

The Thorn Tree

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The Thorn Tree



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“I do not know just how in childhood we arrive at certain images, images of crucial significance to us. They are like filaments in a solution around which the sense of the world crystallizes for us ... They are meanings that seem predestined for us, ready and waiting at the very entrance of our life ... It seems to me that the rest of our life passes in the interpretation of those insights, in the attempt to master them with all the wisdom we acquire, to draw them through all the range of intellect we have in our possession.”

-Bruno Schulz

Introduction

The roar of the jeep cracked the savannah in half. Guilt seeped into Mary's blood as the African sun made every inch of her body sweat. The savannah was by no means silent; the air buzzed frantically with invisible insects, heavy with a primal hum. But the coughs of the jeep were modern, filthy, and out of place in the vast expanse of baking land.

Mary sat in the passenger seat of the jeep, wiping the sweat from her forehead. Jarrett was driving, his "I'm in the Peace Corps" hat and kerchief soaking up sweat. It had been almost a year since she arrived in South Africa. After finishing her four years at Swarthmore, Mary felt unsure of what to do with herself, directionless. She had friends, but none close enough to tie her down to one place. She hadn't had a relationship in a while, just a few guys here or there, none of whom she could trust enough to let in. Her ecology major and environmental law minor were interesting to her, but not life-consuming. When friends and wide-eyed relatives asked about why she joined the Peace Corps, she proudly spouted a list of noble reasons, which sounded believable, even honest. Only she knew the true reason: the program simply postponed "real life," delayed direction, another two years.

Not that she regretted coming. South Africa was not a place one could experience without a constant sense of awe. The natural beauty, the spirited residents who grinned and waved despite their poverty, the way it felt to breathe in the air, like sunlight had lit up her lungs. She did love it here. But she was so constantly reminded of home, of Massachusetts, by so many different things, that she half-

expected to one day fall through a floorboard and end up sitting in the middle of North Main Street. The smile of a village child, the way someone said her name – a thousand things triggered this feeling. Her travel journal, a gift from her parents, was only half full of scribbles about Africa. The other half was all home, all childhood, all past.

A grouping of trees lay ahead, growing larger and clearer through the haze as the jeep bounced along. “Pull over,” Mary said. It was their week off from Peace Corps duties, and they were exploring the Mkhuzi Game Reserve. Despite the brochures packed with close-up photos of giraffes, elephants, and rhinos, their trip had yielded nothing but plants, trees, and the endless landscape, which always looked shrouded in smoke.

“Are you sure?” Jarrett called to her over the noise of the motor.

“I know these trees,” she answered. “Giraffes eat them.”

It felt good to get out of the jeep, to stretch her sweat-doused legs. She noticed the many different types of trees in the group as wiped the backs of her knees with a red bandanna. The varied nature of the African landscape fascinated Mary; it was always changing, always a little chaotic.

“So giraffes eat these, huh?” Jarrett asked, his frustration echoing in the air.

“I feel like we would probably notice if one was around. That’s just me, though.”

Mary shrugged him off and explored the trees. One stood out among the rest, shadowing the land with its bizarre, jagged spikes and bulging, heart-like bulbs. It looked like an awkwardly constructed child’s sculpture. She knew this tree, too.

Acacia drepanolobium. She'd written its technical name on the side of a flashcard for a test in college. On the back of the card: *whistling thorn*.

Jarrett spit into the dirt. She cringed. "This one is crazy," he said, pointing to the thorn-covered tree.

"It's a whistling thorn acacia," Mary said. "It protects itself from animals with these thorns." She fingered two of the spikes in her hand. They must have been three inches long, stretched out from the purple bulb like victorious arms. As sharp as they looked.

"Wait, so we stopped to find animals by a tree *designed* to ward them off?" Jarrett kicked up dust.

Mary shot him a look. "Come on, this is interesting enough," she said. "Plus, giraffes still eat a lot of these other trees."

She touched one of the bulbs softly, afraid it would be delicate. It felt surprisingly strong. The bulbs resembled closed flower petals, but felt more like tree bark. "There are these tiny ants," Mary told Jarrett excitedly, "that live inside these bulbs. And they have little stingers, and poke tons of little holes in the bulbs. Scientists don't even really know why they do it; if it's a symbiotic relationship, or if they're just parasites eating part of the bulb, or what. They think animals can smell the ants' pheromones or something, and stay away from them. But nobody can really figure it out. It's this weird science mystery."

Jarrett made the "pfft" sound he'd grown fond of during this trip. "Fascinating. A *science* mystery. You find the weirdest stuff interesting."

Mary wished she hadn't come on this safari with Jarrett alone. They were a casual couple, but every time he said something like that to her, she disliked him a little more – his aviator sunglasses, his swagger, his expensive shoes. The fact that his parents filled up his checking account without him even asking. He had told her yesterday that she was impossible to get to know, that she “put up a shield” whenever he tried to get close to her. She hadn't denied it.

“I'm guessing we aren't gonna see any giraffes today.” Jarrett squinted closely at the bulbs. “Where are the holes, anyway?”

Mary looked at the bulb closely, careful not to get poked in the eye by a thorn. Trying to see the tiny holes, she squinted, looking for thin slivers of light cutting through it. “They're too tiny to see,” she said. “But they're there.” Jarrett looked unconvinced.

A breeze passed over the savannah, as if rising from the ground. The wind sailed through the acacia's punctured bulbs, navigating the tree's invisible wounds. Its thorns shook. There was a sound, like someone blowing across a glass bottle, or an old flute. Piercing, but breathy. It reminded Mary of church as a child, listening to the cantor singing the high verses of hymns before everyone joined in for the chorus. That quiet, tension-riddled moment of almost-silence, except for that one, floating sound.

“Whoa,” Jarrett whispered, the sarcasm gone from his voice.

“See?” Mary said as the breeze died down. “It really does whistle.”

“It sounds like singing,” Jarrett said.

Mary smiled at him. Her cramped legs ached, but they stood there for a long while, listening to the tree until the wind finally settled back into the dirt. She knew she would write about this moment later.

Later, hours after they had driven away, the savannah hardened with cold and became shrouded in a dark purple fog. The air still buzzed; a lazy hum now, instead of frantic. The air smelled of smoke and sleep. There was a rustling, and then, out of the purple shadows, a giraffe appeared. Other-worldly in its hugeness, the animal loped over to the acacia tree. Impossibly lanky, with its knobby joints, it looked as awkward as the tree itself. Its spotted fur glowed with a strange sanctity. The giraffe lowered its head, sniffing guardedly at the bulbs of the acacia for a moment. The air got colder, quieter. It pulled its head back, neck arching, eyes slightly wild. Stumbling, but staying balanced, the animal turned, and moved into the darkness.

Prologue

Her legs stung. Sharp little things, a bunch of them, were poking through her new, mint-green corduroys (never worn, and never to be worn again), piercing her peach-fuzzed skin. The mint green was dotted with small, red blossoms of blood. She tried to swallow her sobs, hot with the effort to hold them back.

Mary had stumbled into the sharp bushes while hopping up and down, rabbit-like in her nervousness. It was her first day of school. Years later her younger brother Danny would demonstrate a familial tendency to get hurt on this momentous day, rushing around the house trying to find his shoes and splitting his ear open on the edge of the bathroom door. But right now, it was just her. Everyone else at the bus stop was without injury, and it wasn't fair.

The thorns hadn't ripped her pants, but had managed to poke right through their careful seams. As she blinked and blinked and tried her hardest to not feel like a baby, the shade behind the window of Mrs. Wicklow's house raised slightly. The old woman stared out at the bus stop from behind cat glasses, a cartoonish image of evil. She had carefully cut her border hedges into leafless, well-sharpened knives in order to keep children at the bus stop out of her yard. Kids always had to take care not to fall into the hedges. The older children, even Mark's gang of brothers, hadn't warned them. Mary didn't tell anyone about the cuts on her legs, only giggled with the other children as if nothing was wrong, swallowing tears.

They were six years old. The four of them were sandwiched in a scared little row waiting for the bus. Mary swallowing again and again, not looking at her pants.

Emily chewing on the ends of her thick, black hair. Mark, watching his brothers talk and push each other, his pale brow furrowed. Kevin, fidgety as ever, staring across the street at all the mothers, standing a sprint's length away. The heaviness of the past summer's humidity hung in the morning air, slowly being infiltrated by the chill of impending autumn. September in Massachusetts was an in-between month, and the four of them were just as in-between: standing there, impossibly small, just steps out of toddlerhood, rudely shoved into the much larger world of the schoolchild. It was 1990, but to them this number meant nothing; it was as meaningless as news shows, car insurance, money. To them it was only the first day of school, and this fact carried all the weight necessary to secure this sidewalk, these thorny bushes, these children around them into the bunker of history. The old stop sign presided over the momentousness of the morning, a zigzag of black spray paint marring its authority. Milkweeds from the big bushes across the street floated in the air. They would make Mary sneeze every morning for the next ten years.

Mary couldn't look across the street at her mother, who was chatting casually with the other parents, or she knew she'd run across the road, bury herself in her mother's jeans, and never go to school. She couldn't look down at her legs; the sight of blood on her new pants would make her collapse in a heap of babyish wails. She decided to just look at the other kids, to keep giggling, to try to make the pain disappear.

The bow in Emily's shiny black hair was already sliding out of place. She looked big-eyed and frightened. Mary had gone to preschool with Emily. She was

always quiet and sweet, always sharing. Once, Mary had been sobbing quietly in a corner, having accidentally broken the preschool's toy telephone, a sleek, green thing that was highly coveted. After pulling too hard on the earpiece's spiraled cord and detaching it from the base of the phone, Mary had felt a sense of hysterical hopelessness, certain she had ruined any future possibility of make-believe communications. Emily had come over to her and stuck the cord back into the phone until it clicked. She always seemed to know how to fix things. "Now you're not sad anymore," she'd said.

Mark was watching his brothers, who had the rough, huddled nature of a rugby scrum. They were all shoulders, all grunts. His mother was good friends with Mary's mother. Some Saturdays in his living room, Mark and Mary would play an ancient version of Trouble while their mothers drank coffee in his kitchen and talked over the popping sounds of the board game. Mary was never sure quite how many brothers Mark had. Whenever one of them ran through the house, often stealing the little colored pieces or pressing the center bubble down over and over again trying to wreck their game, Mark's face would turn red and he would just sit there being silent until the boys grew bored with them. "Have fun with your *GIRL-FRIEND*," they would say, and stampede out of the house with a baseball bat or handfuls of snappers that they'd throw down onto the concrete walk. Mark's house was loud. Luckily they made durable Trouble boards in the '70s, and the game never broke.

Kevin was the most mysterious of the three, a boy Mary had seen in the neighborhood before but did not yet know. He had moved into the new house

around the corner, with the big long driveway and no trees around it, where there used to be woods. “What a shame,” Mary’s mother would say as they walked their golden retriever Sam past the workers cutting down trees and building the house. If Danny was with them they’d have to drag him away from the excitement of chainsaws and steam shovels. Kevin had white-blond hair that stood straight up, like someone who got startled by a vampire in an old horror movie, and he had a little curly rattail that bounced on his neck. His face was always sort of scrunched up. Mary thought he looked like a real wiseguy. He could have been one of the Little Rascals.

Then Mary. Still swallowing, her long brown hair curled and tied back with a pink scrunchie. Navy Mary Janes on her ruffly-socked feet. She took in everything, painfully aware. It was impossible for her to not notice; she couldn’t help but watch everything. She suspected her big eyes were to blame for this.

After surveying the other children, Mary looked back at Mrs. Wicklow’s window, the shade now drawn. Mary was sure the old hag had watched her stumble and cut her legs on her handiwork. Mrs. Wicklow had probably cackled, and tapped her long, thorny fingernails together in glee. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, no one noticed the fiery little tears she kept wiping away because of this. Kevin was doing an impression of one of the Muppets, and Emily and Mark were laughing in a nervous way. Then, suddenly, the sound of the bus – the squealing brakes, the old motor. It appeared at the other end of the road, and moved towards them.

Mary panicked, looking at the red spots on the backs of her pant legs and staring across the road to her mother, who was smiling at her, just far enough away that she couldn't see the blood. She wondered suddenly why the mothers were all across the street in the first place; why couldn't they just stand on the bus stop side? The four of them weren't old enough to want that distance, to feel the need for some semblance of independence. The width of the road separating the parents and the children began to widen before Mary's eyes. It was an uncrossable, gray river, a cement gulf, and she was on the wrong side. A giant monster of a vehicle was getting closer and closer and suddenly there was no time for her to run. Her mother, her house, her dog – her entire life up to this very moment was on the other side of the world.

The bus pulled up, and cut off Mary's line of vision. Instead of her mother she was now looking at a mammoth yellow wall. *NATICK PUBLIC SCHOOLS* was painted in menacing black along its endless side; Mary read the words to herself, feeling the nauseous thrill of its official glare. She was probably the only kindergartner there who could read the words at all. Mary, Emily, Mark and Kevin were all suddenly a part of something important, an entity that shuttled giant, yellow monsters all over town. The hugeness of it all was piercing.

The bus door opened and the older kids began to file on as if it meant nothing. Mary looked at Emily, whose little hands were shaking as she wrung them together, then at the bus driver, who was not looking at them. She was a fat woman whose eyebrows looked like they were drawn on with magic marker. Mary wanted to go

home, never to come to this corner again, never to set foot on this menacing thing driven by a creature who, she realized as she took the first too-high step, smelled like cigarette smoke. She looked like she was made of smoke.

Her legs still hurt. This was not the way it was supposed to start – in the books Mary had stacked around her room the first day of school was something colorful, fun, and exciting. This was something different, something that smelled bad. This stung. But there was the bus, there was the door opening, and there they were.

Mary sat by the window, Emily next to her. She pasted her face against the glass, determined to catch one last glimpse of her mother, trying her best not to look like a baby. Her mother was talking to Mark's mother and waving to her. Mary held her breath, still smelling the smokewoman.

The bus's engine barked out a metallic cough. The windows looked like they would pinch the skin of whoever tried to open them. Mary and Emily dug around for seatbelts; there were none. The bus kicked into gear and they careened out of their neighborhood toward a world none of them knew, smokewoman at the wheel.

Leaves were beginning to darken but the sky was still a summer shade of blue. Houses jostled by that, years later, would burn to the ground and leave gravelly, vacant lots. The bus bounced its way over the bridge, over the highway. Past the playground where Mark and Kevin had first played together. Past the old Howard Johnson where Emily took swimming lessons and choked on pool water. Past Brigham's, where they served Mary's favorite flavor, black raspberry chip.

Mary checked her pants. The red splotches had formed what looked like tiny little flowers in a field of mint green grass. Flowers blooming from thorns.

Emily

(Kindergarten)

My hair was straight then. I hardly look like myself in my class picture, sitting in the middle row, my long, silky, black hair in two shining braids, too big for my little triangle face. Like an Indian princess, Mommy said as she tightened the elastics that morning. Was that what I was? I thought. A dark brown daddy and a pink-white mommy made me sort of a plain light brown, the same color Mary was in the summertime, so I guessed it made sense. The Crayola that was closest to my skin color was sepia, but that wasn't a color people called themselves. Besides, you couldn't really go by Crayola. No white kids ever called themselves "peach." I was Indian, then, I decided. I was Tiger Lily from *Peter Pan*, quiet and true, hiding secrets in my braids.

I can't remember if I liked my hair then – I probably liked it okay – but I was fascinated with curls. The girl with the best curls in my kindergarten class was Courtney Steele. The one black kid. Courtney's hair was wiry; it looked alive. She never wore bows or barrettes in it and she didn't need to. Her hair stood straight-up all over her head. Her curls yelled. They had a louder voice than Courtney, than any of us. She was so quiet. It's lucky she was. I'm not sure what Miss Krist would have done to her if she hadn't been so quiet.

Miss Krist was my first teacher. She was different from the teachers I had in preschool, who were like extra Nanas and never ever yelled. Actually, Miss Krist didn't really yell either. She always kind of sang what she was saying in this really high voice. But you could always tell she was yelling on the inside. Like whenever she told Courtney to please come to the front of the class. It was never a yell, never something really angry-sounding. But if I was Courtney I would have cried every time.

We all learned to know that it would happen every day. Mary told me sometimes she could feel when it was going to happen, like the way the sky looks funny right before a storm hits. I could never tell, though. For me it always hit like a surprise rainstorm. I wondered if Courtney could tell. The weirdest part was that it happened at a different time every day. It could be just after the day started, or maybe a few minutes before the last bell, when we would all be thinking, maybe it won't happen today. Miss Krist would look up all of a sudden, like a bee had stung her neck. "Courtney, to my desk, please." She sounded as blank as an intercom.

Courtney would stand up softly, never making a sound. She was always so, so silent; she didn't match her wild hair at all. Mary and I would look at each other as Courtney floated up to the front of the classroom. Her shoes didn't clack against the tile as she walked towards Miss Krist's desk. She never bumped into anything. Like a ghost.

Usually when it happened the rest of the class was being noisy, cutting up paper or spilling fingerpaint, laughing and talking. Everything would go quiet,

though, when Miss Krist called Courtney to her desk. We all watched like we were under a spell. I bet everyone said a little, silent thank-you to themselves that they weren't the only black kid. Except me. I said a different kind of thank-you.

Miss Krist would look at Courtney for a minute before she said anything else. We stared at her, just waiting. Miss Krist really was awful to look at, for a lot of reasons: 1. her pale face, a true white, looked like it was made out of bread dough, 2. her hair was the wrong color, too dark a brown for her eyebrows and 3. she wore bright, sleeveless turtleneck sweaters almost every day that showed off her flabby, white arms. They all looked like they'd gotten the sleeves cut off by accident. I wished she liked sleeves.

I wondered what Courtney thought of her as she stood next to that desk. Was she afraid of Miss Krist, or just angry at her? Did she still not understand, after months of it? Had she told her parents?

“Courtney, please count to one hundred for the class.” It was always the same: Miss Krist would look at her desk and say these words like they weren't important, like they meant nothing. It started maybe two weeks after the first day of school, when we started doing numbers. There were a lot of kids worse at counting than Courtney, but I knew that was never the real reason. The first few times, Courtney looked scared and confused, her face crumpling up when she realized she would actually have to count. I hated how Miss Krist always made it seem like we were in on it. *For the class.* Like we asked Miss Krist to make her do this, like we *liked* it.

One. Two. Three.

A few weeks into the year Courtney's face stopped crumpling and she just sort of looked blank. Then the blankness spread to times when she wasn't counting, and she always looked that way, like there was no one really there. "Lights are on but nobody's home," Nana would say.

Thirteen. Four. Teen. Five ... fifteen.

When she did count, it was the same every time. Quiet, mostly steady and speedy till twenty, slowing down till fifty. In the seventies, each number was a question.

Seven ... tee ... one? Seven ... tee ... tee ... tee?

Usually she couldn't get past eighty. Once she was totally quiet for a while, Miss Krist would say, in her intercom voice, "That will be all, Courtney. Back to your desk."

I was good at counting. Really good. I never understood how she didn't learn to get any farther than eighty. I would always wish she could get to one hundred, just so she could laugh in Miss Krist's face. Or at least laugh on the inside. I wanted her to sing those numbers. But she never did.

Courtney also wasn't allowed to be at any parties we had in class, which pretty much made her the unluckiest girl in the entire world. She would sort of slump down if she saw a pile of party hats by Miss Krist's desk, or if the room smelled like cake and pizza. "Class, I will be back in one moment after I bring Courtney to the

office,” Miss Krist would say, and the one moment, which was the only thing between eating and not eating, would last forever.

The first time this happened I thought Miss Krist had to be the most evil woman in the entire world. Maybe even meaner than Mrs. Wicklow, the witch who lived by the bus stop. At least with the counting Miss Krist could say it was for Courtney’s own good, so she would learn. She just needed more practice than the other kids in the class. But banning her from class parties didn’t seem like it could have any reason behind it. It was just *mean*.

On Earth Day, I finally found out why Courtney couldn’t come to parties. We were all dying to eat the melty globe cake by Miss Krist’s desk, waiting for her to come back when Mark told me: “She’s Jahobah’s Witness. My mommy told me.”

“What’s that?” I asked. Mark didn’t know.

None of us knew much. I didn’t know that fifteen years earlier and fifteen miles from Elliot Elementary School and Miss Krist’s room, men and women rioted against blacks and whites being in the same schools, or using the same bathrooms, or doing *anything* together, really. A few years after I left Miss Krist’s class, Mommy sat me down at our kitchen table, folded her hands together like she did when she was being very serious, and told me there were bad people in the world who didn’t like people with brown skin. I never told my parents about Courtney and Miss Krist, so I guess they thought I might not know this. But I knew it like the pledge of allegiance.

She told me about the ugly names all the kids were called when Daddy went to school. There was a picture in one of her college books of a white man attacking a black man with the American flag. She showed it to me, shaking her head. The white man looked madder than I ever thought a person could be. “This was right in Boston, if you can believe that.” I didn’t understand the difference between Boston, which you could see from the highest hill in Natick, and anywhere else. So I believed it.

Sometimes when I asked Nana questions that she didn’t feel like answering she would say to me: “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” She probably just wanted me to go away and think about such a weird question, but I thought about it a lot, and I thought about it staring at that picture of the men with the flag. I looked at the pointy end of the flagpole between the black and white faces, and wondered if a little girl could balance on it. Maybe dance a little.

I wondered what they would have done with me if I was born fifteen years earlier and fifteen miles away. Would I have gotten a miniature yellow bus and a whole school all to myself? For some weird reason this idea made me happy: me sitting alone in an old-timey red schoolhouse, one gold bell shining in the roof. I would have a nice, pretty, sepia teacher, and she would show me how to do fractions because I was so good at numbers, and no other kids would be around to ask questions or get picked on by the teacher.

I didn’t know much about Jehovah’s Witnesses, either. All I knew was that 1. they couldn’t go to parties and 2. they loved to knock on doors. Whenever the

Jehovahs came to our house, Daddy would grumble and tell Mommy not to answer the door. They always wore gray suits and I thought they were lost in our neighborhood and wanted directions. I learned later, not at my kitchen table but sitting on the carpet in the school library, that Jehovahs saluted no flags and recited no pledges of allegiance. They even had a motto: “We are no part of the world.” I remembered the way Courtney mumbled when we first learned the pledge of allegiance. Miss Krist said it over and over again the way my parents said my address and phone number over and over again. If I ever got lost I would probably go up to a policeman and say: *Emily Jackson. Five Loker Street. And to the republic. For Richard Sands. Six-five-one-five-five-nine-five. One nation. Under God. Indivisible.*

I didn't really see what the big deal was about the pledge of allegiance. Jehovahs seemed to love God and he was mentioned right in there. I thought it must have something to do with Richard Sands. *We are no part of the world.* I thought of the flagpole, my very own red schoolhouse and wondered, how can you *not* be part of the world?

The Earth Day party was worth missing. We had to color in globes and then cut them out, and Miss Krist was going to hang them all from the ceilings with string. But there were only so many blue and green crayons and I got stuck with an ugly, stubby red-orange crayon and a dark purple one. “Your Earth looks like somebody barfed on it,” Mark told me.

“I’ll barf on *you*,” I said.

I actually felt sort of sick. I ate too much melty globe cake plus Miss Krist handed out globe sugar cookies, and I could never say no to cookies. Miss Krist had taped a bunch of pieces of paper together across the chalkboard that said “OUR SPECIAL EARTH!” with all these pictures of the planet on it. It was like she was afraid we all might forget what “Our Special Earth” looked like. We already had 1. paper globes 2. globe cake 3. globe cookies and 4. a giant, yelling banner.

I thought of Courtney, sitting in our sort of dark school library, and felt bad about eating so much. I wondered what she was even doing in the library. She couldn’t count, so I was pretty sure she couldn’t read, either. I took an extra cookie from the big plate on Miss Krist’s desk, wrapped it up in a napkin, and put it in my pocket.

When I got on the bus to go home, I walked by Courtney, who was sitting by herself near the front. She was looking out the window, but it didn’t look like she was really even looking at anything. Her wild hair was scrunched into two puffs on top of her head. I wondered what her parents looked like. If Mommy was black I would look like her, and I knew it.

I stopped and tapped her shoulder. That sick feeling came back. All the baked planet parts sloshed around in my stomach. Courtney stared at me, or maybe at something right behind me. I took the cookie out of my pocket and unwrapped it. Pieces of napkin stuck to the ocean-parts.

“I saved this for you, Courtney,” I said, in my I’m-Your-New-Best-Friend voice.

Her eyes got small and narrow. They looked darker up close, and very sad, like I had just made fun of her. My throat dried up and I felt like I’d made some kind of bad mistake and made things worse for her. She looked ready to cry, or reach over and yank on my hair. I really wanted to rewind and just eat the cookie myself but worst of all I wanted her to *say* something. Finally her voice peeked out from her usual quietness: “I’m not allowed.”

And then, as I pulled back my hand and thought that *I* might cry, two things happened at the same time: 1. the bus pulled away from the school in the jerky way the smelly bus driver always drove and 2. I barfed up Our Special, Sugary Earth all over the aisle of the bus.

It sounded like everyone, including the bus itself, screamed at the same time. Probably because 1. barf smells *very* bad and 2. I was at the front of the bus, which meant that 3. no one could get *off* the bus without walking through, or trying to hop over, my puddle of planet puke. I heard the driver yelling but I just stared at Courtney, wondering why she didn’t scream, or look at me like I was gross. She just looked away, out the smudgy window with all the numbers and letters carved into it. I wondered what the letters and numbers looked like to Courtney. Just a bunch of lines and curves?

My stomach felt better after getting rid of all that Earth Day food, but the rest of me felt sad and angry. And surprised – because I really, really thought Courtney

would take the cookie, talk to me and laugh a little, and be happy to have a new friend. It played out like a movie in my head just before I did it. But when it really happened it was all wrong. Courtney didn't even pretend to like me, or my cookie, or anything. She could have at least smiled. Or said she was allergic.

The bus started to really smell and the color in everyone's faces started going away, like watercolors with too much water. I just stood there, watching Courtney staring out the window, looking at something past the LF SUX, I LUV MK, 2/4/89. I started hating her a little. This girl was too dumb to be my friend anyway. She couldn't even count.

Mommy was mad that she had to clean me up when I got home. "I didn't mean to," I said again and again. My jumper with the fuzzy elephants along the border smelled bad, and she went down to the basement to scrub it out in the big sink. She stayed down there a long time and I guessed it was because 1. the jumper *really* smelled and 2. Nana was in the kitchen. Nana never called before she came over, she just showed up at our doorstep, usually in a big flowery dress and a matching hat. Everything about Nana was very big and very surprising. Mommy always got a little sweaty and would push her glasses up to her face over and over again when Nana visited. "You'd think she could call just *once*," she said to Daddy once after Nana left. He looked at her like he was stumped.

I was sniffing as I sat at the kitchen table in my fresh clothes, being very polite, sipping a paper cup of Canada Dry. "What's wrong, Emma?" Nana asked me.

She was eating shortbread cookies that my mother only put out when she was here. There were crumbs on her big, round lips. Nana always called me Emma and I never really wondered why. I should have, though, because Emma's not a nickname for Emily, it's really a different name.

I stared into the wrinkly, cartoon face of Nana. I was old enough to be sort of wowed by her age, but too young to imagine her being young or unwrinkled. "There's a girl at school who doesn't like me," I said. "She doesn't want to be friends."

"Well, why not?" Nana never gave me the expected grandmother reactions I always hoped for –taking my side, feeling bad for me without a question. Instead she treated me sort of like a science project, or a math problem that had to be figured out to make sure I would be "the best girl I could be." She always said that last part to me really slow, to make sure I knew it was important. Sometimes it made me feel good, like she thought I could do anything. But sitting at that table, I felt yucky and sad, and confused by how cold she was.

"I don't know, Nana. I tried to be nice to her."

She folded her large hands in front of her. Her fingers reminded me of tulip bulbs, all bulgy between the knuckles. "Let me tell you something, Emma," she said. "People might treat you badly in life because you're different. But if you listen to them you won't get anywhere. You're a strong black woman, Emma, and you're gonna do great things one day."

Mommy came back upstairs. She looked sweaty. “I think you need a nap, Emily.” She felt my forehead. Her hand was warm.

Upstairs with my Little Mermaid blanket, I couldn’t fall asleep.

Back at school Courtney acted the same as always, like no one else in the class was even there, counting and messing up every time. I got madder and madder watching her: everything was so slow, and she never finished, never learned. Things I have always been good at are: 1. counting, 2. singing and 3. fixing. I understood numbers quicker than anyone else. After all, all you had to do was remember what came next. One through twenty was the only tough part, after that it was just putting things together. It was sort of like building something. You put things together and they fit.

I could always fix broken things or do puzzles faster than anyone. Once in nursery school there was this green phone, a real one that the Nana-teachers turned into a toy for us. Mary broke the earpiece part from the big chunky part with all the numbers. She screamed like a monkey because she thought the phone was broken, gone forever. But I knew it wasn’t and I fixed it and she stopped crying. When I fixed things, it made people happy.

If I ever couldn’t do it, though, and the toy just wouldn’t go back together, no matter how hard I tried, I would get *really* mad. “Stupid doll,” I would say if I couldn’t screw a head back on or pop a leg back in. “Ugly doll.” And it would really look ugly to me, even if it was pretty before.

I could have taught Courtney to count better. We could have practiced and then played dolls and I would be the only other girl in Natick besides her who had brown Barbies with curly hair that the little pink brushes would never go through. I would be the only girl who was nice to her. She'd never have to stop at eighty again. But she missed her chance. She looked at me sometimes in class, by accident, and I would look right at her when I felt her dark eyes come over me like a big shadow. But nothing would change in her face: it was like I wasn't there, like I had never tried to be her friend. I blended into the whitish walls of our classroom. She did not see me.

It was my sixth birthday on May 4th. My party was on the real day, and it was sunny and perfect in my backyard. My birthday always started the nicest weather you could ask for in Massachusetts – sunshine that really warmed you instead of just blinding you like it did on cold days, wind that smelled like lilacs and didn't make your ears burn. My mother said my birthday was the sunniest day of the year. I thought about inviting Courtney to my party, but then remembered that she wasn't allowed near cake anyways, so I didn't.

We had a plastic Barbie tablecloth and a Carvel ice cream cake in a big pink box. Mommy had been keeping it in the basement refrigerator and I snuck down there to look at it about ten times before the party. Everyone played Mother-May-I while my daddy balanced our giant video camera on his shoulder in the yard. I got to

be the Mother, and I said “yes you may” or “no you may not” to everyone. I let Mary be the first to hop all the way to me.

Nana and Mommy stood next to Daddy as he videotaped us. They stood the same way: their arms crossed, with one hand cupping a chin, a little smile over both sets of fingers. Nana’s tulip bulbs and big purplish lips; Mommy’s thin, veiny fingers and pink mouth. They could have been for-real relatives, standing like that.

By the end of the party there was wrapping paper and ripped bows all over the Barbie tablecloth. I got a lot of presents: five trolls (all with different colored hair), a Speak & Spell, a Lite Brite from Mary. The present from my parents was last; wrapped in pink and green paper with a silver bow. I knew it was going just what I wanted, because I asked Mommy for it over and over: the newest member of Barbie’s family, her kid sister Stacie. I had seen commercials for her and had wanted her more than anything. Everything about her was beautiful: 1. her long, shiny, blond curls, 2. her wide, blue eyes, and best of all, 3. a white lace hat with a pink rose in the center. In the commercials, and twist-tied into the box now, she was waving, saying hello. The box was the right size. I knew it was Stacie.

I ripped open the shiny paper and saw a corner of the pink box. Stacie! But then when all the paper was gone I realized: Mommy got me the black one. I didn’t even know there *was* a black Stacie. This was a Stacie that made all the girls at the party look sort of confused. Only Mary, who knew me the best, smiled really big. But I still knew she would never want a black Stacie. And her parents never would have bought her one.

“Thank you, Mommy and Daddy,” I said, touching the shiny plastic covering the waving Stacie. They smiled at me. I noticed that black Stacie had that same curly hair that my other black Barbies had, the kind that I could never brush. I looked at Nana. She was smiling like she was proud, and her hand was on Mommy’s shoulder. I tried to picture a Nana Barbie. It wouldn’t work in my head.

All the rain of April meant our town was all muddy in May. The mud ran in little brown rivers in the sidewalk cracks that broke your mother’s back, and collected in big gross puddles in everyone’s yards and in every dip in the street. No one walked anywhere without making this awful squishing sound. Just like all the other kids, I was sent to school in plastic galoshes that made my feet sweaty and were heavy to walk in. The Monday after my birthday party everyone was stuck in the coatroom, ripping off the plastic boots and changing into real shoes. Miss Krist waded through all of us to help kids tie their shoelaces. I didn’t need help. I had Velcro high-tops.

While I was Velcro-ing, a girl named Kelly, with red frizzy hair and bright blue eyes, came up to me and smiled. Kelly looked like a kid who would run around all the time and be wild and loud, but she was really shy. It was like someone put the wrong wig on her. I had invited her to my birthday party even though I didn’t really know her, and I was happy I did. She seemed like she had more fun than anyone else there. “Your birthday was fun,” she said quietly to me, smiling the tiniest smile, trying to shake off a muddy boot. “I liked the goodie bag.”

“Thanks,” I said, but I wasn’t really paying attention to her anymore. Courtney was right next to us, wiping off her shoes since she hadn’t worn boots. Or didn’t have boots. I watched her to see if she heard Kelly, to see if she was sad she wasn’t invited to my party. But she floated through the muddy room like she was the only person there. Her shoes left a trail of wet footprints behind her. I realized that I really wished she was at my party. Not for her, but for me.

A day came when Miss Krist yelled at me. I never thought it would happen. I knew she liked me because 1. I was good at counting, 2. I paid attention, 3. I never cried in class and 4. I *never* wet my pants. But she still yelled at me. It was the scariest day of the year.

We were coloring in a sheet of paper full of different shapes: triangles, squares, circles. “Color in the lines as best as you can,” Miss Krist sung to us, but with that inside-it’s-a-yell voice.

I had a brand-new purple crayon to do my sheet with. The tip was sharp and the paper wrapper wasn’t ripped even a little bit. Mary had a nub of a brown crayon. I felt sorry for her. I focused hard and bit my lip, and colored the shapes as best as I could. Some of them didn’t look quite right. But they weren’t *that* bad.

Miss Krist walked around as we colored. She reminded me of the policewoman downtown who looked for cars that needed tickets. Her hands were always folded right at her middle, but she always looked ready to attack.

As Miss Krist got closer and closer to my desk my heart beat faster and faster. I was done with my circle but it didn't look right. I looked at Mary's paper. Her circle was brown and gross-looking, but it had curved lines that fit the way the circle went around. My lines were straight. I had sort of drawn a triangle in the circle.

Miss Krist was behind me and cleared her throat. "What have you done here, Emily?" she asked me, pointing at the circle. Her voice was all edgy. The singing was gone.

The rubbing sounds of crayons on paper stopped. Faces turned to look at me. Even Courtney's. I said nothing. Her question didn't need an answer.

"Emily. What shape is that." The finger on my paper was bluish-white and puffy.

I choked out the word. "Circle."

"That is correct. And you have used straight lines to color in the circle. The circle is curved. That is *incorrect*, Emily! It doesn't fit!"

Well, here were the tears. I nodded and they spilled out quietly.

"Next time listen to directions." And she moved on.

It was the only time she ever yelled at me. Everyone else looked either 1. ashamed for me, 2. sorry for me, or 3. happy that it wasn't them. Most were number 3. Courtney just looked blank as ever, coloring like a robot. She probably knew it wouldn't be long before Miss Krist came back to her. I wanted her to smile, to hate me, to think "Finally! Not me!" But there was nothing. I felt like whipping my crayon at her head.

The next day after school I went to Mary's house. I brought over a bunch of my Barbies and we played school. The oldest Barbie Mary had, that must have been her mother's, got to be Miss Krist. Its hair was gross and papery. We propped her up at the front of her class, her pointy, hoof-feet lost in Mary's thick carpet. All the other dolls sat in rows.

"Okay, class," Mary said in a pretty good Miss Krist voice. "Now it's time for Courtney to count to one hundred." She picked up my new Stacie doll and had her walk to the front of the class. Since Barbies had such weird feet, it looked like they hopped everywhere.

I frowned. "I thought Stacie was supposed to be me."

Mary twisted her lips like she was thinking. "No, I think Jasmine should be you." She picked up her doll, the Disney princess. "She looks like you. Stacie looks like Courtney the most."

I still didn't like this. I didn't want my new doll to have anything to do with Courtney. "Let's not do the counting part," I said.

Mary looked confused. "But it happens every day. We have to play right."

I wanted to go home.

It was June, the last day of school, and my throat hurt. Other things that happened in June were: 1. it got hot, like *really* hot, 2. Mommy went to a sociology conference for one week and 3. no one was supposed to get sick, because it was finally summer. I

didn't tell Daddy about my throat on the morning of the last day. He kept trying to do my braids right, but they kept coming out wrong. I wanted red ribbons, special ones. But Daddy's hands were a lot like Nana's, and his big knuckles kept getting in the way of the bow. I could feel him messing it up as he pulled my slippery hair, and it seemed like my throat hurt worse and worse. I ended up with a messy, sagging ponytail. I missed Mommy.

I thought if I wished really hard, my throat would stop hurting. I could not be sick on the last day of school. It would be the best party of the whole year, better than the St. Patrick's Day shamrock hunt, even tree-planting on Arbor Day, even our hand turkeys during Thanksgiving week. The worst thing that could possibly happen to me on this day would be to get sick, or to magically change into Courtney for a day, like in a movie. If either of those things happened I would miss the piñata, the hokey-pokey, and the homemade cupcakes Miss Krist had told us about.

I didn't even make it till party-time before I was shaking all over. "You look pale, Emily," Miss Krist said. She sounded far away. I felt her gross hand on my forehead, but her hands were clammy and cold, not warm like Mommy's. I tried to back away from her, and my head felt all fuzzy.

"Oh, my. You've got to get right down to the nurse," Miss Krist sang in a worried voice. "Class, I'll be back in a moment. Sit quietly until then."

Miss Krist brought me to the nurse's office, holding my hand too tightly as we walked. I felt chills go straight down my back like fingers. I shut my eyes and saw

tulips blooming behind my eyelids in fast-forward. I couldn't swallow anymore without my eyes welling up, so my mouth was filling with saliva. I wanted to spit worse than anything and was dizzy and hot. My ponytail was sagging more and more and the ribbon was loose and soon it would fall off, I just knew it.

I counted the steps as we walked to the office, mostly in silence. *Ten. Eleven. Twelve.* Every so often Miss Krist would say something to me and it would sound far, far away. "We'll get you right home," she said, not even really looking at me. She stared straight ahead, with her head always turned a little bit upwards, looking at something I couldn't see.

Twenty-six. Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight.

"Is your mommy going to be able to come get you, do you think?"

I shook my head, afraid I would cry. The sociology conference. I didn't even really know what it was, but I knew it meant she could not come get me. She wouldn't be back for two days and I was sick. If Daddy couldn't do a ponytail right how would he take care of me alone? "Well, I hope your dad can, then," she said to me. She talked like she was acting in a movie. She was in the nice teacher scene, reading the lines, but secretly she was ready to slump her shoulders, light a cigarette, and be her real self.

Sixty. Sixty-one. Sixty-two.

Eighty-nine steps. We were at the office, and it looked huge. There were too-bright lights and computer noises. I shut my eyes again. The tulips. This time growing out

of a miniature globe. The nurse's room was at the back. I thought my throat would close up and I wouldn't be able to breathe anymore. I opened my eyes and tears spilled down. They burned my skin.

Miss Krist talked to the nurse, who looked right in my eyes, smiled, and was my newest friend. My heart slowed down a little. "Well, little miss, it looks like you have a fever," she told me. "Is your mommy at home, do you know?"

I shook my head. I couldn't get words out, only tears.

"Oh, it's okay, honey, don't worry. I have your dad's work number right here."

How did she have it? I wondered. Grown-ups always seemed to have ways of knowing that I wanted to have too. She called Daddy and told me he was on his way. I sat there shaking, wanting Mommy, hating the sociology conference, playing with the ribbon that had slid all the way out of my now-dead ponytail. I ripped the ribbon's edges and counted the crinkled threads. *One. Two. Three.* It made me feel a little bit better to count each little thread, to rub them between my fingers.

When I got to eighteen Daddy was in the doorway. I thought I would at least get to forty before he would show up. He was always either late, or just in the nick of time. Mommy was early to everything and would get mad at him sometimes, but then he would smile at her, and win. Now he was early – and looked scared, really scared, through his big, bright smile. His little girl was sick. I ran to him.

He squatted down. His body was like a tower that he could collapse down to my size if he wanted. "Sweetie," was all he said, and I started to cry really hard. The

hokey pokey was going on without me, and Daddy's jacket was so warm and big, and his arms gave the best hugs and everything sort of fell on top of me. I hid myself from everything in his jacket. I should have stayed buried in that good-smelling leather. It was the safest place in the world.

He picked me up and set me on his hip the way he did when I was little. My legs dangled. "I'm Emily's father," he said. His voice always made everything sound so important. "You must be Mrs. Reilly. Thank you so much for taking care of her." He stuck out his hand.

I peeked out from behind my sweaty hair and the collar of Daddy's jacket. The nurse looked sort of confused, but only for a second. She shook his hand. "Nice to meet you," she said, nodding her head. "Emily here's got a fever and a nasty sore throat. Could be a late case of the flu, but you'll want to get her checked for strep." She looked at me again and I looked away, embarrassed at how sick I was. It seemed like I was always sick.

"Will do. Thank you, ma'am." My head was resting on his shoulder as he walked out of the office. "Let's go home, sweetie," he said softly to me, patting my hair. "We'll get you all set up with your blankie and *Peter Pan* and some soup. Huh? Okay?"

I didn't answer. Everything slowed down as we walked out of the office, because the party in our classroom was starting, and so Miss Krist was walking in, and Courtney was next to her. They were not holding hands.

The dizzy feeling came back and suddenly I felt like I was watching myself in a movie, the movie that Miss Krist was acting in, something that was as unreal as her singing voice. I couldn't move, I could only watch, a blob on Daddy's hip. Miss Krist saw us. She looked confused at first – a longer version of Mrs. Reilly's look – then looked icy and mean. She saw me in Daddy's arms, cuddled so close that yes, it had to be him, not an uncle, not a family friend. Courtney, following behind her, stepped into the spotlight, not holding Miss Krist's hand but picking at a hangnail on her thumb, slowly looking up at the tower of Daddy and me. And now the good part where everybody gasps: Miss Krist, counting one hundred and eighty days of missed chances to yell at me over and over in her head, says something. She says, in what had to be her real voice, deep and scratchy:

“Feel better.”

I shut my eyes. Instead of tulips and globes I saw myself with dark, Courtney-colored skin, the kind that tells. Like a video on rewind I saw: 1. Miss Krist letting go of my hand, 2. her un-writing “Good job!” in red marker on my worksheets, and worst of all, 3. her replacing Courtney's name in an order to count for the class with mine. Then: 4., me counting proudly, the hero of the class, beating Miss Krist. I thought to myself, I could have done it, I still could do it. Right?

I opened my eyes and saw Courtney's. They were bright and dark at the same time. I wondered if she would cry, or look mad. She looked blank, but a different kind of blank, like she was really trying for it. Different from the time I tried to give her the cookie – more intense. Even though she didn't cry, I know she had to have

been sad learning the truth, learning how unfair it was. But I wondered if sadness could even get to her now, wherever she was hiding.

Miss Krist turned away from us and told the secretary Courtney was to stay in the office for the rest of the day, as the class would be celebrating and the library was closed. Daddy walked me out of the school with my head on his shoulder. I watched the office get smaller as we walked away. Courtney was sitting in a chair that troublemakers probably sat in most of the time. The chair leaned back a little bit; one of its little metal feet was gone. I grabbed Daddy's jacket tighter, feeling its wetness under my sweaty hands. I knew I was safe, that it was too late for me to be the one sitting in that wobbly chair. It was the last day. It didn't matter that Miss Krist saw Daddy. It would always be just her,.

Courtney moved away a few years later. I would mention her name to friends every so often and no one, not even memory-queen-Mary, would know who I was talking about. Miss Krist probably forgot her, too, moving on to someone new and starting the year fresh. But I always had to know. It was never just her. It was always, always me.

2

Mark

(1st grade)

When you have six older brothers you start to feel like the extra. My mother was always out of breath by the time she said my name at the end of the long list, sighing “Maahk” in her soupy Boston accent like I was the P.S. of a letter. On our Christmas card every year, my name was just barely squeezed onto the fingerprint-covered photo paper from Sears. Next to a blurry picture of the seven of us squirming in front of some apple orchard in our church clothes, my mother’s swirly red letters looked like this:

Happy Holidays! Love, Dede, Frank, Timmy, Joey, Frankie, Ricky, Bobby,

Jimmy & Mark

My parents were always tired, and it always seemed like I was the one that never let them get any rest. My father would come home sweaty every night and sit down at our round kitchen table so hard I thought he’d break the chair. A cloud of dust would rise up from the folds of his jacket like a ghost.

“Long day,” he’d say while the ghost started to shine under our too-bright kitchen light. “Aren’t they all?” my mother would say back. Her fingers were always sticky with meat loaf or red and raw from too much dishwashing. It was like

they were actors in a movie with the same lines every day. My father built houses for other people while my mother constantly made meals for the nine of us. Dinnertime was so loud it hurt, but we were all used to it: forks against plates, pushed-out chairs like dog yelps, someone kicking or smacking someone else for the last roll. A lot of nights were pasta nights.

The way my parents slumped at the table, the way the corners of my mother's brown eyes seemed to sink a little more every day, the way the dust-ghost hovered in our kitchen – all of this made me feel like I was shrunk down to the size of maybe a mouse. I would dart along the corners of my house from room to room, trying not to be seen, not to be punched by one of my brothers or yelled at by my mother. Trying not to make anything worse than it already was. None of my brothers were like this: they yelled, they fought, they asked my mother for all kinds of things till her hands shook and she looked like she might just explode into a thousand pieces. I didn't get why I was the only one who tried to stay out of the way. The only mouse.

My bed was in the darkest corner of our bedroom and I would mostly hide there, building models, which I liked to do better than anything else. I made planes, trains, boats, all kinds of stuff. I kept most of them in a box under my bed, next to my box of books, so my brothers wouldn't mess them up. Measuring and putting things together was always really easy for me, and my skinny fingers made it easy to build small things. The rest of my brothers had these big sausagey fingers that would never have been able to glue a propeller or screw in a tiny wheel.

If I wasn't making models I was reading. I had gotten to be a pretty good reader and I read mostly stories about knights. They were kid versions – a lot of pictures and big letters and all happy endings – and I read them over and over again till I could read them in my head, without even opening the books at all.

At school I didn't hide out. I walked different there, I talked different. People talked to me in different voices, like I wasn't in the way. I don't know why. I would stretch out my neck and get taller than I was in my tiny house. As soon as I got to the bus stop I was my real self: loud, silly, and actually kind of smart. Smarter than my brothers, I knew but didn't ever say. Emily, Kevin, Mary and I took the bus together every day after playing around at the bus stop. In the wintertime we would watch my brothers throw snowballs at the stop sign. It made this loud clanging sound. I always felt sort of like I was watching another family, like Emily, Kevin, and Mary were my real siblings.

Elliot Elementary was this short brick building that had a flagpole and a statue of pilgrims in front of it and a big gym with high ceilings. The smiling janitor with the big handlebar mustache kept everything clean and the hallways were bright. Mrs. Siegel was my teacher, the best teacher in the grade. She had red hair, these small half-glasses with a chain, and wore sweaters that made me guess she was probably a grandmother. She always made me feel like the best kid she had ever had in class. Sometimes when I was walking home from the bus stop a few steps behind the pack of brothers I would wish Mrs. Siegel was waiting in our house instead of my mother. Then I would feel bad about thinking things like that.

One thing I loved about school was that Mrs. Siegel always let a lot of light into the room, even if it blinded us. We sat in groups of four desks and mine faced the wall with all the windows. They were long windows, all the way to the ceiling, that only a grown-up could open using a big wooden pole. I liked that about them. Crisscrosses of black iron were all over the panes, so the light shined through black squares like it was coloring in the lines, the way Mrs. Siegel always told us we should. The windows seemed like something out of an old movie.

I would have to squint from math lessons till lunchtime each day if it were sunny outside. Mary sat at the desk across from me, and when I squinted she told me I looked like Cody Garvey, our neighbor's Shar-Pei with the smushed face. "Here, Cody," she giggled. Her voice was high and usually sounded like she had a cold. It was always happy. "Come 'ere, boy." I stuck my tongue out and pretended to pant. She cracked up.

One day in October it got really cold for the first time, the kind of cold that makes you feel like your body might crack right in half. The sun was extra-bright and there were clumps of big clouds that were moving faster than clouds usually did, zooming across the sky like someone had pressed fast-forward. Mrs. Siegel had the ugly, fluorescent lights off in the classroom, like she always did. When the clouds passed over the whitish sun the room would get dark, as dark as my dusty corner of the bedroom, where the red and green tiles were cracked into shards like puzzle pieces under my bed. Then it would get bright again, like a spotlight.

I really had no clue about how the sun worked. Light was just there for me, the way dark was. But that day in Mrs. Siegel's room, when the light changed again and again, changing the color of the skin on my hands, it was more than just there, it was something magic. I started to realize how different everything was when the light was behind the clouds. I got this really excited feeling when it got brighter and brighter, like something might happen because of it, something great, or maybe even terrible, but definitely exciting.

We were at our desks doing workbooks, working on writing letters. I was trying to make mine fit in the two bold lines, using that dotted one in the middle for help. *The dog ate its food.* The "g" was hard. Mary was looking at her hand, which she stretched out in front of her as the light changed. Her skin changed colors when the clouds moved. "Isn't that cool?" Mary said.

I watched the light across the back of her hand, squinting and unsquinting my eyes. "Uh huh."

Alyssa, who sat next to me, frowned from under her flyaway blonde hair. She was mad a lot and was what my mother would have called spoiled *rahtten*. "It's not cool," she said. "That happens all the time. Jeez."

Mary's eyes closed a little, and she looked at the floor. I felt my face turn red. It was cool, and Alyssa was mean for saying it was anything else. "I think it's cool, butthead," I said, and Mary giggled while Alyssa ran to tell Mrs. Siegel.

Mary looked at her hand. "How does it do that?" she asked me. We were the two smartest kids in the class, and we knew it. Mary wouldn't have asked anyone

else, except for maybe Mrs. Siegel, how the light was changing in the room. It was okay to ask me, because we understood the same things. I wished I knew the answer.

I leaned across the desk. “Can you keep a secret?”

Mary lowered her eyebrows. “Yes,” she said, very seriously.

Alyssa was walking towards us, and Mrs. Siegel was behind her. Just before they got to us I said, “I can make that happen,” and leaned back into my seat just as Mrs. Siegel said to please not name-call and to focus on my workbook. I don’t know why I said it – I just did without even really meaning to. I felt like I was watching myself on TV or something, or like my whole self was inflating. I was a balloon. I wasn’t used to it. Usually I just felt like I was shrinking.

Mary’s eyes were huge. As we sat there with smiling Alyssa, who was happy whenever she got someone in trouble, I moved my hands a little, the way a conductor of a big symphony might start a song. The light bounced around the room, the clouds zoomed, and the color of Mary’s hand changed weirdly, almost in time with when I moved my hands. Enough to make it seem real. After a few moments Mrs. Siegel looked over in warning, and I stopped. I stared at my workbook, looking up slowly. Mary’s eyes were still big, but her mouth was sort of twisted and smiling, like she knew she’d never believe me, but she really, really wanted to.

I went to Kevin’s house after school. Even though he lived six houses down from me it was like being on a different planet. His house was huge, all the windows sparkled and the floors were so nice we could slide around on them and pretend we were

surfing in our socks. He sang the Surfin' USA song in a really high voice, and we cracked up. There was a giant white staircase that went upstairs to his room and so much space between the floors and the ceilings that if my family lived here, all the dust from my father's jacket would disappear instead of hanging over the kitchen table. I didn't understand why it was so much better there. I didn't know Kevin's mother had married a man from a rich family. I just knew it was different, and sort of accepted it as what each of our families deserved.

"Whaddaya wanna do," Kevin said as we climbed the white stairs up to his big bedroom with the comfy carpet. I felt like I was on a tour of a castle. He had more games and toys than all my brothers and me put together. "We could play Mario."

I was bad at video games because we didn't have any at my house. Kevin could zoom through all the levels, jumping over pipes and grabbing mushrooms like it wasn't even hard. I always made Mario fall down past the bottom of the screen in minutes. "Nah."

Kevin took what looked like a little black remote on a keychain out of his pocket. "Look what my dad gave me," he said, and pressed a button. A tiny line of red light suddenly shone out of the keychain, looking like a security system in an action movie. "It's a laser pointer."

I put my hand in front of the line and a little red dot formed on the center of my palm. "Cool," I said. "What do you do with it?"

Kevin shone it at the wall and swung it around, making crazy patterns that disappeared as soon as they started. "Point it at stuff."

This was a pretty boring toy. "Let's go play basketball," I said. Kevin had a hoop in his driveway. Once he used a knife he got from his kitchen to prove to me that the plastic bottom of it was filled with sand. There was a big cut in the plastic part now, bleeding sand onto the new tar on the driveway.

Kevin stared at the light on the wall like a zombie. He sighed. "Okay."

The next day at the bus stop Mary was studying me like she was getting ready to draw me or something. She wasn't even looking scared of my brothers the way she usually did, and that day they were being especially scary, talking really loud about a movie where a guy came after people with a chainsaw. Mary had these light green eyes that looked very serious all the time, except when she laughed really hard. When she laughed her eyes would change; she would look like a different person. Her eyebrows were almost touching, she was looking at me so hard. "What?" I finally said.

"I think you're a liar." She crossed her arms.

"Am not."

"You didn't make the light change. You can't do that." She sounded like she didn't know if what she was saying was true.

"Oh yes I can." I tried to act like it was no big deal. "I've had magic powers since I was a baby."

“Have *not*.”

“Have *so*.”

She stopped for a minute, thinking about something. “Do some magic right now, then.”

I swallowed air. “Okay, fine.” I looked around. There was no wind, it was all cloudy. The mothers were all talking on the sidewalk across the street. My mother never came to the bus stop after the first day of school, since there were so many of us. She figured my brothers would keep an eye on me. They never did.

I watched Kevin’s mother, with her blonde hair and little eyeglasses and furry hood that looked sort of like a costume. She looked mad, and was sort of waving her hand while she talked. She kept looking at her watch, then down the road.

I had an idea. “I’m gonna make the bus come,” I said.

Mary laughed like she had won a game. “You can’t do that.”

I squinted my eyes shut and started moving my hands the way I did in Mrs. Siegel’s room. I could feel my heart beating in my fingers, my shoulders, my wrists. After a few long moments I heard the sound I wanted. The loud squeak of the bus’s brakes as it was turning the corner to come to us, and Mary gasping.

I opened my eyes. Hers were big again. “Told you,” I said.

I don’t know why things worked like that, twice in a row. Luck of the Irish, maybe, like my mother said sometimes. Only she always said it in this way that I think meant we didn’t really have any luck at all. She usually said “*bullshit*” right after and told

stories about how a hundred years ago all the potatoes rotted in Ireland and that's why our ancestors came to Boston. "That rot followed 'em right across the goddamn ocean, I swaya to Gahd," she said.

But now it seemed like I really *was* lucky, like the rot was gone, like things were really happening when I wanted them to. Part of me knew it was just luck, but part of me wondered. It seemed like my hands could do anything. "You can do anything you want if you just set your mind to it," Mrs. Siegel always said. Maybe I had done that.

My luck never seemed to work at home, though. I tried practicing it, seeing if I could make things appear, or change the light, or make my brothers walk through the door. Or out the door. But the windows in my house were small and the light never really changed. My bedroom was in the basement, so the only windows were at the very top of the room near the ceiling. And the room was half-underground anyways. The only thing I made happen when I moved my hands was a sharp punch on my shoulder from Bobby. "Why are you so *weird*," he said, not in a questioning voice. He was the only one of us that had red hair, and he always seemed mad about it. I was the only one smaller than him.

I rubbed my shoulder and took out one of my knight books. *The Littlest Knight*. I decided that luck only happened at school, or with my friends. Or maybe just with Mary.

The train tracks behind my house reminded me of a river that had dried up. There was a big slope at the edge of the yard that you could slide down till you hit the tracks at the bottom. A long time ago the people who ran the town decided to dig a giant ditch where the train tracks would go, so the trains wouldn't mess up the roads and make everyone wait forever in their cars while they went by. In the next town over there were train tracks on the road, and when we all crowded into my father's truck to go to the Salvation Army we would have to wait forever for the trains to go by. I was glad the people in our town dug the ditch for the trains. It was quieter and nicer that way. But sometimes I got scared about it. I thought that maybe the ditch would grow wider and wider like an opening mouth till it swallowed my little house.

I had never seen a train go down the tracks in my neighborhood, not once. I asked my father if he ever did, and he said that he'd only seen a train once or twice since the bread factory closed down. I loved stories about the bread factory. "It smelled like cookies and baking bread for miles," my father said, and I could almost smell it as he talked. I hated a lot of the food my mother cooked, but I loved when she made homemade bread. Sometimes if she was in a good mood she would let me punch the dough to get all the air out, and it was one of my favorite feelings, that moment when my fist hit the dough.

The bread factory used to smell like Twinkies, but now it was abandoned and smelled sort of like gasoline. The older kids on the bus said they would go there and throw rocks at the dusty windows with all the cobwebs on them and they would smash and glass would go everywhere. They told me and Kevin that it was haunted.

I thought of the ghosts eating ghost-Twinkies and ghost-bread. It wasn't so scary to think of.

Mary and Kevin and I went down to the train tracks after school on St. Patrick's Day instead of playing in my backyard like we were supposed to. My mother was making corned beef and cabbage and wasn't paying any attention to us, which was pretty bad since it was that time between night and day where it's not really dark, but it's not really light, either. Not a time when most kids were playing outside still. But my mother was not in a good mood and was muttering in the kitchen about all the food she had to make. It was warm for St. Patrick's Day, near-record highs Harvey the weatherman said, and so I convinced Kevin and Mary to slide down the hill at the edge of my yard with me, down to where the tracks were.

I would probably get in trouble, but I didn't care today. The warm weather and my friends being there made me act the way I did at school. I ignored my brothers and made Mary laugh. I was still a mouse around my mother, but a sneaky kind of mouse, quiet for a reason. Besides, I hated corned beef and cabbage. It tasted like something you might eat by accident, something you find at the way-back of the fridge, or under the sink. "A little boy with Irish blood should eat this up," my mother yelled at me every year. "Corned beef isn't cheap, you know." Cabbage must have been cheap, though, because we had it for dinner a lot more than once a year. Its gross, soggy smell would always drip all the way down to my bedroom until even my pillow seemed soaked with it. I couldn't get away from that smell. It was even with me down by the tracks.

The snow from the winter was almost all gone, and what was left was a dirty grayness, caked with so many crumbling leaves that it didn't look like snow at all. Kevin kicked patches of it with his hi-top Converse All-Stars. I wanted those shoes. "What do you guys wanna play?" I asked.

Mary looked sort of worried. "I don't like playing down here," she said. Mary followed every rule there ever was. She could tell being down by the tracks was against the rules, even though earlier she didn't hear my mother say, "Stay in the yaahd."

Kevin kicked some more snow. The canvas on his All-Stars was soaked. "We could play Holy Grail," he suggested. He kicked like he was mad, but his voice sounded happy.

Holy Grail was this great game that my uncle Paul taught to me and my brothers. One of us got to start out as King, and hide this old gold cup Paul found somewhere in his basement. The cup was the Grail. You had to find it and run it back to wherever the King was and get on your knees and show it to him. If you found it once, the King tapped a stick or a baseball bat on your shoulders and said "I dub you Jack." If you found it twice, you were a Knight. Then if you found it three times you got to be King and it started over. The best part of the whole game was right after the King hid the Grail. If you were King, you had to yell, "Go, you weaklings!" Paul told us this was the most important part of the game.

Holy Grail was my favorite game because it had knights and because I was a really good finder. My brothers never chose very good hiding spots for the Grail and

I could always figure out where it was faster than anyone else. I taught it to Kevin and Mary because I liked playing it so much, and they liked it too, even though we usually had to play with all my brothers. “Yeah, we can play that.”

“We don’t have a Grail,” Mary said. She seemed like she was going to cry and I wanted to give her a hug, but I didn’t. “We don’t have enough people. Let’s go back to your house.”

I was nervous about how Mary’s voice was shaking. Kevin was still kicking at gray snow chunks. “My magical powers ... are telling me something,” I said. I had that feeling again that words were coming out of my mouth without even really realizing it. I put my hands on my head.

Mary’s eyes got big. She was so easy to amaze. “*What.*”

“There is a Grail somewhere down here,” I said, the way a magician might say it, sounding silly. Kevin laughed. “I can find it with my powers.” When I said this something jumped up into my throat. I had to stop saying things before I thought about them. What if my luck didn’t work? This wasn’t something I could sort of count on the way I could count on the bus. This was something else.

At the same time, though, I sort of weirdly believed in it. It’s like when you’re reading a book, like a book about knights, and you know that knights are from the old days and you will never actually *be* a knight when you grow up. But still. You think about it when you’re falling asleep. The way the armor would feel, the way the light would hit your helmet, how the people would cheer for you at the jousts. How you would be a hero. And then all of a sudden you don’t *really* know

you could never be a knight. I mean you do, way in the back of your head. But it's what's in the front of your head, the shining armor, that you have dreams about.

All the leaves in the ditch around the tracks began to sparkle like they were hiding a golden cup. I felt blind, the way I did in Mrs. Siegel's room when the sun was extra-bright. And all lit up, the way I did when the bus trick worked. The way I felt when Mary kept looking at me for the rest of the day.

"Help me look, you weaklings!" I yelled, and the weaklings did, digging around in the dirty leaves and sticks for the Grail. I looked too, shoving my hands into the leaves. Even though it was still pretty warm out the leaves were cold in my hands, like they knew night was almost there. I kept shoving them deeper and deeper, wondering how deep the pile was, if the dirt was anywhere that I could touch. I threw piles of leaves behind me, ahead of me, sprinkling dirt everywhere and throwing some at Kevin. All the leaves sparkled, and the sun wasn't out. It was my luck, shining out from every little space and gap between the brown and red and gray leaves. Luck of the Irish on St. Patrick's Day, and Mary's scared green eyes. All I could hear was my heart beating and my own inside-voice telling me I was so close, I would find it in one second, I really would. There was a faraway, low noise. And then a much closer, higher one: "TRAIN!"

I looked up. I was on my hands and knees, covered in black dirt and leaves. Down the tracks there was a light, a bright light, getting brighter and rumbling like a hungry stomach. It was this light that was making all the leaves sparkle, showing me a hundred Grails, lighting up the dried river and filling it with shiny water. Water

from Mary's eyes. She was crying really hard, yelling "TRAIN" again and again. Her eyes looked like green puddles. Kevin was just staring at the light, the way he did in his house, like somebody under a magic spell. I felt like I was under one too.

I ran to the side of the ditch and pulled them with me. We sort of leaned and lay down against the wall, looking towards the light that was getting brighter and brighter. Mary's arm was touching mine and it was shaking like crazy. She was easy to scare, too. "MARK WE HAVE TO GO BACK THERE'S A TRAIN!" she yelled. Her voice was even higher than usual and she reminded me of the way a robot might sound if it stopped working and started trying to kill its inventor. I pictured sparking wires flying around Mary's neck.

I looked up the side of the ditch. To get back up to my yard you had to climb using your hands on the slippery leaves, and it was steep. Once when I was climbing up with my brothers, I slipped and slid back down and landed close to the tracks. If we tried to get away from the train we could slip and fall back and get run over and become ghosts that would hover over my backyard for the rest of time. The light was brighter now.

"Shh, shh, shh. We can't climb up, we might fall down." Mary was shaking worse than ever and the leaves were cold on my back. Kevin was still staring. "We can just stay here and we'll be safe. We'll be safe." I said it again and believed it only the second time.

Mary was letting out these little cries like a hurt puppy. I felt sick but excited. I hated the way Mary was crying but I couldn't stop being thrilled by the fact

that a train was coming, for the first time ever in my life, the one time we were down here without anyone older, the exact day, the exact minute. What were the chances of that? It was luck. I just hoped it wasn't the kind of luck my mother always talked about. The rotten luck.

Kevin finally said something. "That train is *slow*."

He was right. The train was taking forever to get to us. All the trains I had ever seen on TV or in movies were speeding, getting chased by people who could never catch them or coming towards cars that had to get out of the way just in time. But this one was crawling along like a bored turtle. It wasn't making any of the normal train sounds, and no smoke was coming out. There was no conductor in a striped hat that I could see. I could barely see anything, though, besides that monster light.

I looked down at the leaves as the train got closer. Now I could feel it sort of shaking the ground, the way a loud plane would shake my house. Even though it was slower than any train I had ever seen, it still scared me to see how big it was. How strong and metal it was. The light was so bright, which was weird, because it wasn't even really dark out yet. But I looked up at the sky and realized it had gone from gray to almost-black. I would be in trouble. My mother would yell, and my father would probably look sad, and my brothers would run, and punch, and say, "Moron, why wouldja do somethin' like that, anyway?"

The train was almost right in front of us and I was under that spell again. The light was the brightest thing I had ever seen. All I could hear was the train

slowly rumbling and all I could see was the sparkle from all the Grails hidden in the leaves. I thought about all the knights in my books. My magic hands. And then – and like my mother says, I *swaya to God* this happened – I saw a real Grail. Right across from where we were trying to melt into the wall of the ditch, at the edge of the farthest track. It wasn't just a sparkle, it was real. A little patch of gold that something told me was a Grail, something more important than just a stupid game. It was like the dreams from the front of my head turning into real life. I believed in something I shouldn't have. I thought – I *knew* I could get the Grail before the train passed us. It was a slow train.

So, at the last minute, the worst possible second, I reached.

My first-ever memory, or what I always think is my first memory, is this random flash of being in a canoe with my father, eating pretzel sticks. I don't know when or where it happened. It must have been in New Hampshire at my uncle Paul's house, because he lived next to a lake and had a red canoe and I'm almost positive the canoe in my first memory is red too. We went there for a whole week every summer and played outside all the time and swam even though it was kind of mucky. I think we had pretzel sticks in the canoe to feed to the ducks that lived in the lake, but I was eating them all, breaking them into even little bites with my hands. The part that makes me wonder if the whole thing is just a dream or something I saw on television is that I'm the only one in the boat with him. Not even one of my brothers is there. Just me, and it's all quiet, and my father is fishing and he keeps sighing really loud,

but not the way he does when he comes home every day. In this other, happy way. And then when he adjusts the way he's sitting the boat sort of tilts and I drop a bite of my pretzel stick into the lake. A duck swims over really slow to eat it and by the time the duck gets there the pretzel's all bloated like a sponge. And I really feel that my father weighs something, he isn't just dust, or air. He says to me, "Mark, the ducks love ya," and I remember it forever, and I never know why.

I woke up thinking of the pretzel sticks and the ducks loving me. I was in the hospital. I had never been in a hospital, but I had watched enough TV to know where I was. There were too-bright fluorescent lights and all white walls and weird smells and squeaky chairs and beds. My mother was there and her eyes were red. There were doctors. I didn't remember it, but they all told me when I reached for the Grail the turtle-train tried to stop but couldn't in time and it ran right over my right arm, my wrist really, and cut my hand right off. Right off the end of my arm. The doctors said I was lucky it was a small train with pretty skinny wheels. Luck of the Irish. I didn't remember any of it – how much it hurt, the feeling of the bone cracking, anything. The doctors said that was lucky too.

I don't remember what it was like without my hand, because when I woke up it was already back on, like magic. I guess if everything goes fast enough they can sew a part of you that gets cut off right back on. It took nine hours, the doctors said. I thought of how slow the train was. I wondered if Mary or Kevin picked up my hand from the train tracks but I didn't ask. It was probably the conductor anyway.

Even though it was back on my arm, I couldn't feel my hand at all. The doctors told me it would take time, lots of time. I would hopefully be able to feel it, and use it again, someday. But maybe not. I cried at this. I was a righty. Everything was strange and awful and sort of like a weird dream, the kind where you don't get why you had it in the morning. I wasn't scared when I thought of what happened, only confused. I should have felt more scared, and sadder. Instead I just felt funny. I could see the tips of my fingers – they looked white – sticking out of my cast, but it felt like nothing was there.

I took a lot of medicine to make the pain in my wrist go away, and it made me sleep all the time. My mother was always there and I wondered who was taking care of my brothers. I went from being the extra to being the only one who mattered. It was sort of nice, that way.

But when I was half-awake one night I heard my mother on the hospital phone talking about money and insurance. I don't know who she was talking to. I heard her cry. Not the puppy-way Mary had cried, but a low, choky way, like something was stuck in her throat. I realized what a stupid thing I had done and I wished I could undo it. I wished I could shrink down like a mouse the way I did at home, and crawl away against the wall to another room, join another family, take a train to another town where I wouldn't make girls or mothers cry. Be small and extra again. But I was trapped in this bed with a hand I couldn't feel, and even though my mother never said anything to me about it, it was all my fault and I knew it. I would

remember this forever, the sound of her crying, the way I remembered the canoe and the pretzel sticks. This time, though, I'd know why.

My cast was green – “For St. Patrick’s Day,” the doctors said, smiling, like it was a day I would happily remember. I had to wear it for six months and go to the doctor all the time. I would have a terrible scar, they said, which I was secretly excited about. My mother was on the phone a lot and yelled sometimes, at doctors or insurance companies, but never once at me. It was weird: no one in the hospital or in my family asked me why I had gone down to the tracks and stuck my hand in front of a slow train. Weren’t they wondering?

After I got home from the hospital, I still stayed at home for a week before I went back to school. I wanted to go back to school, because all there was to do at home was watch movies, since I didn’t practice doing things with my left hand the way my mother told me to. I was afraid to look at my box of models or even open a book. It was too sad to think about not doing models anymore. It was the opposite of believing in things that weren’t real – the thought of not ever doing a model again was something very real, something that really might happen to me, but I pushed it all so far back in my head that it only made me cry every once in a while, in the middle of the day, and not for very long.

On one of the days I was home, Kevin came over with a big envelope full of get-well cards from Mrs. Siegel’s class. He came down the stairs with them and I

heard his mother's voice in my kitchen. I heard my mother saying she was sorry, again and again, and wondered why Kevin's mother wasn't saying sorry too.

We looked through all the cards. There was none from Mary. "Why'd you bring these?" I asked Kevin. "You aren't in my class."

"Oh." He fidgeted, like always. I was wondering if he would be scared of me or mad at me because of what happened with the train. But he didn't act any different. "Mary gave me the cards."

"Oh." I unfolded one: Get Better From Alyssa. Gross. "Why didn't she bring them?"

"Her mommy won't let her come here, she said." He started playing with his shoelaces. "Doesn't that stink?"

I couldn't really answer. My mouth felt full of dust.

With my cast and my numb hand, school was like a different place. Some people wanted to know all about what happened. "Did it hurt?" they asked. I never knew how to answer that. Usually I just said yes.

Some people stayed away from me, though, like I was sort of gross, or scary. One of those people was Mary. Even though we still sat across from each other she kept her eyes turned down, and never said anything to me. I was too afraid to try to talk to her.

When she finally did say something, it was weeks after I got back. Almost at the end of the day, when everyone was getting ready to go to the bus line. She leaned over like she was getting up, and then she said, “Why didn’t you stop the train?”

I was confused for a minute. This question was not what I expected from her. But then I remembered the magic, the bus, the light through the windows. And right then I remembered the second before my wrist hit the track, before the wheel rolled over me – hearing something, a gasp, Mary, thinking I wasn’t reaching for a Grail, hoping that it was for real, that it wasn’t luck at all. I swallowed air.

“Oh, well. I wasn’t *trying* to stop it,” I said. “I was trying to get the Grail. Remember? If I tried to stop the train it woulda stopped. For sure.” I was talking faster than normal.

She looked sort of weirdly happy, like she had figured out a math problem that was bugging her. “I *never* believed you,” she said, in the meanest voice she could. This made me feel sad at first, sad and stupid. But Mary’s eyes were lit up, not the way the leaves were or the way our hands were before, but like light was *in* them, shining out. Like lit matches. Even though she tried to look and sound mean, her eyes couldn’t lie. She wasn’t being mean. She was daring me again.

Before I even knew what I was doing I reached out my right arm towards her, the arm with the cast, and poked her right in the shoulder with one of my sticking-out fingers. It was the first time my hand had touched anyone besides the doctors. And it was the first time I felt a little something, like a blue spark, in my finger. Mary’s eyes got big and brighter than ever, almost like she felt it, too.

“Gross,” she said really soft. “Don’t do that again.” But the spark-light spread from her eyes to her whole face, and I felt it in my eyes and my cheeks and my hand. I smiled at her, because we both knew that I would.

Kevin

(2nd grade)

When he used the hole punch I wished my head could shrink down to the size of a circular paper cutout and he could punch a neat round little hole through the middle of my paper skull. Then my head would grow back to realness and all the noise inside would explode out from the little punched hole like a cartoon steam-pipe. It would make him deaf, whistling through his ears till he could never hear again. It would make Mom cover her ears and fall down, erase her brain and make her forget she had ever met this strange, deaf man. Then the noise would stop, and Mom would stand up, put her hand on her face, and ask who is this deaf man shouting and stomping through my house? She would throw him outside but she'd remember me, of course. It's my little boy, she would say, and she would close the hole in my head with a needle and thread wearing her white pharmacy coat while he stumbled outside on the sidewalk.

It started pretty soon after they got married. They had a wedding in Worcester where everyone drank too much wine and all the pictures came out blurry. I had to wear a suit that was too big. The photo album of their wedding looked like a picture in a textbook. *Unhappy Families, Volume 1*. We're all far apart and slouched. It looks like we were cut and pasted wrong. The dark circles under Jenny's eyes stood out, little half-moon bruises. We were a family that never should have been.

First it was only yelling, then the first push or two, and then I realized *that* was what this house would be like and backed away until I was inside my own head. There was this whole world in there, a world made of noise. It had to be loud and confusing, otherwise it wouldn't distract me enough, it wouldn't stay alive. Then I would be forced to live in the world where my head stayed its own normal shape, except for the back of it, which swelled up and turned purple underneath my white-blond hair. Right where my stepfather hit me with an old 1970s hole-punch once he saw that I accidentally spilled chocolate milk on some of his work papers. The hole punch was silver with red edges, and felt like it was made of steel. "Sharpe" was written on it with a Sharpie, which I thought was kind of funny till I felt it hit my skull. It was the first time he went for my head.

My stepfather was the director of a historical museum at the college in the next town over. It had all sorts of strange artifacts that my mother told me were very interesting and had been written about in books but to me they were boring, boring, boring. He met my mother, who worked at a pharmacy, through an old high school friend, a woman who looked like a man. She came to the house sometimes, and when she saw me she would run her hand through my buzzcut. I would squirm away if her hand went over a bruise. "He doesn't like it!" she'd say like I wasn't there. "Gettin' too old for that." I would not say anything, and I would not look at my mother, just wonder what she was thinking. And wonder what my life would have been like if that man-woman had never been born.

He wore these eyeglasses that would change into sunglasses if it was very bright outside. They would just be regular glasses in regular light. But they didn't work really well and most of the time they were just dark, even when none of the lights were on in the house, and because of this I don't remember what color his eyes were. He had brown hair and wide shoulders. He wore blazers a lot and had a thin beard. He drank red wine till his teeth turned purple.

My mother never saw it – I think he had a rule to never do it in front of her – but she had to know. My stepfather's yell shook the house and stayed shivering in the walls for hours. Every once in a while she would hug me for too long before I went to sleep, rocking back and forth and saying my name, and though there was never a single tear I knew it was her way of crying. I was named after my father, Kevin Donoghue, a construction worker who my mother told me had a disease that made him not nice. I learned later that he would get drunk most nights and would sometimes throw bottles at my mother and my sister Jenny when I was still a baby. I can't remember what I did when he would throw bottles. Probably just cried. It was only when my mother's sister found out he was doing it that she left him for good.

I saw my real dad once a year, when he would take me and my sister out for hot dogs and a Red Sox game and not say much at all. He usually wore sweatpants, which most grown-up men did not wear unless they were playing sports or sleeping. He just seemed like a family friend to me, someone kind of weird and not very important. I loved everything about the Red Sox and never looked away from the field when I got to see real games. The way Fenway Park smelled, the feeling of

peanut shells under my sneakers, the sizzling sound of the Sausage Guy stand. That day, every year, I felt like a real American boy. Someone normal. My cheeks would burn in the sun and my stomach would hurt from too much food, which Mom always gave us money for.

Fenway Park was just too exciting for me to really notice my dad, even sitting next to him in the glossy wooden seats. My favorite player was Wade Boggs and I would scream for him every time he came up to bat. They lost a lot, though. My dad would get mad when they did, a little madder each year. And a little fatter, too. Redder.

I still wrote Kevin Donoghue on all my papers, and luckily my handwriting was so bad that usually my teachers didn't really notice. I didn't do this because I really cared about the guy I was named after. I just did it because I hated Ron Sharpe. Plus, Kevin Donoghue. What a great name. It felt more like me than Sharpe did. Sharpe was a kind of television. Not a baseball player's name.

Sometimes I tried to decide if it would have been worse to live with my real dad, but in a sort of lazy way, like nothing could really ever change from the way it had turned out. I wondered what Jenny thought of him, but she never talked to me about it and I learned not to ask her. Before I learned this, I did the best job I could at bugging her about it.

One day both of us were at the kitchen table eating Spaghetti-Os that were too hot. They burned so hot I could feel the usually invisible insides of my body

working, like I was lit up by Chef Boyardee. The pain of it made me bend forward, trying to fold myself.

“What was it like with our real dad?” I asked Jenny as the Spaghetti-Os finally hit my stomach.

“I don’t remember,” Jenny said, stirring her steaming Spaghetti-Os. You couldn’t even tell we were related. She had long brown curls that always got in her food. Her eyes were glassy. She wouldn’t even get very mad if I tried to pinch her or steal her things or even cut off her braids with the kitchen scissors. Instead she would just sigh in this weird way, call me a pest, and walk away from me.

“Not even a little?” I didn’t believe her. I was two when they split up, but Jenny was six. I remembered things from when I was six like they’d happened yesterday – the T-ball game where I got a double and a triple right in a row and my stepfather gave me a big hug and bought me ice cream afterwards. He called me a winner all night. Or the time we visited my uncle Steve at his farm and I had a staring contest with his biggest cow and won. Or other, worse times.

“I told you, I don’t remember. Pest.” She swallowed a spoonful and I watched it burn her. Her eyes teared up and she bent forward the same way I did. Her cheeks got red. I knew she was remembering. There, for a moment, she glowed.

You would think that school would have been better than the shaky walls of my house. You’d be wrong, though. Somehow school was even worse. I couldn’t make the noise in my head quiet down sometimes, so I could learn things like addition

problems or how to write my name so other people could read it. It drowned out things I needed to hear. At school I was constantly either lost in my head or trying to make the other kids laugh. Eventually Mrs. Daniel would yell at me to pay attention or else I'd have to spend some time in The Corner. The Corner was this little black stool at the end of the coat rack in our classroom, and I went there a lot. Anyone who misbehaved was sent to The Corner, and if it was a rainy day all the coats dripped on you, and then you had sloshy socks for the rest of the day. I hated The Corner.

Mrs. Daniel didn't seem to like anyone, really. But she hated me the most. Every day that I walked into the classroom she gave me this look from behind her thick, round glasses that just dared me to do something wrong. She had this flat, white hair that looked glued-on, and a big sinking face like a sad fish. Her shirts were always flowery and looked sort of like pajamas, and I wondered why she wore flowers all the time when she was such an un-flowery person. Her outfits always looked sort of like costumes, like she was trying to look like a little girl when really she was just this great big angry fish. She never took any crap, and everyone knew it. It was a classroom with a Corner.

I especially hated The Corner because Mary and Mark never got sent to it. They lived down the street from me and were smarter and had better penmanship and did cooler dioramas than I ever could. Like the day we all brought in dioramas of important historical figures. Mary did a Helen Keller diorama, and had shiny blue plastic wrap for the water coming out of the well in a sea of green Easter grass. Helen's oak-tag hands really looked wet. Annie Sullivan stood over her with slanty,

marker eyebrows. Mark beat her, though, with his cardboard Ford's Theater. He had two sort of old-looking action figures, but he made them look really good. I didn't get how, because one of his hands was all messed up from the train accident last year, and it still didn't work right. But he did it. Abraham Lincoln had this construction paper top hat and John Wilkes Booth wore a brown felt suit holding a silver revolver from Clue. I had tried so hard to make a decent Fenway Park with Ted Williams swinging away in the middle, but I couldn't get his stance right, and ended up having to prop him up with a bunch of toothpicks that my mom finally agreed to help me with after about an hour of bugging her. He ended up looking kind of like a spider. And my green marker ran out halfway through, so the grass was half-marker, half-crayon. Mrs. Daniel had said "Good job" to me about it, but the way she said it, she might as well have said "This sucks."

I really did want to be like Mary and Mark. But when I thought about seriously trying to beat them, about working really hard, showing everyone I could do it, the noise would pound inside my head like a drum: *You can't, you can't, you can't*. I was afraid the noise inside would one day force its way out for real, and I would explode and leave no blood or anything, just a noise, like when a microphone went screwy. I had to throw or yell or punch something to make it stop, to keep myself in one piece. Then I would be sent to The Corner.

The first thing I ever threw in Mrs. Daniel's class was my sneaker. It was from my favorite pair, a Converse All-Star that was black and laced all the way over my ankles like Benny's from *The Sandlot*. I had to get extra-high socks to wear with

them. Usually it would have been pretty hard to get off in order to throw it, but the class was sitting on the rug, listening to a librarian read us some story about Paul Bunyan. It was the most boring thing in the whole world, so I untied and re-tied my shoelaces over and over to be less bored. When Babe the Blue Ox was rounding the bend, I heard a hiss.

“*Psst.* Kevin Sharpe, pay attention.” Mrs. Daniel sat behind all of us, making sure we paid attention to the librarian, Mrs. Frank. Mrs. Frank wore square glasses that reminded me of the Blockheads on Gumby. They were the bad guys – little red squares. Mrs. Frank’s hair was red too. And her face was orangey, like someone had colored her in wrong. Frank the Red Ox, I thought. The Red Blocks.

I didn’t turn around when I heard Mrs. Daniel. I kept untying and tying, wanting to see what she would do, how far I could go before it would really be trouble. I started undoing all the laces from their little metal holes. Then I spun them around near other kids’ faces.

“Quit it!” a girl named Samantha whispered. She had a giant mess of curly hair and teeth that stuck straight out from her mouth. Samantha bugged me just sitting there.

I spun the laces faster. The hard ends were close to Samantha’s face. It looked like a mini-circus.

“Stop!” Her voice was getting louder.

I started softly singing circus music: “Doot do do do do do doot do doooo do...”

Mark and Mary started giggling. Mark did it right out loud but Mary tried to hide it. Mary's eyes were this bright green, and whenever she tried to stop herself from laughing it was like someone turned on a light behind them. Her shoulders were shaking and she covered her mouth like she was afraid she might explode. I felt like I got an electric shock when they started giggling. Even though I could never beat them at anything, I could always make them laugh. I held onto this like a rope when everything else seemed to be dragging me down, off the side of a cliff. Even if I really should have stopped misbehaving, I couldn't. Not if they were laughing.

Mrs. Daniel was really mad. She was standing up, and Mrs. Frank had stopped reading. But no matter how far I went, Mary and Mark would tell me how funny it was later, and I would feel sort of like a king. I would beat everyone. "Kevin Sharpe. If you cannot behave yourself and listen to Mrs. Frank you must go sit in The Corner."

Frank the Red Ox was staring me down. Mary and Mark were still giggling. I felt like I was electrified. I stood up without saying anything and took off my loose Converse All-Star. Everyone gasped, and then I threw it as hard as I could, harder than I even threw playing baseball. I whipped the shoe against the blackboard, and it made the most satisfying smacking sound I could have wished for, smudging today's date: October 14th, 1992.

The thing about fire alarms at school was that nobody really thought it was a real fire, but no one was ever sure that it wasn't, either. Everyone would stop what they were

doing: chalk would drop to the ground and break, a name would be half-written, kids in the bathroom would panic and think: can I stop now? Can I hold it? Do I finish? Time went away, the world changed, and we marched out of the school, excited and nervous – because what if this time it was real? We stayed behind our teacher, jackets half-on, sniffing the air for smoke in single file. Outside in the parking lot, we kicked gravel at each other, getting yelled at to be still, watching the fire trucks pull up and getting quiet as the firemen marched into the school just like we had marched out. One time they even had axes in their hands. We watched the brick walls of our school, and wondered what was going on inside. Were they chopping desks in half? Turning on the hose in the gym? But the firemen came back out, their axes looked like they hadn't chopped anything, and they waved at our teachers, and drove off in their trucks without even turning on the sirens. We marched back in, checking the walls to see if anything was broken or damaged, knowing now that they could burn.

When my stepfather got mad at me, the way he did when Mrs. Daniel called our house to tell my parents that I was “acting out,” I had my own fire drill. The alarm got set off by him stomping, or maybe yelling, or even just a feeling that something bad was going to happen. Or the phone ringing, and my stepfather answering, and the sound of him saying, “How exactly has Kevin been acting out.”

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRING Okay everybody out, single file single file, Billy get your coat on, Anna you can finish the worksheet after Let's go Let's gogogogogo. By the time the phone clicked I was already out, watching myself from the parking lot. I turned around at all the bad parts, like the grip of his fingers which

were always cold and the shaking and all the words I couldn't really hear because of the noise in my head, but still, they shook the air and I could feel them. When it was done *ALL CLEAR, COME ON BACK INSIDE* I'd walk back in and check myself the way we checked the walls at school. A few red marks if he slapped. Well, that's okay, those fade in twenty minutes, maybe less. No purple ones today. No real fire. Not this time.

The big difference between school fire drills and my fire drills was the firemen.

Mrs. Van Cleave's office was not like any other room in the school. It had real carpet like a house would, light blue and really soft; something you could take a good nap on. Her office had comfy chairs, too, something I had never seen in Elliot except in Dr. Wilson's office. He was the principal. I didn't know why everybody called him a doctor. Mrs. Van Cleave seemed more like the doctor. She always looked very concerned and had these great big eyeglasses that made her face look even tinier than it was. And this short, bouncy haircut that looked too big for her face. I imagined her face shrinking and shrinking back into her hair until it disappeared, and then I could just tell all of my problems to this Cousin Itt creature in a brown suit instead of feeling these worried, worried eyes on me all the time. It would be more fun with Cousin Itt, who could only sort of move his head, or maybe dance around a little.

"Kevin, what sorts of things do you like?" she asked at the first meeting we had.

I slouched in the comfy chair I was sitting in. It was a chair that could spin and I really wanted to see how many times I could get it around without using my feet. “I dunno.”

She made this funny kissy face that she made a lot when I wouldn't play the game she was trying to start. “Well. You must like *something*. Do you have any hobbies?”

I shrugged. “I like baseball,” I said. *Donoghue's rounding the bases ... he's not even using his feet! We've never seen anything like this! He's going around again! This is truly a historic day for baseball. And chairs.*

“Okay, wonderful! Baseball.” Mrs. Van Cleave was too excited about my answer. “Do you *play* baseball?”

I nodded. “I play coach-pitch.” She looked at me like she didn't get it. I sighed. “The coaches pitch the ball and if you can't hit it that way you use the tee.” *Tee time*, everyone would say on the bench. I would make sipping sounds and everyone would laugh.

“I see. Well, that sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Yep.”

She paused. “Who is your coach, Kevin?”

I fidgeted, spinning the chair a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left. *Donoghue on deck, looking ready to play.* “Um, Mr. Maloney. He's Brian Maloney's dad.”

“Uh huh, and is Mr. Maloney a good coach?”

Last night Donoghue hit through the whole cycle. Do you think he could do it again? “Yep. We win a lot.”

Mrs. Van Cleave nodded. “If Mr. Maloney asks you to do something, do you listen to him and do as he asks?”

I thought about this. Mr. Maloney was probably the nicest man in the entire world and always told us we did a great job. But he did sometimes ask me to behave or to stay in right field and not wander off into the basketball courts to play on the chain-link fence. “I guess so,” I said. “Yeah.”

“Uh *huh*.” She was writing things down. I wondered what. Like sometimes when we went to the baseball games with my real dad, people around us would score the game in these books. I didn’t get how to do it and I always wondered what they were writing down. There was this whole world I could never see, this language I didn’t speak: what grown-ups wrote down. “So Kevin, if you listen to Mr. Maloney when he asks you to do things, then why do you have so much trouble doing what Mrs. Daniel asks you to do?”

Donoghue might be in trouble here. Oh and one. “I don’t know, I just do,” I said, sort of in an angry voice.

She sighed. I had popped her good. I was winning the game. *Donoghue is today’s M! V! P!* “Kevin, what’s your last name?”

“Donoghue,” I said without thinking. “...Sharpe.”

Steeeeeeee-rike! “Mrs. Daniel said that you write Kevin Donoghue on your papers.”

“I like it better.”

“Why?”

“It sounds better. It’s my name.”

“Tell me about your stepfather.”

Oh and two. He’s really in trouble now. Trouble. Mark had this old board game called Trouble and he would play it all the time with Mary and I thought it was boring and I had better games at my house but I didn’t like my house otherwise.

Trouble over at the old mill? They would always ask Lassie that and she would bark and they would always know she meant yes. Jenny watched Lassie whenever it was on. All she watched was old TV shows in black-and-white: *Leave it to Beaver, The Little Rascals, The Andy Griffith Show.* The only old shows I liked were *The Three Stooges* and *The Little Rascals* since they were at least funny and not always as corny as the ones Jenny watched. After all—

“Kevin...”

—you can only hear Barney Fife’s weird old voice so many times before you want to smash in your TV but I do sort of get why she loved those old shows so much with the nice families and no harsh colors or harsh words and simple little problems that were always fixed by the end of the show. I had my own TV in my bedroom and Mark was jealous of it and that made me happy because it was one of the few things and I sat too close to it and no one ever told me to move back and sometimes when I heard his steps on the stairs I would turn the volume up and up and up and keep hitting the little plus sign till I couldn’t hear the steps anymore.

“Kevin, I asked you a question.”

I was losing.

“Your stepfather, Kevin. Tell me about him.”

If Mrs. Van Cleave had a machine that could read minds I would have lost.

But she didn't. “He works at a museum,” I said. “He's nice.”

Ball one.

I walked Mary home that day. She lived farther from the bus stop than I did but I didn't want to go home. We kicked the leaves and talked about when I threw my shoe. “You're crazy!” she said. Sometimes she talked and laughed at the same time and I was glad she was my friend. She said I was crazy like it was a good thing.

The worst part was that every so often there would be something that didn't make any sense, that didn't fit into the picture no matter which way you turned it. He was mean and hurt me and didn't love me but sometimes, for no reason, he would be normal and smile. Like he was someone else wearing a Ron Sharpe mask.

“Hi, son,” he said in a weird robot voice one day in the kitchen. He had just gotten home from work, and had a briefcase and some books under his arm. I was sitting at the kitchen table eating Dunkaroos. They were these little packets of animal-cracker kangaroos with a packet of frosting at the end, and I was dunking them. He came towards me. TV static started buzzing in my head. I got ready for the alarm.

“What do you call that snack?” he asked me in that same voice.

“Dunkaroos,” I said.

“Great idea.” He smiled and shook his head, laughing a little. Sometimes, when he wasn’t mad, he acted like things he had never seen before were just like exhibits in his museum. They were things behind glass, with a little square note next to them, things to study. He would look at them for a while, then move on, ready for the next exhibit. I pictured my little plastic Dunkaroos package in a museum. That would have been pretty funny.

Once, we were driving past an Indian temple on our way home from a boring dinner at his parents’ house a few towns over. It was some holiday and tons of Indian people were trying to cross the road to get to the temple. They were all dressed in these beautiful shiny clothes that reflected our headlights. A lot of them were little kids, all in the shiny fabric, holding their parents’ hands. When I saw them I really wanted to be Indian and to be walking up the big hill on the other side of the road to the temple, holding someone’s hand. They all were hurrying to get inside. Whatever was in there had to be good.

My stepfather stopped the car to let a group of them cross the road and said to my mother, “Look at that. Such numbers of them!” like he saw someone walking a bunch of dogs at once. More of them kept coming and we sat there, waiting for a gap so we could drive along, waiting and waiting. Then out of nowhere he leaned on the horn and sped through the crosswalk, almost hitting a man in the street wearing a blue

robe. I looked behind us as we drove away and the man was still standing there, looking scared, watching our car disappear.

He walked upstairs. The Dunkaroo in my mouth felt dry and sticky. When I couldn't hear his steps anymore I realized I'd been holding my breath.

Second grade was the year we started going to music class once a week. Music class was either really boring or wicked exciting, depending on whether or not Mrs. Hill gave out instruments. When she did, it was the best class of the whole week. A different percussion instrument for each student meant at least twenty different ways of making noise. All at once.

On one of the percussion days I got a maraca-type thing. It was wooden, and had a metal part that was covered in beads, so when you shook it, the beads moved around and it sounded like a rattlesnake. I shook it so much that Mrs. Hill threatened to take it away.

“Okay, class,” she said in a calm voice. Mrs. Hill's hair was way too long for a grown-up and she wore big dream-catcher earrings. “We're going to play a piece of music today that some of you might have heard before. It's called ‘Hot Cross Buns.’”

I hadn't heard “Hot Cross Buns,” because where would I have heard it besides music class? But I was excited for it. My maraca was going to sound awesome; it was the best instrument I could have gotten. I was sitting between Mark and Mary on the floor of the music room.

“I know this song,” Mary whispered to me. She had a little cymbal with a mallet to hit it with, and was holding it really gently, like it was made of glass. “I like it.”

Mrs. Hill started teaching us the rhythms we had to follow in order to make the song sound right. And I don’t know what the problem was, but I couldn’t follow it. I know that “Hot Cross Buns” has the easiest rhythm probably of any song in the entire world, but I just couldn’t do it. Everyone pounded on their instruments in time, but I would shake my maraca too early every time, or I could still hear the rattlesnake sound when there was supposed to be silence.

People started to look over at me. Mark, hitting a bongo perfectly in time, looked at me like he was asking why. Mary tried to hit her cymbal really loud so I could maybe follow her. But I couldn’t. I was wrecking the song. My head started to pound and pound, out of time with the music; it wouldn’t match. I should have just stopped playing, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to play. I really wanted to.

Mrs. Hill started looking at me and pointing out the rhythm for me: *point-point-point. Hot-Cross-Buns. You-you-you.* I don’t know why I did, but I got so mad and sad all at once and suddenly I was on my feet and the song broke down and no one was laughing and before I even knew what happened my rattlesnake maraca was flying towards the wall and then it was smashed, the song was ruined, little wooden beads were everywhere. And no one was laughing, everyone just looked sort of afraid. Even Mark looked upset. Even Mary. Mrs. Hill was yelling and next it would be the principal’s office and a call home and a fire drill but none of that really

mattered right then. Something important changed when no one laughed. There was no rope.

My real dad stopped taking me and Jenny to Red Sox games. My mother told us that baseball had gotten too expensive for our dad to afford. I missed the games and knew that my stepfather would never go to one. If I ever watched a game on television, he would laugh and shake his head.

Before we stopped seeing him at all, our dad took me and Jenny to Castle Island. I didn't know anything about it except that it was near the airport. "Not a real island, and no castle," he said when he picked us up in his brown Chevy Celebrity, an old car no famous person would ever drive.

I liked Castle Island. Even though there wasn't a real castle there was an old military fort covered in grass, and a rocky beach, and tons of people walking dogs. And there was a playground with an entire alphabet of painted wooden letter-animals. The D was a light blue donkey and the S was a purple snake. I thought that if they taught us the alphabet this way in school I would have learned it a lot faster.

My dad sat on a bench, watching planes take off from the airport. I played on the animal letters with Jenny. We tried to spell different words by running around and tagging the different animals, but she was too good at it and I ended up getting mad like I always did and threw sand at her. My dad didn't even yell at me. He was staring out past the playground to a big ocean tanker in the harbor.

We walked around the cement path, along the rocky beach, past the pier where the fishermen all lined up their rods and cast them out into the ocean while their children watched from the benches by the big stone statues. Jenny walked ahead of us, and wouldn't slow down to let us catch up.

While we walked my dad told me everything he knew about Fort Independence, which was the name of the big cement bunker that we were walking around. The water was all shiny and glittery as we walked and, for the first time, talked. No one called it Fort Independence back when they had wars, he explained. People just called it "The Castle," even though it didn't really look like a castle at all. I thought of how I wasn't *really* Donoghue but maybe if enough people just called me that it would become my real name. It had a ton of secret caves and crawl spaces where they kept prisoners. He said there were probably skeletons in some of them.

My dad said that once in the old days all of Boston got scared and panicked because a bunch of people said they saw serpents in the ocean around Castle Island. Priests came and blessed the edges and women ran screaming and it was all like a loud black-and-white movie in my head when I thought about it. I didn't really know what serpents were but I pictured giant, swimming versions of the letter S on the playground, all purple, coming to the surface for just a minute to breathe, and then sliding black down into blackness.

When my real dad told me all these stories he looked more happy and normal than I remembered him looking at any of the games. I wondered why we had always gone to see the Red Sox when this was so much more fun for him. When he was

talking in his rocky old Boston accent, I noticed for the first time that there was a little space in the thick, black eyebrow over his right eye where there was no hair at all, just skin, white and smooth like a baby's. I never noticed it until that day. It glowed like a Christmas light in a field of red, cracked skin. "How do you know all that?" I asked him when he finally finished his long story of Castle Island.

He looked down at me and smiled. "Same reason you know it now," he said matter-of-factly. "Somebody told it to me."

I felt weird all of a sudden. Like maybe he loved me, like maybe everything had gone wrong and I didn't even know it. We yelled up to Jenny and sat down on the benches with the children watching their dads fishing. Once in a while everyone would scramble around and panic and a man's line would bend and he would pull it slowly out of the water until a slimy, silver fish came out, flapping like crazy on the hook. They would hold it up, take a picture, then throw the choking fish back into the sea. The way they all panicked when the line bent reminded me of the serpent story. I pictured the letter from the playground sneaking around the fort, watching the fishermen, hoping for his brother to be dragged up so he'd have another serpent to play with. I wondered how many of the fishermen even knew the serpent story. Most of them probably didn't.

I stared up at my dad, at his eyebrow, at the weird half-smile on his face. I wished we could come here all the time. I would tell my mother this when we got home and I would not shut up until it was settled. But the truth was I would never see

him again. He's probably still alive, but my mother told us he wasn't in a state to visit with us anymore, and that was it.

"Hey, is that a scar?" I asked him. The wind was loud and the smell of salt stung my nose. Three little dogs were walking on the concrete in front of us and were yipping at each other. Their leashes were all tangled.

He looked at me like he didn't get it. "Is what a scah?" He said it like it was a completely different word. Scaaah. I wanted that voice. It sounded tough.

I didn't want to point at him, so I pointed to my own right eyebrow. "There."

He ran his dirty finger over his eyebrow, over the white line, and actually laughed a little. "Kid, I don't know," he said. "I've had that long's I can remembah."

I ran my finger over my own eyebrow. "I wish I had one," I said before I even realized the words were leaving my mouth. I was embarrassed at saying it, and stared at the fishermen. I didn't look over at Jenny, sitting on the other side of our dad. I knew she was probably staring at me like I had five heads.

It wasn't that I loved him or anything like that. I didn't even know him. It was more like I was seeing something for the first time, and too late, like the ice cream man driving away on the last day of summer. That feeling followed me everywhere. Every window I saw was already shut, locked, and frozen over.

He pointed into the sky. "That's a seven-fahty-seven," he said. The plane was coming right towards us and I started feeling like something bad was going to happen, like a giant cloud was forming over our bench. The plane was huge, like a rocket, and the noise of it was too loud to explain. It got louder and louder until I

thought it was definitely going to crash, right on the pier in front of us, breaking like a toy. The sound was awful. There would be flames on the water, splashy explosions, people dying. It would change our lives forever.

I stretched my neck and watched the plane pass over us, not crashing, finally getting quieter, but leaving a shaky feeling inside me that never really went away. I looked over at Jenny, who was looking at her hands. She had barely even noticed.

“We’d better head back,” my dad said, and we got up and walked with him to the Celebrity. The cloth on the ceiling of the car wasn’t stuck on enough, and so it looked like a bunch of upside-down hills. They brushed against my dad’s head when he got into the driver’s seat. Our drive back was very quiet, but I heard in my head, over and over, the roar of the plane’s engine, getting closer and closer to us, ready to crash.

Mary

(3rd grade)

I hate blueberry bagels. Well, only the ones that are purple, really purple, like so purple they change the color of the cream cheese. Mrs. Chase ate a purple blueberry bagel every single day of third grade. The way she ate always reminded me of an animal – not a pig, but more like a nibbling squirrel or a weasel. Her lips were pulled up away from her teeth, her eyes were darting around. A weasel wearing a yellow housecoat. That was Mrs. Chase.

She was the teacher everyone hated, the oldest, the ugliest, the meanest in the third grade. She was just so easy to hate: with her thin, dyed-red hair that stood up from her head like wires, her scraggly yellow teeth like fingernails, her shrill voice that made her sound like she was dying, but still mean, like there were hot coals in her throat. You could tell she had never been a mother to anyone but her Chow Chow Chloe. Her desk was covered with framed pictures of the giant dog. “My darling ChowChowChloe,” she would say, like “ChowChowChloe” was a breed. Its fur was the exact same color as Mrs. Chase’s hair. I swear, if you put tiny little glasses on that dog, you could barely tell the difference.

Everyone said the usual things about her. Kevin and Mark weren’t even in my class, but they still made up rhymes on the bus about the way Mrs. Chase smelled – usually involving ChowChowChloe. Emily and I would laugh. You couldn’t not

laugh when Kevin and Mark really got going. But I couldn't ever join in and make up new rhymes with them. I probably hated Mrs. Chase more than any other person on that bus, but I felt terrible if I ever made fun of her. Because I was her favorite.

I was picked for everything in Mrs. Chase's class. Everything. If someone had to come up to the board to write a cursive Q, I'd be wiping the chalk from my hands a few minutes later. Watering the little Venus fly-trap we were growing in the corner of the room was my job and only my job. You would think that maybe having a plant in a classroom would be give everyone a chance to take care of it, but Mrs. Chase didn't think that way. It seemed like she just thought everyone else would screw it up, and maybe kill the plant. I could feel everyone's eyes on me when I watered that ugly thing. They all wanted to hold the green plastic watering can, with the long, thin spout. And I couldn't blame them – it was a fun thing to do, to feel like I was helping something grow.

The worst was taking notes to other teachers' rooms. Mrs. Chase asked me to do this a lot. I got to leave class and go on a secret, grown-up mission, deliver an urgent message. I can't imagine now what all those notes said. Probably just coordinating cigarette breaks.

After the first three weeks of school I stopped raising my hand at all, hoping she would be disappointed in me and move on to some other poor kid who would suddenly hear their name called out in her crackly voice ten times a day. I wished I could go back to being as invisible as I was in second grade. Kevin got all of the attention in that class with his yelling and shoe-throwing. What I really missed about

second grade was never having to wonder who in my class really hated me, and who actually felt sorry for me.

I think probably the worst part of all was that even though I hated Mrs. Chase's attention, a tiny part of me still felt good about it. Like I really deserved it. I couldn't shut that part of myself up that said, really quietly: *You're just better than everyone else. Why else would she do this?*

There were two Marys in my class that year, so I was Mary O, and the stringy-haired girl I sort of remembered from kindergarten was Mary D. I didn't really know much about Mary D besides the fact that her dad was a pastor of some weird church near my old preschool, her parents were divorced, she could draw Disney characters better than anyone, and she was a little scary. She drew all the time, and everything she drew looked traced. She knew how to color with shading, which I still couldn't really do. My babysitter over the summer tried to teach me how to shade, how to press the crayon down harder against the black lines on the page, but I could never do it right. I worked hard to even make a Lion King coloring book Simba look okay, but Mary D could draw her own, with Rafiki and Nala in there too. She knew it, too, and had this weird intensity about it that made her scary. I never felt relaxed talking to Mary D.

Whenever Mrs. Chase decided who would be picked to do something special, she would pause – it *had* to be on purpose – between “Mary” and whichever letter she was going to say. After a few weeks we all knew it would be me, but there was still a moment of hope for everyone in the class – including me – when maybe, just maybe,

she would say D. But every time it was the pause, and then “Oh,” like Mrs. Chase had just realized something very important. Maybe so important that it might just have to be written down and hand-carried by one lucky student down to the principal’s office right away.

Because we had the same name, and because of the way Mrs. Chase always paused, Mary D and I were pretty much forced to be enemies. And Mary D was not an enemy you would want. Once, when my mom was driving me to piano lessons, I saw her outside in her yard. She lived in this split-level house with an ugly teal door. When we drove by Mary D was hitting a dog with an old branch, and laughing. It made me sad, and also afraid of her – she was missing something I had, something that would stop her from just going crazy and smacking me if I was her true enemy.

One day at lunch, to try to avoid this smacking, I sat next to Mary D. She bought her lunch every day; I brought mine. I hated the smell of the cafeteria food; it smelled like green-bean-water. The kids who bought their lunch every day always seemed different from me in some way. People who bought lunch had parents who didn’t make them lunch, the way my mother did. It was the same thing with kids who had divorced parents. Even though I probably shouldn’t have thought about them any differently than I thought about other kids, I always did.

I unwrapped my ham-and-cheese sandwich and asked Mary D if she had done any drawings lately. For a minute she looked like she didn’t believe I really cared, but then her face changed a little. “I did a new Jasmine,” she said.

“Oh, really?”

She pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of her denim vest and unfolded it, smoothing it out on the lunch table. “My mom said she likes it the best,” she said. “cuz I got the carpet so good. See? The edges and everything.” She was right. It was beautiful. Jasmine was lying on a flying carpet above a bunch of marked grass that smelled like apples. Her head was a little too big for her body, but otherwise she was perfect.

“Did you use smelly markers?” I asked her.

Mary D took a bite of her gross-looking turkey fricassee and nodded her head seriously. “Her hair smells like licorice,” she said. Lumpy gravy was dripping from the corner of her mouth.

I stared at the drawing. I could ace every spelling and math test and say all the state capitals, but I would never figure out how to make Jasmine’s eyes look just right, or much less draw her cheeks, her pointy chin. “That’s wicked good,” I told her, and I meant it.

“Thanks.” No smile. Mary D had a businesslike way of talking. Very fast and intense. I thought again of the dog and the dead branch and swallowed the piece of sandwich that was caught in my throat.

A week later Mrs. Chase told us she had some exciting news. “Harvey Packer is coming to our school to speak to the entire third grade,” she crackled, sounding completely unexcited. “He’s going to talk to you about being a weatherman and being on television every day.”

The room buzzed. This *was* exciting. Harvey Packer did the weather on the Channel 7 News every night – he was Lead Meteorologist. On Boston’s *Most Trusted* News Network. I had heard he was married to a teacher at my school, but never knew if it was really true, since there were no Mrs. Packer. I wondered if his name was fake, a just-for-television name. It did work with all the commercials: “HARVEY’S PACKING A PUNCH WITH TONIGHT’S *WET* FORECAST!” He was bald and nice-looking, always smiling sort of nervously, never looking very ready to punch anything, really. At the end of every weather update he would say something like, “Stay tuned for the news at six, and I’ll give *you* an update on this storm.” When he said “*you*” he would point at the camera, but sort of like he didn’t want to. I pictured his boss standing behind him, where New York might be on the weather map, glaring and pointing at him the same way.

“When Mr. Packer arrives here at Elliot,” Mrs. Chase went on, “we want to give him an extra-special welcome. So, a student from each class in the third grade will draw a picture of him doing the weather that will show him how much we appreciate him coming to see us.”

We buzzed again. One student from each class meant only four kids out of the hundred or so in our grade. This was the chance of a lifetime – to create a gift for a famous TV star. “I bet he would even show it on the news,” I heard Mary D whisper. My heart went faster. This could make me – any of us – famous.

Mrs. Chase was caught in a long cough that she finally found her way out of after we quieted down. She looked over at me and smiled her yellow smile. For the

first time, I was sort of glad I was the favorite. This was something I really wanted, and I might have a better chance at it. This wasn't a note delivery or a chalkboard math problem. I deserved something like this. "Class, listen up," she said. "The other teachers and I have decided that the best way to choose the artists will be to have each class vote."

I slumped down. A vote. I stared straight ahead, feeling everyone's smirking eyes on me, saying without saying it: "Not *this* time."

I knew as well as everyone else did that Mary D would be drawing the picture of Harvey Packer. After Mrs. Chase's announcement, she asked to hang up the drawing of Jasmine by the big window in the classroom, and Mrs. Chase said yes. I felt the words "I told you so" floating around the classroom like steam, but I tried to just ignore it and be friendly to everyone anyway. It was really the only way I knew how to be. The thought of ever confronting another person, or being really mean to someone's face, made my stomach flip. I was even nice to Christopher, the boy with the spiky mullet who hated me most in the class. He never told me he did, but everyone else made sure I knew.

The day of the vote seemed kind of pointless. Everyone had been admiring Jasmine at the window during the past week. The smell of her eyes was gone, but they stared out at the room with an eerie intensity that reminded me of Mary D herself. She was so strange, so unsmiling – but she was so proud of her drawings that you couldn't help but be proud too. Everyone seemed to like Mary D, either because

they were too scared not to or because they were amazed at her drawings. “That’s soooo good, Mary,” people would say when they walked by the princess. Every time I would turn around, then I’d realize they weren’t talking to me.

I guess I should explain something: it wasn’t that everyone hated me, or that no one ever talked to me ever, or that I was a total weirdo outcast. It wasn’t like that. I think everyone knew that it wasn’t *really* my fault I got picked for stuff all the time, but it was just kind of easier to blame me anyway. Since they all sort of knew I couldn’t help it, no one was really terrible to me. But still. I was kind of like that character on every TV show – the one who is known for some annoying thing they always do, and they do it every episode. The whole audience and all the other characters sort of groan when he comes in, but they know it’s just the way he is, so no one’s really outright *mean* to him. They don’t like him, but they put up with him.

If there was really a show with me in it, though, this is what would happen: the annoying thing would keep happening and happening until the good characters eventually were mean to him, all joined together, everyone against him. You’d feel sorry for that character eventually. Or at least I would.

Our voting ballots were shreds of yellow lined paper; the rough, dusty kind. I wrote in my neatest cursive: “Mary.” I paused for a second. Jasmine was watching me from the window and I looked around at everyone, writing in their choices. She was better. But I wanted it. Even if I wasn’t going to win, I had to at least give myself a chance. After “Mary,” I drew the most circular “O” that I could.

Mrs. Chase counted the ballots while we were at lunch. All twenty-six of us raced back to the classroom, almost tripping over each other. She wasted no time as we leaned forward at our desks. “I’ve counted the votes,” she said, adjusting her glasses. “And I am happy to announce--”

Happy? *Oh no.*

“—that our class will be represented by Mary--”

Her eyes met mine and the yellow smile told me before the letter came out. I felt sick.

“—Oh.”

I really didn’t think this would happen. Everyone always says that, I know, but it’s true. I smiled shakily and hunched over my shoulders. My desk was across from Christopher’s, and his tall brown hair was blocking my view of Mary D across the room. He looked like someone had just told him there was no Santa Claus. I thought he might actually cry.

I was afraid Mary D would burst into tears and run out of the room. But instead she just sat there, her mouth open and her eyes narrowed. I could see her trying to figure out what had just happened. Finally she looked up at Mrs. Chase, who was ridiculously asking everyone for a round of applause, and then past her to the drawing of Jasmine. I swear, the cartoon’s face had changed. Now it just looked mean. I wanted to cry, suddenly, because this would be one of those moments for Mary D that would bother her forever, one of those little things that really isn’t little at all. I knew moments like that. I could tell that Mary D would later rip up that

Jasmine drawing and throw it out. She would never have this chance, this exact chance, again. Everyone watched the unfairness settle on her shoulders, slumping her down in her seat. I don't think anyone saw it settling on me.

Mary D's best friend in the class was Kaitlyn, a beady-eyed, skinny girl who tried to act just like Mary D all the time. She tried to have that same non-smile all the time but it never really worked. She just looked dumb. A few days after the vote, Kaitlyn came up to me during gym class. Her red plastic jump rope was clicking as she dragged it along the gym floor.

“So Mary. I asked everyone in the class. And you didn't win the vote.”

I looked at her. I didn't feel as upset as I thought I would. I mean, I knew. But I had to say something. “You don't know that,” I said.

“Mary *D* got the most votes,” she said. “Not you.”

“Well, I didn't count the votes,” I said. “It's not my fault Mrs. Chase can't count.”

“Yes it is!” she said, raising her voice. The clicking of all the other jump ropes stopped. “You can't just draw the picture if you didn't even win!”

“Tell Mrs. Chase she counted wrong, if you really think so,” I said.

Then she threw down her jump rope with a loud snapping sound, leaving it coiled at her feet like a dead snake. Everyone stared. “Let the other Mary draw the picture!”

I wondered what the right thing to do really was. I knew I didn't get the most votes, but I wanted to draw that picture so much it hurt. I had sort of gotten used to the idea of the new stardom I would have, and to give it up for someone I didn't even like was silly. I think my quiet "no" was one part stubborn, because I wasn't going to let Kaitlyn tell me what to do, and another part selfish.

Kaitlyn picked up her jump rope and stormed away from me, dragging the plastic jump rope, and the clicking in the gym started again. I looked over at Mary D, jumping rope really fast, like she wanted to hurt something. I realized that now, even if I told her she could have my spot, she probably would have spit in my face.

The picture was beautiful. Three other girls from the other third grade classes and I used a picture of Harvey Packer from the newspaper that Mrs. Chase gave us to draw from. We got to miss classtime. Luckily none of these girls were friends with Mary D or even really knew the whole story, so they were nice to me. Harvey Packer's baldness was hard to draw, but we ended up just doing two Sharpie lines at the sides of his head and it looked just right. His mouth was a little line of a smile with two little curves at each end, to show we weren't just screwing around – we were artists. We drew all the details, even a little remote-clicker that he used to change the maps in his hand. It was too hard to make him point straight ahead like he did all the time on TV, so we had him pointing at a lumpy-looking Massachusetts with a raincloud over it. When the teachers saw this they decided to paste a real map of New England over

our colorful states. It looked better, I guess, but I liked our Massachusetts, and I bet Harvey Packer would have, too.

He was actually sort of boring when he came to the school, except when he talked about lightning, which I liked. I didn't even really care about the talk at Elliot. I sat too close to the TV all afternoon waiting for the news to come on and finally it did. "I went back to school today!" Harvey Packer said after the weather report, holding up the picture. I yelped and felt like my life had just gotten a lot bigger than it was before five o'clock.

Everyone saw the news, and everyone in my class was mad at me about it. It didn't take long for them to get back at me. One day Mrs. Chase went down to the office to make a phone call. She did this a lot, and I wondered who she was always calling. While we were sitting working on spelling sheets, her voice buzzed in the room over the intercom. "Class, I've forgotten my purse and I need it down at the office," she said. Her voice was loud, and crackly as ever.

Kaitlyn was closest to the intercom button. She ran over to it and pressed TALK. "Who do you want bring it down?" she asked, staring right at me.

A pause. "Mary," the crackling box answered.

Kaitlyn pressed TALK. "Which Mary?"

A longer, awful pause. And then, of course: "Oh."

Everyone went crazy. Christopher yelled something I couldn't understand – "GRRRAAAAHHH!" – and pounded his fist against his desk. A bunch of kids

yelled about how it wasn't fair. Other kids stood up so fast their chairs tipped over. I ran to Mrs. Chase's desk and grabbed her giant leather purse. It smelled like cigarettes and cottage cheese. And then I ran, because everyone else was getting up and chasing me out of the room, yelling "GET OUT! GET OUT!"

As I ran down the hall with the purse, I tried to block out the sounds of the yelling by figuring out how to ask my parents if I could be home-schooled.

A few weeks later Mrs. Chase sent me to deliver a note to my old first-grade teacher, Ms. Siegel. She was probably the nicest lady in the entire world. I wondered if Mrs. Chase had known that I liked Mrs. Siegel, if she had thought I might hang around talking to her for a little while, which of course, I did. She asked me how my advanced reading class was going, and I told her I loved it. We were reading *Bridge to Terabithia*. While we were talking, a curly-haired girl at her desk looked over at us with big eyes. Mrs. Siegel noticed. "Olivia here was just chosen for Advanced Reading," she told me, nodding at the big-eyed girl. Olivia stared at me and smiled a little. For once, I felt allowed to be proud.

When I got back to Mrs. Chase's room the class was sitting in a circle on the dirty purple rug. Christopher was in the middle, crying. He cried a lot, so this wasn't anything new. I was even used to everyone turning at the same time to stare at me when I came back to the room after one of my note deliveries. What got me was this:

"Mary, you might want to stay outside for a few more minutes."

I stared at Mrs. Chase. She gave me a knowing look. *You know how these kids are.* I hated that look. It made it seem like we were pals, like we were in on it together. “Why?” I asked. My voice was shaky.

“Well, some students are upset” – she glanced over at Christopher – “about ... you.”

My eyes burned. “I want to stay,” I said, trying not to let my voice shake and not at any of my classmates.

Mrs. Chase sighed. “Well, fine.” She turned to the rug full of angry faces. There was no way I was going to sit with them. I stayed standing by the edge of the chalkboard and watched. Christopher sobbed about how bad it made him feel when he never got chosen to do anything. At first I felt bad, watching him cry like that. Then I found myself staring at the back of his head. He had one of those long, skinny braids at the end of his spiky hair, and it looked ridiculous. I wanted to just cut it off, make him cry more. I smiled a little to myself while he was wailing. And then I wondered, standing there completely alone, what kind of person the third grade was making me become.

Soon it was warm, and none of us could stop ourselves. Massachusetts winters are more than a season long; they make days and weeks extra-long, with the sort of cold that makes you forget it has ever been warm. When May came and the sun came with it, we all went sort of crazy. We’d forgotten what it was like to have a nice day. Four girls in our class were sent to the principal’s office for sticking their heads out of the

window of the girls' room. Kids took their shoes off at recess just to feel the warmth of the basketball court against the soles of their feet. The air smelled like honeysuckle, and the wait for recess was never-ending. Mrs. Chase kept all the windows closed and we sweated through our afternoon lessons like miners. But it would be worth it, because soon, third grade was going to end.

We were having a silent lunch one Tuesday afternoon. It was silent because of Scott Lucas. The day before, he had tried to take over the cafeteria so we could all get early recess. He was a pudgy, red-haired kid with yellowish eyes. I didn't like him, but I couldn't help watching him, wondering what he might do next. I guess he decided that the best way to get us all early recess would be to knock over a giant trash barrel full of half-eaten Sloppy Joes and ham sandwiches. After it was on its side he stood on top of it, wobbling around, pumping his fists in the air. We all cheered, because even though it seemed sort of pointless, he still did it. Now we sat punished, eating and not talking. Dr. Wilson, the scary principal, walked around the cafeteria, watching us.

Not only was the lunch silent, but we had to sit with our classmates, like we didn't get enough of them during the five and a half hours a day we normally spent together. I was sitting across the lunch table from Christopher. When Dr. Wilson was on the opposite side of the cafeteria, Christopher kicked my shin.

"OW! Jerk," I whispered, glaring at him. I wondered how much it would take to make him start crying at silent lunch. Probably not much.

"What'd you get at the shuttle run?" He had weasel eyes.

“Ten seconds.” The shuttle run was a big event in gym class. You had to run back and forth between a piece of red tape and two erasers along the gym floor. When Mr. Van Wyck, the gym teacher who was always wearing sweatpants, yelled “GO”, you had to run from the tape, grab an eraser, bring it back to the tape, go get the other one, and bring that one back. I don’t know who invented this or why it became such a huge event at our school – and why erasers? Anyway, our times were recorded and told to us so that we could all compare numbers. Even though it was kind of a dumb idea, I loved the shuttle run. I was fast.

That year I didn’t ask anyone their times, because everyone would just say I was bragging. But I knew ten seconds was fast, and I walked around with that ten floating around in my head like a cloud, so that the next time I got a mean look or an “accidental” splash of water in the girl’s room from Mary D, I could just think of that ten and feel okay.

I had to ask. “What’d you get?” I kept my voice as low as possible. Dr. Wilson was circling back.

“You cheated!” Tears were coming. Christopher’s face was all scrunched up in a sad little frown.

“Yeah right. You *can’t* cheat at the shuttle run. What’d you *get*?”

“Ten point four,” he whispered. I knew he was lying. It was probably ten point eight, or maybe longer. “But I know I’m faster than *you*.”

A freckled boy named Jack leaned over. “You guys should race,” he said. “See who’s really the fastest.”

Mary D was a few seats down but she lunged over like a crazy person. “Yeah, *race!*” She hadn’t talked to me without yelling since the Harvey Packer picture. She looked so excited, gripping the edge of the table with her grubby, chewed hands. She wanted to see me lose. So did everybody else. And I realized, as Dr. Wilson walked by us stroking his mustache and glaring, that if I were them, I’d probably want to see me lose too. I took too big a bite from my sandwich and swallowed extra-hard. As Dr. Wilson got farther away, I whispered, “Okay. I’ll race.”

Christopher stared at me, eyes wide at first, then narrow.

“Are you gonna?” I asked him.

He sniffed. “Fine,” he said, and it was on.

The details of the race were worked out the next day at recess. We would race on Friday. To sort of imitate the shuttle run, Christopher and I would run across the tennis court, touch the fence at the edge, and run back to where we started. It was a longer run than our gym class test, but we didn’t have any extra erasers lying around, and couldn’t think of anything else that everyone could agree on.

Mary D seemed like she might go insane as she worked out every last detail. No kids with glasses were allowed to judge the finish line; it was too risky. She walked heel-to-toe along the green clay to measure the distance we would be running. As I watched her, I knew that this race was about more than just everyone wanting to see me finally lose. It was a chance to really hurt me. If I lost, Mary D and others would torture me. If I won, they would still hate me, but I would at least have proven

that I could win on my own, without a teacher wearing a whistle or holding a piece of chalk. Mary D was biting her lip as she went heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe. She loved being in charge. I had to win.

The day of the race was blindingly sunny and warm. Boys wore shorts and I wore my best sneakers. Christopher wore a too-big Celtics jersey that looked new. I wondered if he had practiced sprints the night before, which I didn't let myself do. I wouldn't be a kid that tried too hard. I was going to win from natural speed and my own amazing talent. There was no focusing on school the entire morning; when Mrs. Chase repeatedly called on me I answered like a retarded robot. Confused, she sent me to the nurse's office.

When the lunch bell rang I thought I might faint. Mary D shot me a mean look and grinned. "Almost time," she said. Like I didn't know.

Christopher wouldn't look at me all day. I think if anyone had talked to him he would have burst into tears. A new admiration for Christopher had spread throughout the class despite his crybaby status; he was challenging me. At lunch some of the tough boys moved over to let him sit down. He looked so pathetically happy. It made me want to win even more.

We stood at the starting line, soon to become the finish line.

My blood was electric. It was going through my legs so fast it hurt. Christopher was jumping up and down, and his Celtics jersey flapped in the wind like a flag. Our entire class was gathered around, plus other kids from the third grade.

Emily, Kevin, and Mark were there. Emily smiled at me and gave me the thumbs up, and Kevin and Mark yelled “WOO” as the crowd got louder. I was glad they were there.

Mary D was judging one side of the line; Kaitlyn was at the other. I felt trapped by their eyes. “When I say go,” Mary said, “and NOT BEFORE, you guys run to the fence, touch it, and run back. Me and Kaitlyn are the judges. All you guys, no cheering allowed till the end.”

These overly serious instructions were pretty pointless. I think she said them only so she could feel like she was in charge. Plus they gave her a chance to accuse me of cheating, since she looked right at me during the “NOT BEFORE” section of her little speech. I took some deep breaths. A breeze picked up and I squinted into the sky. *It's only a race*, I told myself, but my hands wouldn't stop shaking.

We crouched at the white line. I stared at the chain-link fence ahead of me. It was old, a diamond pattern of fencing tied in a few places to horizontal metal poles that held it up. I would boomerang off that fence and keep speeding up. Hopefully Christopher would stumble and trip over himself.

We were ready.

When Mary D yelled “GO!” I took off towards the fence, forgetting everyone around me, forgetting even Christopher, running right next to me, pounding his feet into the clay like he wanted to leave a trail of cracks. I was lighter as I ran, my feet barely touching the court as I burned my eyes into that chain-link fence. The diamond spaces got closer and closer and I raised my hands to catch myself. I was a

step or two ahead and as we reached the fence, I saw out of the corner of my eye that Christopher's hands were thrown up too. I felt my fingers hit the metal and waited for the fence to push me back, but something was wrong, I felt all give and no hold, the metal seemed to bend against my palms and I kept going forward. I heard the sound before I felt it, and then the clay of the tennis courts was against my cheek. I felt sick to my stomach, then felt nothing.

It turned out that the fence was older than we thought. The diamond-patterned chain link was not fastened very tightly to the horizontal metal frame. With all of the planning that had gone into this race, no one had bothered to check how sturdy it was. Christopher and I both hit the section of the fence which was not fastened at all to the middle metal pole, which was at eye-level for both of us. The links looked connected, but when pushed, they bowed back until the chain-link finally caught, still tied pretty well to the top and bottom poles. Christopher and I slammed our faces into the middle pole at nearly the same exact moment, though I still swear I hit a second before him, our fingers gripping the fence, almost breaking our cheeks before we realized what was going on. Too stunned even for pain, we stumbled away, all of our energy vibrating in our faces like Looney Tunes characters. Later, when I tried to recreate what happened in my head, I pictured tiny cartoon birds rising up from both our unconscious bodies and twirling around our heads.

I woke up with my face against the court. A terrible pain shot through my skull like a nail. I saw a crowd gathered around me and a heap of a Celtics jersey next to me.

Christopher, yes. I had run a race against him to prove ... what? That I was fast, or that I would race at all? Everything was blurry and the sun was blinding me. All I knew was that somehow, I had ended up unconscious on the ground.

“Hey, she’s awake!”

“Maybe they’ll call an ambulance.”

“Does that mean she won? Cuz she did wake up first.”

I could only open one eye. The crowd suddenly broke up and the teacher on duty at recess ran over with Emily at her side, pointing. I heard a choking sob from the heap next to me and knew that Christopher was okay. “We’ve got to get you two to the nurse’s office,” the birdlike teacher chirped. She helped me up and I stumbled along, somehow not even crying. Maybe my tear ducts had slammed shut. As Christopher was helped up, I saw that his face was wet and shiny. His tears were still working. He started to wail and I thought, well, at least I won this part.

As we were led towards the nurse’s office, I saw Mary D with my one open eye. She hadn’t run over to the fence with the rest of the crowd, but was still standing at the finish line, staring at the white paint, like we were still going to come back and cross it.

There were no broken bones, only two black eyes on two different faces. For the next week Christopher and I were asked by every single grown-up in Elliot Elementary if we had butted heads. It stopped being funny after the first time. Mrs. Chase was the only one who never asked us anything about our matching bruises. I know she

noticed them when we both got back to class late that day, with matching ice packs wrapped in those brown paper towels that only elementary schools use. She did a sort of double-take when we came in, but she didn't say anything. Instead she continued with the lesson, telling us to take out our workbooks, and finishing her cursive Q on the board. Maybe she just didn't care, or maybe she realized that what she had done to me all year had something to do with the bruises, and felt guilty. I hoped that was why.

Everyone was sort of disappointed, because nobody could tell for sure who hit the fence first. People tried to argue about it, but it was useless. I wondered if maybe Christopher and I would be friends now, with our matching bruises. But he was as sad and hurt-looking as ever, just a little quieter about it. In fact, everyone was a little quieter towards me, watching me like they were waiting for me to do something, or say something. Waiting for the race to be finished, for someone to cross that white line first, to be declared the winner by a mad little girl.

This waiting lasted the rest of the school year, which was almost over anyway. I thought that the whole thing had ended up being sort of funny, but no one else seemed to think so, especially not Christopher, and especially not Mary D. I guess I could understand, though. Even though I did find it a little bit funny then – our vibrating faces like gongs slamming against the court, the cartoon birds, the matching ice packs – there was still a crazy sort of importance to that race, one that kept shaking me long after the vibrations in the bones of my bruised face had stopped. It was do-or-die, and we hadn't done, we hadn't died. We had just stumbled.

When I think of Mary D now, and wonder where she might be, I can only imagine her still waiting at that white line painted over green clay, waiting for us to get up, waiting to declare the winner. And sometimes I imagine myself struggling up, blinded in one eye, nearly broken by a crappy fence but still running, whistling toward the edge of the court, faster than I'd ever run, past Mrs. Chase, past my old bus stop and the thorny bushes, past Mary D, leaving everyone in a cloud of cartoon dust, all of them nodding in a final, satisfying confirmation.

Epilogue

Mary was jet-lagged, still. Her mind was caught between times, playing musical chairs and losing at every turn, never finding a place to sit. Thankfully, she didn't have to focus on the road. Driving home from Swarthmore was automatic for her now – the lane changes, the tolls, each exit. She felt the way she did whenever she sat down at a piano, playing Für Elise perfectly without having practiced it in years. Her body remembered, right down to the bones.

She hadn't been home in two years. She flew from South Africa back to Philadelphia first to retrieve her car, which she had lent to a younger friend for the past two years. Though it felt automatic, it also felt strange to be driving home, to get closer and closer to everything in Natick. Closer and closer to deciding what would come next. She'd hit the Pike half an hour ago and was almost there.

Natick had no friends left that she would have sought out. Kevin, tough as ever. He could have been there, but she was never quite sure where he was. He hadn't gone to college and the last she'd heard he was on one of his many road trips across the country. "How does Kevin always have the money to make all those trips?" her mother would ask her on the phone. "I mean, he doesn't even have a job, from what I've heard." Mary didn't have the heart to explain.

Emily, still in college in Baltimore. She'd gotten really sick after high school, and took some years off. Mary had tried to keep in touch with her, but hadn't done all that well. By the end of high school they'd already grown apart without realizing it. Neither acknowledged this fact; both pretended they were as close as ever, their

emails full of exclamation points. *I'm doing great! Hope all is well! We should get together soon!!*

And Mark. He was working in New York. An architectural firm. “You guys are gonna be together forever, I just *know* it,” Emily said to her in ninth grade. She’d believed it then, too. Part of her still believed it, childishly. Maybe she’d call him soon, ask him how he was. But he might think it was strange. Or desperate.

She turned off the Pike.

Mary drove slowly once she reached Fisher Street, the long, sloping road with the archway of trees over its lowest point, right before the old train tracks that bent and passed Mark’s old house. The street’s shape was like a fisherman’s line mid-cast. Mary always thought that was the story behind its name, until she learned in school about Elliot Fisher and the other co-founders of the town. They taught the Indians Christianity, took their land, and named all the streets after themselves.

Mary drove slower and remembered walking home in middle school with a new kid, Andrew. He was strange-looking, with a large head and skinny legs, and had no brothers or sisters. Mary felt sorry for him. They walked steps ahead of the rest of the group, as Kevin threw rocks at Andrew’s ankles and yelled “FAGGOT” at him. She remembered Andrew telling her about how fast a cheetah could run. Her listening, pretending not to hear anything else as the rocks skipped along the pavement. She didn’t remember ever noticing the way these trees bent towards each other, like tentative lovers. Not once. All she remembered was constantly turning

inward, desperately concerned with the systoles of her youth, paying scant attention to everything outside of herself. Like the slow way her grandmother waved when she drove by, going to afternoon Mass, or how the sky over the lake looked as though it were made of ice on winter mornings.

It was those other moments – the shrill “FAGGOT” echoing into the trees, or the first time Mark showed her the scar on his arm, the static of the Red Sox losing on Kevin’s portable radio – that, no matter how far she drove, Mary couldn’t manage to escape. Couldn’t stop writing down. Even in the middle of South Africa.

She reached the intersection where the old bus stop had been, where it still was. Kids still waited every morning to be shuttled off to Elliot Elementary. The school Mary had attended was knocked down the year after she left. They’d used a wrecking ball, a method Mary had always considered strangely archaic. A modern, curving, funky building now stood where the squat brick school used to be. They had done the same thing to Mary’s middle school – a wrecking ball, again. After her college graduation Mary half-expected her entire campus to come crashing down behind her. The structures of her past were always collapsing in on themselves, the dust of them tickling her heels as she moved along.

Mary pulled over at the bus stop and got out of the car. It was like stepping into a freezer. She considered the last two years in South Africa and felt the momentary sting of the memory of real warmth. She had been so far away for so long, and yet standing here now, by a new, clean stop sign, she felt as though she had dropped through that loose floorboard in Africa that always seemed to creak beneath

her feet.

Mrs. Wicklow's house. The woman was long dead by now. Her son rented the house out to dubious boarders, Mary's mother had told her, and all the parents complained, what with the bus stop being so close. An old Chevy was parked in the driveway, covered in bumper stickers. *I'm Going Nucking Futs. My Other Ride is Your Daughter!* The thorny bushes were overgrown, sparkling with ice crystals. Mary ran her cold hands over them. Thick with leaves, not pruned back as they always had been. Mary frowned, and plunged her hand deep into the frozen leaves. No thorns.

Her first day of kindergarten. The corduroy pants she never wore again. Blood-flowers. Swallowing. She plunged her hand in again, determined, her skin now raw with the cold. The leaves were cold and cushiony.

She wanted to feel the familiar sting; aching for cuts that had scabbed and healed years ago. The floorboard feeling came back. A creakiness shook the pavement. Mary thought of landing back in the middle of the savannah with the acacia tree. The buzzing air and the whistling. Scientists can't figure out the relationship between the tree and the stinging ants, she had told Jarrett under that baking sun. It was simple, though: they gave the tree a voice.

Mary got back into her car, her hands icy. She rolled up her pant leg to rub the back of her leg; it was smooth, scarless. But a little raw. She hummed softly, drumming the wheel with her fingernails as she drove home.