense charisma to win her over." He paused, so I decided to say something.

"You're not that charismatic," I said. He scoffed, disbelieving. "You're mostly just hot," I explained.

He laughed it off. "The thing about dead people," he said, and then stopped himself. "The thing is you sound like a bastard if you don't romanticize them, but the truth is...complicated, I guess. Like, you are familiar with the trope of the stoic and determined cancer victim who heroically fights her cancer with

inhuman strength and never complains or stops smiling even at the very end, etcetera?”

“Indeed,” I said. “They are kindhearted and generous souls whose every breath is an Inspiration to Us All. They’re so strong! We admire them so!”

“Right, but really, I mean aside from us obviously, cancer kids are not statistically more likely to be awesome or compassionate or perseverant or whatever. Caroline was always moody and miserable, but I liked it. I liked feeling as if she had chosen me as the only person in the world not to hate, and so we spent all this time together just ragging on everyone, you know? Ragging on the nurses and the other kids and our families and whatever else. But I don’t know if that was her or the tumor. I mean, one of her nurses told me once that the kind of tumor Caroline had is known among medical types as the Asshole Tumor, because it just turns you into a monster. So here’s this girl missing a fifth of her brain who’s just had a recurrence of the Asshole Tumor, and so she was not, you know, the paragon of stoic cancer-kid heroism. She was...I mean, to be honest, she was a bitch. But you can’t say that, because she had this tumor, and also she’s, I mean, she’s dead. And she had plenty of reason to be unpleasant, you know?”

I knew.

“You know that part in *An Imperial Affliction* when Anna’s walking across the football field to go to PE or whatever and she falls and goes face-first into the grass and that’s when she knows that the cancer is back and in her nervous system and she can’t get up and her face is like an inch from the football-field grass and she’s just stuck there looking at this grass up close, noticing the way the light hits it and...I don’t remember the line but it’s something like Anna having the Whitmanesque revelation that the definition of humanness is the opportunity to marvel at the majesty of creation or whatever. You know that part?”

“I know that part,” I said.

“So afterward, while I was getting eviscerated by chemo, for some reason I decided to feel really hopeful. Not about survival specifically, but I felt like Anna does in the book, that feeling of excitement and gratitude about just being able to marvel at it all.

“But meanwhile Caroline got worse every day. She went home after a while and there were moments where I thought we could have, like, a regular relationship, but we couldn’t, really, because she had no filter between her thoughts and her speech, which was sad and unpleasant and frequently hurtful. But, I mean, you can’t dump a girl with a brain tumor. And her parents liked me, and she has this little brother who is a really cool kid. I mean, how can you

dump her? She's *dying*.

"It took forever. It took almost a year, and it was a year of me hanging out with this girl who would, like, just start laughing out of nowhere and point at my prosthetic and call me Stumpy."

"No," I said.

"Yeah. I mean, it was the tumor. It ate her brain, you know? Or it wasn't the tumor. I have no way of knowing, because they were inseparable, she and the tumor. But as she got sicker, I mean, she'd just repeat the same stories and laugh at her own comments even if she'd already said the same thing a hundred times that day. Like, she made the same joke over and over again for weeks: 'Gus has great legs. I mean leg.' And then she would just laugh like a maniac."

"Oh, Gus," I said. "That's..." I didn't know what to say. He wasn't looking at me, and it felt invasive of me to look at him. I felt him scoot forward. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and stared at it, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, then put it back.

"Well," he said, "to be fair, I *do* have great leg."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"It's all good, Hazel Grace. But just to be clear, when I thought I saw Caroline Mathers's ghost in Support Group, I was not entirely happy. I was staring, but I wasn't yearning, if you know what I mean." He pulled the pack out of his pocket and placed the cigarette back in it.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"Me too," he said.

"I don't ever want to do that to you," I told him.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind, Hazel Grace. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

I woke up at four in the Dutch morning ready for the day. All attempts to go back to sleep failed, so I lay there with the BiPAP pumping the air in and urging it out, enjoying the dragon sounds but wishing I could choose my breaths.

I reread *An Imperial Affliction* until Mom woke up and rolled over toward me around six. She nuzzled her head against my shoulder, which felt uncomfortable and vaguely Augustinian.

The hotel brought a breakfast to our room that, much to my delight, featured *deli meat* among many other denials of American breakfast constructions. The dress I'd planned to wear to meet Peter Van Houten had been moved up in the rotation for the Oranje dinner, so after I showered and got my hair to lie halfway flat, I spent like thirty minutes debating with Mom the various benefits and drawbacks of the available outfits before deciding to dress as much like Anna in *AIA* as possible: Chuck Taylors and dark jeans like she always wore, and a light blue T-shirt.

The shirt was a screen print of a famous Surrealist artwork by René Magritte in which he drew a pipe and then beneath it wrote in cursive *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. ("This is not a pipe.")

"I just don't get that shirt," Mom said.

"Peter Van Houten will get it, trust me. There are like seven thousand Magritte references in *An Imperial Affliction*."

"But it *is* a pipe."

"No, it's not," I said. "It's a *drawing* of a pipe. Get it? All representations of a thing are inherently abstract. It's very clever."

"How did you get so grown up that you understand things that confuse your ancient mother?" Mom asked. "It seems like just yesterday that I was telling seven-year-old Hazel why the sky was blue. You thought I was a genius back then."

“Why is the sky blue?” I asked.

“Cuz,” she answered. I laughed.

As it got closer to ten, I grew more and more nervous: nervous to see Augustus; nervous to meet Peter Van Houten; nervous that my outfit was not a good outfit; nervous that we wouldn’t find the right house since all the houses in Amsterdam looked pretty similar; nervous that we would get lost and never make it back to the Filosoof; nervous nervous nervous. Mom kept trying to talk to me, but I couldn’t really listen. I was about to ask her to go upstairs and make sure Augustus was up when he knocked.

I opened the door. He looked down at the shirt and smiled. “Funny,” he said.

“Don’t call my boobs funny,” I answered.

“Right here,” Mom said behind us. But I’d made Augustus blush and put him enough off his game that I could finally bear to look up at him.

“You sure you don’t want to come?” I asked Mom.

“I’m going to the Rijksmuseum and the Vondelpark today,” she said. “Plus, I just don’t get his book. No offense. Thank him and Lidewij for us, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. I hugged Mom, and she kissed my head just above my ear.

...

Peter Van Houten’s white row house was just around the corner from the hotel, on the Vondelstraat, facing the park. Number 158. Augustus took me by one arm and grabbed the oxygen cart with the other, and we walked up the three steps to the lacquered blue-black front door. My heart pounded. One closed door away from the answers I’d dreamed of ever since I first read that last unfinished page.

Inside, I could hear a bass beat thumping loud enough to rattle the windowsills. I wondered whether Peter Van Houten had a kid who liked rap music.

I grabbed the lion’s-head door knocker and knocked tentatively. The beat continued. “Maybe he can’t hear over the music?” Augustus asked. He grabbed the lion’s head and knocked much louder.

The music disappeared, replaced by shuffled footsteps. A dead bolt slid. Another. The door creaked open. A potbellied man with thin hair, sagging jowls, and a week-old beard squinted into the sunlight. He wore baby-blue man pajamas like guys in old movies. His face and belly were so round, and his arms so skinny, that he looked like a dough ball with four sticks stuck into it. “Mr. Van Houten?” Augustus asked, his voice squeaking a bit.

The door slammed shut. Behind it, I heard a stammering, reedy voice shout, “LEEE-DUH-VIGH!” (Until then, I’d pronounced his assistant’s name like lid-

uh-widge.)

We could hear everything through the door. “Are they here, Peter?” a woman asked.

“There are—Lidewij, there are two adolescent apparitions outside the door.”

“Apparitions?” she asked with a pleasant Dutch lilt.

Van Houten answered in a rush. “Phantasms specters ghouls visitants post-terrestrials *apparitions*, Lidewij. How can someone pursuing a postgraduate degree in American literature display such abominable English-language skills?”

“Peter, those are not post-terrestrials. They are Augustus and Hazel, the young fans with whom you have been corresponding.”

“They are—what? They—I thought they were in America!”

“Yes, but you invited them here, you will remember.”

“Do you know why I left America, Lidewij? So that I would never again have to encounter Americans.”

“But you are an American.”

“Incurably so, it seems. But as to *these* Americans, you must tell them to leave at once, that there has been a terrible mistake, that the blessed Van Houten was making a rhetorical offer to meet, not an actual one, that such offers must be read symbolically.”

I thought I might throw up. I looked over at Augustus, who was staring intently at the door, and saw his shoulders slacken.

“I will not do this, Peter,” answered Lidewij. “You *must* meet them. You must. You need to see them. You need to see how your work matters.”

“Lidewij, did you knowingly deceive me to arrange this?”

A long silence ensued, and then finally the door opened again. He turned his head metronomically from Augustus to me, still squinting. “Which of you is Augustus Waters?” he asked. Augustus raised his hand tentatively. Van Houten nodded and said, “Did you close the deal with that chick yet?”

Whereupon I encountered for the first and only time a truly speechless Augustus Waters. “I,” he started, “um, I, Hazel, um. Well.”

“This boy appears to have some kind of developmental delay,” Peter Van Houten said to Lidewij.

“*Peter*,” she scolded.

“Well,” Peter Van Houten said, extending his hand to me. “It is at any rate a pleasure to meet such ontologically improbable creatures.” I shook his swollen hand, and then he shook hands with Augustus. I was wondering what *ontologically* meant. Regardless, I liked it. Augustus and I were together in the Improbable Creatures Club: us and duck-billed platypuses.

Of course, I had hoped that Peter Van Houten would be sane, but the world

is not a wish-granting factory. The important thing was that the door was open and I was crossing the threshold to learn what happens after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*. That was enough. We followed him and Lidewij inside, past a huge oak dining room table with only two chairs, into a creepily sterile living room. It looked like a museum, except there was no art on the empty white walls. Aside from one couch and one lounge chair, both a mix of steel and black leather, the room seemed empty. Then I noticed two large black garbage bags, full and twist-tied, behind the couch.

“Trash?” I mumbled to Augustus soft enough that I thought no one else would hear.

“Fan mail,” Van Houten answered as he sat down in the lounge chair. “Eighteen years’ worth of it. Can’t open it. Terrifying. Yours are the first missives to which I have replied, and look where that got me. I frankly find the reality of readers wholly unappetizing.”

That explained why he’d never replied to my letters: He’d never read them. I wondered why he kept them at all, let alone in an otherwise empty formal living room. Van Houten kicked his feet up onto the ottoman and crossed his slippers. He motioned toward the couch. Augustus and I sat down next to each other, but not *too* next.

“Would you care for some breakfast?” asked Lidewij.

I started to say that we’d already eaten when Peter interrupted. “It is far too early for breakfast, Lidewij.”

“Well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies.”

“Then it’s too late for breakfast,” he said. “However, it being after noon in the body and whatnot, we should enjoy a cocktail. Do you drink Scotch?” he asked me.

“Do I—um, no, I’m fine,” I said.

“Augustus Waters?” Van Houten asked, nodding toward Gus.

“Uh, I’m good.”

“Just me, then, Lidewij. Scotch and water, please.” Peter turned his attention to Gus, asking, “You know how we make a Scotch and water in this home?”

“No, sir,” Gus said.

“We pour Scotch into a glass and then call to mind thoughts of water, and then we mix the actual Scotch with the abstracted idea of water.”

Lidewij said, “Perhaps a bit of breakfast first, Peter.”

He looked toward us and stage-whispered, “She thinks I have a drinking problem.”

“And I think that the sun has risen,” Lidewij responded. Nonetheless, she turned to the bar in the living room, reached up for a bottle of Scotch, and

poured a glass half full. She carried it to him. Peter Van Houten took a sip, then sat up straight in his chair. “A drink this good deserves one’s best posture,” he said.

I became conscious of my own posture and sat up a little on the couch. I rearranged my cannula. Dad always told me that you can judge people by the way they treat waiters and assistants. By this measure, Peter Van Houten was possibly the world’s douchiest douche. “So you like my book,” he said to Augustus after another sip.

“Yeah,” I said, speaking up on Augustus’s behalf. “And yes, we—well, Augustus, he made meeting you his Wish so that we could come here, so that you could tell us what happens after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*.”

Van Houten said nothing, just took a long pull on his drink.

After a minute, Augustus said, “Your book is sort of the thing that brought us together.”

“But you aren’t together,” he observed without looking at me.

“The thing that brought us nearly together,” I said.

Now he turned to me. “Did you dress like her on purpose?”

“Anna?” I asked.

He just kept staring at me.

“Kind of,” I said.

He took a long drink, then grimaced. “I do not have a drinking problem,” he announced, his voice needlessly loud. “I have a Churchillian relationship with alcohol: I can crack jokes and govern England and do anything I want to do. Except not drink.” He glanced over at Lidewij and nodded toward his glass. She took it, then walked back to the bar. “Just the *idea* of water, Lidewij,” he instructed.

“Yah, got it,” she said, the accent almost American.

The second drink arrived. Van Houten’s spine stiffened again out of respect. He kicked off his slippers. He had really ugly feet. He was rather ruining the whole business of authorial genius for me. But he had the answers.

“Well, um,” I said, “first, we do want to say thank you for dinner last night and—”

“We bought them dinner last night?” Van Houten asked Lidewij.

“Yes, at Oranje.”

“Ah, yes. Well, believe me when I say that you do not have me to thank but rather Lidewij, who is exceptionally talented in the field of spending my money.”

“It was our pleasure,” Lidewij said.

“Well, thanks, at any rate,” Augustus said. I could hear annoyance in his

voice.

“So here I am,” Van Houten said after a moment. “What are your questions?”

“Um,” Augustus said.

“He seemed so intelligent in print,” Van Houten said to Lidewij regarding Augustus. “Perhaps the cancer has established a beachhead in his brain.”

“Peter,” Lidewij said, duly horrified.

I was horrified, too, but there was something pleasant about a guy so despicable that he wouldn't treat us deferentially. “We do have some questions, actually,” I said. “I talked about them in my email. I don't know if you remember.”

“I do not.”

“His memory is compromised,” Lidewij said.

“If only my memory would compromise,” Van Houten responded.

“So, our questions,” I repeated.

“She uses the royal we,” Peter said to no one in particular. Another sip. I didn't know what Scotch tasted like, but if it tasted anything like champagne, I couldn't imagine how he could drink so much, so quickly, so early in the morning. “Are you familiar with Zeno's tortoise paradox?” he asked me.

“We have questions about what happens to the characters after the end of the book, specifically Anna's—”

“You wrongly assume that I need to hear your question in order to answer it. You are familiar with the philosopher Zeno?” I shook my head vaguely. “Alas. Zeno was a pre-Socratic philosopher who is said to have discovered forty paradoxes within the worldview put forth by Parmenides—surely you know Parmenides,” he said, and I nodded that I knew Parmenides, although I did not. “Thank God,” he said. “Zeno professionally specialized in revealing the inaccuracies and oversimplifications of Parmenides, which wasn't difficult, since Parmenides was spectacularly wrong everywhere and always. Parmenides is valuable in precisely the way that it is valuable to have an acquaintance who reliably picks the wrong horse each and every time you take him to the racetrack. But Zeno's most important—wait, give me a sense of your familiarity with Swedish hip-hop.”

I could not tell if Peter Van Houten was kidding. After a moment, Augustus answered for me. “Limited,” he said.

“Okay, but presumably you know Afasi och Filthy's seminal album *Fläcken*.”

“We do not,” I said for the both of us.

“Lidewij, play ‘Bomfalleralla’ immediately.” Lidewij walked over to an

MP3 player, spun the wheel a bit, then hit a button. A rap song boomed from every direction. It sounded like a fairly regular rap song, except the words were in Swedish.

After it was over, Peter Van Houten looked at us expectantly, his little eyes as wide as they could get. “Yeah?” he asked. “Yeah?”

I said, “I’m sorry, sir, but we don’t speak Swedish.”

“Well, of course you don’t. Neither do I. Who the hell speaks Swedish? The important thing is not whatever nonsense the voices are *saying*, but what the voices are *feeling*. Surely you know that there are only two emotions, love and fear, and that Afasi och Filthy navigate between them with the kind of facility that one simply does not find in hip-hop music outside of Sweden. Shall I play it for you again?”

“Are you joking?” Gus said.

“Pardon?”

“Is this some kind of performance?” He looked up at Lidewij and asked, “Is it?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lidewij answered. “He’s not always—this is unusually—”

“Oh, shut up, Lidewij. Rudolf Otto said that if you had not encountered the numinous, if you have not experienced a nonrational encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*, then his work was not for you. And I say to you, young friends, that if you cannot hear Afasi och Filthy’s bravadic response to fear, then my work is not for you.”

I cannot emphasize this enough: It was a completely normal rap song, except in Swedish. “Um,” I said. “So about *An Imperial Affliction*. Anna’s mom, when the book ends, is about to—”

Van Houten interrupted me, tapping his glass as he talked until Lidewij refilled it again. “So Zeno is most famous for his tortoise paradox. Let us imagine that you are in a race with a tortoise. The tortoise has a ten-yard head start. In the time it takes you to run that ten yards, the tortoise has maybe moved one yard. And then in the time it takes you to make up that distance, the tortoise goes a bit farther, and so on forever. You are faster than the tortoise but you can never catch him; you can only decrease his lead.

“Of course, you just run past the tortoise without contemplating the mechanics involved, but the question of how you are able to do this turns out to be incredibly complicated, and no one really solved it until Cantor showed us that some infinities are bigger than other infinities.”

“Um,” I said.

“I assume that answers your question,” he said confidently, then sipped generously from his glass.

“Not really,” I said. “We were wondering, after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*—”

“I disavow everything in that putrid novel,” Van Houten said, cutting me off.

“No,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“No, that is not acceptable,” I said. “I understand that the story ends midnarrative because Anna dies or becomes too sick to continue, but you said you would tell us what happens to everybody, and that’s why we’re here, and we, *I* need you to tell me.”

Van Houten sighed. After another drink, he said, “Very well. Whose story do you seek?”

“Anna’s mom, the Dutch Tulip Man, Sisyphus the Hamster, I mean, just—what happens to everyone.”

Van Houten closed his eyes and puffed his cheeks as he exhaled, then looked up at the exposed wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling. “The hamster,” he said after a while. “The hamster gets adopted by Christine”—who was one of Anna’s presickness friends. That made sense. Christine and Anna played with Sisyphus in a few scenes. “He is adopted by Christine and lives for a couple years after the end of the novel and dies peacefully in his hamster sleep.”

Now we were getting somewhere. “Great,” I said. “Great. Okay, so the Dutch Tulip Man. Is he a con man? Do he and Anna’s mom get married?”

Van Houten was still staring at the ceiling beams. He took a drink. The glass was almost empty again. “Lidewij, I can’t do it. I can’t. I *can’t*.” He leveled his gaze to me. “*Nothing* happens to the Dutch Tulip Man. He isn’t a con man or not a con man; he’s *God*. He’s an obvious and unambiguous metaphorical representation of *God*, and asking what becomes of him is the intellectual equivalent of asking what becomes of the disembodied eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in *Gatsby*. Do he and Anna’s mom get married? We are speaking of a novel, dear child, not some historical enterprise.”

“Right, but surely you must have thought about what happens to them, I mean as characters, I mean independent of their metaphorical meanings or whatever.”

“They’re fictions,” he said, tapping his glass again. “Nothing happens to them.”

“You said you’d tell me,” I insisted. I reminded myself to be assertive. I needed to keep his addled attention on my questions.

“Perhaps, but I was under the misguided impression that you were incapable of transatlantic travel. I was trying...to provide you some comfort, I suppose, which I should know better than to attempt. But to be perfectly frank, this

childish idea that the author of a novel has some special insight into the characters in the novel...it's ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life outside of those scratches. What *happened* to them? They all ceased to exist the moment the novel ended."

"No," I said. I pushed myself up off the couch. "No, I understand that, but it's impossible not to imagine a future for them. You are the most qualified person to imagine that future. Something happened to Anna's mother. She either got married or didn't. She either moved to Holland with the Dutch Tulip Man or didn't. She either had more kids or didn't. I need to know what happens to her."

Van Houten pursed his lips. "I regret that I cannot indulge your childish whims, but I refuse to pity you in the manner to which you are well accustomed."

"I don't want your pity," I said.

"Like all sick children," he answered dispassionately, "you say you don't want pity, but your very existence depends upon it."

"Peter," Lidewij said, but he continued as he reclined there, his words getting rounder in his drunken mouth. "Sick children inevitably become arrested: You are fated to live out your days as the child you were when diagnosed, the child who believes there is life after a novel ends. And we, as adults, we pity this, so we pay for your treatments, for your oxygen machines. We give you food and water though you are unlikely to live long enough—"

"PETER!" Lidewij shouted.

"You are a side effect," Van Houten continued, "of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation."

"I RESIGN!" Lidewij shouted. There were tears in her eyes. But I wasn't angry. He was looking for the most hurtful way to tell the truth, but of course I already knew the truth. I'd had years of staring at ceilings from my bedroom to the ICU, and so I'd long ago found the most hurtful ways to imagine my own illness. I stepped toward him. "Listen, douchebags," I said, "you're not going to tell me anything about disease I don't already know. I need one and only one thing from you before I walk out of your life forever: WHAT HAPPENS TO ANNA'S MOTHER?"

He raised his flabby chins vaguely toward me and shrugged his shoulders. "I can no more tell you what happens to her than I can tell you what becomes of Proust's Narrator or Holden Caulfield's sister or Huckleberry Finn after he lights out for the territories."

"BULLSHIT! That's bullshit. Just tell me! Make something up!"

"No, and I'll thank you not to curse in my house. It isn't becoming of a

lady.”

I still wasn't angry, exactly, but I was very focused on getting the thing I'd been promised. Something inside me welled up and I reached down and smacked the swollen hand that held the glass of Scotch. What remained of the Scotch splashed across the vast expanse of his face, the glass bouncing off his nose and then spinning balletically through the air, landing with a shattering crash on the ancient hardwood floors.

“Lidewij,” Van Houten said calmly, “I'll have a martini, if you please. Just a whisper of vermouth.”

“I have resigned,” Lidewij said after a moment.

“Don't be ridiculous.”

I didn't know what to do. Being nice hadn't worked. Being mean hadn't worked. I needed an answer. I'd come all this way, hijacked Augustus's Wish. I needed to know.

“Have you ever stopped to wonder,” he said, his words slurring now, “why you care so much about your silly questions?”

“YOU PROMISED!” I shouted, hearing Isaac's impotent wailing echoing from the night of the broken trophies. Van Houten didn't reply.

I was still standing over him, waiting for him to say something to me when I felt Augustus's hand on my arm. He pulled me away toward the door, and I followed him while Van Houten ranted to Lidewij about the ingratitude of contemporary teenagers and the death of polite society, and Lidewij, somewhat hysterical, shouted back at him in rapid-fire Dutch.

“You'll have to forgive my former assistant,” he said. “Dutch is not so much a language as an ailment of the throat.”

Augustus pulled me out of the room and through the door to the late spring morning and the falling confetti of the elms.

...

For me there was no such thing as a quick getaway, but we made our way down the stairs, Augustus holding my cart, and then started to walk back toward the Filosoof on a bumpy sidewalk of interwoven rectangular bricks. For the first time since the swing set, I started crying.

“Hey,” he said, touching my waist. “Hey. It's okay.” I nodded and wiped my face with the back of my hand. “He sucks.” I nodded again. “I'll write you an epilogue,” Gus said. That made me cry harder. “I will,” he said. “I will. Better than any shit that drunk could write. His brain is Swiss cheese. He doesn't even remember writing the book. I can write ten times the story that guy can. There

will be blood and guts and sacrifice. *An Imperial Affliction* meets *The Price of Dawn*. You'll love it." I kept nodding, faking a smile, and then he hugged me, his strong arms pulling me into his muscular chest, and I sogged up his polo shirt a little but then recovered enough to speak.

"I spent your Wish on that doucheface," I said into his chest.

"Hazel Grace. No. I will grant you that you did spend my one and only Wish, but you did not spend it on him. You spent it on us."

Behind us, I heard the *plonk plonk* of high heels running. I turned around. It was Lidewij, her eyeliner running down her cheeks, duly horrified, chasing us up the sidewalk. "Perhaps we should go to the Anne Frank Huis," Lidewij said.

"I'm not going anywhere with that monster," Augustus said.

"He is not invited," Lidewij said.

Augustus kept holding me, protective, his hand on the side of my face. "I don't think—" he started, but I cut him off.

"We should go." I still wanted answers from Van Houten. But it wasn't all I wanted. I only had two days left in Amsterdam with Augustus Waters. I wouldn't let a sad old man ruin them.

...

Lidewij drove a clunky gray Fiat with an engine that sounded like an excited four-year-old girl. As we drove through the streets of Amsterdam, she repeatedly and profusely apologized. "I am very sorry. There is no excuse. He is very sick," she said. "I thought meeting you would help him, if he would see that his work has shaped real lives, but...I'm very sorry. It is very, very embarrassing." Neither Augustus nor I said anything. I was in the backseat behind him. I snuck my hand between the side of the car and his seat, feeling for his hand, but I couldn't find it. Lidewij continued, "I have continued this work because I believe he is a genius and because the pay is very good, but he has become a monster."

"I guess he got pretty rich on that book," I said after a while.

"Oh, no no, he is of the Van Houtens," she said. "In the seventeenth century, his ancestor discovered how to mix cocoa into water. Some Van Houtens moved to the United States long ago, and Peter is of those, but he moved to Holland after his novel. He is an embarrassment to a great family."

The engine screamed. Lidewij shifted and we shot up a canal bridge. "It is circumstance," she said. "Circumstance has made him so cruel. He is not an evil man. But this day, I did not think—when he said these terrible things, I could not believe it. I am very sorry. Very very sorry."

...

We had to park a block away from the Anne Frank House, and then while Lidewij stood in line to get tickets for us, I sat with my back against a little tree, looking at all the moored houseboats in the Prinsengracht canal. Augustus was standing above me, rolling my oxygen cart in lazy circles, just watching the wheels spin. I wanted him to sit next to me, but I knew it was hard for him to sit, and harder still to stand back up. “Okay?” he asked, looking down at me. I shrugged and reached a hand for his calf. It was his fake calf, but I held on to it. He looked down at me.

“I wanted...” I said.

“I know,” he said. “I know. Apparently the world is not a wish-granting factory.” That made me smile a little.

Lidewij returned with tickets, but her thin lips were pursed with worry. “There is no elevator,” she said. “I am very very sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“No, there are many stairs,” she said. “Steep stairs.”

“It’s okay,” I said again. Augustus started to say something, but I interrupted. “It’s okay. I can do it.”

We began in a room with a video about Jews in Holland and the Nazi invasion and the Frank family. Then we walked upstairs into the canal house where Otto Frank’s business had been. The stairs were slow, for me and Augustus both, but I felt strong. Soon I was staring at the famous bookcase that had hid Anne Frank, her family, and four others. The bookcase was half open, and behind it was an even steeper set of stairs, only wide enough for one person. There were fellow visitors all around us, and I didn’t want to hold up the procession, but Lidewij said, “If everyone could be patient, please,” and I began the walk up, Lidewij carrying the cart behind me, Gus behind her.

It was fourteen steps. I kept thinking about the people behind me—they were mostly adults speaking a variety of languages—and feeling embarrassed or whatever, feeling like a ghost that both comforts and haunts, but finally I made it up, and then I was in an eerily empty room, leaning against the wall, my brain telling my lungs *it’s okay it’s okay calm down it’s okay* and my lungs telling my brain *oh, God, we’re dying here*. I didn’t even see Augustus come upstairs, but he came over and wiped his brow with the back of his hand like *whew* and said, “You’re a champion.”

After a few minutes of wall-leaning, I made it to the next room, which Anne had shared with the dentist Fritz Pfeffer. It was tiny, empty of all furniture. You’d never know anyone had ever lived there except that the pictures Anne had

pasted onto the wall from magazines and newspapers were still there.

Another staircase led up to the room where the van Pels family had lived, this one steeper than the last and eighteen steps, essentially a glorified ladder. I got to the threshold and looked up and figured I could not do it, but also knew the only way through was up.

“Let’s go back,” Gus said behind me.

“I’m okay,” I answered quietly. It’s stupid, but I kept thinking I *owed* it to her—to Anne Frank, I mean—because she was dead and I wasn’t, because she had stayed quiet and kept the blinds drawn and done everything right and still died, and so I should go up the steps and see the rest of the world she’d lived in those years before the Gestapo came.

I began to climb the stairs, crawling up them like a little kid would, slow at first so I could breathe, but then faster because I knew I couldn’t breathe and wanted to get to the top before everything gave out. The blackness encroached around my field of vision as I pulled myself up, eighteen steps, steep as hell. I finally crested the staircase mostly blind and nauseated, the muscles in my arms and legs screaming for oxygen. I slumped seated against a wall, heaving watered-down coughs. There was an empty glass case bolted to the wall above me and I stared up through it to the ceiling and tried not to pass out.

Lidewij crouched down next to me, saying, “You are at the top, that is it,” and I nodded. I had a vague awareness of the adults all around glancing down at me worriedly; of Lidewij speaking quietly in one language and then another and then another to various visitors; of Augustus standing above me, his hand on the top of my head, stroking my hair along the part.

After a long time, Lidewij and Augustus pulled me to my feet and I saw what was protected by the glass case: pencil marks on the wallpaper measuring the growth of all the children in the annex during the period they lived there, inch after inch until they would grow no more.

From there, we left the Franks’ living area, but we were still in the museum: A long narrow hallway showed pictures of each of the annex’s eight residents and described how and where and when they died.

“The only member of his whole family who survived the war,” Lidewij told us, referring to Anne’s father, Otto. Her voice was hushed like we were in church.

“But he didn’t survive a war, not really,” Augustus said. “He survived a genocide.”

“True,” Lidewij said. “I do not know how you go on, without your family. I do not know.” As I read about each of the seven who died, I thought of Otto Frank not being a father anymore, left with a diary instead of a wife and two

daughters. At the end of the hallway, a huge book, bigger than a dictionary, contained the names of the 103,000 dead from the Netherlands in the Holocaust. (Only 5,000 of the deported Dutch Jews, a wall label explained, had survived. 5,000 Otto Franks.) The book was turned to the page with Anne Frank's name, but what got me about it was the fact that right beneath her name there were four Aron Franks. *Four*. Four Aron Franks without museums, without historical markers, without anyone to mourn them. I silently resolved to remember and pray for the four Aron Franks as long as I was around. (Maybe some people need to believe in a proper and omnipotent God to pray, but I don't.)

As we got to the end of the room, Gus stopped and said, "You okay?" I nodded.

He gestured back toward Anne's picture. "The worst part is that she almost lived, you know? She died weeks away from liberation."

Lidewij took a few steps away to watch a video, and I grabbed Augustus's hand as we walked into the next room. It was an A-frame room with some letters Otto Frank had written to people during his months-long search for his daughters. On the wall in the middle of the room, a video of Otto Frank played. He was speaking in English.

"Are there any Nazis left that I could hunt down and bring to justice?" Augustus asked while we leaned over the vitrines reading Otto's letters and the gutting replies that no, no one had seen his children after the liberation.

"I think they're all dead. But it's not like the Nazis had a monopoly on evil."

"True," he said. "That's what we should do, Hazel Grace: We should team up and be this disabled vigilante duo roaring through the world, righting wrongs, defending the weak, protecting the endangered."

Although it was his dream and not mine, I indulged it. He'd indulged mine, after all. "Our fearlessness shall be our secret weapon," I said.

"The tales of our exploits will survive as long as the human voice itself," he said.

"And even after that, when the robots recall the human absurdities of sacrifice and compassion, they will remember us."

"They will robot-laugh at our courageous folly," he said. "But something in their iron robot hearts will yearn to have lived and died as we did: on the hero's errand."

"Augustus Waters," I said, looking up at him, thinking that you cannot kiss anyone in the Anne Frank House, and then thinking that Anne Frank, after all, kissed someone in the Anne Frank House, and that she would probably like nothing more than for her home to have become a place where the young and irreparably broken sink into love.

“I must say,” Otto Frank said on the video in his accented English, “I was very much surprised by the deep thoughts Anne had.”

And then we were kissing. My hand let go of the oxygen cart and I reached up for his neck, and he pulled me up by my waist onto my tiptoes. As his parted lips met mine, I started to feel breathless in a new and fascinating way. The space around us evaporated, and for a weird moment I really liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I’d spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle, worth the chest tubes and the PICC lines and the ceaseless bodily betrayal of the tumors.

“It was quite a different Anne I had known as my daughter. She never really showed this kind of inner feeling,” Otto Frank continued.

The kiss lasted forever as Otto Frank kept talking from behind me. “And my conclusion is,” he said, “since I had been in very good terms with Anne, that most parents don’t know really their children.”

I realized that my eyes were closed and opened them. Augustus was staring at me, his blue eyes closer to me than they’d ever been, and behind him, a crowd of people three deep had sort of circled around us. They were angry, I thought. Horrified. These teenagers, with their hormones, making out beneath a video broadcasting the shattered voice of a former father.

I pulled away from Augustus, and he snuck a peck onto my forehead as I stared down at my Chuck Taylors. And then they started clapping. All the people, all these adults, just started clapping, and one shouted “Bravo!” in a European accent. Augustus, smiling, bowed. Laughing, I curtsied ever so slightly, which was met with another round of applause.

We made our way downstairs, letting all the adults go down first, and right before we got to the café (where blessedly an elevator took us back down to ground level and the gift shop) we saw pages of Anne’s diary, and also her unpublished book of quotations. The quote book happened to be turned to a page of Shakespeare quotations. *For who so firm that cannot be seduced?* she’d written.

...

Lidewij drove us back to the Filosoof. Outside the hotel, it was drizzling and Augustus and I stood on the brick sidewalk slowly getting wet.

Augustus: “You probably need some rest.”

Me: “I’m okay.”

Augustus: “Okay.” (Pause.) “What are you thinking about?”

Me: “You.”

Augustus: "What about me?"

Me: "I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendos, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after."

Augustus: "God, you are sexy."

Me: "We could go to your room."

Augustus: "I've heard worse ideas."

...

We squeezed into the tiny elevator together. Every surface, including the floor, was mirrored. We had to pull the door to shut ourselves in and then the old thing creaked slowly up to the second floor. I was tired and sweaty and worried that I generally looked and smelled gross, but even so I kissed him in that elevator, and then he pulled away and pointed at the mirror and said, "Look, infinite Hazels."

"Some infinities are larger than other infinities," I drawled, mimicking Van Houten.

"What an assclown," Augustus said, and it took all that time and more just to get us to the second floor. Finally the elevator lurched to a halt, and he pushed the mirrored door open. When it was half open, he winced in pain and lost his grip on the door for a second.

"You okay?" I asked.

After a second, he said, "Yeah, yeah, door's just heavy, I guess." He pushed again and got it open. He let me walk out first, of course, but then I didn't know which direction to walk down the hallway, and so I just stood there outside the elevator and he stood there, too, his face still contorted, and I said again, "Okay?"

"Just out of shape, Hazel Grace. All is well."

We were just standing there in the hallway, and he wasn't leading the way to his room or anything, and I didn't know where his room was, and as the stalemate continued, I became convinced he was trying to figure out a way not to hook up with me, that I never should have suggested the idea in the first place, that it was unladylike and therefore had disgusted Augustus Waters, who was standing there looking at me unblinking, trying to think of a way to extricate himself from the situation politely. And then, after forever, he said, "It's above my knee and it just tapers a little and then it's just skin. There's a nasty scar, but it just looks like—"

"What?" I asked.

"My leg," he said. "Just so you're prepared in case, I mean, in case you see it or what—"

“Oh, get over yourself,” I said, and took the two steps I needed to get to him. I kissed him, hard, pressing him against the wall, and I kept kissing him as he fumbled for the room key.

...

We crawled into the bed, my freedom circumscribed some by the oxygen, but even so I could get on top of him and take his shirt off and taste the sweat on the skin below his collarbone as I whispered into his skin, “I love you, Augustus Waters,” his body relaxing beneath mine as he heard me say it. He reached down and tried to pull my shirt off, but it got tangled in the tube. I laughed.

...

“How do you do this every day?” he asked as I disentangled my shirt from the tubes. Idiotically, it occurred to me that my pink underwear didn’t match my purple bra, as if boys even notice such things. I crawled under the covers and kicked out of my jeans and socks and then watched the comforter dance as beneath it, Augustus removed first his jeans and then his leg.

...

We were lying on our backs next to each other, everything hidden by the covers, and after a second I reached over for his thigh and let my hand trail downward to the stump, the thick scarred skin. I held the stump for a second. He flinched. “It hurts?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

He flipped himself onto his side and kissed me. “You’re so hot,” I said, my hand still on his leg.

“I’m starting to think you have an amputee fetish,” he answered, still kissing me. I laughed.

“I have an Augustus Waters fetish,” I explained.

The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be: slow and patient and quiet and neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. There were a lot of condomy problems that I did not get a particularly good look at. No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we’d ever spent together without talking.

Only one thing followed type: Afterward, when I had my face resting against Augustus’s chest, listening to his heart pound, Augustus said, “Hazel Grace, I

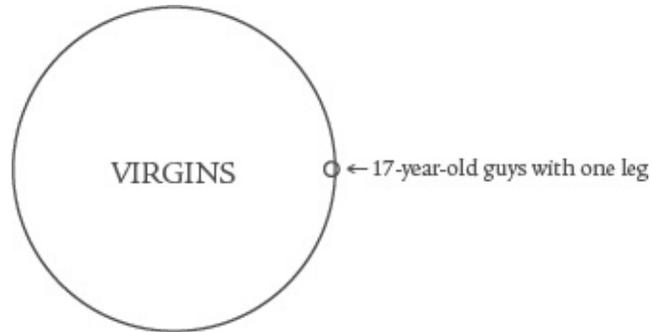
literally cannot keep my eyes open.”

“Misuse of literality,” I said.

“No,” he said. “So. Tired.”

His face turned away from me, my ear pressed to his chest, listening to his lungs settle into the rhythm of sleep. After a while, I got up, dressed, found the Hotel Filosoof stationery, and wrote him a love letter:

Dearest Augustus,



yrs,
Hazel Grace

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning, our last full day in Amsterdam, Mom and Augustus and I walked the half block from the hotel to the Vondelpark, where we found a café in the shadow of the Dutch national film museum. Over lattes—which, the waiter explained to us, the Dutch called “wrong coffee” because it had more milk than coffee—we sat in the lacy shade of a huge chestnut tree and recounted for Mom our encounter with the great Peter Van Houten. We made the story funny. You have a choice in this world, I believe, about how to tell sad stories, and we made the funny choice: Augustus, slumped in the café chair, pretended to be the tongue-tied, word-slurring Van Houten who could not so much as push himself out of his chair; I stood up to play a me all full of bluster and machismo, shouting, “Get up, you fat ugly old man!”

“Did you call him ugly?” Augustus asked.

“Just go with it,” I told him.

“I’m naht uggy. You’re the uggy one, nosetube girl.”

“You’re a coward!” I rumbled, and Augustus broke character to laugh. I sat down. We told Mom about the Anne Frank House, leaving out the kissing.

“Did you go back to chez Van Houten afterward?” Mom asked.

Augustus didn’t even give me time to blush. “Nah, we just hung out at a café. Hazel amused me with some Venn diagram humor.” He glanced at me. God, he was sexy.

“Sounds lovely,” she said. “Listen, I’m going to go for a walk. Give the two of you time to talk,” she said at Gus, an edge in it. “Then maybe later we can go for a tour on a canal boat.”

“Um, okay?” I said. Mom left a five-euro note under her saucer and then kissed me on the top of the head, whispering, “I love love love you,” which was two more loves than usual.

Gus motioned down to the shadows of the branches intersecting and coming

apart on the concrete. “Beautiful, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Such a good metaphor,” he mumbled.

“Is it now?” I asked.

“The negative image of things blown together and then blown apart,” he said. Before us, hundreds of people passed, jogging and biking and Rollerblading. Amsterdam was a city designed for movement and activity, a city that would rather not travel by car, and so inevitably I felt excluded from it. But God, was it beautiful, the creek carving a path around the huge tree, a heron standing still at the water’s edge, searching for a breakfast amid the millions of elm petals floating in the water.

But Augustus didn’t notice. He was too busy watching the shadows move. Finally, he said, “I could look at this all day, but we should go to the hotel.”

“Do we have time?” I asked.

He smiled sadly. “If only,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He nodded back in the direction of the hotel.

...

We walked in silence, Augustus a half step in front of me. I was too scared to ask if I had reason to be scared.

So there is this thing called Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Basically, this guy Abraham Maslow became famous for his theory that certain needs must be met before you can even have other kinds of needs. It looks like this:



MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Once your needs for food and water are fulfilled, you move up to the next set of needs, security, and then the next and the next, but the important thing is that, according to Maslow, until your physiological needs are satisfied, you can't even worry about security or social needs, let alone "self-actualization," which is when you start to, like, make art and think about morality and quantum physics and stuff.

According to Maslow, I was stuck on the second level of the pyramid, unable to feel secure in my health and therefore unable to reach for love and respect and art and whatever else, which is, of course, utter horseshit: The urge to make art or contemplate philosophy does not go away when you are sick. Those urges just become transfigured by illness.

Maslow's pyramid seemed to imply that I was less human than other people, and most people seemed to agree with him. But not Augustus. I always thought he could love me because he'd once been sick. Only now did it occur to me that maybe he still was.

...

We arrived in my room, the Kierkegaard. I sat down on the bed expecting him to join me, but he hunkered down in the dusty paisley chair. That chair. How old was it? Fifty years?

I felt the ball in the base of my throat hardening as I watched him pull a cigarette from his pack and stick it between his lips. He leaned back and sighed. "Just before you went into the ICU, I started to feel this ache in my hip."

"No," I said. Panic rolled in, pulled me under.

He nodded. "So I went in for a PET scan." He stopped. He yanked the cigarette out of his mouth and clenched his teeth.

Much of my life had been devoted to trying not to cry in front of people who loved me, so I knew what Augustus was doing. You clench your teeth. You look up. You tell yourself that if they see you cry, it will hurt them, and you will be nothing but A Sadness in their lives, and you must not become a mere sadness, so you will not cry, and you say all of this to yourself while looking up at the ceiling, and then you swallow even though your throat does not want to close and you look at the person who loves you and smile.

He flashed his crooked smile, then said, "I lit up like a Christmas tree, Hazel Grace. The lining of my chest, my left hip, my liver, everywhere."

Everywhere. That word hung in the air awhile. We both knew what it meant.

I got up, dragging my body and the cart across carpet that was older than Augustus would ever be, and I knelt at the base of the chair and put my head in his lap and hugged him by the waist.

He was stroking my hair. "I'm so sorry," I said.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he said, his voice calm. "Your mom must know. The way she looked at me. My mom must've just told her or something. I should've told you. It was stupid. Selfish."

I knew why he hadn't said anything, of course: the same reason I hadn't wanted him to see me in the ICU. I couldn't be mad at him for even a moment, and only now that I loved a grenade did I understand the foolishness of trying to save others from my own impending fragmentation: I couldn't unlove Augustus Waters. And I didn't want to.

"It's not fair," I said. "It's just so goddamned unfair."

"The world," he said, "is not a wish-granting factory," and then he broke down, just for one moment, his sob roaring impotent like a clap of thunder unaccompanied by lightning, the terrible ferocity that amateurs in the field of suffering might mistake for weakness. Then he pulled me to him and, his face inches from mine, resolved, "I'll fight it. I'll fight it for you. Don't you worry about me, Hazel Grace. I'm okay. I'll find a way to hang around and annoy you for a long time."

I was crying. But even then he was strong, holding me tight so that I could see the sinewy muscles of his arms wrapped around me as he said, "I'm sorry. You'll be okay. It'll be okay. I promise," and smiled his crooked smile.

He kissed my forehead, and then I felt his powerful chest deflate just a little. "I guess I had a *hamartia* after all."

...

After a while, I pulled him over to the bed and we lay there together as he told me they'd started palliative chemo, but he gave it up to go to Amsterdam, even though his parents were furious. They'd tried to stop him right up until that morning, when I heard him screaming that his body belonged to him. "We could have rescheduled," I said.

"No, we couldn't have," he answered. "Anyway, it wasn't working. I could tell it wasn't working, you know?"

I nodded. "It's just bullshit, the whole thing," I said.

"They'll try something else when I get home. They've always got a new idea."

"Yeah," I said, having been the experimental pincushion myself.

“I kind of conned you into believing you were falling in love with a healthy person,” he said.

I shrugged. “I’d have done the same to you.”

“No, you wouldn’t’ve, but we can’t all be as awesome as you.” He kissed me, then grimaced.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“No. Just.” He stared at the ceiling for a long time before saying, “I like this world. I like drinking champagne. I like not smoking. I like the sound of Dutch people speaking Dutch. And now...I don’t even get a battle. I don’t get a fight.”

“You get to battle cancer,” I said. “That is your battle. And you’ll keep fighting,” I told him. I hated it when people tried to build me up to prepare for battle, but I did it to him, anyway. “You’ll...you’ll...live your best life today. This is your war now.” I despised myself for the cheesy sentiment, but what else did I have?

“Some war,” he said dismissively. “What am I at war with? My cancer. And what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They’re made of me as surely as my brain and my heart are made of me. It is a civil war, Hazel Grace, with a predetermined winner.”

“Gus,” I said. I couldn’t say anything else. He was too smart for the kinds of solace I could offer.

“Okay,” he said. But it wasn’t. After a moment, he said, “If you go to the Rijksmuseum, which I really wanted to do—but who are we kidding, neither of us can walk through a museum. But anyway, I looked at the collection online before we left. If you were to go, and hopefully someday you will, you would see a lot of paintings of dead people. You’d see Jesus on the cross, and you’d see a dude getting stabbed in the neck, and you’d see people dying at sea and in battle and a parade of martyrs. But Not. One. Single. Cancer. Kid. Nobody biting it from the plague or smallpox or yellow fever or whatever, because there is no glory in illness. There is no meaning to it. There is no honor in dying *of*.”

Abraham Maslow, I present to you Augustus Waters, whose existential curiosity dwarfed that of his well-fed, well-loved, healthy brethren. While the mass of men went on leading thoroughly unexamined lives of monstrous consumption, Augustus Waters examined the collection of the Rijksmuseum from afar.

“What?” Augustus asked after a while.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just...” I couldn’t finish the sentence, didn’t know how to. “I’m just very, very fond of you.”

He smiled with half his mouth, his nose inches from mine. “The feeling is mutual. I don’t suppose you can forget about it and treat me like I’m not dying.”

“I don’t think you’re dying,” I said. “I think you’ve just got a touch of cancer.”

He smiled. Gallows humor. “I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up,” he said.

“And it is my privilege and my responsibility to ride all the way up with you,” I said.

“Would it be absolutely ludicrous to try to make out?”

“There is no try,” I said. “There is only do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On the flight home, twenty thousand feet above clouds that were ten thousand feet above the ground, Gus said, “I used to think it would be fun to live on a cloud.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like it would be like one of those inflatable moonwalk machines, except for always.”

“But then in middle school science, Mr. Martinez asked who among us had ever fantasized about living in the clouds, and everyone raised their hand. Then Mr. Martinez told us that up in the clouds the wind blew one hundred and fifty miles an hour and the temperature was thirty below zero and there was no oxygen and we’d all die within seconds.”

“Sounds like a nice guy.”

“He specialized in the murder of dreams, Hazel Grace, let me tell you. You think volcanoes are awesome? Tell that to the ten thousand screaming corpses at Pompeii. You still secretly believe that there is an element of magic to this world? It’s all just soulless molecules bouncing against each other randomly. Do you worry about who will take care of you if your parents die? As well you should, because they will be worm food in the fullness of time.”

“Ignorance is bliss,” I said.

A flight attendant walked through the aisle with a beverage cart, half whispering, “Drinks? Drinks? Drinks? Drinks?” Gus leaned over me, raising his hand. “Could we have some champagne, please?”

“You’re twenty-one?” she asked dubiously. I conspicuously rearranged the nubbins in my nose. The stewardess smiled, then glanced down at my sleeping mother. “She won’t mind?” she asked of Mom.

“Nah,” I said.

So she poured champagne into two plastic cups. Cancer Perks.

Gus and I toasted. “To you,” he said.

“To you,” I said, touching my cup to his.

We sipped. Dimmer stars than we’d had at Oranje, but still good enough to drink.

“You know,” Gus said to me, “everything Van Houten said was true.”

“Maybe, but he didn’t have to be such a douche about it. I can’t believe he imagined a future for Sisyphus the Hamster but not for Anna’s mom.”

Augustus shrugged. He seemed to zone out all of a sudden. “Okay?” I asked.

He shook his head microscopically. “Hurts,” he said.

“Chest?”

He nodded. Fists clenched. Later, he would describe it as a one-legged fat man wearing a stiletto heel standing on the middle of his chest. I returned my seat-back tray to its upright and locked position and bent forward to dig pills out of his backpack. He swallowed one with champagne. “Okay?” I asked again.

Gus sat there, pumping his fist, waiting for the medicine to work, the medicine that did not kill the pain so much as distance him from it (and from me).

“It was like it was personal,” Gus said quietly. “Like he was mad at us for some reason. Van Houten, I mean.” He drank the rest of his champagne in a quick series of gulps and soon fell asleep.

...

My dad was waiting for us in baggage claim, standing amid all the limo drivers in suits holding signs printed with the last names of their passengers: JOHNSON, BARRINGTON, CARMICHAEL. Dad had a sign of his own. MY BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, it read, and then underneath that (AND GUS).

I hugged him, and he started crying (of course). As we drove home, Gus and I told Dad stories of Amsterdam, but it wasn’t until I was home and hooked up to Philip watching good ol’ American television with Dad and eating American pizza off napkins on our laps that I told him about Gus.

“Gus had a recurrence,” I said.

“I know,” he said. He scooted over toward me, and then added, “His mom told us before the trip. I’m sorry he kept it from you. I’m...I’m sorry, Hazel.” I didn’t say anything for a long time. The show we were watching was about people who are trying to pick which house they are going to buy. “So I read *An Imperial Affliction* while you guys were gone,” Dad said.

I turned my head up to him. “Oh, cool. What’d you think?”

“It was good. A little over my head. I was a biochemistry major, remember, not a literature guy. I do wish it had ended.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Common complaint.”

“Also, it was a bit hopeless,” he said. “A bit defeatist.”

“If by defeatist you mean *honest*, then I agree.”

“I don’t think defeatism is honest,” Dad answered. “I refuse to accept that.”

“So everything happens for a reason and we’ll all go live in the clouds and play harps and live in mansions?”

Dad smiled. He put a big arm around me and pulled me to him, kissing the side of my head. “I don’t know what I believe, Hazel. I thought being an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that has not been my experience.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

He told me again that he was sorry about Gus, and then we went back to watching the show, and the people picked a house, and Dad still had his arm around me, and I was kinda starting to fall asleep, but I didn’t want to go to bed, and then Dad said, “You know what I believe? I remember in college I was taking this math class, this really great math class taught by this tiny old woman. She was talking about fast Fourier transforms and she stopped midsentence and said, ‘Sometimes it seems the universe wants to be noticed.’”

“That’s what I believe. I believe the universe wants to be noticed. I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. And who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it—or my observation of it—is temporary?”

“You are fairly smart,” I said after a while.

“You are fairly good at compliments,” he answered.

...

The next afternoon, I drove over to Gus’s house and ate peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with his parents and told them stories about Amsterdam while Gus napped on the living room couch, where we’d watched *V for Vendetta*. I could just see him from the kitchen: He lay on his back, head turned away from me, a PICC line already in. They were attacking the cancer with a new cocktail: two chemo drugs and a protein receptor that they hoped would turn off the oncogene in Gus’s cancer. He was lucky to get enrolled in the trial, they told me. Lucky. I knew one of the drugs. Hearing the sound of its name made me want to barf.

After a while, Isaac’s mom brought him over.

“Isaac, hi, it’s Hazel from Support Group, not your evil ex-girlfriend.” His mom walked him to me, and I pulled myself out of the dining room chair and hugged him, his body taking a moment to find me before he hugged me back,

hard.

“How was Amsterdam?” he asked.

“Awesome,” I said.

“Waters,” he said. “Where are ya, bro?”

“He’s napping,” I said, and my voice caught. Isaac shook his head, everyone quiet.

“Sucks,” Isaac said after a second. His mom walked him to a chair she’d pulled out. He sat.

“I can still dominate your blind ass at Counterinsurgence,” Augustus said without turning toward us. The medicine slowed his speech a bit, but only to the speed of regular people.

“I’m pretty sure all asses are blind,” Isaac answered, reaching his hands into the air vaguely, looking for his mom. She grabbed him, pulled him up, and they walked over to the couch, where Gus and Isaac hugged awkwardly. “How are you feeling?” Isaac asked.

“Everything tastes like pennies. Aside from that, I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, kid,” Gus answered. Isaac laughed. “How are the eyes?”

“Oh, excellent,” he said. “I mean, they’re not in my head is the only problem.”

“Awesome, yeah,” Gus said. “Not to one-up you or anything, but my body is made out of cancer.”

“So I heard,” Isaac said, trying not to let it get to him. He fumbled toward Gus’s hand and found only his thigh.

“I’m taken,” Gus said.

...

Isaac’s mom brought over two dining room chairs, and Isaac and I sat down next to Gus. I took Gus’s hand, stroking circles around the space between his thumb and forefinger.

The adults headed down to the basement to commiserate or whatever, leaving the three of us alone in the living room. After a while, Augustus turned his head to us, the waking up slow. “How’s Monica?” he asked.

“Haven’t heard from her once,” Isaac said. “No cards; no emails. I got this machine that reads me my emails. It’s awesome. I can change the voice’s gender or accent or whatever.”

“So I can like send you a porn story and you can have an old German man read it to you?”

“Exactly,” Isaac said. “Although Mom still has to help me with it, so maybe

hold off on the German porno for a week or two.”

“She hasn’t even, like, texted you to ask how you’re doing?” I asked. This struck me as an unfathomable injustice.

“Total radio silence,” Isaac said.

“Ridiculous,” I said.

“I’ve stopped thinking about it. I don’t have time to have a girlfriend. I have like a full-time job Learning How to Be Blind.”

Gus turned his head back away from us, staring out the window at the patio in his backyard. His eyes closed.

Isaac asked how I was doing, and I said I was good, and he told me there was a new girl in Support Group with a really hot voice and he needed me to go to tell him if she was actually hot. Then out of nowhere Augustus said, “You can’t just not contact your former boyfriend after his eyes get cut out of his freaking head.”

“Just one of—” Isaac started.

“Hazel Grace, do you have four dollars?” asked Gus.

“Um,” I said. “Yes?”

“Excellent. You’ll find my leg under the coffee table,” he said. Gus pushed himself upright and scooted down to the edge of the couch. I handed him the prosthetic; he fastened it in slow motion.

I helped him to stand and then offered my arm to Isaac, guiding him past furniture that suddenly seemed intrusive, realizing that, for the first time in years, I was the healthiest person in the room.

I drove. Augustus rode shotgun. Isaac sat in the back. We stopped at a grocery store, where, per Augustus’s instruction, I bought a dozen eggs while he and Isaac waited in the car. And then Isaac guided us by his memory to Monica’s house, an aggressively sterile, two-story house near the JCC. Monica’s bright green 1990s Pontiac Firebird sat fat-wheeled in the driveway.

“Is it there?” Isaac asked when he felt me coming to a stop.

“Oh, it’s there,” Augustus said. “You know what it looks like, Isaac? It looks like all the hopes we were foolish to hope.”

“So she’s inside?”

Gus turned his head around slowly to look at Isaac. “Who cares where she is? This is not about her. This is about *you*.” Gus gripped the egg carton in his lap, then opened the door and pulled his legs out onto the street. He opened the door for Isaac, and I watched through the mirror as Gus helped Isaac out of the car, the two of them leaning on each other at the shoulder then tapering away, like praying hands that don’t quite meet at the palms.

I rolled down the windows and watched from the car, because vandalism

made me nervous. They took a few steps toward the car, then Gus flipped open the egg carton and handed Isaac an egg. Isaac tossed it, missing the car by a solid forty feet.

“A little to the left,” Gus said.

“My throw was a little to the left or I need to aim a little to the left?”

“Aim left.” Isaac swiveled his shoulders. “Lefter,” Gus said. Isaac swiveled again. “Yes. Excellent. And throw hard.” Gus handed him another egg, and Isaac hurled it, the egg arcing over the car and smashing against the slow-sloping roof of the house. “Bull’s-eye!” Gus said.

“Really?” Isaac asked excitedly.

“No, you threw it like twenty feet over the car. Just, throw hard, but keep it low. And a little right of where you were last time.” Isaac reached over and found an egg himself from the carton Gus cradled. He tossed it, hitting a taillight. “Yes!” Gus said. “Yes! TAILLIGHT!”

Isaac reached for another egg, missed wide right, then another, missing low, then another, hitting the back windshield. He then nailed three in a row against the trunk. “Hazel Grace,” Gus shouted back to me. “Take a picture of this so Isaac can see it when they invent robot eyes.” I pulled myself up so I was sitting in the rolled-down window, my elbows on the roof of the car, and snapped a picture with my phone: Augustus, an unlit cigarette in his mouth, his smile deliciously crooked, holds the mostly empty pink egg carton above his head. His other hand is draped around Isaac’s shoulder, whose sunglasses are turned not quite toward the camera. Behind them, egg yolks drip down the windshield and bumper of the green Firebird. And behind that, a door is opening.

“What,” asked the middle-aged woman a moment after I’d snapped the picture, “in God’s name—” and then she stopped talking.

“Ma’am,” Augustus said, nodding toward her, “your daughter’s car has just been deservedly egged by a blind man. Please close the door and go back inside or we’ll be forced to call the police.” After wavering for a moment, Monica’s mom closed the door and disappeared. Isaac threw the last three eggs in quick succession and Gus then guided him back toward the car. “See, Isaac, if you just take—we’re coming to the curb now—the feeling of legitimacy away from them, if you turn it around so they feel like *they* are committing a crime by watching—a few more steps—their cars get egged, they’ll be confused and scared and worried and they’ll just return to their—you’ll find the door handle directly in front of you—quietly desperate lives.” Gus hurried around the front of the car and installed himself in the shotgun seat. The doors closed, and I roared off, driving for several hundred feet before I realized I was headed down a dead-end street. I circled the cul-de-sac and raced back past Monica’s house.

I never took another picture of him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A few days later, at Gus's house, his parents and my parents and Gus and me all squeezed around the dining room table, eating stuffed peppers on a tablecloth that had, according to Gus's dad, last seen use in the previous century.

My dad: "Emily, this risotto..."

My mom: "It's just delicious."

Gus's mom: "Oh, thanks. I'd be happy to give you the recipe."

Gus, swallowing a bite: "You know, the primary taste I'm getting is not-Oranje." "

Me: "Good observation, Gus. This food, while delicious, does not taste like Oranje."

My mom: "Hazel."

Gus: "It tastes like..."

Me: "Food."

Gus: "Yes, precisely. It tastes like food, excellently prepared. But it does not taste, how do I put this delicately...?"

Me: "It does not taste like God Himself cooked heaven into a series of five dishes which were then served to you accompanied by several luminous balls of fermented, bubbly plasma while actual and literal flower petals floated down all around your canal-side dinner table."

Gus: "Nicely phrased."

Gus's father: "Our children are weird."

My dad: "Nicely phrased."

...

A week after our dinner, Gus ended up in the ER with chest pain, and they admitted him overnight, so I drove over to Memorial the next morning and visited him on the fourth floor. I hadn't been to Memorial since visiting Isaac. It

didn't have any of the cloyingly bright primary color-painted walls or the framed paintings of dogs driving cars that one found at Children's, but the absolute sterility of the place made me nostalgic for the happy-kid bullshit at Children's. Memorial was so *functional*. It was a storage facility. A prematorium.

When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, I saw Gus's mom pacing in the waiting room, talking on a cell phone. She hung up quickly, then hugged me and offered to take my cart.

"I'm okay," I said. "How's Gus?"

"He had a tough night, Hazel," she said. "His heart is working too hard. He needs to scale back on activity. Wheelchairs from here on out. They're putting him on some new medicine that should be better for the pain. His sisters just drove in."

"Okay," I said. "Can I see him?"

She put her arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. It felt weird. "You know we love you, Hazel, but right now we just need to be a family. Gus agrees with that. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"I'll tell him you visited."

"Okay," I said. "I'm just gonna read here for a while, I think."

...

She went down the hall, back to where he was. I understood, but I still missed him, still thought maybe I was missing my last chance to see him, to say good-bye or whatever. The waiting room was all brown carpet and brown overstuffed cloth chairs. I sat in a love seat for a while, my oxygen cart tucked by my feet. I'd worn my Chuck Taylors and my *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* shirt, the exact outfit I'd been wearing two weeks before on the Late Afternoon of the Venn Diagram, and he wouldn't see it. I started scrolling through the pictures on my phone, a backward flip-book of the last few months, beginning with him and Isaac outside of Monica's house and ending with the first picture I'd taken of him, on the drive to *Funky Bones*. It seemed like forever ago, like we'd had this brief but still infinite forever. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities.

...

Two weeks later, I wheeled Gus across the art park toward *Funky Bones* with one entire bottle of very expensive champagne and my oxygen tank in his lap.

The champagne had been donated by one of Gus's doctors—Gus being the kind of person who inspires doctors to give their best bottles of champagne to children. We sat, Gus in his chair and me on the damp grass, as near to *Funky Bones* as we could get him in the chair. I pointed at the little kids goading each other to jump from rib cage to shoulder and Gus answered just loud enough for me to hear over the din, "Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton."

We drank from paper Winnie-the-Pooh cups.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A typical day with late-stage Gus:

I went over to his house about noon, after he had eaten and puked up breakfast. He met me at the door in his wheelchair, no longer the muscular, gorgeous boy who stared at me at Support Group, but still half smiling, still smoking his unlit cigarette, his blue eyes bright and alive.

We ate lunch with his parents at the dining room table. Peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and last night's asparagus. Gus didn't eat. I asked how he was feeling.

"Grand," he said. "And you?"

"Good. What'd you do last night?"

"I slept quite a lot. I want to write you a sequel, Hazel Grace, but I'm just so damned tired all the time."

"You can just tell it to me," I said.

"Well, I stand by my pre-Van Houten analysis of the Dutch Tulip Man. Not a con man, but not as rich as he was letting on."

"And what about Anna's mom?"

"Haven't settled on an opinion there. Patience, Grasshopper." Augustus smiled. His parents were quiet, watching him, never looking away, like they just wanted to enjoy The Gus Waters Show while it was still in town. "Sometimes I dream that I'm writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts and memories of my adoring public."

"Why do you need an adoring public when you've got me?" I asked.

"Hazel Grace, when you're as charming and physically attractive as myself, it's easy enough to win over people you meet. But getting strangers to love you...now, *that's* the trick."

I rolled my eyes.

...

After lunch, we went outside to the backyard. He was still well enough to push his own wheelchair, pulling miniature wheelies to get the front wheels over the bump in the doorway. Still athletic, in spite of it all, blessed with balance and quick reflexes that even the abundant narcotics could not fully mask.

His parents stayed inside, but when I glanced back into the dining room, they were always watching us.

We sat out there in silence for a minute and then Gus said, “I wish we had that swing set sometimes.”

“The one from my backyard?”

“Yeah. My nostalgia is so extreme that I am capable of missing a swing my butt never actually touched.”

“Nostalgia is a side effect of cancer,” I told him.

“Nah, nostalgia is a side effect of dying,” he answered. Above us, the wind blew and the branching shadows rearranged themselves on our skin. Gus squeezed my hand. “It is a good life, Hazel Grace.”

...

We went inside when he needed meds, which were pressed into him along with liquid nutrition through his G-tube, a bit of plastic that disappeared into his belly. He was quiet for a while, zoned out. His mom wanted him to take a nap, but he kept shaking his head no when she suggested it, so we just let him sit there half asleep in the chair for a while.

His parents watched an old video of Gus with his sisters—they were probably my age and Gus was about five. They were playing basketball in the driveway of a different house, and even though Gus was tiny, he could dribble like he’d been born doing it, running circles around his sisters as they laughed. It was the first time I’d even seen him play basketball. “He was good,” I said.

“Should’ve seen him in high school,” his dad said. “Started varsity as a freshman.”

Gus mumbled, “Can I go downstairs?”

His mom and dad wheeled the chair downstairs with Gus still in it, bouncing down crazily in a way that would have been dangerous if danger retained its relevance, and then they left us alone. He got into bed and we lay there together under the covers, me on my side and Gus on his back, my head on his bony shoulder, his heat radiating through his polo shirt and into my skin, my feet tangled with his real foot, my hand on his cheek.

When I got his face nose-touchingly close so that I could only see his eyes, I couldn’t tell he was sick. We kissed for a while and then lay together listening to

The Hectic Glow's eponymous album, and eventually we fell asleep like that, a quantum entanglement of tubes and bodies.

...

We woke up later and arranged an armada of pillows so that we could sit comfortably against the edge of the bed and played Counterinsurgency 2: The Price of Dawn. I sucked at it, of course, but my sucking was useful to him: It made it easier for him to die beautifully, to jump in front of a sniper's bullet and sacrifice himself for me, or else to kill a sentry who was just about to shoot me. How he reveled in saving me. He shouted, "You will *not* kill my girlfriend today, International Terrorist of Ambiguous Nationality!"

It crossed my mind to fake a choking incident or something so that he might give me the Heimlich. Maybe then he could rid himself of this fear that his life had been lived and lost for no greater good. But then I imagined him being physically unable to Heimlich, and me having to reveal that it was all a ruse, and the ensuing mutual humiliation.

It's hard as hell to hold on to your dignity when the risen sun is too bright in your losing eyes, and that's what I was thinking about as we hunted for bad guys through the ruins of a city that didn't exist.

Finally, his dad came down and dragged Gus back upstairs, and in the entryway, beneath an Encouragement telling me that Friends Are Forever, I knelt to kiss him good night. I went home and ate dinner with my parents, leaving Gus to eat (and puke up) his own dinner.

After some TV, I went to sleep.

I woke up.

Around noon, I went over there again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One morning, a month after returning home from Amsterdam, I drove over to his house. His parents told me he was still sleeping downstairs, so I knocked loudly on the basement door before entering, then asked, “Gus?”

I found him mumbling in a language of his own creation. He’d pissed the bed. It was awful. I couldn’t even look, really. I just shouted for his parents and they came down, and I went upstairs while they cleaned him up.

When I came back down, he was slowly waking up out of the narcotics to the excruciating day. I arranged his pillows so we could play Counterinsurgency on the bare sheetless mattress, but he was so tired and out of it that he sucked almost as bad as I did, and we couldn’t go five minutes without both getting dead. Not fancy heroic deaths either, just careless ones.

I didn’t really say anything to him. I almost wanted him to forget I was there, I guess, and I was hoping he didn’t remember that I’d found the boy I love deranged in a wide pool of his own piss. I kept kind of hoping that he’d look over at me and say, “Oh, Hazel Grace. How’d you get here?”

But unfortunately, he remembered. “With each passing minute, I’m developing a deeper appreciation of the word *mortified*,” he said finally.

“I’ve pissed the bed, Gus, believe me. It’s no big deal.”

“You used,” he said, and then took a sharp breath, “to call me Augustus.”

•••

“You know,” he said after a while, “it’s kids’ stuff, but I always thought my obituary would be in all the newspapers, that I’d have a story worth telling. I always had this secret suspicion that I was special.”

“You are,” I said.

“You know what I mean, though,” he said.

I did know what he meant. I just didn’t agree. “I don’t care if the *New York*

Times writes an obituary for me. I just want you to write one,” I told him. “You say you’re not special because the world doesn’t know about you, but that’s an insult to me. *I* know about you.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna make it to write your obituary,” he said, instead of apologizing.

I was so frustrated with him. “I just want to be enough for you, but I never can be. This can never be enough for you. But this is all you get. You get me, and your family, and this world. This is your life. I’m sorry if it sucks. But you’re not going to be the first man on Mars, and you’re not going to be an NBA star, and you’re not going to hunt Nazis. I mean, look at yourself, Gus.” He didn’t respond. “I don’t mean—” I started.

“Oh, you meant it,” he interrupted. I started to apologize and he said, “No, I’m sorry. You’re right. Let’s just play.”

So we just played.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up to my phone singing a song by The Hectic Glow. Gus's favorite. That meant he was calling—or someone was calling from his phone. I glanced at the alarm clock: 2:35 A.M. *He's gone*, I thought as everything inside of me collapsed into a singularity.

I could barely creak out a “*Hello?*”

I waited for the sound of a parent's annihilated voice.

“Hazel Grace,” Augustus said weakly.

“Oh, thank God it's you. Hi. Hi, I love you.”

“Hazel Grace, I'm at the gas station. Something's wrong. You gotta help me.”

“What? Where are you?”

“The Speedway at Eighty-sixth and Ditch. I did something wrong with the G-tube and I can't figure it out and—”

“I'm calling nine-one-one,” I said.

“No no no no no, they'll take me to a hospital. Hazel, listen to me. Do not call nine-one-one or my parents I will never forgive you don't please just come please just come and fix my goddamned G-tube. I'm just, God, this is the stupidest thing. I don't want my parents to know I'm gone. Please. I have the medicine with me; I just can't get it in. Please.” He was crying. I'd never heard him sob like this except from outside his house before Amsterdam.

“Okay,” I said. “I'm leaving now.”

I took the BiPAP off and connected myself to an oxygen tank, lifted the tank into my cart, and put on sneakers to go with my pink cotton pajama pants and a Butler basketball T-shirt, which had originally been Gus's. I grabbed the keys from the kitchen drawer where Mom kept them and wrote a note in case they woke up while I was gone.

Went to check on Gus. It's important. Sorry.

Love, H

As I drove the couple miles to the gas station, I woke up enough to wonder why Gus had left the house in the middle of the night. Maybe he'd been hallucinating, or his martyrdom fantasies had gotten the better of him.

I sped up Ditch Road past flashing yellow lights, going too fast partly to reach him and partly in the hopes a cop would pull me over and give me an excuse to tell someone that my dying boyfriend was stuck outside of a gas station with a malfunctioning G-tube. But no cop showed up to make my decision for me.

...

There were only two cars in the lot. I pulled up next to his. I opened the door. The interior lights came on. Augustus sat in the driver's seat, covered in his own vomit, his hands pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in. "Hi," he mumbled.

"Oh, God, Augustus, we have to get you to a hospital."

"Please just look at it." I gagged from the smell but bent forward to inspect the place above his belly button where they'd surgically installed the tube. The skin of his abdomen was warm and bright red.

"Gus, I think something's infected. I can't fix this. Why are you here? Why aren't you at home?" He puked, without even the energy to turn his mouth away from his lap. "Oh, sweetie," I said.

"I wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes," he mumbled. "I lost my pack. Or they took it away from me. I don't know. They said they'd get me another one, but I wanted...to do it myself. Do one little thing myself."

He was staring straight ahead. Quietly, I pulled out my phone and glanced down to dial 911.

"I'm sorry," I told him. *Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?* "Hi, I'm at the Speedway at Eighty-sixth and Ditch, and I need an ambulance. The great love of my life has a malfunctioning G-tube."

...

He looked up at me. It was horrible. I could hardly look at him. The Augustus Waters of the crooked smiles and unsmoked cigarettes was gone, replaced by this desperate humiliated creature sitting there beneath me.

"This is it. I can't even not smoke anymore."

“Gus, I love you.”

“Where is my chance to be somebody’s Peter Van Houten?” He hit the steering wheel weakly, the car honking as he cried. He leaned his head back, looking up. “I hate myself I hate myself I hate this I hate this I disgust myself I hate it I hate it I hate it just let me fucking die.”

According to the conventions of the genre, Augustus Waters kept his sense of humor till the end, did not for a moment waiver in his courage, and his spirit soared like an indomitable eagle until the world itself could not contain his joyous soul.

But this was the truth, a pitiful boy who desperately wanted not to be pitiful, screaming and crying, poisoned by an infected G-tube that kept him alive, but not alive enough.

I wiped his chin and grabbed his face in my hands and knelt down close to him so that I could see his eyes, which still lived. “I’m sorry. I wish it was like that movie, with the Persians and the Spartans.”

“Me too,” he said.

“But it isn’t,” I said.

“I know,” he said.

“There are no bad guys.”

“Yeah.”

“Even cancer isn’t a bad guy really: Cancer just wants to be alive.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re okay,” I told him. I could hear the sirens.

“Okay,” he said. He was losing consciousness.

“Gus, you have to promise not to try this again. I’ll get you cigarettes, okay?” He looked at me. His eyes swam in their sockets. “You have to promise.”

He nodded a little and then his eyes closed, his head swiveling on his neck.

“Gus,” I said. “Stay with me.”

“Read me something,” he said as the goddamned ambulance roared right past us. So while I waited for them to turn around and find us, I recited the only poem I could bring to mind, “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Williams was a doctor. It seemed to me like a doctor's poem. The poem was over, but the ambulance was still driving away from us, so I kept writing it.

...

And so much depends, I told Augustus, upon a blue sky cut open by the branches of the trees above. So much depends upon the transparent G-tube erupting from the gut of the blue-lipped boy. So much depends upon this observer of the universe.

Half conscious, he glanced over at me and mumbled, "And you say you don't write poetry."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He came home from the hospital a few days later, finally and irrevocably robbed of his ambitions. It took more medication to remove him from the pain. He moved upstairs permanently, into a hospital bed near the living room window.

These were days of pajamas and beard scruff, of mumblings and requests and him endlessly thanking everyone for all they were doing on his behalf. One afternoon, he pointed vaguely toward a laundry basket in a corner of the room and asked me, “What’s that?”

“That laundry basket?”

“No, next to it.”

“I don’t see anything next to it.”

“It’s my last shred of dignity. It’s very small.”

...

The next day, I let myself in. They didn’t like me to ring the doorbell anymore because it might wake him up. His sisters were there with their banker husbands and three kids, all boys, who ran up to me and chanted *who are you who are you who are you*, running circles around the entryway like lung capacity was a renewable resource. I’d met the sisters before, but never the kids or their dads.

“I’m Hazel,” I said.

“Gus has a *girlfriend*,” one of the kids said.

“I am aware that Gus has a girlfriend,” I said.

“She’s got boobies,” another said.

“Is that so?”

“Why do you have that?” the first one asked, pointing at my oxygen cart.

“It helps me breathe,” I said. “Is Gus awake?”

“No, he’s sleeping.”

“He’s dying,” said another.

“He’s dying,” the third one confirmed, suddenly serious. It was quiet for a moment, and I wondered what I was supposed to say, but then one of them kicked another and they were off to the races again, falling all over each other in a scrum that migrated toward the kitchen.

I made my way to Gus’s parents in the living room and met his brothers-in-law, Chris and Dave.

I hadn’t gotten to know his half sisters, really, but they both hugged me anyway. Julie was sitting on the edge of the bed, talking to a sleeping Gus in precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable, saying, “Oh, Gussy Gussy, our little Gussy Gussy.” Our Gussy? Had they acquired him?

“What’s up, Augustus?” I said, trying to model appropriate behavior.

“Our beautiful Gussy,” Martha said, leaning in toward him. I began to wonder if he was actually asleep or if he’d just laid a heavy finger on the pain pump to avoid the Attack of the Well-Meaning Sisters.

•••

He woke up after a while and the first thing he said was, “Hazel,” which I have to admit made me kind of happy, like maybe I was part of his family, too.

“Outside,” he said quietly. “Can we go?”

We went, his mom pushing the wheelchair, sisters and brothers-in-law and dad and nephews and me trailing. It was a cloudy day, still and hot as summer settled in. He wore a long-sleeve navy T-shirt and fleece sweatpants. He was cold all the time for some reason. He wanted some water, so his dad went and got some for him.

Martha tried to engage Gus in conversation, kneeling down next to him and saying, “You’ve always had such beautiful eyes.” He nodded a little.

One of the husbands put an arm on Gus’s shoulder and said, “How’s that fresh air feel?” Gus shrugged.

“Do you want meds?” his mom asked, joining the circle kneeling around him. I took a step back, watching as the nephews tore through a flower bed on their way to the little patch of grass in Gus’s backyard. They immediately commenced to play a game that involved throwing one another to the ground.

“Kids!” Julie shouted vaguely.

“I can only hope,” Julie said, turning back to Gus, “they grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you’ve become.”

I resisted the urge to audibly gag. “He’s not that smart,” I said to Julie.

“She’s right. It’s just that most really good-looking people are stupid, so I exceed expectations.”

“Right, it’s primarily his hotness,” I said.

“It can be sort of blinding,” he said.

“It actually did blind our friend Isaac,” I said.

“Terrible tragedy, that. But can I help my own deadly beauty?”

“You cannot.”

“It is my burden, this beautiful face.”

“Not to mention your body.”

“Seriously, don’t even get me started on my hot bod. You don’t want to see me naked, Dave. Seeing me naked actually took Hazel Grace’s breath away,” he said, nodding toward the oxygen tank.

“Okay, enough,” Gus’s dad said, and then out of nowhere, his dad put an arm around me and kissed the side of my head and whispered, “I thank God for you every day, kid.”

Anyway, that was the last good day I had with Gus until the Last Good Day.

CHAPTER TWENTY

One of the less bullshit conventions of the cancer kid genre is the Last Good Day convention, wherein the victim of cancer finds herself with some unexpected hours when it seems like the inexorable decline has suddenly plateaued, when the pain is for a moment bearable. The problem, of course, is that there's no way of knowing that your last good day is your Last Good Day. At the time, it is just another good day.

I'd taken a day off from visiting Augustus because I was feeling a bit unwell myself: nothing specific, just tired. It had been a lazy day, and when Augustus called just after five P.M., I was already attached to the BiPAP, which we'd dragged out to the living room so I could watch TV with Mom and Dad.

"Hi, Augustus," I said.

He answered in the voice I'd fallen for. "Good evening, Hazel Grace. Do you suppose you could find your way to the Literal Heart of Jesus around eight P.M.?"

"Um, yes?"

"Excellent. Also, if it's not too much trouble, please prepare a eulogy."

"Um," I said.

"I love you," he said.

"And I you," I answered. Then the phone clicked off.

"Um," I said. "I have to go to Support Group at eight tonight. Emergency session."

My mom muted the TV. "Is everything okay?"

I looked at her for a second, my eyebrows raised. "I assume that's a rhetorical question."

"But why would there—"

"Because Gus needs me for some reason. It's fine. I can drive." I fiddled with the BiPAP so Mom would help me take it off, but she didn't. "Hazel," she said, "your dad and I feel like we hardly even see you anymore."

“Particularly those of us who work all week,” Dad said.

“He needs me,” I said, finally unfastening the BiPAP myself.

“We need you, too, kiddo,” my dad said. He took hold of my wrist, like I was a two-year-old about to dart out into the street, and gripped it.

“Well, get a terminal disease, Dad, and then I’ll stay home more.”

“Hazel,” my mom said.

“You were the one who didn’t want me to be a homebody,” I said to her. Dad was still clutching my arm. “And now you want him to go ahead and die so I’ll be back here chained to this place, letting you take care of me like I always used to. But I don’t need it, Mom. I don’t need you like I used to. *You’re* the one who needs to get a life.”

“Hazel!” Dad said, squeezing harder. “Apologize to your mother.”

I was tugging at my arm but he wouldn’t let go, and I couldn’t get my cannula on with only one hand. It was infuriating. All I wanted was an old-fashioned Teenager Walkout, wherein I stomp out of the room and slam the door to my bedroom and turn up *The Hectic Glow* and furiously write a eulogy. But I couldn’t because I couldn’t freaking breathe. “The cannula,” I whined. “I need it.”

My dad immediately let go and rushed to connect me to the oxygen. I could see the guilt in his eyes, but he was still angry. “Hazel, apologize to your mother.”

“Fine, I’m sorry, just please let me do this.”

They didn’t say anything. Mom just sat there with her arms folded, not even looking at me. After a while, I got up and went to my room to write about Augustus.

Both Mom and Dad tried a few times to knock on the door or whatever, but I just told them I was doing something important. It took me forever to figure out what I wanted to say, and even then I wasn’t very happy with it. Before I’d technically finished, I noticed it was 7:40, which meant that I would be late even if I *didn’t* change, so in the end I wore baby blue cotton pajama pants, flip-flops, and Gus’s Butler shirt.

I walked out of the room and tried to go right past them, but my dad said, “You can’t leave the house without permission.”

“Oh, my God, Dad. He wanted me to write him a *eulogy*, okay? I’ll be home every. Freaking. Night. Starting any day now, okay?” That finally shut them up.

•••

It took the entire drive to calm down about my parents. I pulled up around the

back of the church and parked in the semicircular driveway behind Augustus's car. The back door to the church was held open by a fist-size rock. Inside, I contemplated taking the stairs but decided to wait for the ancient creaking elevator.

When the elevator doors unscrolled, I was in the Support Group room, the chairs arranged in the same circle. But now I saw only Gus in a wheelchair, ghoulishly thin. He was facing me from the center of the circle. He'd been waiting for the elevator doors to open.

"Hazel Grace," he said, "you look ravishing."

"I know, right?"

I heard a shuffling in a dark corner of the room. Isaac stood behind a little wooden lectern, clinging to it. "You want to sit?" I asked him.

"No, I'm about to eulogize. You're late."

"You're...I'm...what?"

Gus gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair into the center of the circle with him as he spun the chair to face Isaac. "I want to attend my funeral," Gus said. "By the way, will you speak at my funeral?"

"Um, of course, yeah," I said, letting my head fall onto his shoulder. I reached across his back and hugged both him and the wheelchair. He winced. I let go.

"Awesome," he said. "I'm hopeful I'll get to attend as a ghost, but just to make sure, I thought I'd—well, not to put you on the spot, but I just this afternoon thought I could arrange a prefuneral, and I figured since I'm in reasonably good spirits, there's no time like the present."

"How did you even get in here?" I asked him.

"Would you believe they leave the door open all night?" Gus asked.

"Um, no," I said.

"As well you shouldn't." Gus smiled. "Anyway, I know it's a bit self-aggrandizing."

"Hey, you're stealing my eulogy," Isaac said. "My first bit is about how you were a self-aggrandizing bastard."

I laughed.

"Okay, okay," Gus said. "At your leisure."

Isaac cleared his throat. "Augustus Waters was a self-aggrandizing bastard. But we forgive him. We forgive him not because he had a heart as figuratively good as his literal one sucked, or because he knew more about how to hold a cigarette than any nonsmoker in history, or because he got eighteen years when he should have gotten more."

"Seventeen," Gus corrected.

“I’m assuming you’ve got some time, you interrupting bastard.

“I’m telling you,” Isaac continued, “Augustus Waters talked so much that he’d interrupt you at his own funeral. And he was pretentious: Sweet Jesus Christ, that kid never took a piss without pondering the abundant metaphorical resonances of human waste production. And he was vain: I do not believe I have ever met a more physically attractive person who was more acutely aware of his own physical attractiveness.

“But I will say this: When the scientists of the future show up at my house with robot eyes and they tell me to try them on, I will tell the scientists to screw off, because I do not want to see a world without him.”

I was kind of crying by then.

“And then, having made my rhetorical point, I will put my robot eyes on, because I mean, with robot eyes you can probably see through girls’ shirts and stuff. Augustus, my friend, Godspeed.”

Augustus nodded for a while, his lips pursed, and then gave Isaac a thumbs-up. After he’d recovered his composure, he added, “I would cut the bit about seeing through girls’ shirts.”

Isaac was still clinging to the lectern. He started to cry. He pressed his forehead down to the podium and I watched his shoulders shake, and then finally, he said, “Goddamn it, Augustus, editing your own eulogy.”

“Don’t swear in the Literal Heart of Jesus,” Gus said.

“Goddamn it,” Isaac said again. He raised his head and swallowed. “Hazel, can I get a hand here?”

I’d forgotten he couldn’t make his own way back to the circle. I got up, placed his hand on my arm, and walked him slowly back to the chair next to Gus where I’d been sitting. Then I walked up to the podium and unfolded the piece of paper on which I’d printed my eulogy.

“My name is Hazel. Augustus Waters was the great star-crossed love of my life. Ours was an epic love story, and I won’t be able to get more than a sentence into it without disappearing into a puddle of tears. Gus knew. Gus knows. I will not tell you our love story, because—like all real love stories—it will die with us, as it should. I’d hoped that he’d be eulogizing me, because there’s no one I’d rather have...” I started crying. “Okay, how not to cry. How am I—okay. Okay.”

I took a few breaths and went back to the page. “I can’t talk about our love story, so I will talk about math. I am not a mathematician, but I know this: There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. There’s .1 and .12 and .112 and an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a *bigger* infinite set of numbers between 0 and 2, or between 0 and a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them,

when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I'm grateful."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Augustus Waters died eight days after his prefuneral, at Memorial, in the ICU, when the cancer, which was made of him, finally stopped his heart, which was also made of him.

He was with his mom and dad and sisters. His mom called me at three thirty in the morning. I'd known, of course, that he was going. I'd talked to his dad before going to bed, and he told me, "It could be tonight," but still, when I grabbed the phone from the bedside table and saw *Gus's Mom* on the caller ID, everything inside of me collapsed. She was just crying on the other end of the line, and she told me she was sorry, and I said I was sorry, too, and she told me that he was unconscious for a couple hours before he died.

My parents came in then, looking expectant, and I just nodded and they fell into each other, feeling, I'm sure, the harmonic terror that would in time come for them directly.

I called Isaac, who cursed life and the universe and God Himself and who said where are the goddamned trophies to break when you need them, and then I realized there was no one else to call, which was the saddest thing. The only person I really wanted to talk to about Augustus Waters's death was Augustus Waters.

My parents stayed in my room forever until it was morning and finally Dad said, "Do you want to be alone?" and I nodded and Mom said, "We'll be right outside the door," me thinking, *I don't doubt it.*

...

It was unbearable. The whole thing. Every second worse than the last. I just kept thinking about calling him, wondering what would happen, if anyone would answer. In the last weeks, we'd been reduced to spending our time together in recollection, but that was not nothing: The pleasure of remembering had been

taken from me, because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It felt like losing your co-rememberer meant losing the memory itself, as if the things we'd done were less real and important than they had been hours before.

...

When you go into the ER, one of the first things they ask you to do is to rate your pain on a scale of one to ten, and from there they decide which drugs to use and how quickly to use them. I'd been asked this question hundreds of times over the years, and I remember once early on when I couldn't get my breath and it felt like my chest was on fire, flames licking the inside of my ribs fighting for a way to burn out of my body, my parents took me to the ER. A nurse asked me about the pain, and I couldn't even speak, so I held up nine fingers.

Later, after they'd given me something, the nurse came in and she was kind of stroking my hand while she took my blood pressure and she said, "You know how I know you're a fighter? You called a ten a nine."

But that wasn't quite right. I called it a nine because I was saving my ten. And here it was, the great and terrible ten, slamming me again and again as I lay still and alone in my bed staring at the ceiling, the waves tossing me against the rocks then pulling me back out to sea so they could launch me again into the jagged face of the cliff, leaving me floating faceup on the water, undrowned.

Finally I did call him. His phone rang five times and then went to voice mail. "You've reached the voice mail of Augustus Waters," he said, the clarion voice I'd fallen for. "Leave a message." It beeped. The dead air on the line was so eerie. I just wanted to go back to that secret post-terrestrial third space with him that we visited when we talked on the phone. I waited for that feeling, but it never came: The dead air on the line was no comfort, and finally I hung up.

I got my laptop out from under the bed and fired it up and went onto his wall page, where already the condolences were flooding in. The most recent one said:

I love you, bro. See you on the other side.

...Written by someone I'd never heard of. In fact, almost all the wall posts, which arrived nearly as fast as I could read them, were written by people I'd never met and whom he'd never spoken about, people who were extolling his various virtues now that he was dead, even though I knew for a fact they hadn't seen him in months and had made no effort to visit him. I wondered if my wall would look like this if I died, or if I'd been out of school and life long enough to escape widespread memorialization.

I kept reading.

I miss you already, bro.

I love you, Augustus. God bless and keep you.

You'll live forever in our hearts, big man.

(That particularly galled me, because it implied the immortality of those left behind: You will live forever in my memory, because I will live forever! I AM YOUR GOD NOW, DEAD BOY! I OWN YOU! Thinking you won't die is yet another side effect of dying.)

You were always such a great friend I'm sorry I didn't see more of you after you left school, bro. I bet you're already playing ball in heaven.

I imagined the Augustus Waters analysis of that comment: If I am playing basketball in heaven, does that imply a physical location of a heaven containing physical basketballs? Who makes the basketballs in question? Are there less fortunate souls in heaven who work in a celestial basketball factory so that I can play? Or did an omnipotent God create the basketballs out of the vacuum of space? Is this heaven in some kind of unobservable universe where the laws of physics don't apply, and if so, why in the hell would I be playing basketball when I could be flying or reading or looking at beautiful people or something else I actually enjoy? It's almost as if the way you imagine my dead self says more about you than it says about either the person I was or the whatever I am now.

...

His parents called around noon to say the funeral would be in five days, on Saturday. I pictured a church packed with people who thought he liked basketball, and I wanted to puke, but I knew I had to go, since I was speaking and everything. When I hung up, I went back to reading his wall:

Just heard that Gus Waters died after a lengthy battle with cancer. Rest in peace, buddy.

...

I knew these people were genuinely sad, and that I wasn't really mad at them. I was mad at the universe. Even so, it infuriated me: You get all these friends just when you don't need friends anymore. I wrote a reply to his comment:

We live in a universe devoted to the creation, and eradication, of awareness. Augustus Waters did not die after a lengthy battle with cancer. He died after a lengthy battle with human consciousness, a victim—as you will be—of the universe's need to make and unmake all that is possible.

I posted it and waited for someone to reply, refreshing over and over again. Nothing. My comment got lost in the blizzard of new posts. Everyone was going to miss him so much. Everyone was praying for his family. I remembered Van Houten's letter: Writing does not resurrect. It buries.

...

After a while, I went out into the living room to sit with my parents and watch TV. I couldn't tell you what the show was, but at some point, my mom said, "Hazel, what can we do for you?"

And I just shook my head. I started crying again.

"What can we do?" Mom asked again.

I shrugged.

But she kept asking, as if there were something she could do, until finally I just kind of crawled across the couch into her lap and my dad came over and held my legs really tight and I wrapped my arms all the way around my mom's middle and they held on to me for hours while the tide rolled in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When we first got there, I sat in the back of the visitation room, a little room of exposed stone walls off to the side of the sanctuary in the Literal Heart of Jesus church. There were maybe eighty chairs set up in the room, and it was two-thirds full but felt one-third empty.

For a while, I just watched people walk up to the coffin, which was on some kind of cart covered in a purple tablecloth. All these people I'd never seen before would kneel down next to him or stand over him and look at him for a while, maybe crying, maybe saying something, and then all of them would touch the coffin instead of touching him, because no one wants to touch the dead.

Gus's mom and dad were standing next to the coffin, hugging everybody as they passed by, but when they noticed me, they smiled and shuffled over. I got up and hugged first his dad and then his mom, who held on to me too tight, like Gus used to, squeezing my shoulder blades. They both looked so old—their eye sockets hollowed, the skin sagging from their exhausted faces. They had reached the end of a hurdling sprint, too.

"He loved you so much," Gus's mom said. "He really did. It wasn't—it wasn't puppy love or anything," she added, as if I didn't know that.

"He loved you so much, too," I said quietly. It's hard to explain, but talking to them felt like stabbing and being stabbed. "I'm sorry," I said. And then his parents were talking to my parents—the conversation all nodding and tight lips. I looked up at the casket and saw it unattended, so I decided to walk up there. I pulled the oxygen tube from my nostrils and raised the tube up over my head, handing it to Dad. I wanted it to be just me and just him. I grabbed my little clutch and walked up the makeshift aisle between the rows of chairs.

The walk felt long, but I kept telling my lungs to shut up, that they were strong, that they could do this. I could see him as I approached: His hair was parted neatly on the left side in a way that he would have found absolutely

horrifying, and his face was plasticized. But he was still Gus. My lanky, beautiful Gus.

I wanted to wear the little black dress I'd bought for my fifteenth birthday party, my death dress, but I didn't fit into it anymore, so I wore a plain black dress, knee-length. Augustus wore the same thin-lapeled suit he'd worn to Oranje.

As I knelt, I realized they'd closed his eyes—of course they had—and that I would never again see his blue eyes. "I love you present tense," I whispered, and then put my hand on the middle of his chest and said, "It's okay, Gus. It's okay. It is. It's okay, you hear me?" I had—and have—absolutely no confidence that he could hear me. I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Okay," I said. "Okay."

I suddenly felt conscious that there were all these people watching us, that the last time so many people saw us kiss we were in the Anne Frank House. But there was, properly speaking, no us left to watch. Only a me.

I snapped open the clutch, reached in, and pulled out a hard pack of Camel Lights. In a quick motion I hoped no one behind would notice, I snuck them into the space between his side and the coffin's plush silver lining. "You can light these," I whispered to him. "I won't mind."

•••

While I was talking to him, Mom and Dad had moved up to the second row with my tank, so I didn't have a long walk back. Dad handed me a tissue as I sat down. I blew my nose, threaded the tubes around my ears, and put the nubbins back in.

I thought we'd go into the proper sanctuary for the real funeral, but it all happened in that little side room—the Literal Hand of Jesus, I guess, the part of the cross he'd been nailed to. A minister walked up and stood behind the coffin, almost like the coffin was a pulpit or something, and talked a little bit about how Augustus had a courageous battle and how his heroism in the face of illness was an inspiration to us all, and I was already starting to get pissed off at the minister when he said, "In heaven, Augustus will finally be healed and whole," implying that he had been less whole than other people due to his leglessness, and I kind of could not repress my sigh of disgust. My dad grabbed me just above the knee and cut me a disapproving look, but from the row behind me, someone muttered almost inaudibly near my ear, "What a load of horse crap, eh, kid?"

I spun around.

Peter Van Houten wore a white linen suit, tailored to account for his rotundity, a powder-blue dress shirt, and a green tie. He looked like he was

dressed for a colonial occupation of Panama, not a funeral. The minister said, “Let us pray,” but as everyone else bowed their head, I could only stare slack-jawed at the sight of Peter Van Houten. After a moment, he whispered, “We gotta fake pray,” and bowed his head.

I tried to forget about him and just pray for Augustus. I made a point of listening to the minister and not looking back.

The minister called up Isaac, who was much more serious than he’d been at the prefuneral. “Augustus Waters was the Mayor of the Secret City of Cancervania, and he is not replaceable,” Isaac began. “Other people will be able to tell you funny stories about Gus, because he was a funny guy, but let me tell you a serious one: A day after I got my eye cut out, Gus showed up at the hospital. I was blind and heartbroken and didn’t want to do anything and Gus burst into my room and shouted, ‘I have wonderful news!’ And I was like, ‘I don’t really want to hear wonderful news right now,’ and Gus said, ‘This is wonderful news you want to hear,’ and I asked him, ‘Fine, what is it?’ and he said, ‘You are going to live a good and long life filled with great and terrible moments that you cannot even imagine yet!’”

Isaac couldn’t go on, or maybe that was all he had written.

•••

After a high school friend told some stories about Gus’s considerable basketball talents and his many qualities as a teammate, the minister said, “We’ll now hear a few words from Augustus’s special friend, Hazel.” *Special friend?* There were some titters in the audience, so I figured it was safe for me to start out by saying to the minister, “I was his girlfriend.” That got a laugh. Then I began reading from the eulogy I’d written.

“There’s a great quote in Gus’s house, one that both he and I found very comforting: *Without pain, we couldn’t know joy.*”

I went on spouting bullshit Encouragements as Gus’s parents, arm in arm, hugged each other and nodded at every word. Funerals, I had decided, are for the living.

•••

After his sister Julie spoke, the service ended with a prayer about Gus’s union with God, and I thought back to what he’d told me at Oranje, that he didn’t believe in mansions and harps, but did believe in capital-S Something, and so I tried to imagine him capital-S Somewhere as we prayed, but even then I

could not quite convince myself that he and I would be together again. I already knew too many dead people. I knew that time would now pass for me differently than it would for him—that I, like everyone in that room, would go on accumulating loves and losses while he would not. And for me, that was the final and truly unbearable tragedy: Like all the innumerable dead, he'd once and for all been demoted from haunted to haunter.

And then one of Gus's brothers-in-law brought up a boom box and they played this song Gus had picked out—a sad and quiet song by The Hectic Glow called “The New Partner.” I just wanted to go home, honestly. I didn't know hardly any of these people, and I felt Peter Van Houten's little eyes boring into my exposed shoulder blades, but after the song was over, everyone had to come up to me and tell me that I'd spoken beautifully, and that it was a lovely service, which was a lie: It was a funeral. It looked like any other funeral.

His pallbearers—cousins, his dad, an uncle, friends I'd never seen—came and got him, and they all started walking toward the hearse.

When Mom and Dad and I got in the car, I said, “I don't want to go. I'm tired.”

“Hazel,” Mom said.

“Mom, there won't be a place to sit and it'll last forever and I'm exhausted.”

“Hazel, we have to go for Mr. and Mrs. Waters,” Mom said.

“Just...” I said. I felt so little in the backseat for some reason. I kind of wanted to *be* little. I wanted to be like six years old or something. “Fine,” I said.

I just stared out the window awhile. I really didn't want to go. I didn't want to see them lower him into the ground in the spot he'd picked out with his dad, and I didn't want to see his parents sink to their knees in the dew-wet grass and moan in pain, and I didn't want to see Peter Van Houten's alcoholic belly stretched against his linen jacket, and I didn't want to cry in front of a bunch of people, and I didn't want to toss a handful of dirt onto his grave, and I didn't want my parents to have to stand there beneath the clear blue sky with its certain slant of afternoon light, thinking about their day and their kid and my plot and my casket and my dirt.

But I did these things. I did all of them and worse, because Mom and Dad felt we should.

•••

After it was over, Van Houten walked up to me and put a fat hand on my shoulder and said, “Could I hitch a ride? Left my rental at the bottom of the hill.” I shrugged, and he opened the door to the backseat right as my dad unlocked the

car.

Inside, he leaned between the front seats and said, “Peter Van Houten: Novelist Emeritus and Semiprofessional Disappointer.”

My parents introduced themselves. He shook their hands. I was pretty surprised that Peter Van Houten had flown halfway across the world to attend a funeral. “How did you even—” I started, but he cut me off.

“I used the infernal Internet of yours to follow the Indianapolis obituary notices.” He reached into his linen suit and produced a fifth of whiskey.

“And you just like bought a ticket and—”

He interrupted again while unscrewing the cap. “It was fifteen thousand for a first-class ticket, but I’m sufficiently capitalized to indulge such whims. And the drinks are free on the flight. If you’re ambitious, you can almost break even.”

Van Houten took a swig of the whiskey and then leaned forward to offer it to my dad, who said, “Um, no thanks.” Then Van Houten nodded the bottle toward me. I grabbed it.

“Hazel,” my mom said, but I unscrewed the cap and sipped. It made my stomach feel like my lungs. I handed the bottle back to Van Houten, who took a long slug from it and then said, “So. *Omnis cellula e cellula.*”

“Huh?”

“Your boy Waters and I corresponded a bit, and in his last—”

“Wait, you read your fan mail now?”

“No, he sent it to my house, not through my publisher. And I’d hardly call him a fan. He despised me. But at any rate he was quite insistent that I’d be absolved for my misbehavior if I attended his funeral and told you what became of Anna’s mother. So here I am, and there’s your answer: *Omnis cellula e cellula.*”

“What?” I asked again.

“*Omnis cellula e cellula,*” he said again. “All cells come from cells. Every cell is born of a previous cell, which was born of a previous cell. Life comes from life. Life begets life begets life begets life begets life.”

We reached the bottom of the hill. “Okay, yeah,” I said. I was in no mood for this. Peter Van Houten would not hijack Gus’s funeral. I wouldn’t allow it.

“Thanks,” I said. “Well, I guess we’re at the bottom of the hill.”

“You don’t want an explanation?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m good. I think you’re a pathetic alcoholic who says fancy things to get attention like a really precocious eleven-year-old and I feel super bad for you. But yeah, no, you’re not the guy who wrote *An Imperial Affliction* anymore, so you couldn’t sequel it even if you wanted to. Thanks, though. Have an excellent life.”

“But—”

“Thanks for the booze,” I said. “Now get out of the car.” He looked scolded. Dad had stopped the car and we just idled there below Gus’s grave for a minute until Van Houten opened the door and, finally silent, left.

As we drove away, I watched through the back window as he took a drink and raised the bottle in my direction, as if toasting me. His eyes looked so sad. I felt kinda bad for him, to be honest.

...

We finally got home around six, and I was exhausted. I just wanted to sleep, but Mom made me eat some cheesy pasta, although she at least allowed me to eat in bed. I slept with the BiPAP for a couple hours. Waking up was horrible, because for a disoriented moment I felt like everything was fine, and then it crushed me anew. Mom took me off the BiPAP, I tethered myself to a portable tank, and stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth.

Appraising myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, I kept thinking there were two kinds of adults: There were Peter Van Houtens—miserable creatures who scoured the earth in search of something to hurt. And then there were people like my parents, who walked around zombically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around.

Neither of these futures struck me as particularly desirable. It seemed to me that I had already seen everything pure and good in the world, and I was beginning to suspect that even if death didn’t get in the way, the kind of love that Augustus and I share could never last. *So dawn goes down to day*, the poet wrote. *Nothing gold can stay*.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

“Occupada,” I said.

“Hazel,” my dad said. “Can I come in?” I didn’t answer, but after a while I unlocked the door. I sat down on the closed toilet seat. Why did breathing have to be such work? Dad knelt down next to me. He grabbed my head and pulled it into his collarbone, and he said, “I’m sorry Gus died.” I felt kind of suffocated by his T-shirt, but it felt good to be held so hard, pressed into the comfortable smell of my dad. It was almost like he was angry or something, and I liked that, because I was angry, too. “It’s total bullshit,” he said. “The whole thing. Eighty percent survival rate and he’s in the twenty percent? Bullshit. He was such a bright kid. It’s bullshit. I hate it. But it was sure a privilege to love him, huh?”

I nodded into his shirt.

“Gives you an idea how I feel about you,” he said.

My old man. He always knew just what to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A couple days later, I got up around noon and drove over to Isaac's house. He answered the door himself. "My mom took Graham to a movie," he said.

"We should go do something," I said.

"Can the something be play blind-guy video games while sitting on the couch?"

"Yeah, that's just the kind of something I had in mind."

So we sat there for a couple hours talking to the screen together, navigating this invisible labyrinthine cave without a single lumen of light. The most entertaining part of the game by far was trying to get the computer to engage us in humorous conversation:

Me: "Touch the cave wall."

Computer: "You touch the cave wall. It is moist."

Isaac: "Lick the cave wall."

Computer: "I do not understand. Repeat?"

Me: "Hump the moist cave wall."

Computer: "You attempt to jump. You hit your head."

Isaac: "Not *jump*. *HUMP*."

Computer: "I don't understand."

Isaac: "Dude, I've been alone in the dark in this cave for weeks and I need some relief. *HUMP THE CAVE WALL*."

Computer: "You attempt to ju—"

Me: "Thrust pelvis against the cave wall."

Computer: "I do not—"

Isaac: "Make sweet love to the cave."

Computer: "I do not—"

Me: "*FINE*. Follow left branch."

Computer: "You follow the left branch. The passage narrows."

Me: "Crawl."

Computer: "You crawl for one hundred yards. The passage narrows."

Me: "Snake crawl."

Computer: "You snake crawl for thirty yards. A trickle of water runs down your body. You reach a mound of small rocks blocking the passageway."

Me: "Can I hump the cave now?"

Computer: "You cannot jump without standing."

Isaac: "I dislike living in a world without Augustus Waters."

Computer: "I don't understand—"

Isaac: "Me neither. Pause."

...

He dropped the remote onto the couch between us and asked, "Do you know if it hurt or whatever?"

"He was really fighting for breath, I guess," I said. "He eventually went unconscious, but it sounds like, yeah, it wasn't great or anything. Dying sucks."

"Yeah," Isaac said. And then after a long time, "It just seems so impossible."

"Happens all the time," I said.

"You seem angry," he said.

"Yeah," I said. We just sat there quiet for a long time, which was fine, and I was thinking about way back in the very beginning in the Literal Heart of Jesus when Gus told us that he feared oblivion, and I told him that he was fearing something universal and inevitable, and how really, the problem is not suffering itself or oblivion itself but the depraved meaninglessness of these things, the absolutely inhuman nihilism of suffering. I thought of my dad telling me that the universe wants to be noticed. But what we want is to be noticed by the universe, to have the universe give a shit what happens to us—not the collective idea of sentient life but each of us, as individuals.

"Gus really loved you, you know," he said.

"I know."

"He wouldn't shut up about it."

"I know," I said.

"It was annoying."

"I didn't find it that annoying," I said.

"Did he ever give you that thing he was writing?"

"What thing?"

"That sequel or whatever to that book you liked."

I turned to Isaac. "What?"

“He said he was working on something for you but he wasn’t that good of a writer.”

“When did he say this?”

“I don’t know. Like, after he got back from Amsterdam at some point.”

“At which point?” I pressed. Had he not had a chance to finish it? Had he finished it and left it on his computer or something?

“Um,” Isaac sighed. “Um, I don’t know. We talked about it over here once. He was over here, like—uh, we played with my email machine and I’d just gotten an email from my grandmother. I can check on the machine if you—”

“Yeah, yeah, where is it?”

•••

He’d mentioned it a month before. A month. Not a good month, admittedly, but still—a month. That was enough time for him to have written *something*, at least. There was still something of him, or by him at least, floating around out there. I needed it.

“I’m gonna go to his house,” I told Isaac.

I hurried out to the minivan and hauled the oxygen cart up and into the passenger seat. I started the car. A hip-hop beat blared from the stereo, and as I reached to change the radio station, someone started rapping. In Swedish.

I swiveled around and screamed when I saw Peter Van Houten sitting in the backseat.

“I apologize for alarming you,” Peter Van Houten said over the rapping. He was still wearing the funeral suit, almost a week later. He smelled like he was sweating alcohol. “You’re welcome to keep the CD,” he said. “It’s Snook, one of the major Swedish—”

“Ah ah ah ah GET OUT OF MY CAR.” I turned off the stereo.

“It’s your mother’s car, as I understand it,” he said. “Also, it wasn’t locked.”

“Oh, my God! Get out of the car or I’ll call nine-one-one. Dude, what is your *problem?*”

“If only there were just one,” he mused. “I am here simply to apologize. You were correct in noting earlier that I am a pathetic little man, dependent upon alcohol. I had one acquaintance who only spent time with me because I paid her to do so—worse, still, she has since quit, leaving me the rare soul who cannot acquire companionship even through bribery. It is all true, Hazel. All that and more.”

“Okay,” I said. It would have been a more moving speech had he not slurred his words.

“You remind me of Anna.”

“I remind a lot of people of a lot of people,” I answered. “I really have to go.”

“So drive,” he said.

“Get out.”

“No. You remind me of Anna,” he said again. After a second, I put the car in reverse and backed out. I couldn’t make him leave, and I didn’t have to. I’d drive to Gus’s house, and Gus’s parents would make him leave.

“You are, of course, familiar,” Van Houten said, “with Antonietta Meo.”

“Yeah, no,” I said. I turned on the stereo, and the Swedish hip-hop blared, but Van Houten yelled over it.

“She may soon be the youngest nonmartyr saint ever beatified by the Catholic Church. She had the same cancer that Mr. Waters had, osteosarcoma. They removed her right leg. The pain was excruciating. As Antonietta Meo lay dying at the ripened age of six from this agonizing cancer, she told her father, ‘Pain is like fabric: The stronger it is, the more it’s worth.’ Is that true, Hazel?”

I wasn’t looking at him directly but at his reflection in the mirror. “No,” I shouted over the music. “That’s bullshit.”

“But don’t you wish it were true!” he cried back. I cut the music. “I’m sorry I ruined your trip. You were too young. You were—” He broke down. As if he had a right to cry over Gus. Van Houten was just another of the endless mourners who did not know him, another too-late lamentation on his wall.

“You didn’t ruin our trip, you self-important bastard. We had an awesome trip.”

“*I am trying,*” he said. “*I am trying, I swear.*” It was around then that I realized Peter Van Houten had a dead person in his family. I considered the honesty with which he had written about cancer kids; the fact that he couldn’t speak to me in Amsterdam except to ask if I’d dressed like her on purpose; his shittiness around me and Augustus; his aching question about the relationship between pain’s extremity and its value. He sat back there drinking, an old man who’d been drunk for years. I thought of a statistic I wish I didn’t know: Half of marriages end in the year after a child’s death. I looked back at Van Houten. I was driving down College and I pulled over behind a line of parked cars and asked, “You had a kid who died?”

“My daughter,” he said. “She was eight. Suffered beautifully. Will never be beatified.”

“She had leukemia?” I asked. He nodded. “Like Anna,” I said.

“Very much like her, yes.”

“You were married?”

“No. Well, not at the time of her death. I was insufferable long before we lost her. Grief does not change you, Hazel. It reveals you.”

“Did you live with her?”

“No, not primarily, although at the end, we brought her to New York, where I was living, for a series of experimental tortures that increased the misery of her days without increasing the number of them.”

After a second, I said, “So it’s like you gave her this second life where she got to be a teenager.”

“I suppose that would be a fair assessment,” he said, and then quickly added, “I assume you are familiar with Philippa Foot’s Trolley Problem thought experiment?”

“And then I show up at your house and I’m dressed like the girl you hoped she would live to become and you’re, like, all taken aback by it.”

“There’s a trolley running out of control down a track,” he said.

“I don’t care about your stupid thought experiment,” I said.

“It’s Philippa Foot’s, actually.”

“Well, hers either,” I said.

“She didn’t understand why it was happening,” he said. “I had to tell her she would die. Her social worker said I had to tell her. I had to tell her she would die, so I told her she was going to heaven. She asked if I would be there, and I said that I would not, not yet. But eventually, she said, and I promised that yes, of course, very soon. And I told her that in the meantime we had great family up there that would take care of her. And she asked me when I would be there, and I told her soon. Twenty-two years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

After a while, I asked, “What happened to her mom?”

He smiled. “You’re still looking for your sequel, you little rat.”

I smiled back. “You should go home,” I told him. “Sober up. Write another novel. Do the thing you’re good at. Not many people are lucky enough to be so good at something.”

He stared at me through the mirror for a long time. “Okay,” he said. “Yeah. You’re right. You’re right.” But even as he said it, he pulled out his mostly empty fifth of whiskey. He drank, recapped the bottle, and opened the door. “Good-bye, Hazel.”

“Take it easy, Van Houten.”

He sat down on the curb behind the car. As I watched him shrink in the rearview mirror, he pulled out the bottle and for a second it looked like he would leave it on the curb. And then he took a swig.

...

It was a hot afternoon in Indianapolis, the air thick and still like we were inside a cloud. It was the worst kind of air for me, and I told myself it was just the air when the walk from his driveway to his front door felt infinite. I rang the doorbell, and Gus's mom answered.

"Oh, Hazel," she said, and kind of enveloped me, crying.

She made me eat some eggplant lasagna—I guess a lot of people had brought them food or whatever—with her and Gus's dad. "How are you?"

"I miss him."

"Yeah."

I didn't really know what to say. I just wanted to go downstairs and find whatever he'd written for me. Plus, the silence in the room really bothered me. I wanted them to be talking to each other, comforting or holding hands or whatever. But they just sat there eating very small amounts of lasagna, not even looking at each other. "Heaven needed an angel," his dad said after a while.

"I know," I said. Then his sisters and their mess of kids showed up and piled into the kitchen. I got up and hugged both his sisters and then watched the kids run around the kitchen with their sorely needed surplus of noise and movement, excited molecules bouncing against each other and shouting, "You're it no you're it no I was it but then I tagged you you didn't tag me you missed me well I'm tagging you now no dumb butt it's a time-out DANIEL DO NOT CALL YOUR BROTHER A DUMB BUTT Mom if I'm not allowed to use that word how come you just used it dumb butt dumb butt," and then, chorally, *dumb butt dumb butt dumb butt dumb butt dumb butt*, and at the table Gus's parents were now holding hands, which made me feel better.

"Isaac told me Gus was writing something, something for me," I said. The kids were still singing their dumb-butt song.

"We can check his computer," his mom said.

"He wasn't on it much the last few weeks," I said.

"That's true. I'm not even sure we brought it upstairs. Is it still in the basement, Mark?"

"No idea."

"Well," I said, "can I..." I nodded toward the basement door.

"We're not ready," his dad said. "But of course, yes, Hazel. Of course you can."

...

I walked downstairs, past his unmade bed, past the gaming chairs beneath the TV. His computer was still on. I tapped the mouse to wake it up and then searched for his most recently edited files. Nothing in the last month. The most recent thing was a response paper to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Maybe he'd written something by hand. I walked over to his bookshelves, looking for a journal or a notebook. Nothing. I flipped through his copy of *An Imperial Affliction*. He hadn't left a single mark in it.

I walked to his bedside table next. *Infinite Mayhem*, the ninth sequel to *The Price of Dawn*, lay atop the table next to his reading lamp, the corner of [page 138](#) turned down. He'd never made it to the end of the book. "Spoiler alert: Mayhem survives," I said out loud to him, just in case he could hear me.

And then I crawled into his unmade bed, wrapping myself in his comforter like a cocoon, surrounding myself with his smell. I took out my cannula so I could smell better, breathing him in and breathing him out, the scent fading even as I lay there, my chest burning until I couldn't distinguish among the pains.

I sat up in the bed after a while and reinserted my cannula and breathed for a while before going up the stairs. I just shook my head no in response to his parents' expectant looks. The kids raced past me. One of Gus's sisters—I could not tell them apart—said, "Mom, do you want me to take them to the park or something?"

"No, no, they're fine."

"Is there anywhere he might have put a notebook? Like by his hospital bed or something?" The bed was already gone, reclaimed by hospice.

"Hazel," his dad said, "you were there every day with us. You—he wasn't alone much, sweetie. He wouldn't have had time to write anything. I know you want...I want that, too. But the messages he leaves for us now are coming from above, Hazel." He pointed toward the ceiling, as if Gus were hovering just above the house. Maybe he was. I don't know. I didn't feel his presence, though.

"Yeah," I said. I promised to visit them again in a few days.

I never quite caught his scent again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Three days later, on the eleventh day AG, Gus's father called me in the morning. I was still hooked to the BiPAP, so I didn't answer, but I listened to his message the moment it beeped through to my phone. "Hazel, hi, it's Gus's dad. I found a, uh, black Moleskine notebook in the magazine rack that was near his hospital bed, I think near enough that he could have reached it. Unfortunately there's no writing in the notebook. All the pages are blank. But the first—I think three or four—the first few pages are torn out of the notebook. We looked through the house but couldn't find the pages. So I don't know what to make of that. But maybe those pages are what Isaac was referring to? Anyway, I hope that you are doing okay. You're in our prayers every day, Hazel. Okay, bye."

Three or four pages ripped from a Moleskine notebook no longer in Augustus Waters's house. Where would he leave them for me? Taped to *Funky Bones*? No, he wasn't well enough to get there.

The Literal Heart of Jesus. Maybe he'd left it there for me on his Last Good Day.

So I left twenty minutes early for Support Group the next day. I drove over to Isaac's house, picked him up, and then we drove down to the Literal Heart of Jesus with the windows of the minivan down, listening to The Hectic Glow's leaked new album, which Gus would never hear.

We took the elevator. I walked Isaac to a seat in the Circle of Trust then slowly worked my way around the Literal Heart. I checked everywhere: under the chairs, around the lectern I'd stood behind while delivering my eulogy, under the treat table, on the bulletin board packed with Sunday school kids' drawings of God's love. Nothing. It was the only place we'd been together in those last days besides his house, and it either wasn't here or I was missing something. Perhaps he'd left it for me in the hospital, but if so, it had almost certainly been thrown away after his death.

I was really out of breath by the time I settled into a chair next to Isaac, and I devoted the entirety of Patrick's nutless testimonial to telling my lungs they were okay, that they could breathe, that there was enough oxygen. They'd been drained only a week before Gus died—I watched the amber cancer water dribble out of me through the tube—and yet already they felt full again. I was so focused on telling myself to breathe that I didn't notice Patrick saying my name at first.

I snapped to attention. "Yeah?" I asked.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay, Patrick. I'm a little out of breath."

"Would you like to share a memory of Augustus with the group?"

"I wish I would just die, Patrick. Do you ever wish you would just die?"

"Yes," Patrick said, without his usual pause. "Yes, of course. So why don't you?"

I thought about it. My old stock answer was that I wanted to stay alive for my parents, because they would be all gutted and childless in the wake of me, and that was still true kind of, but that wasn't it, exactly. "I don't know."

"In the hopes that you'll get better?"

"No," I said. "No, it's not that. I really don't know. Isaac?" I asked. I was tired of talking.

Isaac started talking about true love. I couldn't tell them what I was thinking because it seemed cheesy to me, but I was thinking about the universe wanting to be noticed, and how I had to notice it as best I could. I felt that I owed a debt to the universe that only my attention could repay, and also that I owed a debt to everybody who didn't get to be a person anymore and everyone who hadn't gotten to be a person yet. What my dad had told me, basically.

I stayed quiet for the rest of Support Group, and Patrick said a special prayer for me, and Gus's name was tacked onto the long list of the dead—fourteen of them for every one of us—and we promised to live our best life today, and then I took Isaac to the car.

...

When I got home, Mom and Dad were at the dining room table on their separate laptops, and the moment I walked in the door, Mom slammed her laptop shut.

"What's on the computer?"

"Just some antioxidant recipes. Ready for BiPAP and *America's Next Top Model*?" she asked.

"I'm just going to lie down for a minute."

"Are you okay?"

“Yeah, just tired.”

“Well, you’ve gotta eat before you—”

“Mom, I am aggressively unhungry.” I took a step toward the door but she cut me off.

“Hazel, you have to eat. Just some ch—”

“No. I’m going to bed.”

“No,” Mom said. “You’re not.” I glanced at my dad, who shrugged.

“It’s my life,” I said.

“You’re not going to starve yourself to death just because Augustus died. You’re going to eat dinner.”

I was really pissed off for some reason. “I can’t eat, Mom. I can’t. Okay?”

I tried to push past her but she grabbed both my shoulders and said, “Hazel, you’re eating dinner. You need to stay healthy.”

“NO!” I shouted. “I’m not eating dinner, and I can’t stay healthy, because I’m not healthy. I am dying, Mom. I am going to die and leave you here alone and you won’t have a me to hover around and you won’t be a mother anymore, and I’m sorry, but I can’t do anything about it, okay?!”

I regretted it as soon as I said it.

“You heard me.”

“What?”

“Did you hear me say that to your father?” Her eyes welled up. “Did you?” I nodded. “Oh, God, Hazel. I’m sorry. I was wrong, sweetie. That wasn’t true. I said that in a desperate moment. It’s not something I believe.” She sat down, and I sat down with her. I was thinking that I should have just puked up some pasta for her instead of getting pissed off.

“What do you believe, then?” I asked.

“As long as either of us is alive, I will be your mother,” she said. “Even if you die, I—”

“When,” I said.

She nodded. “Even when you die, I will still be your mom, Hazel. I won’t stop being your mom. Have you stopped loving Gus?” I shook my head. “Well, then how could I stop loving you?”

“Okay,” I said. My dad was crying now.

“I want you guys to have a life,” I said. “I worry that you won’t have a life, that you’ll sit around here all day with no me to look after and stare at the walls and want to off yourselves.”

After a minute, Mom said, “I’m taking some classes. Online, through IU. To get my master’s in social work. In fact, I wasn’t looking at antioxidant recipes; I was writing a paper.”

“Seriously?”

“I don’t want you to think I’m imagining a world without you. But if I get my MSW, I can counsel families in crisis or lead groups dealing with illness in their families or—”

“Wait, you’re going to become a Patrick?”

“Well, not exactly. There are all kinds of social work jobs.”

Dad said, “We’ve both been worried that you’ll feel abandoned. It’s important for you to know that we will *always* be here for you, Hazel. Your mom isn’t going anywhere.”

“No, this is great. This is fantastic!” I was really smiling. “Mom is going to become a Patrick. She’ll be a great Patrick! She’ll be so much better at it than Patrick is.”

“Thank you, Hazel. That means everything to me.”

I nodded. I was crying. I couldn’t get over how happy I was, crying genuine tears of actual happiness for the first time in maybe forever, imagining my mom as a Patrick. It made me think of Anna’s mom. She would’ve been a good social worker, too.

After a while we turned on the TV and watched *ANTM*. But I paused it after five seconds because I had all these questions for Mom. “So how close are you to finishing?”

“If I go up to Bloomington for a week this summer, I should be able to finish by December.”

“How long have you been keeping this from me, exactly?”

“A year.”

“*Mom.*”

“I didn’t want to hurt you, Hazel.”

Amazing. “So when you’re waiting for me outside of MCC or Support Group or whatever, you’re always—”

“Yes, working or reading.”

“This is so great. If I’m dead, I want you to know I will be sighing at you from heaven every time you ask someone to share their feelings.”

My dad laughed. “I’ll be right there with ya, kiddo,” he assured me.

Finally, we watched *ANTM*. Dad tried really hard not to die of boredom, and he kept messing up which girl was which, saying, “We like her?”

“No, no. We *revile* Anastasia. We like *Antonia*, the other blonde,” Mom explained.

“They’re all tall and horrible,” Dad responded. “Forgive me for failing to tell the difference.” Dad reached across me for Mom’s hand.

“Do you think you guys will stay together if I die?” I asked.

“Hazel, what? Sweetie.” She fumbled for the remote control and paused the TV again. “What’s wrong?”

“Just, do you think you would?”

“Yes, of course. Of course,” Dad said. “Your mom and I love each other, and if we lose you, we’ll go through it together.”

“Swear to God,” I said.

“I swear to God,” he said.

I looked back at Mom. “Swear to God,” she agreed. “Why are you even worrying about this?”

“I just don’t want to ruin your life or anything.”

Mom leaned forward and pressed her face into my messy puff of hair and kissed me at the very top of my head. I said to Dad, “I don’t want you to become like a miserable unemployed alcoholic or whatever.”

My mom smiled. “Your father isn’t Peter Van Houten, Hazel. You of all people know it is possible to live with pain.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. Mom hugged me and I let her even though I didn’t really want to be hugged. “Okay, you can unpause it,” I said. Anastasia got kicked off. She threw a fit. It was awesome.

I ate a few bites of dinner—bow-tie pasta with pesto—and managed to keep it down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I woke up the next morning panicked because I'd dreamed of being alone and boatless in a huge lake. I bolted up, straining against the BiPAP, and felt Mom's arm on me.

"Hi, you okay?"

My heart raced, but I nodded. Mom said, "Kaitlyn's on the phone for you." I pointed at my BiPAP. She helped me get it off and hooked me up to Philip and then finally I took my cell from Mom and said, "Hey, Kaitlyn."

"Just calling to check in," she said. "See how you're doing."

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "I'm doing okay."

"You've just had the worst luck, darling. It's *unconscionable*."

"I guess," I said. I didn't think much about my luck anymore one way or the other. Honestly, I didn't really want to talk with Kaitlyn about anything, but she kept dragging the conversation along.

"So what was it like?" she asked.

"Having your boyfriend die? Um, it sucks."

"No," she said. "Being in love."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. It was...it was nice to spend time with someone so interesting. We were very different, and we disagreed about a lot of things, but he was always so interesting, you know?"

"Alas, I do not. The boys I'm acquainted with are vastly uninteresting."

"He wasn't perfect or anything. He wasn't your fairy-tale Prince Charming or whatever. He tried to be like that sometimes, but I liked him best when that stuff fell away."

"Do you have like a scrapbook of pictures and letters he wrote?"

"I have some pictures, but he never really wrote me letters. Except, well there are some missing pages from his notebook that might have been something for me, but I guess he threw them away or they got lost or something."

“Maybe he mailed them to you,” she said.

“Nah, they’d’ve gotten here.”

“Then maybe they weren’t written for you,” she said. “Maybe...I mean, not to depress you or anything, but maybe he wrote them for someone else and mailed them—”

“VAN HOUTEN!” I shouted.

“Are you okay? Was that a cough?”

“Kaitlyn, I love you. You are a genius. I have to go.”

I hung up, rolled over, reached for my laptop, turned it on, and emailed lidewij.vliegenthart.

Lidewij,

I believe Augustus Waters sent a few pages from a notebook to Peter Van Houten shortly before he (Augustus) died. It is very important to me that someone reads these pages. I want to read them, of course, but maybe they weren’t written for me. Regardless, they must be read. They must be. Can you help?

Your friend,
Hazel Grace Lancaster

She responded late that afternoon.

Dear Hazel,

I did not know that Augustus had died. I am very sad to hear this news. He was such a very charismatic young man. I am so sorry, and so sad.

I have not spoken to Peter since I resigned that day we met. It is very late at night here, but I am going over to his house first thing in the morning to find this letter and force him to read it. Mornings were his best time, usually.

Your friend,
Lidewij Vliegenthart

p.s. I am bringing my boyfriend in case we have to physically restrain Peter.

I wondered why he'd written Van Houten in those last days instead of me, telling Van Houten that he'd be redeemed if only he gave me my sequel. Maybe the notebook pages had just repeated his request to Van Houten. It made sense, Gus leveraging his terminality to make my dream come true: The sequel was a tiny thing to die for, but it was the biggest thing left at his disposal.

I refreshed my email continually that night, slept for a few hours, and then commenced to refreshing around five in the morning. But nothing arrived. I tried to watch TV to distract myself, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Amsterdam, imagining Lidewij Vliegthart and her boyfriend bicycling around town on this crazy mission to find a dead kid's last correspondence. How fun it would be to bounce on the back of Lidewij Vliegthart's bike down the brick streets, her curly red hair blowing into my face, the smell of the canals and cigarette smoke, all the people sitting outside the cafés drinking beer, saying their *r*'s and *g*'s in a way I'd never learn.

I missed the future. Obviously I knew even before his recurrence that I'd never grow old with Augustus Waters. But thinking about Lidewij and her boyfriend, I felt robbed. I would probably never again see the ocean from thirty thousand feet above, so far up that you can't make out the waves or any boats, so that the ocean is a great and endless monolith. I could imagine it. I could remember it. But I couldn't see it again, and it occurred to me that the voracious ambition of humans is never sated by dreams coming true, because there is always the thought that everything might be done better and again.

That is probably true even if you live to be ninety—although I'm jealous of the people who get to find out for sure. Then again, I'd already lived twice as long as Van Houten's daughter. What he wouldn't have given to have a kid die at sixteen.

Suddenly Mom was standing between the TV and me, her hands folded behind her back. "Hazel," she said. Her voice was so serious I thought something might be wrong.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what today is?"

"It's not my birthday, is it?"

She laughed. "Not just yet. It's July fourteenth, Hazel."

"Is it *your* birthday?"

"No..."

"Is it Harry Houdini's birthday?"

"No..."

"I am really tired of guessing."

"IT IS BASTILLE DAY!" She pulled her arms from behind her back,

producing two small plastic French flags and waving them enthusiastically.

“That sounds like a fake thing. Like Cholera Awareness Day.”

“I assure you, Hazel, that there is nothing fake about Bastille Day. Did you know that two hundred and twenty-three years ago today, the people of France stormed the Bastille prison to arm themselves to fight for their freedom?”

“Wow,” I said. “We should celebrate this momentous anniversary.”

“It so happens that I have just now scheduled a picnic with your father in Holliday Park.”

She never stopped trying, my mom. I pushed against the couch and stood up. Together, we cobbled together some sandwich makings and found a dusty picnic basket in the hallway utility closet.

...

It was kind of a beautiful day, finally real summer in Indianapolis, warm and humid—the kind of weather that reminds you after a long winter that while the world wasn’t built for humans, we were built for the world. Dad was waiting for us, wearing a tan suit, standing in a handicapped parking spot typing away on his handheld. He waved as we parked and then hugged me. “What a day,” he said. “If we lived in California, they’d all be like this.”

“Yeah, but then you wouldn’t enjoy them,” my mom said. She was wrong, but I didn’t correct her.

We ended up putting our blanket down by the Ruins, this weird rectangle of Roman ruins plopped down in the middle of a field in Indianapolis. But they aren’t real ruins: They’re like a sculptural re-creation of ruins built eighty years ago, but the fake Ruins have been neglected pretty badly, so they have kind of become actual ruins by accident. Van Houten would like the Ruins. Gus, too.

So we sat in the shadow of the Ruins and ate a little lunch. “Do you need sunscreen?” Mom asked.

“I’m okay,” I said.

You could hear the wind in the leaves, and on that wind traveled the screams of the kids on the playground in the distance, the little kids figuring out how to be alive, how to navigate a world that was not built for them by navigating a playground that was. Dad saw me watching the kids and said, “You miss running around like that?”

“Sometimes, I guess.” But that wasn’t what I was thinking. I was just trying to notice everything: the light on the ruined Ruins, this little kid who could barely walk discovering a stick at the corner of the playground, my indefatigable mother zigzagging mustard across her turkey sandwich, my dad patting his

handheld in his pocket and resisting the urge to check it, a guy throwing a Frisbee that his dog kept running under and catching and returning to him.

Who am I to say that these things might not be forever? Who is Peter Van Houten to assert as fact the conjecture that our labor is temporary? All I know of heaven and all I know of death is in this park: an elegant universe in ceaseless motion, teeming with ruined ruins and screaming children.

My dad was waving his hand in front of my face. “Tune in, Hazel. Are you there?”

“Sorry, yeah, what?”

“Mom suggested we go see Gus?”

“Oh. Yeah,” I said.

...

So after lunch, we drove down to Crown Hill Cemetery, the last and final resting place of three vice presidents, one president, and Augustus Waters. We drove up the hill and parked. Cars roared by behind us on Thirty-eighth Street. It was easy to find his grave: It was the newest. The earth was still mounded above his coffin. No headstone yet.

I didn't feel like he was there or anything, but I still took one of Mom's dumb little French flags and stuck it in the ground at the foot of his grave. Maybe passersby would think he was a member of the French Foreign Legion or some heroic mercenary.

...

Lidewij finally wrote back just after six P.M. while I was on the couch watching both TV and videos on my laptop. I saw immediately there were four attachments to the email and I wanted to open them first, but I resisted temptation and read the email.

Dear Hazel,

Peter was very intoxicated when we arrived at his house this morning, but this made our job somewhat easier. Bas (my boyfriend) distracted him while I searched through the garbage bag Peter keeps with the fan mail in it, but then I realized that Augustus knew Peter's address. There was a large pile of mail on his dining room table, where I found the letter very quickly. I opened it and saw that it was addressed to Peter, so I

asked him to read it.

He refused.

At this point, I became very angry, Hazel, but I did not yell at him. Instead, I told him that he owed it to his dead daughter to read this letter from a dead boy, and I gave him the letter and he read the entire thing and said—I quote him directly—“Send it to the girl and tell her I have nothing to add.”

I have not read the letter, although my eyes did fall on some phrases while scanning the pages. I have attached them here and then will mail them to you at your home; your address is the same?

May God bless and keep you, Hazel.

Your friend,
Lidewij Vliegenthart

I clicked open the four attachments. His handwriting was messy, slanting across the page, the size of the letters varying, the color of the pen changing. He'd written it over many days in varying degrees of consciousness.

Van Houten,

I'm a good person but a shitty writer. You're a shitty person but a good writer. We'd make a good team. I don't want to ask you any favors, but if you have time—and from what I saw, you have plenty—I was wondering if you could write a eulogy for Hazel. I've got notes and everything, but if you could just make it into a coherent whole or whatever? Or even just tell me what I should say differently.

Here's the thing about Hazel: Almost everyone is obsessed with leaving a mark upon the world. Bequeathing a legacy. Outlasting death. We all want to be remembered. I do, too. That's what bothers me most, is being another unremembered casualty in the ancient and inglorious war against disease.

I want to leave a mark.

But Van Houten: The marks humans leave are too often scars. You build

a hideous minimall or start a coup or try to become a rock star and you think, “They’ll remember me now,” but (a) they don’t remember you, and (b) all you leave behind are more scars. Your coup becomes a dictatorship. Your minimall becomes a lesion.

(Okay, maybe I’m not such a shitty writer. But I can’t pull my ideas together, Van Houten. My thoughts are stars I can’t fathom into constellations.)

We are like a bunch of dogs squirting on fire hydrants. We poison the groundwater with our toxic piss, marking everything MINE in a ridiculous attempt to survive our deaths. I can’t stop pissing on fire hydrants. I know it’s silly and useless—epically useless in my current state—but I am an animal like any other.

Hazel is different. She walks lightly, old man. She walks lightly upon the earth. Hazel knows the truth: We’re as likely to hurt the universe as we are to help it, and we’re not likely to do either.

People will say it’s sad that she leaves a lesser scar, that fewer remember her, that she was loved deeply but not widely. But it’s not sad, Van Houten. It’s triumphant. It’s heroic. Isn’t that the real heroism? Like the doctors say: First, do no harm.

The real heroes anyway aren’t the people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine didn’t actually invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox didn’t get smallpox.

After my PET scan lit up, I snuck into the ICU and saw her while she was unconscious. I just walked in behind a nurse with a badge and I got to sit next to her for like ten minutes before I got caught. I really thought she was going to die before I could tell her that I was going to die, too. It was brutal: the incessant mechanized haranguing of intensive care. She had this dark cancer water dripping out of her chest. Eyes closed. Intubated. But her hand was still her hand, still warm and the nails painted this almost black dark blue and I just held her hand and tried to

imagine the world without us and for about one second I was a good enough person to hope she died so she would never know that I was going, too. But then I wanted more time so we could fall in love. I got my wish, I suppose. I left my scar.

A nurse guy came in and told me I had to leave, that visitors weren't allowed, and I asked if she was doing okay, and the guy said, "She's still taking on water." A desert blessing, an ocean curse.

What else? She is so beautiful. You don't get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you: You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Van Houten. You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers.

I do, Augustus.

I do.

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PHOTO BY TOM KOENE, 2009



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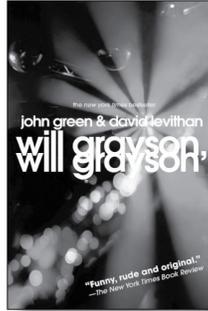
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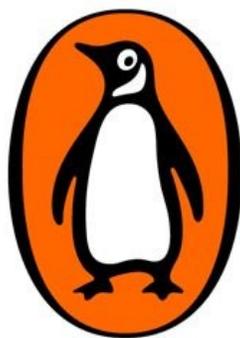
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