

PRINTZ AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*

JOHN GREEN



★ "PROFOUNDLY
MOVING."

—SLJ, STARRED REVIEW

**PAPER
TOWNS**

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

M O R N I N G

With a bag in each hand, I paused for a moment outside the van, staring at her. "Well, it was a helluva night," I said finally.

"Come here," she said, and I took a step forward. She hugged me, and the bags made it hard to hug her back, but if I dropped them I might wake someone. I could feel her on her tiptoes and then her mouth was right up against my ear and she said, very clearly, "I. Will. Miss. Hanging. Out. With. You."

"You don't have to," I answered aloud. I tried to hide my disappointment. "If you don't like them anymore," I said, "just hang out with me. My friends are actually, like, nice."

Her lips were so close to me that I could feel her smile. "I'm afraid it's not possible," she whispered. She let go then, but kept looking at me, taking step after step backward. She raised her eyebrows finally, and smiled, and I believed the smile. I watched her climb up a tree and then lift herself onto the roof outside of her second-floor bedroom window. She jammed her window open and crawled inside.

I walked through my unlocked front door, tiptoed through the kitchen to my bedroom, peeled off my jeans, threw them into a corner of the closet back near the window screen, downloaded the picture of Jase, and got into bed, my mind booming with the things I would say to her at school.

PAPER TOWNS

JOHN GREEN



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*To Julie Strauss-Gabel, without whom none of this
could have become real*



And after, when we went outside to look at her finished lantern from the road, I said I liked the way her light shone through the face that flickered in the dark.

— “Jack O’Lantern,” Katrina Vandenberg in *Atlas*

People say friends don’t destroy one another. What do they know about friends?

— “Game Shows Touch Our Lives,” The Mountain Goats

The logo for NCLC (National Children's Leadership Council) features the letters "NCLC" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a white square that has rounded corners. This white square is set against a background of two overlapping, rounded shapes: a blue one on the left and an orange one on the right, both with rounded corners. The overall design is modern and clean.

PAPER TOWNS



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The logo for NCLC (National Council for Learning) is centered on the page. It features the letters 'NCLC' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The text is set against a white background that is partially enclosed by a thick, orange, rounded rectangular border. This orange border is itself surrounded by a larger, light blue, rounded rectangular border. The overall design is modern and professional.

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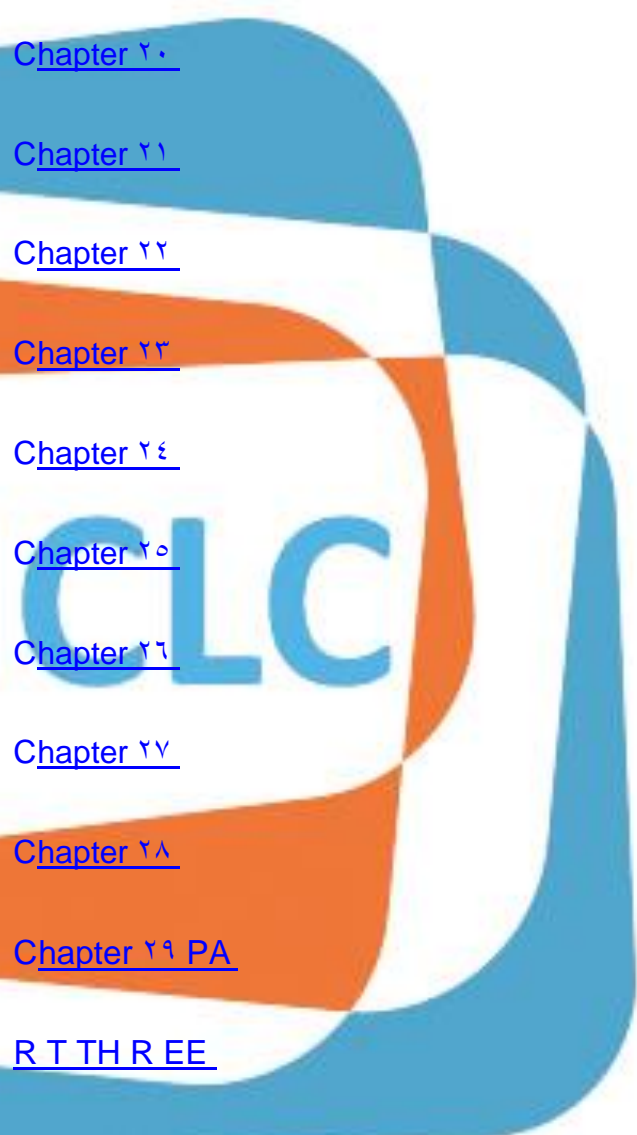
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PROLOGUE

The way I figure it, everyone gets a miracle. Like, I will probably never be struck by lightning, or win a Nobel Prize, or become the dictator of a small nation in the Pacific Islands, or contract terminal ear cancer, or spontaneously combust. But if you consider all the unlikely things together, at least one of them will probably happen to each of us. I could have seen it rain frogs. I could have stepped foot on Mars. I could have been eaten by a whale. I could have married the queen of England or survived months at sea. But my miracle was different. My miracle was this: out of all the houses in all the subdivisions in all of Florida, I ended up living next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman.

Our subdivision, Jefferson Park, used to be a navy base. But then the navy didn't need it anymore, so it returned the land to the citizens of Orlando, Florida, who decided to build a massive subdivision because that's what Florida does with land. My parents and Margo's parents ended up moving next door to one another just after the first houses were built. Margo and I were two.

Before Jefferson Park was a Pleasantville, and before it was a navy base, it belonged to an actual Jefferson, this guy Dr. Jefferson Jefferson. Dr. Jefferson Jefferson has a school named after him in Orlando and also a large charitable foundation, but the fascinating and unbelievable-but-true thing about Dr. Jefferson Jefferson is that he was not a doctor of any kind. He was just an orange juice salesman named Jefferson Jefferson. When he became rich and powerful, he went to court, made "Jefferson" his middle name, and then changed his first name to "Dr." Capital D. Lowercase r. Period.

So Margo and I were nine. Our parents were friends, so we would sometimes play together, biking past the cul-de-sacked streets to Jefferson Park itself, the hub of our subdivision's wheel.

I always got very nervous whenever I heard that Margo was about to show up, on account of how she was the most fantastically gorgeous creature that God had ever created. On the morning in question, she wore white shorts and a pink T-shirt that featured a green dragon breathing a fire of orange glitter. It is difficult to explain how awesome I found this T-shirt at the time.

Margo, as always, biked standing up, her arms locked as she leaned above the handlebars, her purple sneakers a circuitous blur. It was a steam-hot day in March. The sky was clear, but the air tasted acidic, like it might storm later.

At the time, I fancied myself an inventor, and after we locked up our bikes and began the short walk across the park to the playground, I told Margo about an idea I had for an invention called the Ringolator. The Ringolator was a gigantic cannon that would shoot big, colored rocks into a very low orbit, giving Earth the same sort of rings that Saturn has. (I still think this would be a fine idea,

but it turns out that building a cannon that can shoot boulders into a low orbit is fairly complicated.)
I'd been in this park so many times before that it was mapped in my mind, so we were only a few steps inside when I began to sense that the world was out of order, even though I couldn't immediately figure out *what* was different.
"Quentin," Margo said quietly, calmly.
She was pointing. And then I realized *what* was different.



There was a live oak a few feet ahead of us. Thick and gnarled and ancient-looking. That was not new. The playground on our right. Not new, either. But now, a guy wearing a gray suit, slumped against the trunk of the oak tree. Not moving. This was new. He was encircled by blood; a half-dried fountain of it poured out of his mouth. The mouth open in a way that mouths generally shouldn't be. Flies at rest on his pale forehead.

"He's dead," Margo said, as if I couldn't tell.

I took two small steps backward. I remember thinking that if I made any sudden movements, he might wake up and attack me. Maybe he was a zombie. I knew zombies weren't real, but he sure *looked* like a potential zombie.

As I took those two steps back, Margo took two equally small and quiet steps forward. "His eyes are open," she said.

"Wegottagohome," I said.

"I thought you closed your eyes when you died," she said. "Margowegottagohomeandtell."

She took another step. She was close enough now to reach out and touch his foot. "What do you think happened to him?" she asked. "Maybe it was drugs or something."

I didn't want to leave Margo alone with the dead guy who might be an attack zombie, but I also didn't care to stand around and chat about the circumstances of his demise. I gathered my courage and stepped forward to take her hand. "Margowegotta-gorightnow!"

"Okay, yeah," she said. We ran to our bikes, my stomach churning with something that felt exactly like excitement, but wasn't. We got on our bikes and I let her go in front of me because I was crying and didn't want her to see. I could see blood on the soles of her purple sneakers. His blood. The dead guy blood.

And then we were back home in our separate houses. My parents called 911, and I heard the sirens in the distance and asked to see the fire trucks, but my mom said no. Then I took a nap.

Both my parents are therapists, which means that I am really goddamned well adjusted. So when I woke up, I had a long conversation with my mom about the cycle of life, and how death is part of life but not a part of life I needed to be particularly concerned about at the age of nine, and I felt better. Honestly, I never worried about it much. Which is saying something, because I can do some worrying.

Here's the thing: I found a dead guy. Little, adorable nine-year-old me and my even littler and more adorable playdate found a guy with blood pouring out of his mouth, and that blood was on her little, adorable sneakers as we biked home. It's all very dramatic and everything, but so what? I didn't know the guy. People I don't know die all the damned time. If I had a nervous breakdown every time something awful happened in the world, I'd be crazier than a shithouse rat.

That night, I went into my room at nine o'clock to go to bed, because nine o'clock was my bedtime. My mom tucked me in, told me she loved me, and I said, "See you tomorrow," and she said, "See you tomorrow," and then she turned out the lights and closed the door almost-all-the-way.

As I turned on my side, I saw Margo Roth Spiegelman standing outside my window, her face almost pressed against the screen. I got up and opened the window, but the screen stayed between us, pixelating her.

"I did an investigation," she said quite seriously. Even up close the screen broke her face apart, but I could tell that she was holding a little notebook and a pencil with teeth marks around the eraser. She glanced down at her notes. "Mrs. Feldman from over on Jefferson Court said his name was Robert



Joyner. She told me he lived on Jefferson Road in one of those condos on top of the grocery store, so I went over there and there were a bunch of policemen, and one of them asked if I worked at the school paper, and I said our school didn't have a paper, and he said as long as I wasn't a journalist he would answer my questions. He said Robert Joyner was thirty-six years old. A lawyer. They wouldn't let me in the apartment, but a lady named Juanita Alvarez lives next door to him, and I got into her apartment by asking if I could borrow a cup of sugar, and then she said that Robert Joyner had killed himself with a gun. And then I asked why, and then she told me that he was getting a divorce and was sad about it."

She stopped then, and I just looked at her, her face gray and moonlit and split into a thousand little pieces by the weave of the window screen. Her wide, round eyes flitted back and forth from her notebook to me. "Lots of people get divorces and don't kill themselves," I said.

"I know," she said, excitement in her voice. "That's what I told Juanita Alvarez. And then she said . . ." Margo flipped the notebook page. "She said that Mr. Joyner was troubled. And then I asked what that meant, and then she told me that we should just pray for him and that I needed to take the sugar to my mom, and I said forget the sugar and left."

I said nothing again. I just wanted her to keep talking—that small voice tense with the excitement of almost knowing things, making me feel like something important was happening to me.

"I think I maybe know why," she finally said. "Why?"

"Maybe all the strings inside him broke," she said.

While I tried to think of something to say in answer to that, I reached forward and pressed the lock on the screen between us, dislodging it from the window. I placed the screen on the floor, but she didn't give me a chance to speak. Before I could sit back down, she just raised her face up toward me and whispered, "Shut the window." So I did. I thought she would leave, but she just stood there, watching me. I waved at her and smiled, but her eyes seemed fixed on something behind me something monstrous that had already drained the blood from her face, and I felt too afraid to turn around to see. But there was nothing behind me, of course—except maybe the dead guy.

I stopped waving. My head was level with hers as we stared at each other from opposite sides of the glass. I don't remember how it ended—if I went to bed or she did. In my memory, it doesn't end. We just stay there, looking at each other, forever.

Margo always loved mysteries. And in everything that came afterward, I could never stop thinking that maybe she loved mysteries so much that she became one.

PART ONE

The
Strings



The longest day of my life began tardily. I woke up late, took too long in the shower, and ended up having to enjoy my breakfast in the passenger seat of my mom's minivan at 7:15 that Wednesday morning.

I usually got a ride to school with my best friend, Ben Starling, but Ben had gone to school on time, making him useless to me. "On time" for us was thirty minutes before school actually started because the half hour before the first bell was the highlight of our social calendars: standing outside the side door that led into the band room and just talking. Most of my friends were in band, and most of my free time during school was spent within twenty feet of the band room. But I was not in the band, because I suffer from the kind of tone deafness that is generally associated with actual deafness I was going to be twenty minutes late, which technically meant that I'd still be ten minutes early for school itself.

As she drove, Mom was asking me about classes and finals and prom.

"I don't believe in prom," I reminded her as she rounded a corner. I expertly angled my raisin bran to accommodate the g-forces. I'd done this before.

"Well, there's no harm in just going with a friend. I'm sure you could ask Cassie Hiney." And I *could* have asked Cassie Hiney, who was actually perfectly nice and pleasant and cute, despite having a fantastically unfortunate last name.

"It's not just that I don't like prom. I also don't like people who like prom," I explained, although this was, in point of fact, untrue. Ben was absolutely gaga over the idea of going.

Mom turned into school, and I held the mostly empty bowl with both hands as we drove over a speed bump. I glanced over at the senior parking lot. Margo Roth Spiegelman's silver Honda was parked in its usual spot. Mom pulled the minivan into a cul-de-sac outside the band room and kissed me on the cheek. I could see Ben and my other friends standing in a semicircle.

I walked up to them, and the half circle effortlessly expanded to include me. They were talking about my ex-girlfriend Suzie Chung, who played cello and was apparently creating quite a stir by dating a baseball player named Taddy Mac. Whether this was his given name, I did not know. But at any rate, Suzie had decided to go to prom with Taddy Mac. Another casualty.

"Bro," said Ben, standing across from me. He nodded his head and turned around. I followed him out of the circle and through the door. A small, olive-skinned creature who had hit puberty but never hit it very hard, Ben had been my best friend since fifth grade, when we both finally owed up to the fact that neither of us was likely to attract anyone else as a best friend. Plus, he tried hard, and I liked that—most of the time.

"How ya doin'?" I asked. We were safely inside, everyone else's conversations making ours inaudible.

“Radar is going to prom,” he said morosely. Radar was our other best friend. We called him Radar because he looked like a little bespectacled guy called Radar on this old TV show *M*A*S*H*, except the TV Radar wasn’t black, and white. At some point after the nicknaming, our Radar grew about six inches and started wearing contacts, so I suppose that’s why. He actually didn’t look like the guy on *M*A*S*H* at all, but close. With three and a half weeks left of high school, we weren’t very well going to renickname him.

“That girl Angela?” I asked. Radar never told us anything about his love life, but this did not



dissuade us from frequent speculation.

Ben nodded, and then said, "You know my big plan to ask a freshbunny to prom because they're the only girls who don't know the Bloody Ben story?" I nodded.

"Well," Ben said, "this morning some darling little ninth-grade honeybunny came up to me and asked me if I was Bloody Ben, and I began to explain that it was a kidney infection, and she giggled and ran away. So that's out."

In tenth grade, Ben was hospitalized for a kidney infection, butbecca Arrington, Margo's best friend, started a rumor that the real reason he had blood in his urine was due to chronic masturbation. Despite its medical implausibility, this story had haunted Ben ever since. "That sucks," I said.

Ben started outlining plans for finding a date, but I was only half listening, because through the thickening mass of humanity crowding the hallway, I could see Margo Roth Spiegelman. She was next to her locker, standing beside her boyfriend, Jase. She wore a white skirt to her knees and a blue print top. I could see her collarbone. She was laughing at something hysterical—her shoulders bent forward, her big eyes crinkling at their corners, her mouth open wide. But it didn't seem to be anything Jase had said, because she was looking away from him, across the hallway to a bank of lockers. I followed her eyes and sawbecca Arrington draped all over some baseball player like she was an ornament and he a Christmas tree. I smiled at Margo, even though I knew she couldn't see me.

"Bro, you should just hit that. Forget about Jase. God, that is one candy-coated honeybunny." As we walked, I kept taking glances at her through the crowd, quick snapshots: a photographic series entitled *Perfection Stands Still While Mortals Walk Past*. As I got closer, I thought maybe she wasn't laughing after all. Maybe she'd received a surprise or a gift or something. She couldn't seem to close her mouth.

"Yeah," I said to Ben, still not listening, still trying to see as much of her as I could without being too obvious. It wasn't even that she was so pretty. She was just so awesome, and in the literal sense. And then we were too far past her, too many people walking between her and me, and I never even got close enough to hear her speak or understand whatever the hilarious surprise had been. Ben shook his head, because he had seen me see her a thousand times, and he was used to it.

"Honestly, she's hot, but she's not *that* hot. You know who's seriously hot?" "Who?" I asked.

"Lacey," he said, who was Margo's other best friend. "Also your mom. Bro, I saw your mom kiss you on the cheek this morning, and forgive me, but I swear to God I was like, *man, I wish I was Q. And also, I wish my cheeks had penises.*" I elbowed him in the ribs, but I was still thinking about Margo because she was the only legend who lived next door to me. Margo Roth Spiegelman, whose six-syllable name was often spoken in its entirety with a kind of quiet reverence. Margo Roth Spiegelman whose stories of epic adventures would blow through school like a summer storm: an old guy living in a broken-down house in Hot Coffee, Mississippi, taught Margo how to play the guitar. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who spent three days traveling with the circus—they thought she had potential on the trapeze. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who drank a cup of herbal tea with the Millionaires backstage after a concert in St. Louis while they drank whiskey. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who got into that concert by telling the bouncer she was the bassist's

girlfriend, and didn't they recognize her, and come on guys seriously, my name is Margo Roth Spiegelman and if you go back there and ask the bassist to take one look at me, he will tell you that I either am his girlfriend or he wishes I was, and then the bouncer did so, and then the bassist said "yeah that's my girlfriend let her in the show," and then later the bassist wanted to hook up with her and she *rejected the bassist from the Mallionaires*.

The stories, when they were shared, inevitably ended with, *I mean, can you believe it? We often*



could not, but they always proved true.

And then we were at our lockers. Radar was leaning against Ben's locker, typing into a handheld device.

"So you're going to prom," I said to him. He looked up, and then looked back down.

"I'm de-vandalizing the Omnictionary article about a former prime minister of France. Last night someone deleted the entire entry and then replaced it with the sentence 'Jacques Chirac is a gay,' which as it happens is incorrect both factually and grammatically." Radar is a big-time editor of this online user-created reference source called Omnictionary. His whole life is devoted to the maintenance and well-being of Omnictionary. This was but one of several reasons why his having a prom date was somewhat surprising.

"So you're going to prom," I repeated.

"Sorry," he said without looking up. It was a well-known fact that I was opposed to prom. Absolutely nothing about any of it appealed to me— not slow dancing, not fast dancing, not the dresses, and definitely not the rented tuxedo. Renting a tuxedo seemed to me an excellent way to contract some hideous disease from its previous tenant, and I did not aspire to become the world's only virgin with pubic lice.

"Bro," Ben said to Radar, "the freshhoneys know about the Bloody Ben story." Radar put the handheld away finally and nodded sympathetically. "So anyway," Ben continued, "my two remaining strategies are either to purchase a prom date on the Internet or fly to Missouri and kidnap some nice corn-fed little honeybunny." I'd tried telling Ben that "honeybunny" sounded more sexist and lame than retro-cool, but he refused to abandon the practice. He called his own mother a honeybunny. There was no fixing him.

"I'll ask Angela if she knows anybody," Radar said. "Although getting you a date to prom will be harder than turning lead into gold."

"Getting you a date to prom is so hard that the hypothetical idea itself is actually used to cut diamonds," I added.

Radar tapped a locker twice with his fist to express his approval, and then came back with another. "Ben, getting you a date to prom is so hard that the American government believes the problem cannot be solved with diplomacy, but will instead require force."

I was trying to think of another one when we all three simultaneously saw the human-shaped container of anabolic steroids known as Chuck Parson walking toward us with some intent. Chuck Parson did not participate in organized sports, because to do so would distract from the larger goal of his life: to one day be convicted of homicide. "Hey, faggots," he called.

"Chuck," I answered, as friendly as I could muster. Chuck hadn't given us any serious trouble in a couple years— someone in cool kid land laid down the edict that we were to be left alone. So it was a little unusual for him even to talk to us.

Maybe because I spoke and maybe not, he slammed his hands against the lockers on either side of me and then leaned in close enough for me to contemplate his toothpaste brand. "What do you know about Margo and Jase?"

“U h,” I said. I thought of everything I knew about them : Jase w as M argo R oth Spiegelm an’s first and only serious boyfriend. They began dating at the tail end of last year. They w ere both going to U niversity of Florida next year. Jase got a baseball scholarship there. H e w as never over at her house, except to pick her up. She never acted as if she liked him all that m uch, but then she never acted as if she liked anyone all that m uch. “N othing,” I said finally.

“D on’t shit m e around,” he grow led.



"I barely even *know* her," I said, which had become true.

He considered my answer for a minute, and I tried hard to stare at his close-set eyes. He nodded very slightly, pushed off the lockers, and walked away to attend his first-period class: The Care and Feeding of Pectoral Muscles. The second bell rang. One minute to class. Radar and I had calc; Ben had finite mathematics. The classrooms were adjacent; we walked toward them together, the three of us in a row, trusting that the tide of classmates would part enough to let us by, and it did.

I said, "Getting you a date to prom is so hard that a thousand monkeys typing at a thousand typewriters for a thousand years would never once type '*I will go to prom with Ben.*'"

Ben could not resist tearing himself apart. "My prom prospects are so poor that Q's grandma turned me down. She said she was waiting for Radar to ask her."

Radar nodded his head slowly. "It's true, Q. Your grandma loves the brothers."

It was so pathetically easy to forget about Chuck, to talk about prom even though I didn't give a shit about prom. Such was life that morning: nothing really mattered that much, not the good things and not the bad ones. We were in the business of mutual amusement, and we were reasonably prosperous.

I spent the next three hours in classrooms, trying not to look at the clocks above various blackboards and then looking at the clocks, and then being amazed that only a few minutes had passed since I last looked at the clock. I'd had nearly four years of experience looking at these clocks, but their sluggishness never ceased to surprise. If I am ever told that I have one day to live, I will head straight for the hallowed halls of Winter Park High School, where a day has been known to last a thousand years.

But as much as it felt like third-period physics would never end, it did, and then I was in the cafeteria with Ben. Radar had fifth-period lunch with most of our other friends, so Ben and I generally sat together alone, a couple seats between us and a group of drama kids we knew. Today, we were both eating mini pepperoni pizzas.

"Pizza's good," I said. He nodded distractedly. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said through a mouthful of pizza. He swallowed. "I know you think it's dumb, but I want to go to prom."

"\ . I do think it's dumb; ʘ . If you want to go, just go; ʚ . If I'm not mistaken, you haven't even asked anyone."

"I asked Cassie Hiney during math. I wrote her a note." I raised my eyebrows questioningly. Ben reached into his shorts and slid a heavily folded piece of paper to me. I flattened it out:

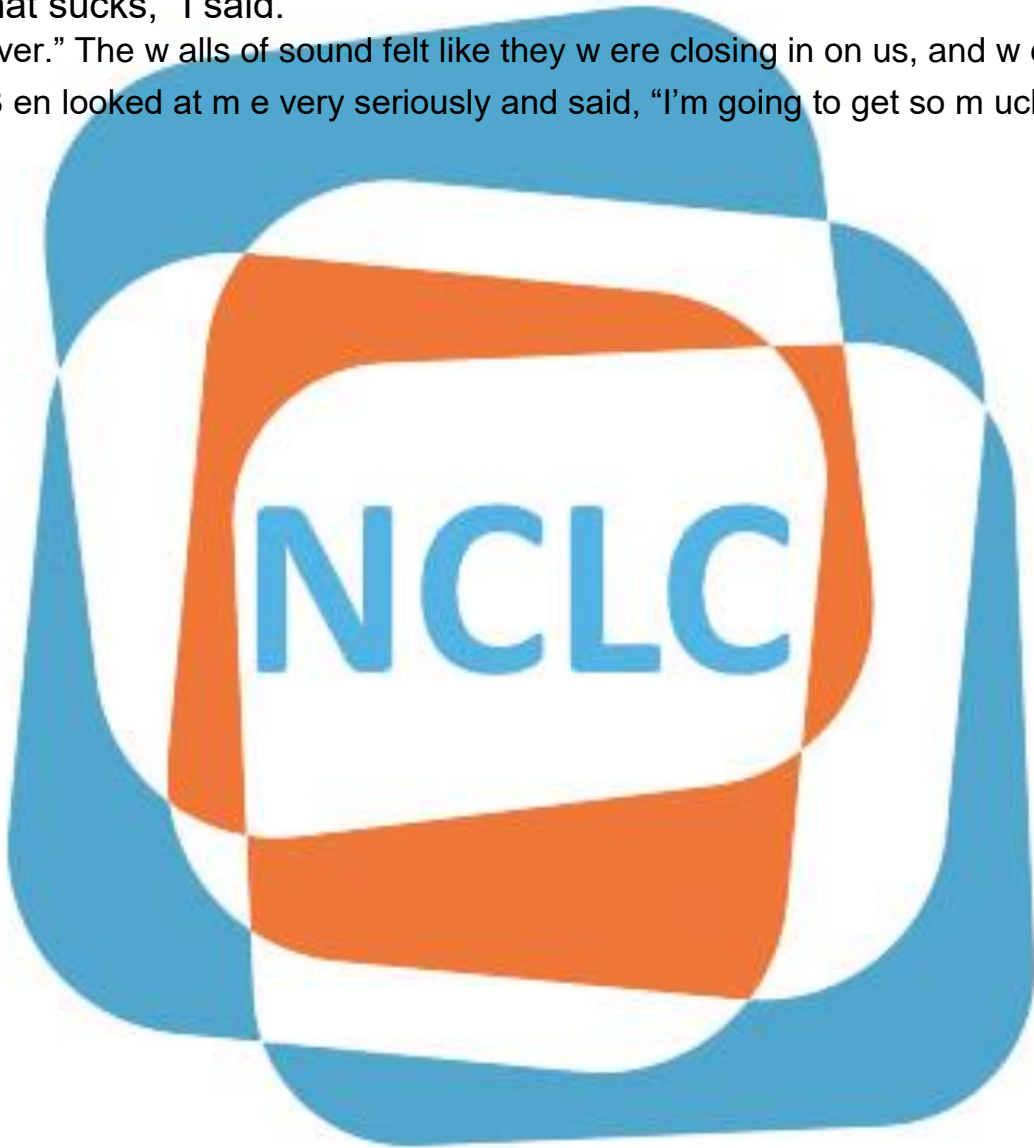
Ben,

I'd love to go to prom with you, but I'm already going with Frank. Sorry!

— C

I refolded it and slid it back across the table. I could remember playing paper football on these tables. “That sucks,” I said.

“Yeah, w hatever.” The walls of sound felt like they were closing in on us, and we were silent for a while, and then Ben looked at me very seriously and said, “I’m going to get so much play in college



I'm going to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records* under the category 'Most Honeybunnies Ever Pleased.'

I laughed. I was thinking about how Radar's parents actually were in the *Guinness Book* when I noticed a pretty African-American girl with spiky little dreads standing above us. It took me a moment to realize that the girl was Angela, Radar's I-guess-girlfriend.

"Hi," she said to me.

"Hey," I said. I'd had classes with Angela and knew her a little, but we didn't say hello in the hallway or anything. I motioned for her to sit. She scooted a chair to the head of the table.

"I figure that you guys probably know Marcus better than anyone," she said, using Radar's real name. She leaned toward us, her elbows on the table.

"It's a shitty job, but someone's got to do it," Ben answered, smiling. "Do you think he's, like, embarrassed of me?"

Ben laughed. "What? No," he said.

"Technically," I added, "you should be embarrassed of *him*."

She rolled her eyes, smiling. A girl accustomed to compliments. "But he's never, like, invited me to hang out with you, though."

"Ohhh," I said, getting it finally. "That's because he's embarrassed of *us*." She laughed. "You seem pretty normal."

"You've never seen Ben snort Sprite up his nose and then spit it out of his mouth," I said. "I look like a demented carbonated fountain," he deadpanned.

"But really, you wouldn't worry? I mean, we've been dating for five weeks, and he's never even taken me to his house." Ben and I exchanged a knowing glance, and I scrunched up my face to suppress laughter. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Honestly, Angela. If he was forcing you to hang out with us and taking you to his house all the time—"

"Then it would definitely mean he *didn't* like you," Ben finished. "Are his parents weird?"

I struggled with how to answer that question honestly. "Uh, no. They're cool. They're just kinda overprotective, I guess."

"Yeah, overprotective," Ben agreed a little too quickly.

She smiled and then got up, saying she had to go say hi to someone before lunch was over. Ben waited until she was gone to say anything. "That girl is awesome," Ben said.

"I know," I answered. "I wonder if we can replace Radar with her."

"She's probably not that good with computers, though. We need someone who's good at computers. Plus I bet she sucks at Resurrection," which was our favorite video game. "By the way," Ben added, "nice call saying that Radar's folks are overprotective."

"Well, it's not my place to tell her," I said.

"I wonder how long till she gets to see the Team Radar Residence and Museum." Ben smiled.

The period was almost over, so Ben and I got up and put our trays onto the conveyor belt. The very same one that Chuck Parson had thrown me onto freshman year, sending me into the terrifying netherworld of Winter Park's dishwashing corps. We walked over to Radar's locker and were standing there when he raced up just after the first bell.

"I decided during government that I would actually, literally suck donkey balls if it meant I could



skip that class for the rest of the semester," he said.

"You can learn a lot about government from donkey balls," I said. "Hey, speaking of reasons you wish you had fourth-period lunch, we just dined with Angela."

Ben smirked at Radar and said, "Yeah, she wants to know why she's never been over to your house."

Radar exhaled a long breath as he spun the combination to open his locker. He breathed for so long I thought he might pass out. "Crap," he said finally.

"Are you embarrassed about something?" I asked, smiling.

"Shut up," he answered, poking his elbow into my gut.

"You live in a lovely home," I said.

"Seriously, bro," added Ben. "She's a really nice girl. I don't see why you can't introduce her to your parents and show her Casa Radar."

Radar threw his books into his locker and shut it. The din of conversation around us quieted just a bit as he turned his eyes toward the heavens and shouted, "IT IS NOT MY FAULT THAT MY PARENTS OWN THE WORLD'S LARGEST COLLECTION OF BLACK SANTAS."

I'd heard Radar say "the world's largest collection of black Santas" perhaps a thousand times in my life, and it never became any less funny to me. But he wasn't kidding. I remembered the first time I visited. I was maybe thirteen. It was spring, many months past Christmas, and yet black Santas lined the window sills. Paper cutouts of black Santas hung from the stairway banister. Black Santa candles adorned the dining room table. A black Santa oil painting hung above the mantel, which was itself lined with black Santa figurines. They had a black Santa Pez dispenser purchased from Namibia. The light-up plastic black Santa that stood in their postage-stamp front yard from Thanksgiving to New Year's spent the rest of the year proudly keeping watch in the corner of the guest bathroom, a bathroom with homemade black Santa wallpaper created with paint and a Santa-shaped sponge.

In every room, save Radar's, their home was awash in black Santadom — plaster and plastic and marble and clay and wood and resin and cloth. In total, Radar's parents owned more than twelve hundred black Santas of various sorts. As a plaque beside their front door proclaimed, Radar's house was an officially registered Santa Landmark according to the Society for Christmas.

"You just gotta tell her, man," I said. "You just gotta say, 'Angela, I really like you, but there's something you need to know: when we go to my house and hook up, we'll be watched by the twenty-four hundred eyes of twelve hundred black Santas.'"

Radar ran a hand through his buzz cut and shook his head. "Yeah, I don't think I'll put it exactly like that, but I'll deal with it."

I headed off to government, Ben to an elective about video game design. I watched clocks through two more classes, and then finally the relief radiated out of my chest when I was finished—the end of each day like a dry run for our graduation less than a month away.

I went home. I ate two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as an early dinner. I watched poker on TV.

My parents came home at six, hugged each other, and hugged me. We ate a macaroni casserole as a proper dinner. They asked me about school. They asked me about prom. They marveled at what a wonderful job they'd done raising me. They told me about their days dealing with people who had been raised less brilliantly. They went to watch TV. I went to my room to check my email. I wrote a little bit about *The Great Gatsby* for English. I read some of *The Federalist Papers* as early prep for my government final. I IM'ed with Ben, and then Radar came online. In our conversation, he used the



phrase “the world’s largest collection of black Santas” four times, and I laughed each time. I told him I was happy for him, having a girlfriend. He said it would be a great summer. I agreed. It was May fifth, but it didn’t have to be. My days had a pleasant identicalness about them. I had always liked that: I liked routine. I liked being bored. I didn’t want to, but I did. And so May fifth could have been any day— until just before midnight, when Margot Roth Spiegelman slid open my screenless bedroom window for the first time since telling me to close it nine years before.





I swiveled around when I heard the window open, and Margo's blue eyes were staring back at me. Her eyes were all I could see at first, but as my vision adjusted, I realized she was wearing black face paint and a black hoodie. "Are you having cybersex?" she asked.

"I'm IM'ing with Ben Starling." "That doesn't answer my question, perv."

I laughed awkwardly, then walked over and knelt by the window, my face inches from hers. I couldn't imagine why she was here, in my window, like this. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked. Margo and I were still friendly, I guess, but we weren't meet-in-the-dead-of-night-wearing-black-face-paint friendly. She had friends for that, I'm sure. I just wasn't among them.

"I need your car," she explained.

"I don't have a car," I said, which was something of a sore point for me. "Well, I need your mom's car."

"You have your own car," I pointed out.

Margo puffed out her cheeks and sighed. "Right, but the thing is that my parents have taken the keys to my car and locked them inside a safe, which they put under their bed, and Myrna Moutweazel"—who was her dog—"is sleeping inside their room. And Myrna Moutweazel has a freaking aneurysm whenever she catches sight of me. I mean, I could totally sneak in there and steal the safe and crack it and get my keys out and drive away, but the thing is that it's not even worth trying because Myrna Moutweazel is just going to bark like crazy if I so much as crack open the door. So like I said, I need a car. Also, I need you to drive it, because I have to do eleven things tonight, and at least five of them involve a getaway man."

When I let my sight unfocus, she became nothing but eyes, floating in the ether. And then I looked back on her, and I could see the outline of her face, the paint still wet against her skin. Her cheekbones triangulating into her chin, her pitch-black lips barely turned to a smile. "Any felonies?" I asked.

"Hmm," said Margo. "Remember if breaking and entering is a felony." "No," I answered firmly.

"No it's not a felony or no you won't help?"

"No I won't help. Can't you enlist some of your underlings to drive you around?" Lacey and/or Becca were always doing her bidding.

"They're part of the problem, actually," Margo said. "What's the problem?" I asked.

"There are eleven problems," she said somewhat impatiently. "No felonies," I said.

"I swear to God that you will not be asked to commit a felony."

And right then, the floodlights came on all around Margo's house. In one swift motion, she somersaulted through my window, into my room, and then rolled beneath my bed. Within seconds, her dad was standing on the patio outside. "Margo!" he shouted. "I saw you!"

From beneath my bed, I heard a muffled, "Oh, Christ." Margo scooted out from under the bed, stood up, walked to the window, and said, "Come on, Dad. I'm just trying to have a chat with Quentin. You're always telling me what a fantastic influence he could be on me and everything."

"Just chatting with Quentin?"



“Yes.”

“Then why are you wearing black face paint?”

Margo faltered for only the briefest moment. “Dad, to answer that question would take hours of backstory, and I know that you’re probably very tired, so just go back to—”

“In the house,” he thundered. “This minute!”

Margo grabbed hold of my shirt, whispered, “Back in a minute,” in my ear, and then climbed out the window.

As soon as she left, I grabbed my car keys from my desk. The keys are mine; the car, tragically, is not. On my sixteenth birthday, my parents gave me a very small gift, and I knew the moment they handed it to me that it was a car key, and I about peed myself, because they’d said over and over again that they couldn’t afford to give me a car. But when they handed me the tiny wrapped box, I knew they’d been tricking me, that I was getting a car after all. I tore off the wrapping paper and popped open the little box. Indeed, it contained a key.

Upon close inspection, it contained a Chrysler key. A key for a Chrysler minivan. The one and the same Chrysler minivan owned by my mother.

“My present is a key to your car?” I asked my mother.

“Tom,” she said to my dad, “I told you he would get his hopes up.”

“Oh, don’t blame me,” my dad said. “You’re just sublimating your own frustration with my income.”

“Isn’t that snap analysis a tad passive-aggressive?” my mother asked.

“Aren’t rhetorical accusations of passive aggression inherently passive-aggressive?” my dad responded, and they went on like that for a while.

The long and short of it was this: I had access to the vehicular awesomeness that is a late-model Chrysler minivan, except for when my mother was driving it. And since she drove to work every morning, I could only use the car on weekends. Well, weekends and the middle of the goddamned night.

It took Margo more than the promised minute to return to my window, but not much more. But in the time she was gone, I’d started to waffle again. “I’ve got school tomorrow,” I told her.

“Yeah, I know,” Margo answered. “There’s school tomorrow and the day after that, and thinking about that too long could make a girl bonkers. So, yeah. It’s a school night. That’s why we’ve got to get going, because we’ve got to be back by morning.”

“I don’t know.”

“Q,” she said. “Darling. How long have we been dear friends?” “We’re not friends. We’re neighbors.”

“Oh, Christ, Q. Am I not nice to you? Do I not order my various and sundry minions to

be kind to you at school?”

“U h-huh,” I answered dubiously, although in point of fact I’d always figured it was Margo who had stopped Chuck Parson and his ilk from screwing with us.

She blinked. She’d even painted her eyelids. “Q,” she said, “we have to go.”



And so I went. I slid out the window, and we ran along the side of my house, heads down, until we opened the doors of the minivan. Margo whispered not to close the doors— too much noise— so with the doors open, I put it in neutral, pushed off the cement with my foot, and then let the minivan roll down the driveway. We rolled slowly past a couple houses before I turned on the engine and the headlights. We closed the doors, and then I drove through the serpentine streets of Jefferson Park's endlessness, the houses all still new-looking and plastic, like a toy village housing tens of thousands of real people.

Margo started talking. "The thing is they don't even really *care*; they just feel like my exploits make them look bad. Just now, do you know what he said? He said, 'I don't care if you screw up your life, but don't embarrass us in front of the Jacobsens— they're our *friends*.' Ridiculous. And you have no idea how hard they've made it to get out of that goddamned house. You know how in prison-escape movies they put bundled-up clothes under the blankets to make it look like there's a person in there?" I nodded. "Yeah, well, Mom put a goddamned baby monitor in my room so she could hear my sleep-breathing all night. So I just had to pay Ruthie five bucks to sleep in my room, and then I put bundled-up clothes in *her* room." Ruthie is Margo's little sister. "It's *Mission: Impossible* shit now. Used to be I could just sneak out like a regular goddamned American— just climb out the window and jump off the roof. But God, these days, it's like living in a fascist dictatorship."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Well, first we're going to Publix. Because for reasons I'll explain later, I need you to go grocery shopping for me. And then to Wal-Mart."

"What, we're just gonna go on a grand tour of every commercial establishment in Central Florida?" I asked.

"Tonight, darling, we are going to right a lot of wrongs. And we are going to wrong some rights. The first shall be last; the last shall be first; the meek shall do some earth-inheriting. But before we can radically reshape the world, we need to shop." I pulled into the Publix then, the parking lot almost entirely empty, and parked.

"Listen," she said, "how much money do you have on you right now?"

"Zero dollars and zero cents," I answered. I turned off the ignition and looked over at her. She wiggled a hand into a pocket of her tight, dark jeans and pulled out several hundred-dollar bills "Fortunately, the good Lord has provided," she said.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Baitzvamoney, bitch. I'm not allowed to access the account, but I know my parents' password because they use 'mynameoutwazl' for everything. So I made a withdrawal." I tried to blink away the awe, but she saw the way I was looking at her and smirked at me. "Basically," she said, "this is going to be the best night of your life."



The thing about Margo Roth Spiegelman is that really all I could ever do was let her talk, and then when she stopped talking encourage her to go on, due to the facts that 1. I was incontestably in love with her, and 2. She was absolutely unprecedented in every way, and 3. She never really asked me any questions, so the only way to avoid silence was to keep her talking.

And so in the parking lot of Publix she said, "So, right. I made you a list. If you have any questions, just call my cell. Listen, that reminds me, I took the liberty of putting some supplies in the back of the van earlier."

"What, like, before I agreed to all this?"

"Well, yes. Technically yes. Anyway, just call me if you have any questions, but with the Vaseline, you want the one that's bigger than your fist. There's like a Baby Vaseline, and then there's a Mommy Vaseline, and then there's a big fat Daddy of a Vaseline, and that's the one you want. If they don't have that, then get, like, three of the Mommys." She handed me the list and a hundred-dollar bill and said, "That should cover it."

Margo's list:

1 whole Catfish, Wrapped separately

Veet (It's for Shaving your legs Only you don't Need A razor It's with all the Girly cosmetic stuff)

Vaseline

*six-pack, Mountain Dew
One dozen Tulips*

*one Bottle of water
Tissues*

one Can of blue Spray paint

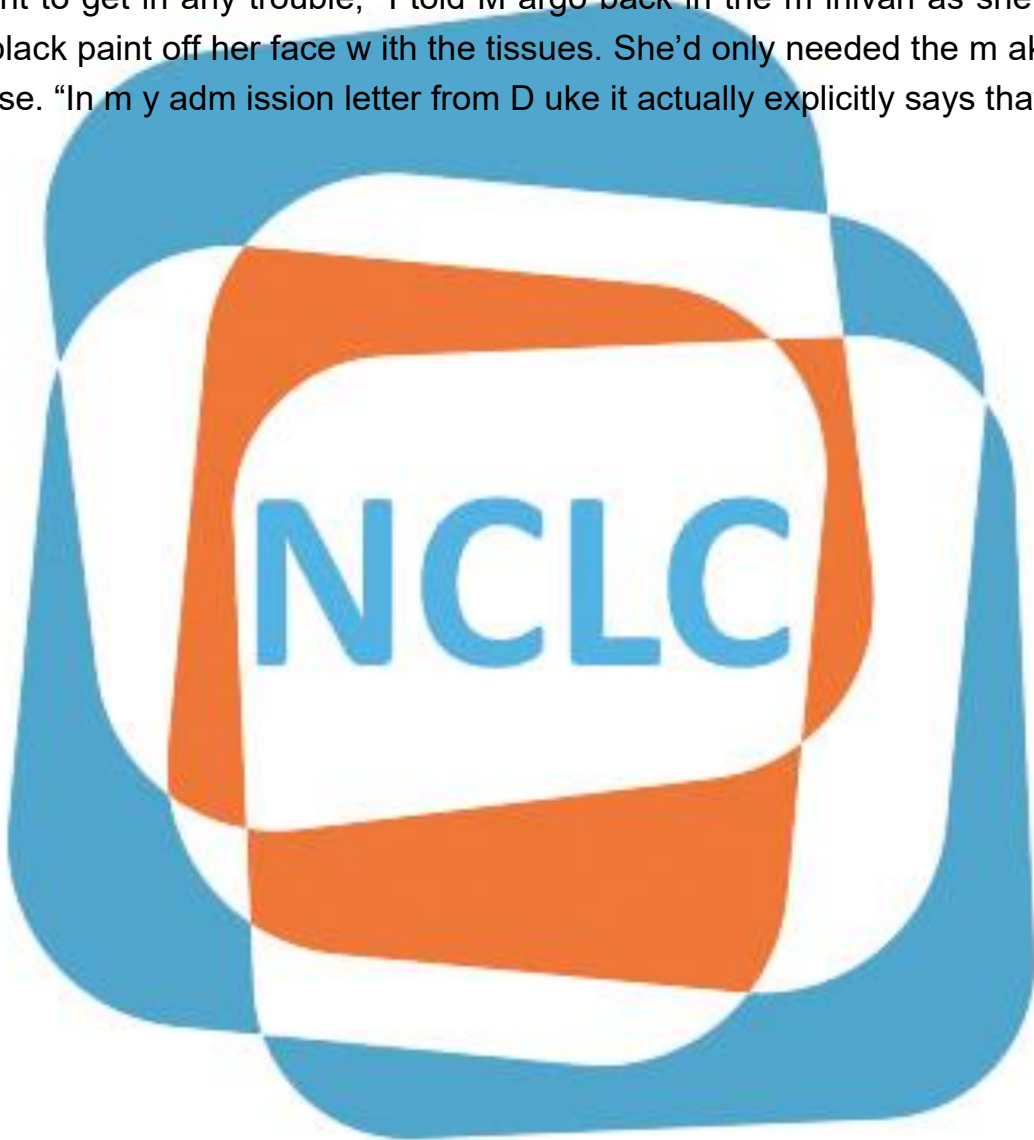
"Interesting capitalization," I said.

"Yeah. I'm a big believer in random capitalization. The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle."

Now, I'm not sure what you're supposed to say to the checkout woman at twelve-thirty in the morning when you put thirteen pounds of catfish, Veet, the fat-daddy-size tub of Vaseline, a six-pack of Mountain Dew, a can of blue spray paint, and a dozen tulips on the conveyor belt. But here's what I said: "This isn't as weird as it looks."

The woman cleared her throat but didn't look up. "Still weird," she muttered.

"I really don't want to get in any trouble," I told Margot back in the minivan as she used the bottled water to wipe the black paint off her face with the tissues. She'd only needed the makeup, apparently, to get out of the house. "In my admission letter from Duke it actually explicitly says that they won't



take me if I get arrested.”

“You’re a very anxious person, Q.”

“Let’s just please not get in trouble,” I said. “I mean, I want to have fun and everything, but not at the expense of, like, my future.”

She looked up at me, her face mostly revealed now, and she smiled just the littlest bit. “It amazes me that you can find all that shit even remotely interesting.”

“Huh?”

“College: getting in or not getting in. Trouble: getting in or not getting in. School: getting A’s or getting D’s. Career: having or not having. House: big or small, owning or renting. Money: having or not having. It’s all so boring.”

I started to say something, to say that she obviously cared a little, because she had good grades and was going to the University of Florida’s honors program next year, but she just said, “Wal-Mart.”

We entered Wal-Mart together and picked up that thing from infomercials called The Club, which locks a car’s steering wheel into place. As we walked through the Juniors department, I asked Margo, “Why do we need The Club?”

Margo managed to speak in her usual manic soliloquy without answering my question. “Did you know that for pretty much the entire history of the human species, the average life span was less than thirty years? You could count on ten years or so of real adulthood, right? There was no planning for retirement. There was no planning for a career. There was no *planning*. No time for planning. No time for a future. But then the life spans started getting longer, and people started having more and more future, and so they spent more time thinking about it. About the future. And now life has *become* the future. Every moment of your life is lived for the future—you go to high school so you can go to college so you can get a good job so you can get a nice house so you can afford to send your kids to college so they can get a good job so they can get a nice house so they can afford to send their kids to college.”

It felt like Margo was just rambling to avoid the question at hand. So I repeated it. “Why do we need The Club?”

Margo patted me in the middle of the back softly. “I mean, obviously this is all going to be revealed to you before the night is over.” And then, in boating supplies, Margo located an air horn. She took it out of the box and held it up in the air, and I said, “No,” and she said, “Now what?” And I said, “No, don’t blow the air horn,” except when I got to about the *b* in *blow*, she squeezed on it and it let out an excruciatingly loud honk that felt in my head like the auditory equivalent of an aneurysm and then she said, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you. What was that?” And I said, “Stop b—” and then she did it again.

A Wal-Mart employee just a little older than us walked up to us then and said, “Hey, you can’t use that in here,” and Margo said, with seeming sincerity, “Sorry, I didn’t know that,” and the guy said, “Oh, it’s cool. I don’t mind, actually.” And then the conversation seemed over,

except the guy could not stop looking at Margo, and honestly I don't blame him, because she is hard to stop looking at, and then finally he said, "What are you guys up to tonight?"

And Margo said, "Not much. You?"

And he said, "I get off at one and then I'm going out to this bar downtown on Orange, if you want to come. But you'd have to drop off your brother; they're really strict about ID's."

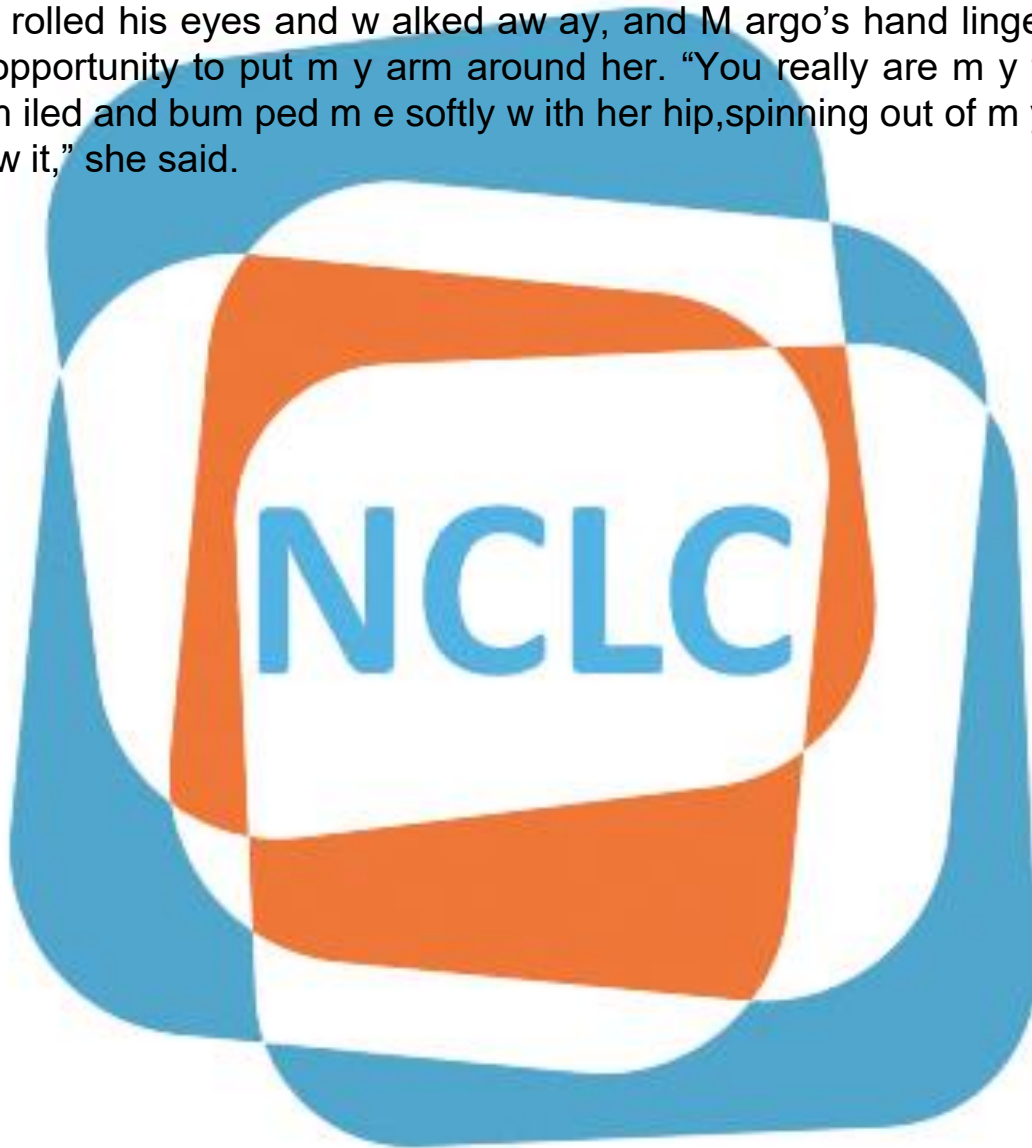
Her what?! "I'm not her brother," I said, looking at the guy's sneakers.



And then Margo proceeded to lie. "He's actually my *cousin*," she said. Then she sidled up to me put her hand around my waist so that I could feel each of her fingers taut against my hip bone, and she added, "*And my lover.*"

The guy just rolled his eyes and walked away, and Margo's hand lingered for a minute and I took the opportunity to put my arm around her. "You really are my favorite cousin," I told her. She smiled and bumped me softly with her hip, spinning out of my embrace.

"Don't I know it," she said.



W e w e r e d r i v i n g down a blessedly empty I-4, and I was following Margo's directions. The clock on the dashboard said it was 1:07.

"It's pretty, huh?" she said. She was turned away from me, staring out the window, so I could hardly see her. "I love driving fast under streetlights."

"Light," I said, "the visible remainder of Invisible Light." "That's beautiful," she said.

"T. S. Eliot," I said. "You read it, too. In English last year." I hadn't actually ever read the whole poem that line was from, but a couple of the parts I did read got stuck in my head.

"Oh, it's a quote," she said, a little disappointed. I saw her hand on the center console. I could have put my own hand on the center console and then our hands would have been in the same place at the same time. But I didn't. "Say it again," she said.

"Light, the visible remainder of Invisible Light."

"Yeah. Damn, that's good. That must help with your lady friend." "Ex-lady friend," I corrected her.

"Suzie dumped you?" Margo asked. "How do you know *she* dumped *me*?" "Oh, sorry."

"Although she did," I admitted, and Margo laughed. The breakup had happened months ago, but I didn't blame Margo for failing to pay attention to the world of lower-caste romance. What happens in the band room stays in the band room.

Margo put her feet up on the dashboard and wiggled her toes to the cadence of her speaking. She always talked like that, with this discernible rhythm, like she was reciting poetry. "Right, well, I'm sorry to hear that. But I can relate. My lovely boyfriend of *lo these many months* is fucking my best friend."

I looked over but her hair was all in her face, so I couldn't make out if she was kidding "Seriously?" She didn't say anything. "But you were just laughing with him this morning. I saw you." "I don't know what you're talking about. I heard about it before first period, and then I found them both talking together and I started screaming bloody murder, and *Becca* ran into the arms of *Clint Bauer*, and *Jase* was just standing there like a dumbass with the chaw drool running out of his stank mouth."

I had clearly misinterpreted the scene in the hallway. "That's weird, because *C Huck Parson* asked me this morning what I knew about you and *Jase*."

"Yeah, well, *C Huck* does as he's told, I guess. Probably trying to find out for *Jase* who knew." "Jesus, why would he hook up with *Becca*?"

"Well, she's not known for her personality or generosity of spirit, so it's probably because

she's hot."

"She's not as hot as you," I said, before I could think better of it.

"That's always seemed so ridiculous to me, that people would want to be around someone because they're pretty. It's like picking your breakfast cereals based on color instead of taste. It's the next exit, by the way. But I'm not pretty, not close up anyway. Generally, the closer people get to me the less hot they find me."



“That’s— ” I started.

“Whatever,” she answered.

It struck me as somehow unfair that an asshole like Jason Worthington would get to have sex with both Margo *and* Becca, when perfectly likable individuals such as myself don’t get to have sex with either of them — or anyone else, for that matter. That said, I like to think that I am the type of person who wouldn’t hook up with Becca Arrington. She may be hot, but she is also 1. aggressively vapid, and 2. an absolute, unadulterated, raging bitch. Those of us who frequent the band room have long suspected that Becca maintains her lovely figure by eating nothing but the souls of kittens and the dreams of impoverished children. “Becca does sort of suck,” I said, trying to draw Margo back into conversation.

“Yeah,” she answered, looking out the passenger window, her hair reflecting oncoming streetlights. I thought for a second she might be crying, but she rallied quickly, pulling her hoodie up and taking The Club out of the Wal-Mart bag. “Well, this’ll be fun at any rate,” she said as she ripped open The Club’s packaging.

“May I ask where we’re going yet?” “Becca’s,” she answered.

“Uh-oh,” I said as I pulled up to a stop sign. I put the minivan in park and started to tell Margo that I was taking her home.

“No felonies. Promise. We need to find Jase’s car. Becca’s street is the next one up on the right, but he wouldn’t park his car on her street, because her parents are home. Try the one after. That’s the first thing.”

“Okay,” I said, “but then we go home.”

“No, then we move on to Part Two of Eleven.” “Margo, this is a bad idea.”

“Just drive,” she said, and so I just did. We found Jase’s Lexus two blocks down from Becca’s street, parked in a cul-de-sac. Before I’d even come to a complete stop, Margo jumped out of the minivan with The Club in hand. She pulled open the Lexus’s driver-side door, sat down in the seat, and proceeded to attach The Club to Jase’s steering wheel. Then she softly closed the door to the Lexus.

“Dumb bastard never locks that car,” she mumbled as she climbed back into the minivan. She pocketed the key to The Club. She reached over and tousled my hair. “Part One— done. Now, to Becca’s house.”

As I drove, Margo explained Parts Two and Three to me.

“That’s quite brilliant,” I said, even though inside I was bursting with a shimmering nervousness. I turned onto Becca’s street and parked two houses down from her mansion. Margo crawled into the wayback of the minivan and returned with a pair of binoculars and a digital camera. She looked through the binoculars first, and then handed them to me. I could see a light on in the house’s basement.

ent, but no movement. I was most surprised that the house even *had* a basement— you can't dig very deep before hitting water in most of Orlando.

I reached into my pocket, grabbed my cell phone, and dialed the number that Margo recited to me. The phone rang once, twice, and then a groggy male voice answered, "Hello?"

"Mr. Arrington?" I asked. Margo wanted me to call because no one would ever recognize my voice.



“Who is this? God, what time is it?”

“Sir, I think you should know that your daughter is currently having sex with Jason Worthington in your basement.” And then I hung up. Part Two: accomplish.

Margo and I threw open the doors of the minivan and charged down the street, diving onto our stomachs just behind the hedge ringing Becca’s yard. Margo handed me the camera, and I watched as an upstairs bedroom light came on, and then a stairway light, and then the kitchen light. And finally, the stairway down to the basement.

“Here he comes,” Margo whispered, and I didn’t know what she meant until, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a shirtless Jason Worthington giggling out of the basement window. He took off sprinting across the lawn, naked but for his boxer shorts, and as he approached I jumped up and took a picture of him, completing Part Three. The flash surprised both of us, I think, and he blinked at me through the darkness for a white-hot moment before running off into the night.

Margo tugged on my jeans leg; I looked down at her, and she was smiling goofily. I reached my hand down, helped her up, and then we raced back to the car. I was putting the key in the ignition when she said, “Let me see the picture.”

I handed her the camera, and we watched it come up on the screen together, our heads almost touching. Upon seeing the stunned, pale face of Jason Worthington, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh, God,” Margo said, and pointed. In the rush of the moment, it seemed that Jason had been unable to get Little Jason inside his boxers, and so there it was, hanging out, digitally captured for posterity.

“It’s a penis,” Margo said, “in the same sense that Rhode Island is a state: it may have an illustrious history, but it sure isn’t big.”

I looked back at the house and noticed that the basement light was now off. I found myself feeling slightly bad for Jason—it wasn’t his fault he had a micropenis and a brilliantly vindictive girlfriend. But then again, in sixth grade, Jase promised not to punch my arm if I ate a live earthworm, so I ate a live earthworm and then he punched me in the face. So I didn’t feel very bad for very long.

When I looked over at Margo, she was staring at the house through her binoculars. “We have to go,” Margo said. “Into the basement.”

“What? Why?”

“Part Four. Get his clothes in case he tries to sneak back into her house. Part Five. Leave fish for Becca.”

“No.”

“Yes. Now,” she said. “She’s upstairs getting yelled at by her parents. But, like, how long does that lecture last? I mean, what do you say? ‘You shouldn’t screw Margo’s boyfriend in the basement.’ It’s a one-sentence lecture, basically. So we have to hustle.”

She got out of the car with the spray paint in one hand and one of the catfish in the other. I whispered, “This is a bad idea,” but I followed behind her, crouched down as she was, until we were standing in front of the still-open basement window.

“I’ll go first,” she said. She went in feetfirst and was standing on Becca’s computer desk,

half in the house and half out of it, when I asked her, “Can’t I just be lookout?”

“Get your skinny ass in here,” she answered, and so I did. Quickly, I grabbed all the boy-type clothes I saw on Becca’s lavender-carpeted floor. A pair of jeans with a leather belt, a pair of flip-flops, a Winter Park High School Wildcats baseball cap, and a baby blue polo shirt. I turned back to Margo, who handed me the paper-wrapped catfish and one of Becca’s sparkly purple pens. She told me what to write:



A message from Margo Roth Spiegelman: Your friendship with her— it sleeps with the fishes

Margo hid the fish between folded pairs of shorts in Becca's closet. I could hear footsteps upstairs, and tapped Margo on the shoulder and looked at her, my eyes bulging. She just smiled and leisurely pulled out the spray paint. I scrambled out the window, and then turned back to watch as Margo leaned over the desk and calmly shook the spray paint. In an elegant motion—the kind you associate with calligraphy or Zorro— she spray-painted the letter *M* onto the wall above the desk.

She reached her hands up to me, and I pulled her through the window. She was just starting to stand when we heard a high-pitched voice shout, “D W I G H T!” I grabbed the clothes and took off running, Margo behind me.

I heard, but did not see, the front door of Becca's house swing open, but I didn't stop or turn around, not when a booming voice shouted “H A L T!” and not even when I heard the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being pumped.

I heard Margo mumble “gun” behind me— she didn't sound upset about it exactly; she was just making an observation— and then rather than walk around Becca's hedge, I dove over it headfirst. I'm not sure how I intended to land— maybe an artful somersault or something— but at any rate, I spilled onto the asphalt of the road, landing on my left shoulder. Fortunately, Jase's bundle of clothes hit the ground first, softening the blow.

I swore, and before I could even start to stand, I felt Margo's hands pulling me up, and then we were in the car and I was driving in reverse with the lights off, which is how I nearly came to run over the mostly naked starting shortstop of the Winter Park High School Wildcats baseball team. Jase was running very fast, but he didn't seem to be running anywhere in particular. I felt another stab of regret as we backed up past him, so I rolled the window halfway down and threw his polo in his general direction. Fortunately, I don't think he saw either Margo or me, and he had no reason to recognize the minivan since— and I don't want to sound bitter or anything by dwelling on this— *I can't drive it to school.*

“Why the hell would you do that?” Margo asked as I turned on the lights and, driving forward now, began to navigate the suburban labyrinth back toward the interstate.

“I felt bad for him.”

“For him? Why? Because he's been cheating on me for six weeks? Because he's probably given me god-only-know-s-what disease? Because he's a disgusting idiot who will probably be rich and happy his whole life, thus proving the absolute unfairness of the cosmos?”

“He just looked sort of desperate,” I said.

“Whatever. We're going to Karin's house. It's on Pennsylvania, by the ABC Liquors.”

“Don't be pissed at me,” I said. “I just had a guy point a freaking shotgun at me for helping you, so don't be pissed at me.”

“I'M NOT PISSED AT YOU!” Margo shouted, and then punched the dashboard. “Well, you're screaming.”

“I thought maybe— whatever. I thought maybe he wasn't cheating.” “Oh.”

“Karin told me at school. And I guess a lot of people have known for a long time. And no one told me until Karin. I thought maybe she was just trying to stir up drama or something.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Yeah. Yeah. I can’t believe I even care.”

“My heart is really pounding,” I said.

“That’s how you know you’re having fun,” Margo said.



But it didn't feel like fun; it felt like a heart attack. I pulled over into a 7-Eleven parking lot and held my finger to my jugular vein while watching the colon in the digital clock blink every second. When I turned to Margo, she was rolling her eyes at me. "My pulse is dangerously high," I explained.

"I don't even remember the last time I got excited about something like that. The adrenaline in the throat and the lungs expanding."

"In through the nose out through the mouth," I answered her. "All your little anxieties. It's just so ..."

"Cute?"

"Is that what they're calling childish these days?" She smiled.

Margo crawled into the backseat and came back with a purse. *How much shit did she put back there?* I thought. She opened up the purse and pulled out a full bottle of nail polish so darkly red it was almost black. "While you calm down, I'm going to paint my nails," she said, smiling up at me through her bangs. "You just take your time."

And so we sat there, she with her nail polish balanced on the dash, and me with a shaky finger on the pulse of myself. It was a good color of nail polish, and Margo had nice fingers, thinner and bonier than the rest of her, which was all curves and soft edges. She had the kind of fingers you want to interlace with your own. I remembered them against my hip bone in Walmart, which felt like days ago. My heartbeat slowed. And I tried to tell myself: Margo's right. There's nothing out here to be afraid of, not in this little city on this quiet night.



“Part Six,” Margo said once we were driving again. She was waving her fingernails through the air, almost like she was playing piano. “Leave flowers on Karin’s doorstep with apologetic note.”

“What’d you do to her?”

“Well, when she told me about Jase, I sort of shot the messenger.”

“How so?” I asked. We were pulled up to a stoplight, and some kids in a sports car next to us were revving their engine—as if I was going to race the Chrysler. When you floored it, it whimpered.

“Well, I don’t remember exactly what I called her, but it was something along the lines of ‘sniveling, repulsive, idiotic, backne-ridden, snaggletoothed, fat-assed bitch with the worst hair in Central Florida—and that’s saying something.’”

“Her hair *is* ridiculous,” I said.

I know. That was the only thing I said about her that was “true. When you say nasty things about people, you should never say the true ones, because you can’t really fully and honestly take those back, you know? I mean, there are highlights. And there are streaks. And then there are skunk stripes.”

As I drove up to Karin’s house, Margo disappeared into the way-back and returned with the bouquet of tulips. Taped to one of the flowers’ stems was a note Margo’d folded to look like an envelope. She handed me the bouquet once I stopped, and I sprinted down a sidewalk, placed the flowers on Karin’s doorstep, and sprinted back.

“Part Seven,” she said as soon as I was back in the minivan. “Leave a fish for the lovely Mr. Worthington.”

“I suspect he won’t be home yet,” I said, just the slightest hint of pity in my voice.

“I hope the cops find him barefoot, frenzied, and naked in some roadside ditch a week from now,” Margo answered dispassionately.

“Remind me never to cross Margo Roth Spiegelman,” I mumbled, and Margo laughed. “Seriously,” she said. “We bring the fucking *rain* down on our enemies.”

“Your enemies,” I corrected.

“We’ll see,” she answered quickly, and then perked up and said, “Oh, hey, I’ll handle this one. The thing about Jason’s house is they have this crazy good security system. And we can’t have another panic attack.”

“Um,” I said.

Jason lived just down the road from Karin, in this uber-rich subdivision called Casavilla. All the

houses in Casavilla are Spanish-style with the red-tile roofs and everything, only they weren't built by the Spanish. They were built by Jason's dad, who is one of the richest land developers in Florida. "Big ugly homes for big, ugly people," I told Margo as we pulled into Casavilla.

"No shit. If I ever end up being the kind of person who has one kid and seven bedrooms, do me a favor and shoot me."

We pulled up in front of Jase's house, an architectural monstrosity that looked generally like an



oversize Spanish hacienda except for three thick Doric columns going up to the roof. Margo grabbed the second catfish from the backseat, uncapped a pen with her teeth, and scrawled in handwriting that didn't look much like hers:

M S's love For you: it Sleeps With the Fishes "Listen, keep the car on," she said. She put Jase's WPHS baseball hat on backward.

"Okay," I said.

"Keep it in drive," she said.

"Okay," I said, and felt my pulse rising. *In through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth.* Catfish and spray paint in hand, Margo threw the door open, jogged across the Worthingtons' expansive front lawn, and then hid behind an oak tree. She waved at me through the darkness, and I waved back, and then she took a dramatically deep breath, puffed her cheeks out, turned, and ran.

She'd only taken one stride when the house lit up like a municipal Christmas tree, and a siren started blaring. I briefly contemplated abandoning Margo to her fate, but just kept breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth as she ran toward the house. She heaved the fish through a window, but the sirens were so loud I could barely even hear the glass breaking. And then, just because she's Margo Roth Spiegelman, she took a moment to carefully spray-paint a lovely *M* on the part of the window that wasn't shattered. Then she was running all out toward the car, and I had a foot on the accelerator and a foot on the brake, and the Chrysler felt at that moment like a Thoroughbred racehorse. Margo ran so fast her hat blew off behind her, and then she jumped into the car, and we were gone before she even got the door closed.

I stopped at the stop sign at the end of the street, and Margo said, "What the hell? Go go go go go," and I said, "Oh, right," because I had forgotten that I was throwing caution to the wind and everything I rolled through the three other stop signs in Casavilla, and we were a mile down Pennsylvania Avenue before we saw a cop car roar past us with its lights on.

"That was pretty hardcore," Margo said. "I mean, even for me. To put it Q-style, my pulse is a little elevated."

"Jesus," I said. "I mean, you couldn't have just left it in his car? Or at least at the doorstep?" "We bring the fucking rain, Q. Not the scattered showers."

"Tell me Part Eight is less terrifying."

"Don't worry. Part Eight is child's play. We're going back to Jefferson Park. Lacey's house. You know where she lives, right?" I did, although God knows Lacey Pemberton would never deign to have me over. She lived on the opposite side of Jefferson Park, a mile away from me, in a nice condo on top of a stationery store—the same block the dead guy had lived on, actually. I'd been to the building before, because friends of my parents lived on the third floor. There were two locked doors before you even got to the condos. I figured even Margo Roth Spiegelman couldn't break into that place.

"So has Lacey been naughty or nice?" I asked.

"Lacey has been *distinctly* naughty," Margo answered. She was looking out the passenger window again, talking away from me, so I could barely hear her. "I mean, we

have been friends since kindergarten.”

“A nd?”

“A nd she didn’t tell m e about Jase. B ut not just that. W hen I look back on it, she’s just a *terrible* friend. I m ean, for instance, do you think I’m fat?”

“Jesus, no,” I said. “You’re— ” A nd I stopped m yself from saying *not skinny, but that’s the w hole point of you; the point of you is that you don’t look like a boy.* “Y ou should not lose any w eight.”



She laughed, waved her hand at me, and said, "You just love my big ass." I turned from the road for a second and glanced over, and I shouldn't have, because she could read my face and my face said: Well, first off I wouldn't say it's *big* exactly and second off, it *is* kind of spectacular. But it was more than that. You can't divorce Margo the person from Margo the body. You can't see one without seeing the other. You looked at Margo's eyes and you saw both their blueness and their Margo-ness. In the end, you could not say that Margo Roth Spiegelman was fat, or that she was skinny, any more than you can say that the Eiffel Tower is or is not lonely. Margo's beauty was a kind of sealed vessel of perfection— uncracked and uncrackable.

"But she would always make these little comments," Margo continued. "'I'd loan you these shorts but I don't think they'd fit right on you.' Or, 'You're so spunky. I love how you just make guys fall in love with your personality.' Constantly undermining me. I don't think she ever said anything that wasn't an attempt at undermining."

"Undermining."

"Thank you, Annoying Mathematician." "Grammarians," I said.

"Oh my God I'm going to kill you!" But she was laughing.

I drove around the perimeter of Jefferson Park so we could avoid driving past our houses, just in case our parents had woken up and discovered us missing. We drove in along the lake (Lake Jefferson), and then turned onto Jefferson Court and drove into Jefferson Park's little faux downtown, which felt eerily deserted and quiet. We found Lacey's black SUV parked in front of the sushi restaurant. We stopped a block away in the first parking spot we could find not beneath a streetlight.

"Would you please hand me the last fish?" Margo asked me. I was glad to get rid of the fish because it was already starting to smell. And then Margo wrote on the paper wrapper in her lettering: *your Friendship with me Sleeps with The fishes* We drove our way around the circular glow of the streetlights, walking as casually as two people can when one of them (Margo) is holding a sizable fish wrapped in paper and the other one (me) is holding a can of blue spray paint. A dog barked, and we both froze, but then it was quiet again, and soon we were at Lacey's car.

"Well, that makes it harder," Margo said, seeing it was locked. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a length of wire that had once been a coat hanger. It took her less than a minute to jimmy the lock open. I was duly awed.

Once she had the driver's-side door open, she reached over and opened my side. "Hey, help me get the seat up," she whispered. Together we pulled the backseat up. Margo slipped the fish underneath it, and then she counted to three, and in one motion we slammed the seat down on the fish. I heard the disgusting sound of catfish guts exploding. I let myself imagine the way Lacey's SUV would smell after just one day of roasting in the sun, and I'll admit it that a kind of serenity washed over me. And then Margo said, "Put an *M* on the roof for me."

I didn't even have to think about it for a full second before I nodded, scrambled up onto the back bumper, and then leaned over, quickly spraying a gigantic *M* all across the roof. Generally, I am opposed to vandalism. But I am also generally opposed to Lacey Pemberton— and in the end, that

proved to be the more deeply held conviction. I jumped off the car. I ran through the darkness— my breath coming fast and short— for the block back to the minivan. As I put my hand on the steering wheel, I noticed my pointer finger was blue. I held it up for Margo to see. She smiled, and held out her own blue finger, and then they touched, and her blue finger was pushing against mine softly and my pulse failed to slow. And then after a long time, she said, “Part Nine— down town.”

It was 7:49 in the morning. I had never, in my entire life, felt less tired.





Tourists never go downtown Orlando, because there's nothing there but a few skyscrapers owned by banks and insurance companies. It's the kind of downtown that becomes absolutely deserted at night and on the weekends, except for a few nightclubs half-filled with the desperate and the desperately lame. As I followed Margo's directions through the maze of one-way streets, we saw a few people sleeping on the sidewalk or sitting on benches, but nobody was moving. Margo rolled down the window, and I felt the thick air blow across my face, warmer than night ought to be. I glanced over and saw strands of hair blowing all around her face. Even though I could see her there, I felt entirely alone among these big and empty buildings, like I'd survived the apocalypse and the world had been given to me, this whole and amazing and endless world, mine for the exploring.

"You just giving me the tour?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm trying to get to the SunTrust Building. It's right next to the Asparagus."

"Oh," I said, because for once on this night I had useful information. "That's on South." I drove down a few blocks and then turned. Margo pointed happily, and yes, there, before us, was the Asparagus.

The Asparagus is not, technically, an asparagus spear, nor is it derived from asparagus parts. It is just a sculpture that bears an uncanny resemblance to a thirty-foot-tall piece of asparagus—although I've also heard it likened to:

1. A green-glass beanstalk
2. An abstract representation of a tree
3. A greener, glassier, uglier Washington Monument
4. The Jolly Green Giant's gigantic jolly green phallus

At any rate, it certainly does *not* look like a Tower of Light, which is the actual name of the sculpture. I pulled in front of a parking meter and looked over at Margo. I caught her staring into the middle distance just for a moment, her eyes blank, looking not at the Asparagus, but past it. It was the first time I thought something might be wrong— not my-boyfriend-is-an-ass wrong, but really *wrong*. And I should have said something. Of course. I should have said thing after thing after thing after thing. But I only said, "May I ask why you have taken me to the Asparagus?"

She turned her head to me and shot me a smile. Margo was so beautiful that even her fake smiles were convincing. "We gotta check on our progress. And the best place to do that is from the top of the SunTrust Building."

I rolled my eyes. "Nope. No. No way. You said no breaking and entering."

"This isn't breaking and entering. It's just entering, because there's an unlocked

door.” “M argo,that’s ridiculous.O f c— ”

“I w ill acknow ledge that over the course of the evening there has been both breaking and entering There w as entering at B ecca’s house. There w as breaking at Jase’s house. A nd there w ill be entering here. B ut there has never been sim ultaneous breaking and entering. Theoretically, the cops could charge us w ith breaking, and they could charge us w ith entering, but they could not charge us w ith breaking *and* entering.So I’ve kept m y prom ise.”

“Surely the SunTrust B uilding has,like,a security guard or w hatever,” I said.



"They do," she said, unbuckling her seat belt. "Of course they do. His name is Gus."

We walked in through the front door. Sitting behind a broad, semicircular desk sat a young guy with a struggling goatee wearing a Regents Security uniform. "What's up, Margo?" he said.

"Hey, Gus," she answered. "Who's the kid?"

WE ARE THE SAME AGE! I wanted to shout, but I let Margo talk for me. "This is my colleague, Q. Q., this is Gus."

"What's up, Q?" asked Gus.

Oh, we're just scattering some dead fish about town, breaking some windows, photographing naked guys, hanging out in skyscraper lobbies at three-fifteen in the morning, that kind of thing. "Not much," I answered.

"Elevators are down for the night," Gus said. "Had to shut 'em off at three. You're welcome to take the stairs, though."

"Cool. See ya, Gus."

"See ya, Margo."

"How the hell do you know the security guard at the SunTrust Building?" I asked once we were safely in the stairwell.

"He was a senior when we were freshmen," she answered. "We gotta hustle, okay? Tim's a-wastin'." Margo started taking the stairs two at a time, flying up, one arm on the rail, and I tried to keep pace with her, but couldn't. Margo didn't play any sports, but she liked to run—I sometimes saw her running by herself listening to music in Jefferson Park. I, however, did not like to run. Or, for that matter, engage in any kind of physical exertion. But now I tried to keep up a steady pace, wiping the sweat off my forehead and ignoring the burning in my legs. When I got to the twenty-fifth floor, Margo was standing on the landing, waiting for me.

"Check it out," she said. She opened the stairwell door and we were inside a huge room with an oak table as long as two cars, and a long bank of floor-to-ceiling windows. "Conference room," she said "It's got the best view in the whole building." I followed her as she walked along the windows. "Okay, so there," she said pointing, "is Jefferson Park. See our houses? Lights still off, so that's good." She moved over a few panes. "Jase's house. Lights off, no more cop cars. Excellent, although it might mean he's made it home, which is unfortunate." Becca's house was too far away to see, even from up here.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she walked right up to the glass and leaned her forehead against it. I hung back, but then she grabbed my T-shirt and pulled me forward. I didn't want our collective weight against a single pane of glass, but she kept pulling me forward.

ard, and I could feel her balled fist in m y side, and finally I put m y head against the glass as gently as possible and looked around.

From above, O rlando w as pretty w ell lit. B eneath us I could see the flashing D O N 'T W A LK signs at intersections, and the streetlights running up and dow n the city in a perfect grid until dow ntow n ended and the w inding streets and cul-de-sacs of O rlando's infinite suburb started.

“It's beautiful,” I said.



Margo scoffed. "Really? You seriously think so?"

"I mean, well, maybe not," I said, although it was. When I saw Orlando from an airplane, it looked like a LEGO set sunk into an ocean of green. Here, at night, it looked like a real place—but for the first time a place I could see. As I walked around the conference room, and then through the other offices on the floor, I could see it all: there was school. There was Jefferson Park. There, in the distance, Disney World. There was Wet 'n Wild. There, the Y-Eleven where Margo painted her nails and I fought for breath. It was all here—my whole world, and I could see it just by walking around a building. "It's more impressive," I said out loud. "From a distance, I mean. You can't see the wear on things, you know? You can't see the rust or the weeds or the paint cracking. You see the place as someone once imagined it."

"Everything's uglier close up," she said.

"Not you," I answered before thinking better of it.

Her forehead still against the glass, she turned to me and smiled. "Here's a tip: you're cute when you're confident. And less when you're not." Before I had a chance to say anything, her eyes went back to the view and she started talking. "Here's what's not beautiful about it: from here, you can't see the rust or the cracked paint or whatever, but you can tell what the place really is. You see how fake it all is. It's not even hard enough to be made out of plastic. It's a paper town. I mean look at it, Q: look at all those cul-de-sacs, those streets that turn in on themselves, all the houses that were built to fall apart. All those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm. All the paper kids drinking beer someone bought for them at the paper convenience store. Everyone demoted with the mania of owning things. All the things paper-thin and paper-frail. And all the people, too. I've lived here for eighteen years and I have never once in my life come across anyone who cares about anything that matters."

"I'll try not to take that personally," I said. We were both staring into the inky distance, the cul-de-sacs and quarter-acre lots. But her shoulder was against my arm, and the backs of our hands were touching, and although I was not looking at Margo, pressing myself against the glass felt almost like pressing myself against her.

"Sorry," she said. "Maybe things would have been different for me if I'd been hanging out with you the whole time instead of—ugh. Just, God. I just hate myself so much for even caring about my, quote, friends. I mean, just so you know, it's not that I am oh-so-upset about Jason. Or Becca. Or even Lacey, although I actually liked her. But it was the last string. It was a lame string, for sure, but it was the one I had left, and every paper girl needs at least one string, right?"

And here is what I said. I said, "You would be welcome at our lunch table tomorrow."

"That's sweet," she answered, her voice trailing off. She turned to me and nodded softly. I smiled. She smiled. I believed the smile. We walked to the stairs and then ran down them. At the bottom of each flight, I jumped off the bottom step and clicked my heels to make her laugh, and she laughed. I thought I was cheering her up. I thought she was cheerable. I thought maybe if I could be confident something might happen between us.

I w as w rong.





Sitting in the minivan with the keys in the ignition but the engine not yet started, she asked, “What time do your parents get up, by the way?”

“I don’t know, like, six-fifteen?” It was 7:01. “I mean, we have two-plus hours and we’re through with nine parts.”

“I know, but I saved the most laborious one for last. Anyway, we’ll get it all done. Part Ten— Q’s turn to pick a victim.”

“What?”

“I already picked a punishment. Now you just pick who we’re going to rain our mighty wrath down on.”

“Upon whom we are going to rain our mighty wrath,” I corrected her, and she shook her head in disgust. “And I don’t really have anyone upon whom I want to rain down my wrath,” I said, because in truth I didn’t. I always felt like you had to be important to have enemies. Example: Historically, Germany has had more enemies than Luxembourg. Margo Roth Spiegelman was Germany. And Great Britain. And the United States. And czarist Russia. Me, I’m Luxembourg. Just sitting around, tending sheep, and yodeling.

“What about Chuck?” she asked.

“Hmm,” I said. Chuck Parson was pretty horrible in all those years before he’d been reined in. Aside from the cafeteria conveyor belt debacle, he once grabbed me outside school while I waited for the bus and twisted my arm and kept saying, “Call yourself a faggot.” That was his all-purpose, I-have-a-vocabulary-of-twelve-words-so-don’t-expect-a-wide-variety-of-insults insult. And even though it was ridiculously childish, in the end I had to call myself a faggot, which really annoyed me because I don’t think that word should ever be used by anyone, let alone me, and as it happens, I am not gay, and furthermore, Chuck Parson made it out like calling yourself a faggot was the ultimate humiliation, even though there’s nothing at all embarrassing about being gay, which I was trying to say while he twisted my arm farther and farther toward my shoulder blade, but he just kept saying, “If you’re so proud of being a faggot, why don’t you admit it that you’re a faggot, faggot?”

Clearly, Chuck Parson was no Aristotle when it came to logic. But he was six three, and 170 pounds, which counts for something.

“You could make a case for Chuck,” I acknowledged. And then I turned on the car and started to make my way back toward the interstate. I didn’t know where we were going, but we were sure as hell weren’t staying downtown.

“Remember at the Crown School of Dance?” she asked. “I was just thinking about that tonight.” “Ugh. Yeah.”

“I’m sorry about that, by the way. I have no idea why I went along with him.”

“Yeah. It’s all good,” I said, but remembering the godforsaken Crown School of Dance pissed me off, and I said, “Yeah. Fuck Parson. You know where he lives?”

“I knew I could bring out your vengeful side. He’s in College Park. Get off at Princeton.” I turned onto the interstate entrance ramp and floored it. “Whoa there,” Margo said. “Don’t break the Chrysler.”



In sixth grade, a bunch of kids including Margo and Chuck and me were forced by our parents to take ballroom dancing lessons at the Crown School of Humiliation, Degradation, and Dance. And how it worked was the boys would stand on one side and the girls would stand on the other and then when the teacher told us to, the boys would walk over to the girls and the boy would say, "May I have this dance?" and the girl would say, "You may." Girls were *not allowed* to say no. But then one day— we were doing the fox-trot— Chuck Parson convinced every single girl to say no to me. Not anyone else. Just me. So I walked across to Mary Beth Shortz and I said, "May I have this dance?" and she said no. And then I asked another girl, and then another, and then Margo, who also said no, and then another, and then I started to cry.

The only thing worse than getting rejected at dance school is crying about getting rejected at dance school, and the only thing worse than that is going to the dance teacher and saying through your tears "The girls are saying no to me and they're *not supposed to*." So of course I went weeping to the teacher, and I spent the majority of middle school trying to live down that one embarrassing event. So, long story short, Chuck Parson kept me from ever dancing the fox-trot, which doesn't seem like a particularly horrible thing to do to a sixth-grader. And I wasn't really pissed about it anymore, or about everything else he'd done to me over the years. But I certainly wasn't going to lament his suffering.

"Wait, he won't know it's me, will he?" "Nope. Why?"

"I don't want him to think I give enough of a shit about him to hurt him." I put a hand down on the center console and Margo patted it. "Don't worry," she said. "He'll never know what depilated him."

"I think you just misused a word, but I don't know what it means."

"I know a word you don't know," Margo chanted. "I'M THE NEW QUEEN OF VOCABULARY! I'VE USURPED YOU!"

"Spell *usurped*," I told her.

"No," she answered, laughing. "I'm not giving up my crown over *usurped*. You'll have to do better."

"Fine." I smiled.

We drove through College Park, a neighborhood that passes for Orlando's historic district on account of how the houses were mostly built thirty whole years ago. Margo couldn't remember Chuck's exact address, or what his house looked like, or even for sure what street it was on ("I'm almost like ninety-five percent positive it's on Vassar."). Finally, after the Chrysler had prowled three blocks of Vassar Street, Margo pointed to her left and said, "That one."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm like ninety-seven-point-two percent sure. I mean, I'm pretty sure his bedroom is right there," she said, pointing. "One time he had a party, and when the cops came I shimmed out his window. I'm pretty sure it's the same window."

“This seems like we could get in trouble.”

“But if the window is open, there’s no breaking involved. Only entering. And we *just* did entering at the SunTrust, and it wasn’t that big of a deal, right?”

I laughed. “It’s like you’re turning me into a badass.”

“That’s the idea. Okay, supplies: get the Veeet, the spray paint, and the Vaseline.” “Okay.” I grabbed them.



“Now don’t freak out on me, Q. The good news is that Chuck sleeps like a hibernating bear—I know because I had English with him last year and he wouldn’t wake up even when Ms. Johnston swatted him with *Jane Eyre*. So we’re going to go up to his bedroom window, we’re gonna open it, we’re gonna take off our shoes, and then very quietly go inside, and I’m going to screw with Chuck. Then you and I are going to fan out to opposite sides of the house, and we’re going to cover every door handle in Vaseline, so even if someone wakes up, they’ll have a hell of a hard time getting out of the house in time to catch us. Then we’ll screw with Chuck some more, paint his house a little, and we’re out of there. And no talking.”

I put my hand to my jugular, but I was smiling.

We were walking away from the car together when Margo reached down for my hand, laced her fingers in mine, and squeezed. I squeezed back and then glanced at her. She nodded her head solemnly, and I nodded back, and then she let go of my hand. We scampered up to the window. I gently pushed the wooden casing up. It squeaked ever so quietly but opened in one motion. I looked in. It was dark, but I could see a body in a bed.

The window was a little high for Margo, so I put my hands together and she stepped a socked foot onto my hand and I boosted her up. Her silent entrance into the house would have made a ninja jealous. I proceeded to jump up, get my head and shoulders into the window, and then attempt, via a complicated torso undulation, to dance the caterpillar into the house. That might have worked fine except I racked my balls against the window sill, which hurt so bad that I groaned, which was a pretty sizable mistake.

A bedside light came on. And there, lying in bed, was some old guy—decidedly not Chuck Parson. His eyes were wide with terror; he didn’t say a thing.

“Um,” said Margo. I thought about shoving off and running back to the car, but for Margo’s sake I stayed there, the top half of me in the house, parallel to the floor. “Um, I think we have the wrong house.” She turned around then and looked at me urgently, and only then did I realize I was blocking Margo’s exit. So I pushed myself back out the window, grabbed my shoes, and took off.

We drove to the other side of College Park to regroup. “I think we share the blame on that one,” Margo said. “Um, *you picked the wrong house*,” I said.

“Right, but *you* were the one who made noise.” It was quiet for a minute, and we were just driving in circles, and then finally I said, “We could probably get his address off the Internet. Radar has a log-in to the school directory.”

“Brilliant,” Margo said.

So I called Radar, but his phone went straight to voice mail. I contemplated calling his house, but his parents were friends with my parents, so that wouldn’t work. Finally, it occurred to me to call Ben. He wasn’t Radar, but he did know all of Radar’s passwords. I called. It went to voice mail, but only after ringing. So I called again. Voice mail. I called again. Voice mail. Margo said, “He’s obviously

not answering,” and as I dialed again, I said, “Oh, he’ll answer.” And after just four more calls, he did.

“You’d better be calling me to say that there are eleven naked honeybunnies in your house, and that they’re asking for the Special Feeling that only Big Daddy Ben can provide.”

“I need you to use Radar’s login to the student directory and look up an address. Chuck Parson.” “No.”

“Please,” I said.



“N o.”

“Y ou’ll be glad you did this, B en. I prom ise.”

“Yeah, yeah, I just did it. I w as doing it w hile saying no— can’t help but help. Four-tw o-tw o A m herst. H ey, w hy do you w ant C huck Parson’s address at four-tw elve in the m orning?”

“G et som e sleep, B enners.”

“I’m going to assum e this is a dream ,” B en answ ered, and hung up.

A m herst w as only a couple blocks dow n. W e parked on the street in front of 414 A m herst, got our supplies together, and jogged across C huck’s law n, the m orning dew shaking off the grass and onto m y calves.

A t his w indow , w hich w as fortunately low er than that of R andom O ld G uy, I clim bed in quietly and then pulled M argo up and in. C huck Parson w as asleep on his back. M argo w alked over to him tiptoeing, and I stood behind her, m y heart pounding. H e’d kill us both if he w oke up. She pulled out the V eet, sprayed a dob of w hat looked like shaving cream onto her palm , and then softly and carefully spread it across C huck’s right eyebrow . H e didn’t so m uch as tw itch.

Then she opened the Vaseline— the lid m ade w hat seem ed like a deafeningly loud *clorp*, but again C huck show ed no sign of w aking. She scooped a huge gob of it into m y hand, and then w e headed off to opposite sides of the house. I w ent to the entryw ay first and slathered Vaseline on the front door’s doorknob, and then to the open door of a bedroom , w here I Vaselined the inner knob and then quietly, w ith only the slightest creak, shut the door to the room .

Finally I returned to C huck’s room — M argo w as already there— and together w e closed his door and then Vaselined the hell out of C huck’s doorknob. W e slathered every surface of his bedroom w indow w ith the rest of the Vaseline, hoping it w ould m ake it hard to open the w indow after w e closed it shut on our w ay out.

M argo glanced at her w atch and held up tw o fingers. W e w aited. A nd for those tw o m inutes w e just stared at each other, and I w atched the blue in her eyes. It w as nice— in the dark and the quiet, w ith no possibility of m e saying anything to screw it up, and her eyes looking back, like there w as som ething in m e w orth seeing.

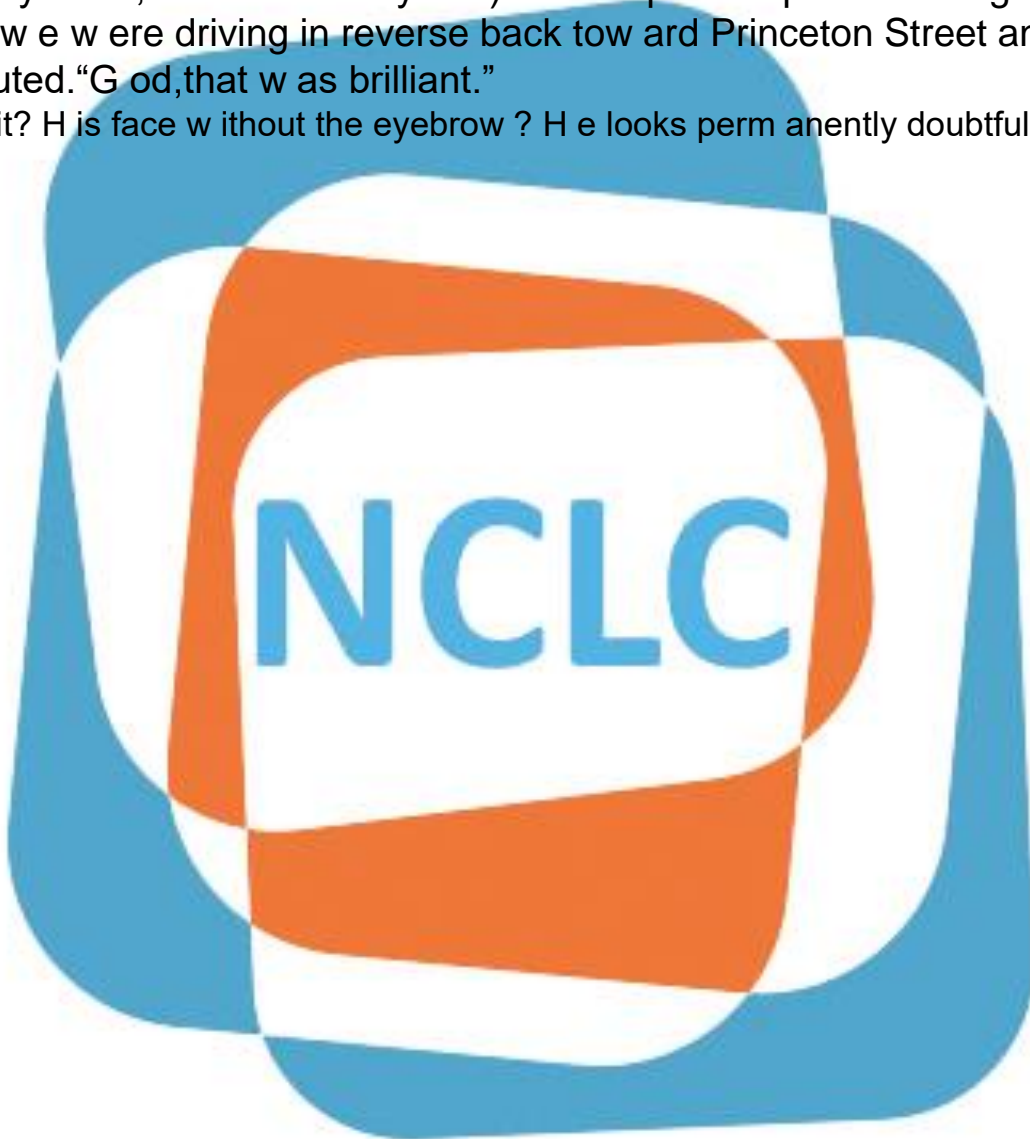
M argo nodded then, and I w alked over to C huck. I w rapped m y hand in m y T-shirt, as she’d told m e to do, leaned forw ard, and— as softly as I could— pressed m y finger against his forehead and then quickly w iped aw ay the Veet. W ith it cam e every last hair that had been C huck Parson’s right eyebrow . I w as standing above C huck w ith his right eyebrow on m y T-shirt w hen his eyes shot open. Lightning fast, M argo grabbed his com forter and threw it over him , and w hen I looked up, the little ninja w as already out the w indow . I follow ed as quickly as I could, as C huck scream ed, “M A M A ! D A D ! R O B B E R Y R O B B E R Y !”

I w anted to say, *The only thing w e stole w as your eyebrow*, but I kept m um as I sw ung m yself feetfirst out the w indow . I dam n near landed on M argo, w ho w as spray-painting an

M onto the vinyl siding of C huck's house, and then w e both grabbed our shoes and hauled ass to the m inivan. W hen I looked back at the house, lights w ere on but no one w as outside yet, a testam ent to the brilliant sim plicity of the w ell-Vaselined doorknob. B y the tim e M r. (or possibly M rs., I couldn't really see) Parson pulled open the living room curtains and looked outside, w e w ere driving in reverse back tow ard Princeton Street and the interstate.

“Y es!” I shouted. “G od, that w as brilliant.”

“D id you see it? H is face w ithout the eyebrow ? H e looks perm anently doubtful, you know ? Like



'oh, really? You're saying I only have one eyebrow ? Likely story.' And I love making that asshole choose: better to shave off Lefty, or paint on Righty? Oh, I just love it. And how he yelled for his mama, that sniveling little shit."

"Wait, why do you hate him ?"

"I didn't say I hated him .I said he was a sniveling little shit."

"But you were always kind of friends with him ," I said, or at least I thought she had been. "Yeah, well, I was always kind of friends with a lot of people," she said. Margo leaned across the minivan and put her head on my bony shoulder, her hair falling against my neck. "I'm tired," she said. "Coffee," I said. She reached into the back and grabbed us each a Mountain Dew , and I drank it in two long chugs.

"So we're going to SeaWorld," she told me. "Part Eleven."

"What, are we going to Free Willy or something?"

"No," she said. "We're just going to go to SeaWorld, that's all. It's the only theme park I haven't broken into yet."

"We can't break into SeaWorld," I said, and then I pulled over into an empty furniture store parking lot and turned off the car.

"We're in a bit of a time crunch," she told me, and then reached over to start the car again. I pushed her hand away. "We can't break into SeaWorld," I repeated.

"There you go with the breaking again." Margo paused and opened another Mountain Dew . Light reflected off the can onto her face, and for a second I could see her smiling at the thing she was about to say. "We're not going to *break* anything. Don't think of it as *breaking in* to SeaWorld. Think of it as visiting SeaWorld in the middle of the night for free."



“Well, first off, we will get caught,” I said. I hadn’t started the minivan and was laying out the reasons I wouldn’t start it and wondering if she could see me in the dark.

“Of course we’ll get caught. So what?” “It’s illegal.”

“Q, in the scheme of things, what kind of trouble can Sea-World get you into? I mean, Jesus, after everything I’ve done for you tonight, you can’t do one thing for me? You can’t just shut up and calm down and stop being so goddamned terrified of every little adventure?” And then under her breath she said, “I mean, God. Grow some nuts.”

And now I was mad. I ducked underneath my shoulder belt so I could lean across the console toward her. “After everything YOU did for ME?” I almost shouted. She wanted confident? I was getting confident. “Did you call MY friend’s father who was screwing MY boyfriend so no one would know that I was calling? Did you chauffeur MY ass all around the world not because you are oh-so-important to me but because I needed a ride and you were close by? Is that the kind of shit you’ve done for me tonight?”

She wouldn’t look at me. She just stared straight ahead at the vinyl siding of the furniture store. “You think I needed you? You don’t think I could have given Myrna Mountweazel a Benadryl so she’d sleep through my stealing the safe from under my parents’ bed? Or snuck into your bedroom while you were sleeping and taken your car key? I didn’t need you, you idiot. I *picked* you. And then you picked me back.” Now she looked at me. “And that’s like a promise. At least for tonight. In sickness and in health. In good times and in bad. For richer, for poorer. Till dawn do us part.”

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, but all her teamwork stuff aside, I still felt like I was getting badgered into something, and I wanted the last word. “Fine, but when Sea-World, Incorporated or whatever sends a letter to Duke University saying that miscreant Quentin Jacobsen broke into their facility at four thirty in the morning with a wild-eyed lass at his side, Duke University will be mad. Also, my parents will be mad.”

“Q, you’re going to go to Duke. You’re going to be a very successful lawyer-or-something and get married and have babies and live your whole little life, and then you’re going to die, and in your last moments, when you’re choking on your own bile in the nursing home, you’ll say to yourself: ‘Well, I wasted my whole goddamned life, but at least I broke into SeaWorld with Margo Roth Spiegelman my senior year of high school. At least I carpe’d that one diem.’”

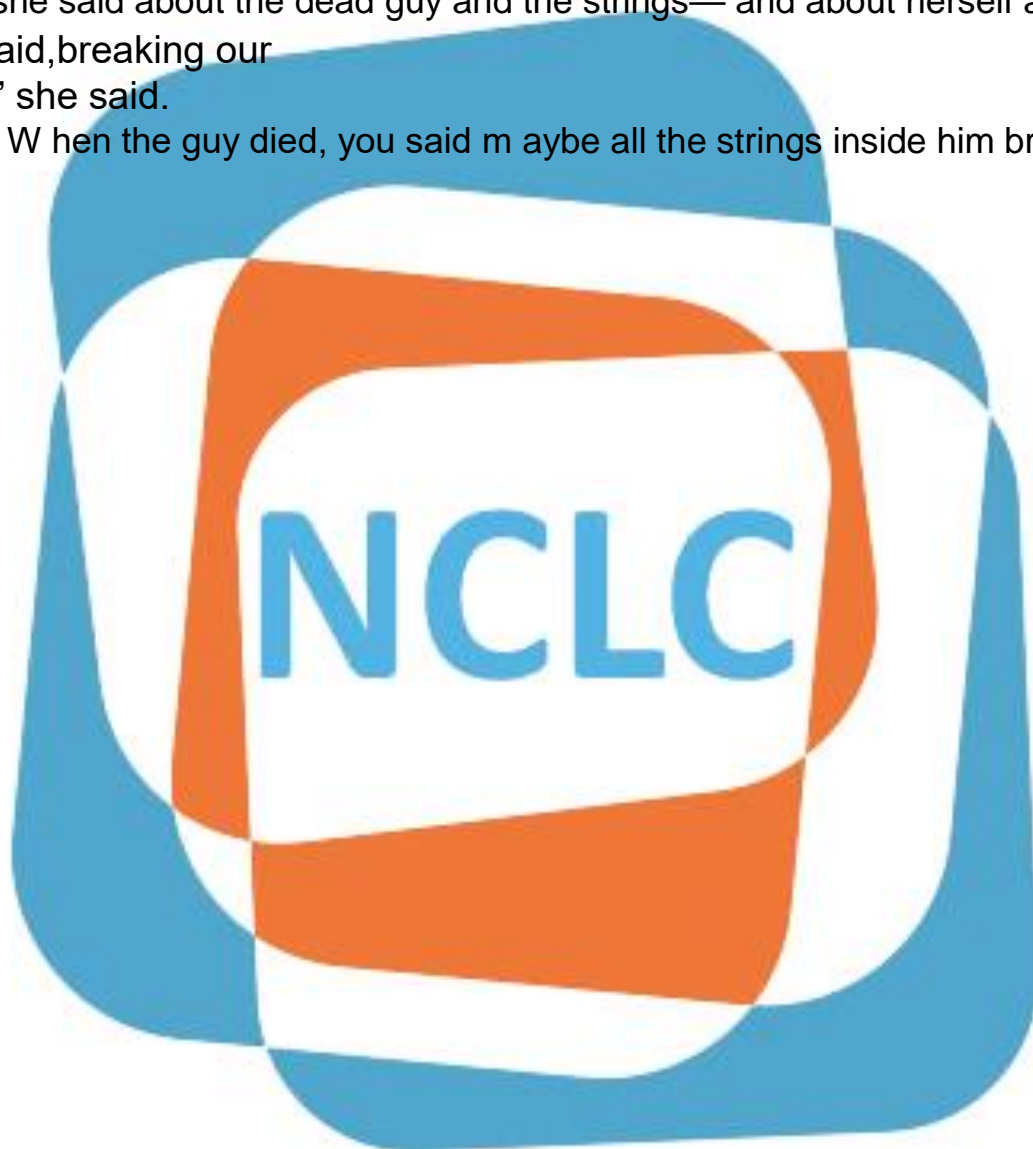
“*Noctem*,” I corrected.

“Okay, you are the Grammar King again. You’ve regained your throne. Now take me to SeaWorld.”

As we drove silently down I-4, I found myself thinking about the day that the guy in the gray suit showed up dead. *Maybe that's the reason she chose me*, I thought. And that's when, finally, I remembered what she said about the dead guy and the strings— and about herself and the strings.

"Margo," I said, breaking our silence. "Q," she said.

"You said . . . When the guy died, you said maybe all the strings inside him broke, and then you



just said that about yourself, that the last string broke.”

She half laughed. “You worry too much. I don’t want some kids to find me swarmed with flies on a Saturday morning in Jefferson Park.” She waited a beat before delivering the punch line. “I’m too vain for that fate.”

I laughed, relieved, and exited the interstate. We turned onto International Drive, the tourism capital of the world. There were a thousand shops on International Drive, and they all sold the exact same thing: crap. Crap molded into seashells, key rings, glass turtles, Florida-shaped refrigerator magnets, plastic pink flamingos, whatever. In fact, there were several stores on I-Drive that sold actual, literal armadillo crap— \$4.99 a bag.

But at 4:00 in the morning, the tourists were sleeping. The Drive was completely dead, like everything else, as we drove past store after parking lot after store after parking lot.

“SeaWorld is just past the parkway,” Margo said. She was in the wayback of the minivan again, rifling through a backpack or something. “I got all these satellite maps and drew our plan of attack but I can’t freaking find them anywhere. But anyway, just go right past the parkway, and on your left there will be this souvenir shop.”

“Only left, there are about seventeen thousand souvenir shops.”

“Right, but there will only be one right after the parkway.”

And sure enough, there was only one, and so I pulled into the empty parking lot and parked the car directly beneath a streetlight, because cars are always getting stolen on I-Drive. And while only a truly masochistic car thief would ever think of jacking the Chrysler, I still didn’t relish the thought of explaining to my mom how and why her car went missing in the small hours of a school night.

We stood outside, leaning against the back of the minivan, the air so warm and thick I felt my clothes clinging to my skin. I felt scared again, as if people I couldn’t see were looking at me. It had been too dark for too long, and my gut ached from the hours of worrying. Margo had found her maps and by the light of the street lamp, her spray-paint-blue fingertip traced our route. “I think there’s a fence right there,” she said, pointing to a wooden patch we’d hit just after crossing the parkway. “I read about it online. They installed it a few years ago after some drunk guy walked into the park in the middle of the night and decided to go swimming with Sham u, who promptly killed him.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, so if that guy can make it in drunk, surely we can make it in sober. I mean, we’re ninjas.” “Well, maybe *you’re* a ninja,” I said.

“You’re just a really loud, awkward ninja,” Margo said, “but we are both ninjas.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, pulled up her hood, and scrunched it shut with a draw string; the streetlight lit up the sharp features of her pale face. Maybe we were both ninjas, but only she had the outfit.

“Okay,” she said. “Memorize the map.” By far the most terrifying part of the half-mile-long journey Margo had plotted for us was the moat. SeaWorld was shaped like a triangle. One side was protected by a road, which Margo figured was regularly patrolled by night watchmen. The second side was guarded by a lake that was at least a mile around, and the third side had a drainage ditch; from the map, it looked to be about as wide as a two-lane road. And we

here there are water-filled drainage ditches near lakes in Florida, there are often alligators.

Margo grabbed me by both shoulders and turned me toward her. "We're going to get caught, probably, and when we do, just let me talk. You just look cute and be that weird mix of innocent and confident, and we'll be fine."

I locked the car, tried to pat down my puffy hair, and whispered, "I'm a ninja." I didn't mean for Margo to hear, but she piped up. "Damn, right you are! Now let's go."



We jogged across I-D rive and then started bushw hacking through a thicket of tall shrubs and oak trees. I started to worry about poison ivy, but ninjas don't worry about poison ivy, so I led the trail, my arms in front of me, pushing aside briars and brush as we walked toward the moat. Finally the trees stopped and the field opened up, and I could see the parkway on our right and the moat straight ahead of us. People could have seen us from the road if there had been any cars, but there weren't. Together we took off running through the brush, and then made a sharp turn toward the parkway. Margo said, "Now, now!" and I dashed across the six lanes of highway. Even though it was empty, something felt exhilarating and wrong about running across a road that big.

We made it across and then knelt down in the knee-high grass beside the parkway. Margo pointed to the strip of trees between SeaWorld's endlessly gigantic parking lot and the black standing water of the moat. We ran for a minute along that line of trees, and then Margo pulled on the back of my shirt, and said quietly, "Now the moat."

"Ladies first," I said.

"No, really. Be my guest," she answered.

And I didn't think about the alligators or the disgusting layer of brackish algae. I just got a running start and jumped as far as I could. I landed in waist-deep water and then high-stepped across. The water smelled rank and felt slimy on my skin, but at least I wasn't wet above my waist. Or at least I wasn't until Margo jumped in, splashing water all over me. I turned around and splashed her. She faux-retched.

"Ninjas don't splash other ninjas," Margo complained. "The true ninja doesn't make a splash at all," I said. "Oh, touché."

I was watching Margo pull herself up out of the moat. And I was feeling thoroughly pleased about the lack of alligators. And my pulse was acceptable, if brisk. And beneath her unzipped hoodie, her black T-shirt had become clingy in the water. In short, a lot of things were going pretty well when I saw in my peripheral vision a slithering in the water beside Margo. Margo started to step out of the water, and I could see her Achilles tendon tensing, and before I could even say anything, the snake lashed out and bit her left ankle, right below the line of her jeans.

"Shit!" Margo said, and she looked down and then said "Shit!" again. The snake was still attached I dove down and grabbed the snake by the tail and ripped it from Margo's leg and threw it into the moat. "Oh, God," she said. "What was it? Was it a moccasin?"

"I don't know. Lie down, lie down," I said, and then I took her leg in my hands, and I pulled up her jeans. There were two drops of blood coming out where the fangs had been, and I leaned down and put my mouth on the wound and sucked as hard as I could, trying to draw out the venom. I spit, and was going to go back to her leg when she said, "Wait, I see it." I jumped up, terrified, and she said, "No, no, God, it's just a garter snake." She was pointing into the moat, and I followed her finger and could see the little garter snake skirting along the surface, swimming beneath a floodlight's skirt. From the

well-lit distance, the thing didn't look much scarier than a baby lizard.

"Thank God," I said, sitting down next to her and catching my breath.

After looking at the bite and seeing that the bleeding had already stopped, she asked, "How was I making out with my leg?"

"Pretty good," I said, which was true. She leaned her body into mine a little and I could feel her upper arm against my ribs.



“I shaved this morning for *precisely* that reason. I was like, ‘Well, you never know when someone is going to clamp down on your calf and try to suck out the snake poison.’”

There was a chain-link fence before us, but it was only about six feet tall. As Margo put it, “Honestly, first garter snakes and now this fence? This security is sort of insulting to a ninja.” She scampered up swinging her body around, and climbed down like it was a ladder. I managed not to fall.

We ran through a small thicket of trees, hugging tight against these huge opaque tanks that might have stored animals, and then we came out to an asphalt path and I could see the big amphitheater where Shamu splashed me when I was a kid. The little speakers lining the walkway were playing soft Muzak. Maybe to keep the animals calm. “Margo,” I said, “we’re in SeaWorld.”

And she said, “Seriously,” and then she jogged away and I followed her. We ended up by the seal tank, but it seemed like there were no seals inside it.

“Margo,” I said again. “We’re in SeaWorld.”

“Enjoy it,” she said without moving her mouth much. “Cause here comes security.” I dashed through a stand of waist-high bushes, but when Margo didn’t run, I stopped.

A guy strolled up wearing a SEAWORLD SECURITY vest and very casually asked, “How y’all?” He held a can of something in his hand—pepper spray, I guessed.

To stay calm, I wondered to myself, *Does he have regular handcuffs, or does he have special SeaWorld handcuffs? Like, are they shaped like two curved dolphins coming together?*

“We were just on our way out, actually,” said Margo.

“Well, that’s certain,” the man said. “The question is whether you’re walkin’ out or gettin’ driven out by the Orange County sheriff.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Margo said, “we’d rather walk.” I shut my eyes. This, I wanted to tell Margo, was no time for snappy comebacks. But the man laughed.

“You know a man got kilt here a couple years ago jumping in the big tank, and they told us we can’t never let anybody go if they break in, no matter if they’re pretty.” Margo pulled her shirt out so it wouldn’t look so clingy. And only then did I realize he was talking to her breasts.

“Well, then I guess you have to arrest us.”

“But that’s the thing. I’m ’bout to get off and go home and have a beer and get some sleep, and if I call the police they’ll take their sweet time in coming. I’m just thinkin’ out loud here,” he said, and then Margo raised her eyes in recognition. She wiggled a hand into a wet pocket and pulled out one moist-water-soaked hundred-dollar bill.

The guard said, “Well, y’all best be getting on now. If I were you, I wouldn’t walk out past the whale tank. It’s got all-night security cameras all ’round it, and we wouldn’t want anyone to know y’all was here.”

“Yessir,” Margo said demurely, and with that the man walked off into the darkness. “Man,” Margo mumbled as the guy walked away, “I really didn’t want to pay that perv. But, oh well. Money’s for spendin’.” I could barely even hear her; the only thing happening was the relief

shivering out of my skin. This raw pleasure was worth all the worry that preceded it.

“Thank God he’s not turning us in,” I said.

Margo didn’t respond. She was staring past me, her eyes squinting almost closed. “I felt this exact same way when I got into Universal Studios,” she said after a moment. “It’s kind of cool and everything, but there’s nothing much to see. The rides aren’t working. Everything cool is locked up. Most of the animals are put into different tanks at night.” She turned her head and appraised the



SeaWorld we could see. "I guess the pleasure isn't being inside." "What's the pleasure?" I asked.

"Planning, I guess. I don't know. Doing stuff never feels as good as you hope it will feel."

"This feels pretty good to me," I confessed. "Even if there isn't anything to see." I sat down on a park bench, and she joined me. We were both looking out at the seal tank, but it contained no seals, just an unoccupied island with rocky outcroppings made of plastic. I could smell her next to me, the sweat and the algae from the moat, her shampoo like lilacs, and the smell of her skin like crushed almonds.

I felt tired for the first time, and I thought of us lying down on some grassy patch of SeaWorld together, me on my back and she on her side with her arm draped against me, her head on my shoulder, facing me. Not doing anything— just lying there together beneath the sky, the night here so well lit that it draws out the stars. And maybe I could feel her breathe against my neck, and maybe we could just stay there until morning and then the people would walk past as they came into the park and they would see us and think that we were tourists, too, and we could just disappear into them.

But no. There was one-eyebrowed Chuck to see, and Ben to tell the story to, and classes and the band room and Duke and the future.

"Q," Margo said.

I looked up at her, and for a moment I didn't know why she'd said my name, but then I snapped out of my half-sleep. And I heard it. The Muzak from the speakers had been turned up, only it wasn't Muzak anymore— it was real music. This old, jazzy song my dad likes called "Stars Fell on Alabama." Even through the tinny speakers you could hear that whoever was singing it could sing a thousand goddamned notes at once.

And I felt the unbroken line of me and of her stretching back from our cribs to the dead guy to acquaintanceship to now. And I wanted to tell her that the pleasure for me wasn't planning or doing or leaving; the pleasure was in seeing our strings cross and separate and then come back together— but that seemed too cheesy to say, and anyway, she was standing up.

Margo's blue blue eyes blinked and she looked impossibly beautiful right then, her jeans wet against her legs, her face shining in the gray light.

I stood up and reached out my hand and said, "May I have this dance?" Margo curtsied, gave me her hand, and said, "You may," and then my hand was on the curve between her waist and her hip, and her hand was on my shoulder. And then step-step-sidestep, step-step-sidestep. We fox-trotted all the way around the seal tank, and still the song kept going on about the stars falling. "Sixth-grade slow dance," Margo announced, and we switched positions, her hands on my shoulders and mine on her hips, elbows locked, two feet between us. And then we fox-trotted some more, until the song ended. I stepped forward and dipped Margo, just as they'd taught us to do at Crown School of Dance. She raised one leg and gave me all her weight as I dipped her. She either trusted me or wanted to fall.

We bought dish towels at a 7-Eleven on I-D rive and tried our best to wash the slime and stink from the moat off our clothes and skin, and I filled the gas tank to where it had been before we drove the circumference of Orlando. The Chrysler's seats were going to be a little bit wet when Mom drove to work, but I held out hope that she wouldn't notice, since she was pretty oblivious. My parents generally believed that I was the most well-adjusted and not-likely-to-break-into-SeaWorld person on the planet, since my psychological well-being was proof of their professional talents.

I took my time going home, avoiding interstates in favor of back roads. Margo and I were listening to the radio, trying to figure out what station had been playing "Stars Fell on Alabama," but then she turned it down and said, "All in all, I think it was a success."

"Absolutely," I said, although by now I was already wondering what tomorrow would be like. Would she show up by the band room before school to hang out? Eat lunch with me and Ben? "I do wonder if it will be different tomorrow," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Me, too." She left it hanging in the air, and then said, "Hey, speaking of tomorrow, as thanks for your hard work and dedication on this remarkable evening, I would like to give you a small gift." She dug around beneath her feet and then produced the digital camera. "Take it," she said. "And use the Power of the Tiny Winky wisely."

I laughed and put the camera in my pocket. "I'll download the pic when we get home and then give it back to you at school?" I asked. I still wanted her to say, *Yes, at school, where things will be different, where I will be your friend in public, and also decidedly single*, but she just said, "Yeah, or whenever."

It was 9:42 when I turned into Jefferson Park. We drove down Jefferson Drive to Jefferson Court and then turned onto our road, Jefferson Way. I killed the headlights one last time and idled up my driveway. I didn't know what to say, and Margo wasn't saying anything. We filled a 7-Eleven bag with trash, trying to make the Chrysler look and feel as if the past six hours had not happened. In another bag, she gave me the remnants of the Vaseline, the spray paint, and the last full Mountain Dew. My brain raced with fatigue.

With a bag in each hand, I paused for a moment outside the van, staring at her. "Well, it was a helluva night," I said finally.

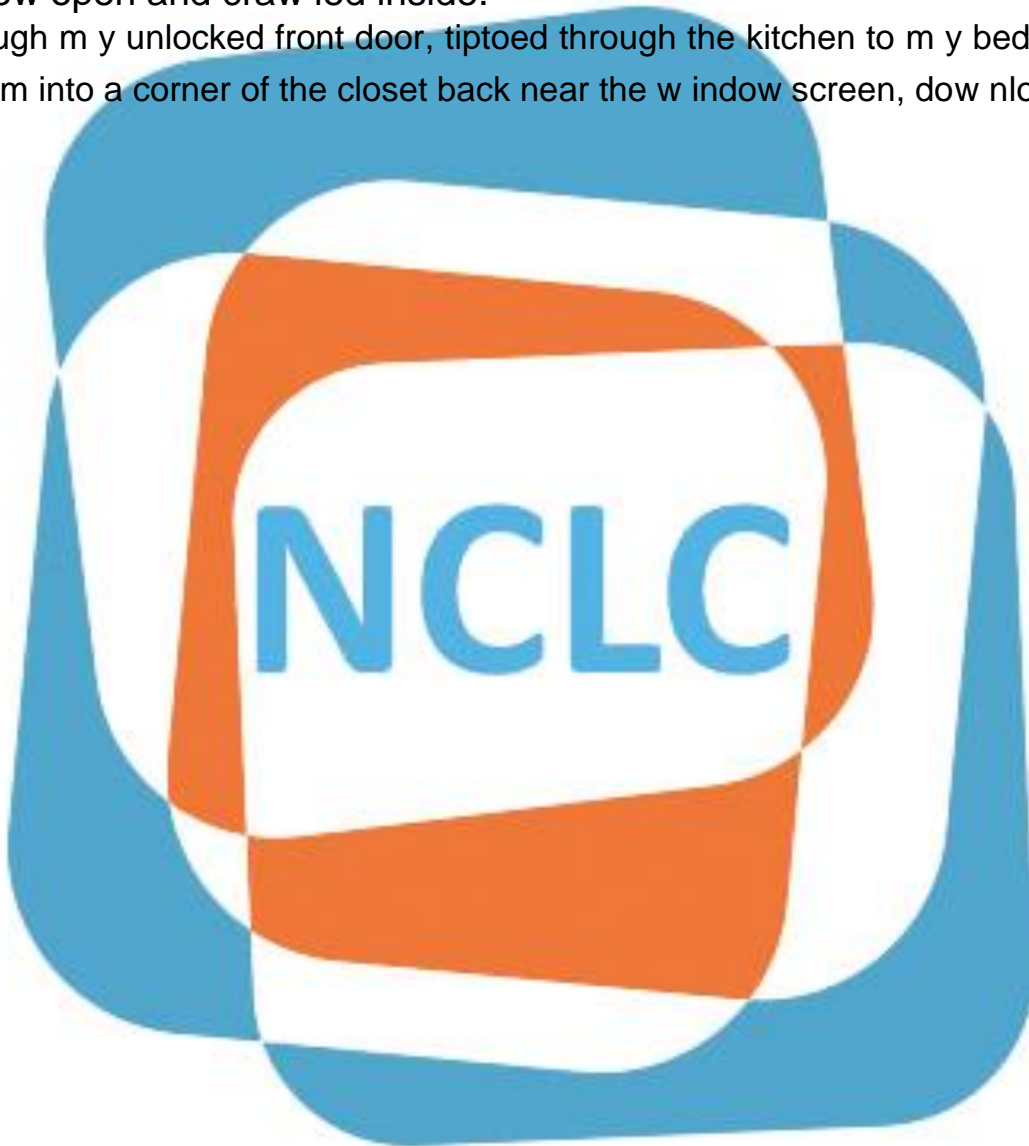
"Come here," she said, and I took a step forward. She hugged me, and the bags made it hard to hug her back, but if I dropped them I might wake someone. I could feel her on her tiptoes and then her mouth was right up against my ear and she said, very clearly, "I. Will. Miss. Hanging. Out. With. You."

"You don't have to," I answered aloud. I tried to hide my disappointment. "If you don't like them anymore," I said, "just hang out with me. My friends are actually, like, nice."

Her lips were so close to me that I could feel her smile. "I'm afraid it's not possible," she

w hispered. She let go then, but kept looking at me, taking step after step backward. She raised her eyebrows finally, and smiled, and I believed the smile. I watched her climb up a tree and then lift herself onto the roof outside of her second-floor bedroom window. She jimmied her window open and crawled inside.

I walked through my unlocked front door, tiptoed through the kitchen to my bedroom, peeled off my jeans, threw them into a corner of the closet back near the window screen, downloaded the picture



of Jase, and got into bed, my mind booming with the things I would say to her at school.



PART TWO

The Grass





I'd been asleep for just about thirty minutes when my alarm clock went off at 6:32. But I did not personally notice that my alarm clock was going off for seventeen minutes, not until I felt hands on my shoulders and heard the distant voice of my mother saying, "Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Uhh," I responded. I felt significantly more tired than I had back at 6:00, and I would have skipped school, except I had perfect attendance, and while I realized that perfect attendance is not particularly impressive or even necessarily admirable, I wanted to keep the streak alive. Plus, I wanted to see how Margo would act around me.

When I walked into the kitchen, Dad was telling Mom something while they ate at the breakfast counter. Dad paused when he saw me and said, "How'd you sleep?"

"I slept fantastically," I said, which was true. Briefly, but well.

He smiled. "I was just telling your mom that I have this recurring anxiety dream," he said. "So I'm in college. And I'm taking a Hebrew class, except the professor doesn't speak Hebrew, and the tests aren't in Hebrew — they're in gibberish. But everyone is acting like this made-up language with a made-up alphabet *is* Hebrew. And so I have this test, and I have to write in a language I don't know using an alphabet I can't decipher."

"Interesting," I said, although in point of fact it wasn't. Nothing is as boring as other people's dreams.

"It's a metaphor for adolescence," my mother piped up. "Writing in a language— adulthood— you can't comprehend, using an alphabet— mature social interaction— you can't recognize." My mother worked with crazy teenagers in juvenile detention centers and prisons. I think that's why she never really worried about me— as long as I wasn't ritually decapitating gerbils or urinating on my own face, she figured I was a success.

A normal mother might have said, "Hey, I notice you look like you're coming down off a meth binge and smell vaguely of algae. Were you perchance dancing with a snakebit Margo Roth Spiegelman a couple hours ago?" But no. They preferred dreams.

I showered, put on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. I was late, but then again, I was always late.

"You're late," Mom said when I made it back to the kitchen. I tried to shake the fog in my brain enough to remember how to tie my sneakers.

"I am aware," I answered groggily.

Mom drove me to school. I sat in the seat that had been Margo's. Mom was mostly quiet on the drive, which was good, because I was entirely asleep, the side of my head against the minivan window

As Mom pulled up to school, I saw Margo's usual spot empty in the senior parking lot. Couldn't blame her for being late, really. Her friends didn't gather as early as mine.

As I walked up toward the band kids, Ben shouted, "Jacobsen, was I dreaming or did you—" I gave him the slightest shake of my head, and he changed gears mid-sentence—"and me go on a wild adventure in French Polynesia last night, traveling in a sailboat made of bananas?"



"That was one delicious sailboat," I answered. Radar raised his eyes at me and ambled into the shade of a tree. I followed him. "Asked Angela about a date for Ben. No dice." I glanced over at Ben, who was talking animatedly, a coffee stirrer dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

"That sucks," I said. "It's all good, though. He and I will hang out and have a marathon session of Resurrection or something."

Ben came over then, and said, "Are you trying to be subtle? Because I know you're talking about the honeybunnyless prom tragedy that is my life." He turned around and headed inside. Radar and I followed him, talking as we went past the band room, where freshmen and sophomores were sitting and chatting amid a slew of instrument cases.

"Why do you even want to go?" I asked.

"Bro, it's our *senior prom*. It's my last best chance to be some honeybunny's fondest high school memory." I rolled my eyes.

The first bell rang, meaning five minutes to class, and like Pavlov's dogs, people started rushing around, filling up the hallways. Ben and Radar and I stood by Radar's locker. "So why'd you call me at three in the morning for Chuck Parson's address?"

I was mulling over how to best answer that question when I saw Chuck Parson walking toward us. I elbowed Ben's side and cut my eyes toward Chuck. Chuck, incidentally, had decided that the best strategy was to shave off Lefty. "Holy shitstickers," Ben said.

Soon enough, Chuck was in my face as I scrunched back against the locker, his forehead deliciously hairless. "What are you assholes looking at?"

"Nothing," said Radar. "We're certainly not looking at your eyebrows." Chuck flicked Radar off, slammed an open palm against the locker next to me, and walked away.

"You did that?" Ben asked, incredulous.

"You can never tell anyone," I said to both of them. And then quietly added, "I was with Margo Roth Spiegelman."

Ben's voice rose with excitement. "You were with Margo Roth Spiegelman last night? At THREE A.M.?" I nodded. "Alone?" I nodded. "Oh my God, if you hooked up with her, you have to tell me every single thing that happened. You have to write me a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman's breasts. Thirty pages, minimum!"

"I want you to do a photo-realistic pencil drawing," Radar said. "A sculpture would also be acceptable," Ben added.

Radar half raised his hand. I dutifully called on him. "Yes, I was wondering if it would be possible for you to write a sestina about Margo Roth Spiegelman's breasts? Your six words are: *pink, round firmness, succulent, supple, and pillow y.*"

"Personally," Ben said, "I think at least one of the words should be *buhbuhbuh*." "I don't think I'm familiar with that word," I said.

"It's the sound my mouth makes when I'm giving a honey-bunny the patented Ben Starling Speedboat." At which point Ben mimicked what he would do in the unlikely event that his face ever encountered cleavage.

“Right now,” I said, “although they have no idea why, thousands of girls all across America are feeling a chill of fear and disgust run down their spines. Anyway, I didn’t hook up with her, perv.”

“Typical,” Ben said. “I’m the only guy I know with the balls to give a honeybunny what she wants, and the only one with no opportunities.”

“What an amazing coincidence,” I said. It was life as it had always been— only more fatigued. I had hoped that last night would change my life, but it hadn’t— at least not yet.



The second bell rang. We hustled off to class.

I became extremely tired during calc first period. I mean, I had been tired since waking, but combining fatigue with calculus seemed unfair. To stay awake, I was scribbling a note to Margo— nothing I'd ever send to her, just a summary of my favorite moments from the night before— but even that could not keep me awake. At some point, my pen just stopped moving, and I found my field of vision shrinking and shrinking, and then I was trying to remember if tunnel vision was a symptom of fatigue. I decided it must be, because there was only one thing in front of me, and it was Mr. Jiminez at the blackboard, and this was the only thing that my brain could process, and so when Mr. Jiminez said, "Quentin?" I was extraordinarily confused, because the one thing happening in my universe was Mr. Jiminez writing on the blackboard, and I couldn't fathom how he could be both an auditory and a visual presence in my life.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Did you hear the question?"

"Yes?" I asked again.

"And you raised your hand to answer it?" I looked up, and sure enough my hand was raised, but I did not know how it had come to be raised, and I only sort of knew how to go about de-raising it. But then after considerable struggle, my brain was able to tell my arm to lower itself, and my arm was able to do so, and then finally I said, "I just needed to ask to go to the bathroom?"

And he said, "Go ahead," and then someone else raised a hand and answered some question about some kind of differential equation.

I walked to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and then leaned over the sink, close to the mirror, and appraised myself. I tried to rub the bloodshotness out of my eyes, but I couldn't. And then I had a brilliant idea. I went into a stall, put the seat down, sat down, leaned against the side, and fell asleep. The sleep lasted for about sixteen milliseconds before the second period bell rang. I got up and walked to Latin, and then to physics, and then finally it was fourth period, and I found Ben in the cafeteria and said, "I really need a nap or something."

"Let's have lunch with R H A PA W," he answered.

R H A PA W was a fifteen-year-old Buick that had been driven with impunity by all three of Ben's older siblings and was, by the time it reached Ben, composed primarily out of duct tape and spackle. Her full name was Rode Hard And Put Away Wet, but we called her R H A PA W for short. R H A PA W ran not on gasoline, but on the inexhaustible fuel of human hope. You would sit on the blisteringly hot vinyl seat and hope she would start, and then B

en would turn the key and the engine would turn over a couple times, like a fish on land making its last, meager, dying flops. And then you would hope harder, and the engine would turn over a couple more times. You hoped some more, and it would finally catch.

Ben started R H A PAW and turned the A C on high. Three of the four windows didn't even open, but the air conditioner worked magnificently, though for the first few minutes it was just hot air blasting out of the vents and mixing with the hot stale air in the car. I reclined the passenger seat all the way



back, so that I was almost lying down, and I told him everything: Margo at my window, the Wal-Mart, the revenge, the SunTrust Building, entering the wrong house, SeaWorld, the I-will-miss-hanging-out-with-you.

He didn't interrupt me once— Ben was a good friend in the not-interrupting way— but when I finished, he immediately asked me the most pressing question in his mind.

"Wait, so about Jase Worthington, how small are we talking?"

"Shrinkage may have played a role, since he was under significant anxiety, but have you ever seen a pencil?" I asked him, and Ben nodded. "Well, have you ever seen a pencil eraser?" He nodded again. "Well, have you ever seen the little shavings of rubber left on the paper after you erase something?" More nodding. "I'd say three shavings long and one shaving wide," I said. Ben had taken a lot of crap from guys like Jason Worthington and Chuck Parson, so I figured he was entitled to enjoy it a little. But he didn't even laugh. He was just shaking his head slowly, awestruck.

"God, she is such a badass." "I know."

"She's the kind of person who either dies tragically at twenty-seven, like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, or else grows up to win, like, the first-ever Nobel Prize for Awesome."

"Yeah," I said. I rarely tired of talking about Margo Roth Spiegelman, but I was rarely this tired. I leaned back against the cracked vinyl headrest and fell immediately asleep. When I woke up, a Wendy's hamburger was sitting in my lap with a note. *Had to go to class, bro. See you after band.*

Later, after my last class, I translated Ovid while sitting up against the cinder-block wall outside the band room, trying to ignore the groaning cacophony coming from inside. I always hung around school for the extra hour during band practice, because to leave before Ben and Radar meant enduring the unbearable humiliation of being the lone senior on the bus.

After they got out, Ben dropped Radar off at his house right by the Jefferson Park "village center," near where Lacey lived. Then he took me home. I noticed Margo's car was not parked in her driveway, either. So she hadn't skipped school to sleep. She'd skipped school for another adventure— a *me-less* adventure. She'd probably spent her day spreading hair-removal cream on the pillows of other enemies or something. I felt a little left out as I walked into the house, but of course she knew I would never have joined her anyway— I cared too much about a day of school. And who even knew if it would be just a day for Margo. Maybe she was off on another three-day jaunt to Mississippi, or temporarily joining the circus. But it wasn't either of those, of course. It was something I couldn't imagine, that I would never imagine, because I couldn't be Margo.

I wondered what stories she would come home with this time. And I wondered if she would tell them to me, sitting across from me at lunch. Maybe, I thought, this is what she meant by I will miss hanging out with you. She knew she was heading somewhere here for another of her brief respites from O

rlando's paperiness. But when she came back, who knew? She couldn't spend the last weeks of school with the friends she'd always had, so maybe she would spend them with me after all.

She didn't have to be gone long for the rumors to start. Ben called me that night after dinner. "I hear



she's not answering her phone. Someone on Facebook said she'd told them she might move into a secret storage room in Tomorrowland at Disney."

"That's idiotic," I said.

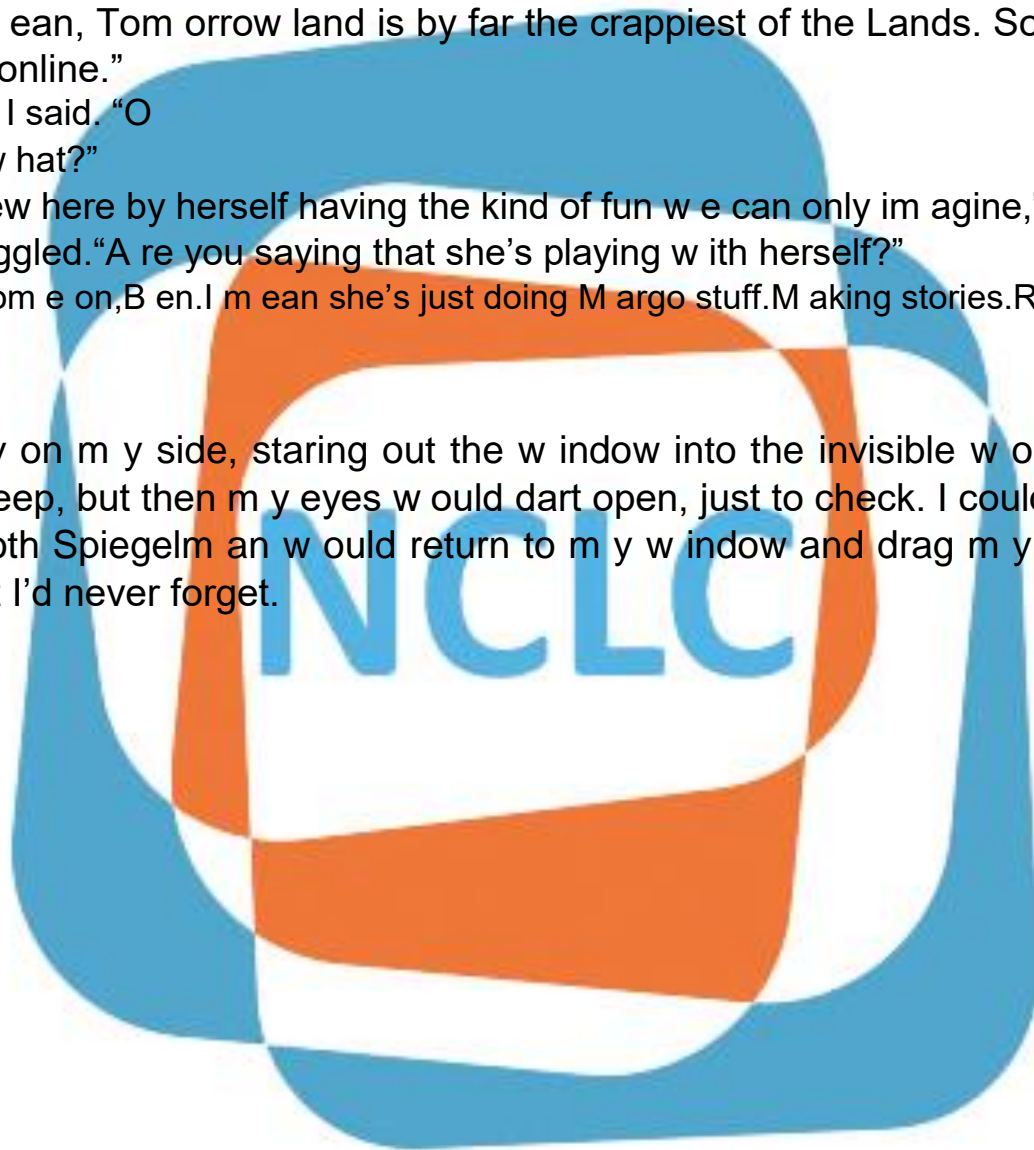
"I know. I mean, Tomorrowland is by far the crappiest of the Lands. Someone else said she met a guy online."

"Ridiculous," I said. "Okay, fine, but what?"

"She's somehow here by herself having the kind of fun we can only imagine," I said. Ben giggled. "Are you saying that she's playing with herself?"

I groaned. "Come on, Ben. I mean she's just doing Margo stuff. Making stories. Rocking worlds."

That night, I lay on my side, staring out the window into the invisible world outside. I kept trying to fall asleep, but then my eyes would dart open, just to check. I couldn't help but hope that Margo Roth Spiegelman would return to my window and drag my tired ass through one more night I'd never forget.





M argo left often enough that there weren't any Find M argo rallies at school or anything, but we all felt her absence. High school is neither a democracy nor a dictatorship— nor, contrary to popular belief, an anarchic state. High school is a divine-right monarchy. And when the queen goes on vacation, things change. Specifically, they get worse. It was during M argo's trip to Mississippi sophomore year, for example, that Becca had unleashed the Bloody Ben story to the world. And this was no different. The little girl with her finger in the dam had run off. Flooding was inevitable.

That morning, I was on time for once and got a ride with Ben. We found everyone unusually quiet outside the band room. "Dude," our friend Frank said with great seriousness.

"What?"

"C huck Parson, Taddy Mac, and Clint Bauer took Clint's Tahoe and ran over twelve bikes belonging to freshmen and sophomores."

"That sucks," I said, shaking my head.

Our friend Ashley added, "Also, yesterday somebody posted our phone numbers in the boys' bathroom with— well, with dirty stuff."

I shook my head again, and then joined the silence. We couldn't turn them in; we'd tried that plenty in middle school, and it inevitably resulted in more punishment. Usually, we'd just have to wait until someone like M argo reminded everyone what immature jackasses they all were.

But M argo had given me a way of starting a counteroffensive. And I was just about to say something when, in my peripheral vision, I saw a large individual running toward us at a full sprint. He wore a black ski mask and carried a large, complex green water cannon. As he ran past he tagged me on the shoulder and I lost my footing, landing against the cracked concrete on my left side. As he reached the door, he turned back and shouted toward me, "You screw with us and you're gonna get *sm ackdown*." The voice was not familiar to me.

Ben and another of our friends picked me up. My shoulder hurt, but I didn't want to rub it. "You okay?" asked Radar.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I rubbed the shoulder now.

Radar shook his head. "Someone needs to tell him that while it is possible to get *sm acked down* and it is also possible to get a *sm ackdown*, it is not possible to get 'sm ackdown.'" I laughed. Someone nodded toward the parking lot, and I looked up to see two little freshmen guys walking toward us their T-shirts hanging wet and limp from their narrow frames.

"It was pee!" one of them shouted at us. The other one didn't say anything; he just held his hands far away from his T-shirt, which only sort of worked. I could see rivulets of liquid snaking from his sleeve down his arm.

"Was it animal pee or human pee?" someone asked.

"How would I know! What, am I an expert in the study of pee?"

I walked over to the kid. I put my hand on the top of his head, the only place that seemed totally dry. "We'll fix this," I said. The second bell rang, and Radar and I raced to class. As I slid into my desk I dinged my arm, and the pain radiated into my shoulder. Radar tapped his notebook, where he'd circled a note: *Shoulder okay?*

I wrote on the corner of my notebook: *Compared to those freshmen, I spent the morning in a field of rainbows frolicking with puppies.*



Radar laughed enough for Mr. Jimenez to shoot him a look. I wrote, *I have a plan, but we have to figure out how it works.*

Radar wrote back, *Jasper Hanson*, and circled it several times. That was a surprise. *How do you know?*

Radar wrote, *You didn't notice? Dum bass was wearing his own football jersey.*

Jasper Hanson was a junior. I'd always thought him harmless, and actually sort of nice—in that bumbling, dude-how's-it-going kind of way. Not the kind of guy you'd expect to see shooting geysers of pee at freshmen. Honestly, in the governmental bureaucracy of Winter Park High School, Jasper Hanson was like Deputy Assistant Undersecretary of Athletics and Malfeasance. When a guy like that gets promoted to Executive Vice President of Urine Gunning, immediate action must be taken.

So when I got home that afternoon, I created an email account and wrote my old friend Jason Worthington.

From : m avenger@ gm ail.com
To: jw orthington@ yahoo.com
Subject: You, Me, Becca Arrington's House, Your Penis, Etc.

Dear Mr. Worthington,

1. \$200 in cash should be provided to each of the 12 people whose bikes your colleagues destroyed via Chevy Tahoe. This shouldn't be a problem, given your magnificent wealth. 2. This graffiti situation in the boys' bathroom has to stop.

3. Water guns? With pee? Really? Grow up.

4. You should treat your fellow students with respect, particularly those less socially fortunate than you.

5. You should probably instruct members of your clan to behave in similarly considerate ways.

I realize that it will be very difficult to accomplish some of these tasks. But then again, it will also be very difficult not to share the attached photograph with the world.

Yours truly,
Your Friendly Neighborhood Nemesis

The reply came twelve minutes later.

Look, Quentin, and yeah, I know it's you. You know it wasn't me who squirt-peed

those freshmen. I'm sorry, but it's not like I control the actions of other people.

My answer:

Mr. Worthington,



I understand that you do not control C huck and Jasper.

B ut you see, I am in a sim ilar situation. I do not control the little devil sitting on m y left shoulder. The devil is saying, "PR IN T TH E PIC TU R E PR IN T TH E PIC TU R E TA PE IT U P A LL O V E R SC H O O L D O IT D O IT D O IT." A nd then on m y right shoulder, there is a little tiny w hite angel.A nd the angel is saying, "M an, I sure as shit hope all those freshm en get their m oney bright and early on M onday m orning." So do I,little angel.So do I.

B est w ishes,
Y our Friendly N eighborhood N em esis

H e did not reply,and he didn't need to.Everything had been said.

B en cam e over after dinner and w e played R esurrection, pausing every half hour or so to call R adar, w ho w as on a date w ith A ngela. W e left him eleven m essages, each m ore annoying and salacious than the last. It w as after nine o'clock w hen the doorbell rang. "Q uentin!" m y m om shouted. B en and I figured it w as R adar, so w e paused the gam e and w alked out into the living room . C huck Parson and Jason W orthington w ere standing in m y doorw ay. I w alked over to them , and Jason said, "H ey, Q uentin," and I nodded m y head. Jason glanced over at C huck, w ho looked at m e and m um bled "Sorry,Q uentin."

"For w hat?" I asked.

"For telling Jasper to piss-gun those freshm en," he m um bled. H e paused, and then said, "A nd the bikes."

B en opened his arm s,as if to hug."C 'm ere,bro," he said. "W hat?"

"C 'm ere," he said again. C huck stepped forw ard. "C loser," B en said. C huck w as standing fully in the entryw ay now , m aybe a foot from B en. O ut of now here, B en slam m ed a punch into C huck's gut. C huck barely flinched, but he im m ediately reared back to clobber B en. Jase grabbed his arm , though "C hill, bro," Jase said. "It's not like it hurt." Jase reached out his hand, to shake. "I like your guts, bro," he said."I m ean,you're an asshole.B ut still." I shook his hand.

They left then, getting into Jase's Lexus and backing dow n the drivew ay. A s soon as I closed the front door, B en let out a m ighty groan. "Ahhhhhhggg. O h, sw eet Lord Jesus, m y hand." H e attempted to m ake a fist and w inced."I think C huck Parson had a textbook strapped to his stom ach."

"Those are called abs," I told him .

"O h, yeah. I've heard of those." I clapped him on the back and w e headed back to the bedroom to play R esurrection. W e'd just unpaused it w hen B en said, "B y the w ay, did you notice that Jase

says 'bro'? I've totally brought *bro* back. Just with the sheer force of my own awesomeness."

"Yeah, you're spending Friday night gaming and nursing the hand you broke while trying to sucker punch somebody. No wonder Jase Worthington has chosen to hitch his star to your wagon."

"At least I'm *good* at Resurrection," he said, whereupon he shot me in the back even though we were playing in team mode.



We played for a while longer, until Ben just curled onto the floor, holding the controller up to his chest, and went to sleep. I was tired, too— it had been a long day. I figured Margot would be back by Monday anyway, but even so, I felt a little pride at having been the person who stemmed the tide of lame.



E very m orning, I now looked up through m y bedroom w indow to check w hether there w as any sign of life in M argo's room . She alw ays kept her rattan shades closed, but since she'd left, her m om or som ebody had pulled them up, so I could see a little snippet of blue w all and w hite ceiling. O n that Saturday m orning, w ith her only forty-eight hours gone, I figured she w ouldn't be hom e yet, but even so, I felt a flicker of disappointm ent w hen I saw the shade still pulled up.

I brushed m y teeth and then, after briefly kicking at B en in an attem pt to w ake him , w alked out in shorts and a T-shirt. Five people w ere seated at the dining room table. M y m om and dad. M argo's m om and dad. A nd a tall, stout A frican-A m erican m an w ith oversize glasses w earing a gray suit, holding a m anila folder.

"U h,hi," I said.

"Q uentin," m y m om asked, "did you see M argo on W ednesday night?"

I w alked into the dining room and leaned against the w all, standing opposite the stranger. I'd thought of m y answ er to this question already. "Yeah," I said. "She show ed up at m y w indow at like m idnight and w e talked for a m inute and then M r. Spiegelman caught her and she w ent back to her house."

"A nd w as that— ? D id you see her after that?" M r. Spiegelman asked. H e seem ed quite calm . "N o, w hy?" I asked.

M argo's m om answ ered, her voice shrill. "W ell," she said, "it seem s that M argo has run aw ay. A gain." She sighed. "This w ould be— w hat is it, Josh, the fourth tim e?"

"O h, I've lost count," her dad answ ered, annoyed.

The A frican-A m erican m an spoke up then. "Fifth tim e you've filed a report." The m an nodded at m e and said, "D etective O tis W arren."

"Q uentin Jacobsen," I said.

M om stood up and put her hands on M rs. Spiegelman's shoulders. "D ebbie," she said, "I'm so sorry. It's a very frustrating situation." I knew this trick. It w as a psychology trick called em pathic listening. Y ou say w hat the person is feeling so they feel understood. M om does it to m e all the tim e.

"I'm not frustrated," M rs. Spiegelman answ ered. "I'm done."

"That's right," M r. Spiegelman said. "W e've got a locksm ith com ing this afternoon. W e're changing the locks. She's eighteen. I m ean, the detective has just said there's nothing w e can do— "

"W ell," D etective W arren interrupted, "I didn't quite say that. I said that she's not a m issing *m inor*, and so she has the right to leave hom e."

M r. Spiegelman continued talking to m y m om . "W e're happy to pay for her to go to college, but w e can't support this . . . this silliness. C onnie, she's eighteen! A nd still so self-centered! She needs to see som e consequences."

M y m om rem oved her hands from M rs. Spiegelman. "I w ould argue she needs to see

loving consequences,” my mom said.

“Well, she’s not your daughter, Connie. She hasn’t walked all over you like a doormat for a decade. We’ve got another child to think about.”

“And ourselves,” Mr. Spiegelman added. He looked up at me then. “Quentin, I’m sorry if she tried to drag you into her little game. You can imagine how . . . just how embarrassing this is for us. You’re such a good boy, and she . . . well.”



I pushed myself off the wall and stood up straight. I knew Margo's parents a little, but I'd never seen them act so bitchy. Nowonder she was annoyed with them Wednesday night. I glanced over at the detective. He was flipping through pages in the folder. "She's been known to leave a bit of a breadcrumb trail; is that right?"

"Clues," Mr. Spiegelman said, standing up now. The detective had placed the folder on the table, and Margo's dad leaned forward to look at it with him. "Clues everywhere. The day she ran away to Mississippi, she ate alphabet soup and left exactly four letters in her soup bowl: A n M, an I, an S, and a P. She was disappointed when we didn't piece it together, although as I told her when she finally returned: 'How can we find you when all we know is *Mississippi*? It's a big state, Margo!'"

The detective cleared his throat. "And she left Minnie Mouse on her bed when she spent a night inside Disney World."

"Yes," her mom said. "The clues. The stupid clues. But you can never *follow* them anywhere here, trust me."

The detective looked up from his notebook. "We'll get the word out, of course, but she can't be compelled to come home; you shouldn't necessarily expect her back under your roof in the near future."

"I don't *want* her under our roof." Mrs. Spiegelman raised a tissue to her eyes, although I heard no crying in her voice. "I know that's terrible, but it's true."

"Deb," my mom said in her therapist voice.

Mrs. Spiegelman just shook her head—the smallest shake. "What can we do? We told the detective. We filed a report. She's an adult, Connie."

"She's *your* adult," my mom said, still calm.

"Oh, come on, Connie. Look, is it sick that it's a blessing to have her out of the house? Of course it's sick. But she was a sickness in this family! How do you look for someone who announces she won't be found, who always leaves clues that lead now here, who runs away constantly? You can't!"

My mom and dad shared a glance, and then the detective spoke to me. "Son, I'm wondering if we can chat privately?" I nodded. We ended up in my parents' bedroom, he in an easy chair and me sitting on the corner of their bed.

"Kid," he said once he'd settled into the chair, "let me give you some advice: never work for the government. Because when you work for the government, you work for the people. And when you work for the people, you have to interact with the people, even the Spiegelmans." I laughed a little.

"Let me be frank with you, kid. Those people know how to parent like I know how to diet. I've worked with them before, and I don't like them. I don't care if you tell her parents where she is, but I'd appreciate it if you told me."

"I don't know," I said. "I really don't."

"Kid, I've been thinking about this girl. This stuff she does— she breaks into Disney World, for instance, right? She goes to Mississippi and leaves alphabet soup clues. She organizes a huge campaign to toilet paper houses."

"How do you know about *that*?" Two years before, Margo had led the TP-ing of two

hundred houses in a single night. Needless to say, I wasn't invited on that adventure.

"I worked this case before. So, kid, here's where I need your help: who plans this stuff? These crazy schemes? She's the mouthpiece for it all, the one crazy enough to do everything. But who plans it? Who's sitting around with notebooks full of diagrams figuring out how much toilet paper you need to toilet paper a ton of houses?"

"It's all her, I assume."



“But she might have a partner, somebody helpin’ her do all these big and brilliant things, and maybe the person who’s in on her secret isn’t the obvious person, isn’t her best friend or her boyfriend. Maybe it’s somebody you wouldn’t think of right off,” he said. He took a breath and was about to say something more when I cut him off.

“I don’t know where she is,” I said. “I swear to God.”

“Just checking, kid. Anyway, you know something, don’t you? So let’s start there.” I told him everything. I trusted the guy. He took a few notes while I talked, but nothing very detailed. And something about telling him, and his scribbling in the notebook, and her parents being so lame—something about all of it made the possibility of her being lastingly missing well up in me for the first time. I felt the worry start to snatch at my breath when I finished talking. The detective didn’t say anything for a while. He just leaned forward in the chair and stared past me until he’d seen whatever he was waiting to see, and then he started talking.

“Listen, kid. This is what happens: somebody—girl usually—got a free spirit, doesn’t get on too good with her parents. These kids, they’re like tied-down helium balloons. They strain against the string and strain against it, and then something happens, and that string gets cut, and they just float away. And maybe you never see the balloon again. It lands in Canada or somewhere, gets work at a restaurant, and before the balloon even notices, it’s been pouring coffee in that same diner to the same sad bastards for thirty years. Or maybe three or four years from now, or three or four days from now, the prevailing winds take the balloon back home, because it needs money, or it sobered up, or it misses its kid brother. But listen, kid, that string gets cut all the time.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’m not finished, kid. The thing about these balloons is that there are so goddamned many of them. The sky is choked full of them, rubbing up against one another as they float to here or from there, and every one of those damned balloons ends up on my desk one way or another, and after a while a man can get discouraged. Everywhere the balloons, and each of them with a mother or a father, or God forbid both, and after a while, you can’t even see ’em individually. You look up at all the balloons in the sky and you can see all of the balloons, but you cannot see any one balloon.” He paused then, and inhaled sharply, as if he was realizing something. “But then every now and again you talk to some big-eyed kid with too much hair for his head and you want to lie to him because he seems like a good kid. And you feel bad for this kid, because the only thing worse than the skyful of balloons you see is what he sees: a clear blue day interrupted by just the one balloon. But once that string gets cut, kid, you can’t uncut it. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I nodded, although I wasn’t sure I *did* understand. He stood up. “I do think she’ll be back soon, kid. If that helps.”

I liked the image of Margo as a balloon, but I figured that in his urge for the poetic, the detective had seen more worry in me than the pang I’d actually felt. I knew she’d be back. She’d deflate and float back to Jefferson Park. She always had.

I followed the detective back to the dining room, and then he said he wanted to go back over to the Spiegelmans' house and pick through her room a little. Mrs. Spiegelman gave me a hug and said, "You've always been such a good boy; I'm sorry she ever got you caught up in this ridiculousness." Mr. Spiegelman shook my hand, and they left. As soon as the door closed, my dad said, "Wow."

"Wow," agreed Mom.



My dad put his arm around me. "Those are some very troubling dynamics, eh, bud?"

"They're kind of assholes," I said. My parents always liked it when I cursed in front of them. I could see the pleasure of it in their faces. It signified that I trusted them, that I was myself in front of them. But even so, they seemed sad.

"Margo's parents suffer a severe narcissistic injury whenever she acts out," Dad said to me. "It prevents them from parenting effectively," my mom added.

"They're assholes," I repeated.

"Honestly," my dad said, "they're probably right. She probably is in need of attention. And God knows, I would need attention, too, if I had those two for parents."

"When she comes back," my mom said, "she's going to be devastated. To be abandoned like that! Shut out when you most need to be loved."

"Maybe she could live here when she comes back," I said, and in saying it I realized what a fantastically great idea it was. My mom's eyes lit up, too, but then she saw something in my dad's expression and answered me in her usual measured way.

"Well, she'd certainly be welcome, although that would come with its own challenges—being next door to the Spiegelmans. But when she returns to school, please do tell her that she's welcome here, and that if she doesn't want to stay with us, there are many resources available to her that we're happy to discuss."

Ben came out then, his bedhead seeming to challenge our basic understanding of the force gravity exerts upon matter. "Mr. and Mrs. Jacobsen—always a pleasure."

"Good morning, Ben. I wasn't aware you were staying the night." "Neither was I, actually," he said. "What's wrong?"

I told Ben about the detective and the Spiegelmans and Margo being technically a missing adult. And when I had finished, he nodded and said, "We should probably discuss this over a piping hot plate of Resurrection." I smiled and followed him back to my room. Radar came over shortly thereafter, and as soon as he arrived, I was kicked off the team, because we were facing a difficult mission and despite being the only one of us who actually owned the game, I wasn't very good at Resurrection. As I watched them tramp through a ghoulish-infested space station, Ben said, "Goblin, Radar, goblin."

"I see him."

"Come here, you little bastard," Ben said, the controller twisting in his hand. "Daddy's gonna put you on a sailboat across the River Styx."

"Did you just use Greek mythology to talk trash?" I asked.

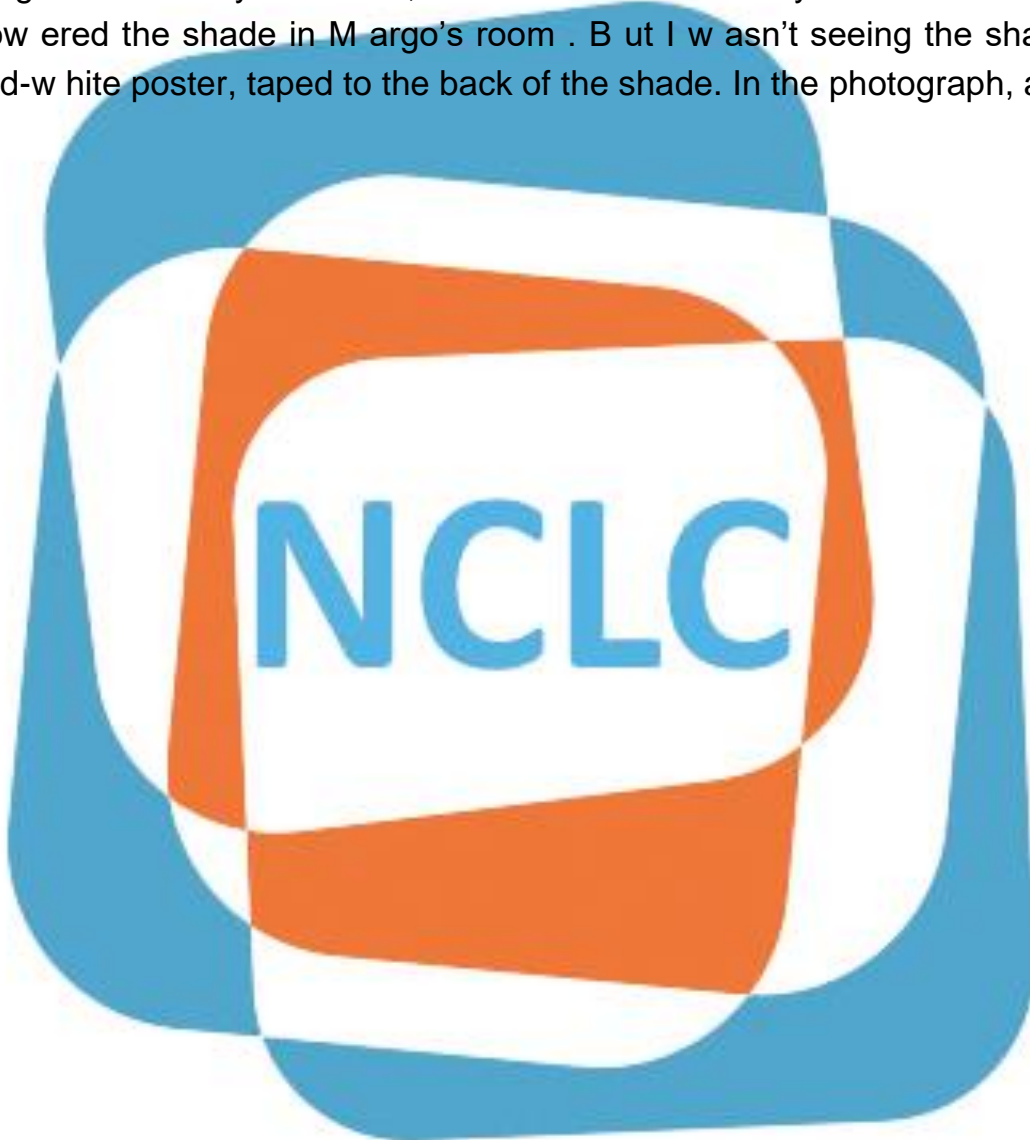
Radar laughed. Ben started pumping buttons, shouting, "Eat it, goblin! Eat it like Zeus ate Metis!"

"I would think that she'd be back by Monday," I said. "You don't want to miss too much school, even if you're Margo Roth Spiegelman. Maybe she can stay here till graduation."

Radar answered me in the disjointed way of someone playing Resurrection. "I don't even get why she left, was it just *im p six o'clock no dude use the ray gun* like because of lost love? I would have figured her to be *w here is the crypt is it to the left* im mune to that kind of stuff."

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t that, I don’t think. Not just that, anyway. She kind of hates Orlando; she called it a paper town. Like, you know, everything so fake and flimsy. I think she just wanted a vacation from that.”

I happened to glance out my window, and I saw immediately that someone—the detective, I guessed—had lowered the shade in Margo’s room. But I wasn’t seeing the shade. Instead, I was seeing a black-and-white poster, taped to the back of the shade. In the photograph, a man stands, his



shoulders slightly slumped, staring ahead. A cigarette dangles out of his mouth. A guitar is slung over his shoulder, and the guitar is painted with the words THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS.

“There’s something in Margo’s window.” The game music stopped, and Radar and Ben knelt down on either side of me. “That’s new?” asked Radar.

“I’ve seen the back of that shade a million times,” I answered, “but I’ve never seen that poster before.”

“Weird,” Ben said.

“Margo’s parents just said this morning that she sometimes leaves clues,” I said. “But never anything, like, concrete enough to find her before she comes home.”

Radar already had his handheld out; he was searching Omnictionary for the phrase. “The picture’s of Woody Guthrie,” he said. “A folksinger, 1912 to 1967. Sang about the working class. ‘This Land Is Your Land.’ Bit of a Communist. Um, inspired Bob Dylan.” Radar played a snippet of one of his songs — a high-pitched scratchy voice sang about unions.

“I’ll email the guy who wrote most of this page and see if there are any obvious connections between Woody Guthrie and Margo,” Radar said.

“I can’t imagine she likes his songs,” I said.

“Seriously,” Ben said. “This guy sounds like an alcoholic Kerm the Frog with throat cancer.”

Radar opened the window and stuck his head out, swiveling it around. “It sure seems she left this for you, though, Q. I mean, does she know anyone else who could see this window?” I shook my head no.

After a moment, Ben added, “The way he’s staring at us— it’s like, ‘pay attention to me.’ And his head like that, you know? It’s not like he’s standing on a stage; it’s like he’s standing in a doorway or something.”

“I think he wants us to come inside,” I said.

We didn't have a view of the front door or the garage from my bedroom : for that, we needed to sit in the family room . So while Ben continued playing Resurrection, Radar and I went out to the family room and pretended to watch TV while keeping watch on the Spiegelmans' front door through a picture window , waiting for Margo's mom and dad to leave. Detective Warren's black Crown Victoria was still in the driveway.

He left after about fifteen minutes, but neither the garage door nor the front door opened again for an hour. Radar and I were watching some half-funny stoner comedy on HBO , and I had started to get into the story when Radar said, "Garage door." I jumped off the couch and got close to the window so that I could see clearly who was in the car. Both Mr. and Mrs. Spiegelman. Ruthie was still at home. "Ben!" I shouted. He was out in a flash, and as the Spiegelmans turned off Jefferson Way and onto Jefferson Road, we raced outside into the morning.

We walked through the Spiegelmans' lawn to their front door. I rang the doorbell and heard Myrna Mountweazel's paws scurrying on the hardwood floors, and then she was barking like crazy, staring at us through the sidelight glass. Ruthie opened the door. She was a sweet girl, maybe eleven.

"Hey, Ruthie."

"Hi, Quentin," she said.

"Hey, are your parents here?"

"They just left," she said, "to go to Target." She had Margo's big eyes, but hers were hazel. She looked up at me, her lips pursed with worry. "Did you meet the policeman?"

"Yeah," I said. "He seemed nice."

"Mom says that it's like if Margo went to college early."

"Yeah," I said, thinking that the easiest way to solve a mystery is to decide that there is no mystery to solve. But it seemed clear to me now that she had left the clues to a mystery behind.

"Listen, Ruthie, we need to look in Margo's room," I said. "But the thing is— it's like when Margo would ask you to do top-secret stuff. We're in the same situation here."

"Margo doesn't like people in her room," Ruthie said. "C'mon. And sometimes Mommy." "But we're her friends."

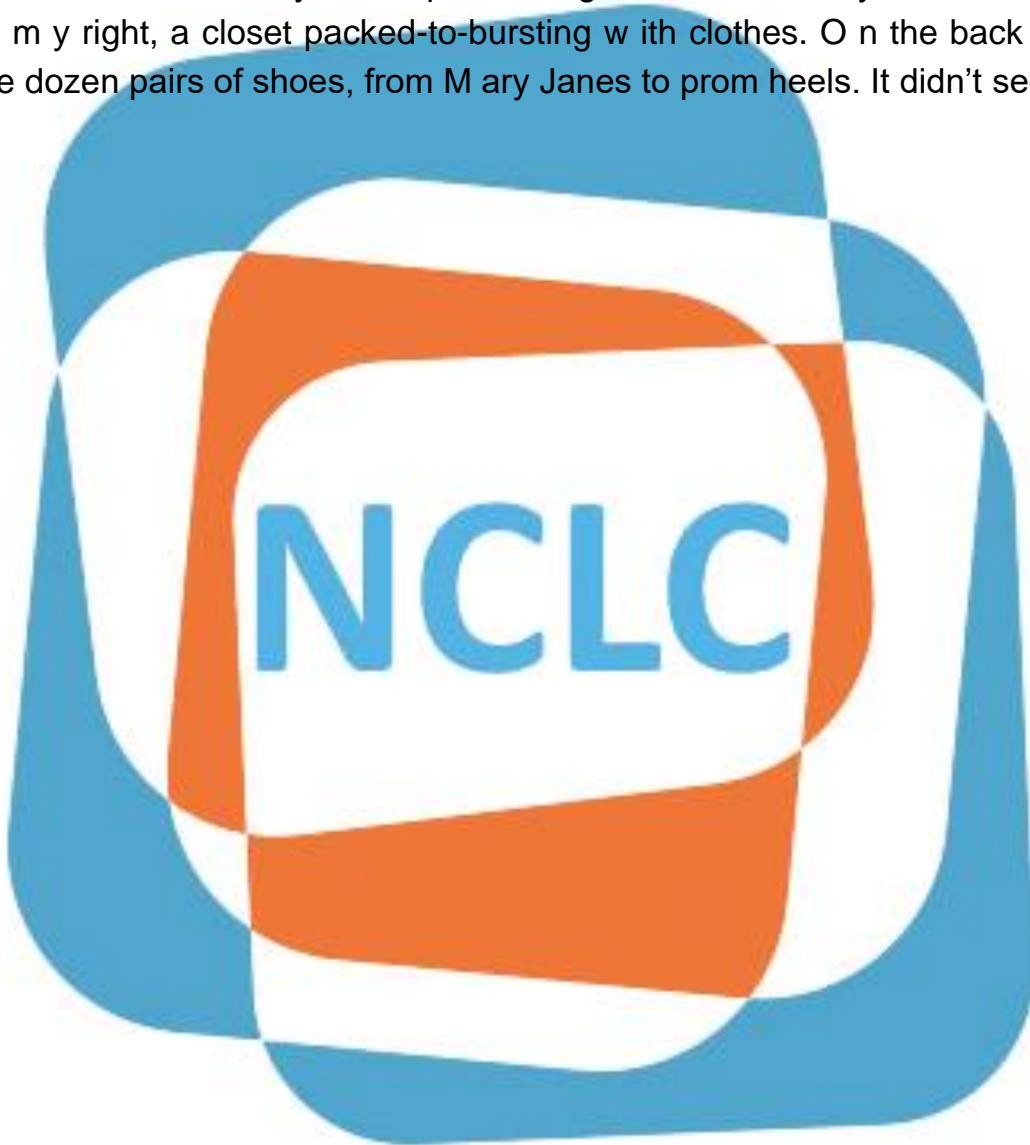
"She doesn't like her friends in her room," Ruthie said. I leaned down toward her. "Ruthie, please."

"And you don't want me to tell Mommy and Dad," she said. "Correct."

"Five dollars," she said. I was about to bargain with her, but then Radar produced a five-dollar bill and handed it to her. "If I see the car in the driveway, I'll let you know," she said conspiratorially.

I knelt down to give the aging-but-always-enthusiastic Myrna Mountweazel a good petting, and then we raced upstairs to Margo's room. As I put my hand on the doorknob, it occurred to me that I had not seen Margo's entire room since I was about ten years old.

I walked in. Much neater than you'd expect Margo to be, but maybe her mom had just picked everything up. To my right, a closet packed-to-bursting with clothes. On the back of the door, a shoe rack with a couple dozen pairs of shoes, from Mary Janes to prom heels. It didn't seem like much



could be missing from that closet.

“I’m on the computer,” Radar said. Ben was fiddling with the shade. “The poster is taped on,” he said. “Just Scotch tape. Nothing strong.”

The great surprise was on the wall next to the computer desk: bookcases as tall as me and twice as long, filled with vinyl records. Hundreds of them. “John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* is in the record player,” Ben said.

“God, that is a brilliant album,” Radar said without looking away from the computer. “Girl’s got taste.” I looked at Ben, confused, and then Ben said, “He was a sax player.” I nodded.

Still typing, Radar said, “I can’t believe Q has never heard of Coltrane. Trane’s playing is literally the most convincing proof of God’s existence I’ve ever come across.”

I began to look through the records. They were organized alphabetically by artist, so I scanned through, looking for the G’s. Dizzy Gillespie, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Green Day, Guided by Voices, George Harrison. “She has, like, every musician in the world except Woody Guthrie,” I said. And then I went back and started from the A’s.

“All her schoolbooks are still here,” I heard Ben say. “Plus some other books by her bedside table. No journal.”

But I was distracted by Margo’s music collection. She liked *everything*. I could never have imagined her listening to all these old records. I’d seen her listening to music while running, but I’d never suspected this kind of obsession. I’d never heard of most of the bands, and I was surprised to learn that vinyl records were even being produced for the newer ones.

I kept going through the A’s and then the B’s—making my way through the Beatles and the Blind Boys of Alabama and Blondie—and I started to rifle through them more quickly, so quickly that I didn’t even see the back cover of Billy Bragg’s *Mermaid Avenue* until I was looking at the Buzzcocks. I stopped, went back, and pulled out the Billy Bragg record. The front was a photograph of urban row houses. But on the back, Woody Guthrie was staring at me, a cigarette hanging out of his lips, holding a guitar that said THIS MACHINE KILLS FASTISTS.

“Hey,” I said. Ben looked over.

“Holy shitstickers,” he said. “Nice find.” Radar spun around the chair and said, “Impressive Wonder what’s inside.”

Unfortunately, only a record was inside. The record looked exactly like a record. I put it on Margo’s record player and eventually figured out how to turn it on and put down the needle. It was some guy singing Woody Guthrie songs. He sang better than Woody Guthrie.

“What is it, just a crazy coincidence?”

Ben was holding the album cover. “Look,” he said. He was pointing at the song list. In thin black pen, the song title “Walt Whitman’s Niece” had been circled.

“Interesting,” I said. Margo’s mom had said that Margo’s clues never led anywhere, but I knew now that Margo had created a chain of clues—and she had seemingly made them for me. I immediately thought of her in the SunTrust Building, telling me I was better when I showed confidence. I turned the record over and played it. “Walt Whitman’s Niece” was the first

song on side two. Not bad, actually.

I saw Ruthie in the doorway then. She looked at me. "Got any clues for us, Ruthie?" She shook her head. "I already looked," she said glumly. Radar looked at me and gestured his head toward Ruthie.

"Can you please keep watch for your mom for us?" I asked. She nodded and left. I closed the door. "What's up?" I asked Radar. He motioned us over to the computer. "In the week before she left, Margo was on Omnictionary a bunch. I can tell from minutes logged by her username, which she



stored in her passwords. But she erased her browsing history, so I can't tell what she was looking at." "Hey, Radar, look up who Walt Whitman was," Ben said.

"He was a poet," I answered. "Nineteenth century."

"Great," Ben said, rolling his eyes. "Poetry."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"Poetry is just so emo," he said. "Oh, the pain. The pain. It always rains. In my soul."

"Yeah, I believe that's Shakespeare," I said dismissively. "Did Whitman have any nieces?" I asked Radar. He was already on Whitman's Omnictionary page. A burly guy with this huge beard. I'd never read him, but he *looked* like a good poet.

"Uh, no one famous. Says he had a couple brothers, but no mention of whether they had kids. I can probably find out if you want." I shook my head. That didn't seem right. I went back to looking around the room. The bottom shelf of her record collection included some books—middle school yearbooks, a beat-up copy of *The Outsiders*—and some back issues of teen magazines. Nothing relating to Walt Whitman's niece, certainly.

I looked through the books by her bedside table. Nothing of interest. "It would make sense if she had a book of his poetry," I said. "But she doesn't seem to."

"She does!" Ben said excitedly. I went over to where he had knelt by the bookshelves, and saw it now. I'd looked right past the slim volume on the bottom shelf, wedged between two yearbooks. Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. I pulled out the book. There was a photograph of Whitman on the cover, his light eyes staring back at me.

"Not bad," I told Ben.

He nodded. "Yeah, now can we get out of here? Call me old-fashioned, but I'd rather not be here when Margo's parents get back."

"Is there anything we're missing?"

Radar stood up. "It really seems like she's drawing a pretty straight line; there's gotta be something in that book. It's weird, though—I mean, no offense, but if she always left clues for her parents, why would she leave them for you this time?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn't know the answer, but of course I had my hopes: maybe Margo needed to see my confidence. Maybe this time she *wanted* to be found, and to be found by *me*. Maybe—just as she had chosen me on the longest night, she had chosen me again. And maybe untold riches awaited whoever found her.

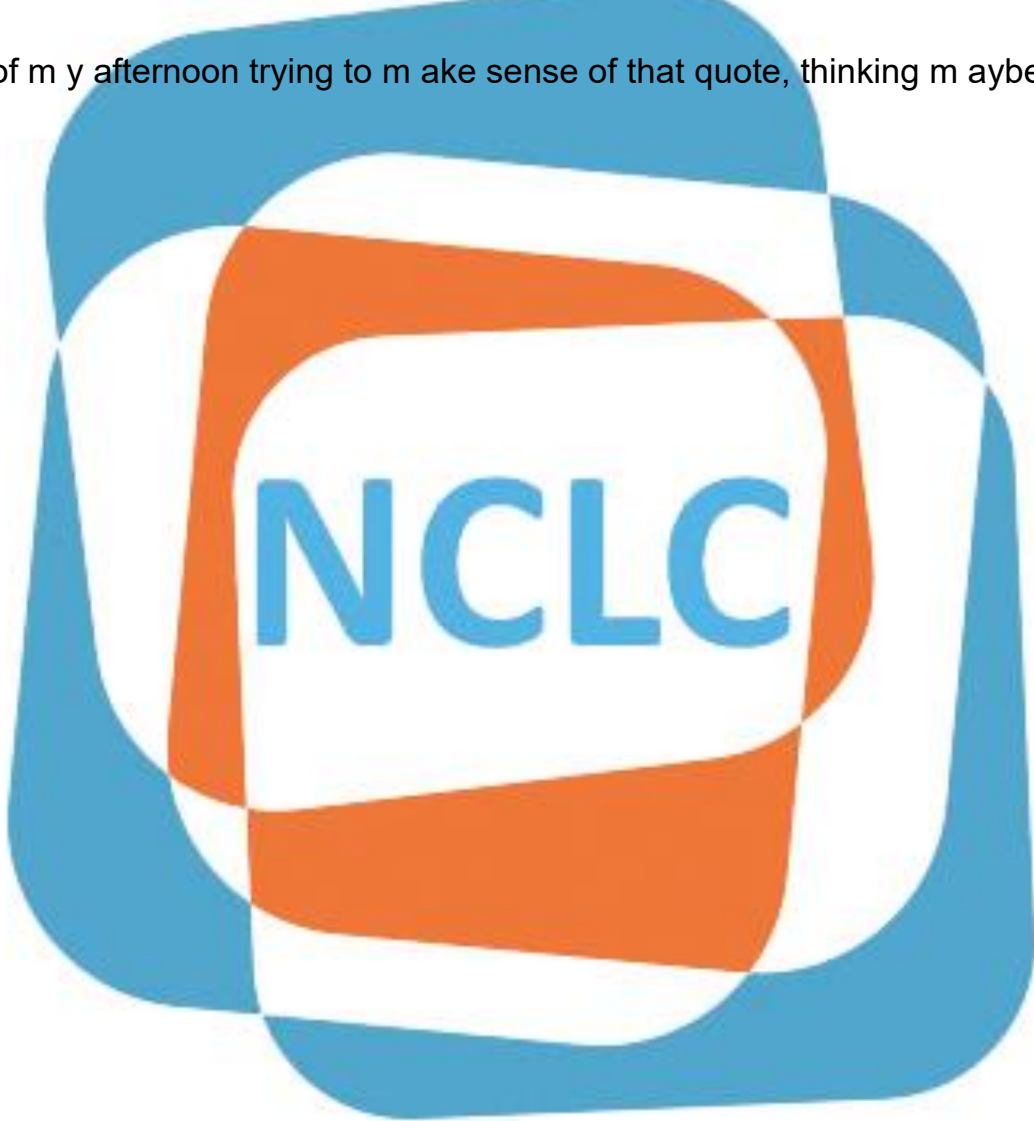
Ben and Radar left soon after we got back to my house, after they'd each looked through the book and not found any obvious clues. I grabbed some cold lasagna from the fridge for lunch and went to my room with Walt. It was the Penguin Classics version of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I read a little from the introduction and then paged through the book. There were several quotes highlighted in blue, all from the epically long poem known as "Song of M

yself.” And there were two lines from the poem that were highlighted in green:

Unscrew the locks from the doors!

Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

I spent most of my afternoon trying to make sense of that quote, thinking maybe it was Margot's



way of telling me to become more of a badass or something. But I also read and reread everything highlighted in blue:

*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand
nor look through the eyes of the deadnor feed
on the spectres in books.*

I tramp a perpetual journey

*All goes onward and outwardand nothing
collapses, And to die is different from what any
one supposed, and luckier.*

*If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.*

The final three stanzas of "Song of Myself" were also highlighted.

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boots.*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you*

It became a weekend of reading, of trying to see her in the fragments of the poem she'd left for me. I could never get anywhere with the lines, but I kept thinking about them anyway, because I didn't want to disappoint her. She wanted me to play out the string, to find the place where she had stopped and was waiting for me, to follow the breadcrumb trail until it dead-ended into her.

M onday m orning, an extraordinary event occurred. I w as late, w hich w as norm al; and then m y m om dropped m e off at school, w hich w as norm al; and then I stood outside talking w ith everyone for a w hile, w hich w as norm al; and then B en and I headed inside, w hich w as norm al. B ut as soon as w e sw ung open the steel door, B en's face becam e a m ix of excitem ent and panic, like he'd just been picked out of a crow d by a m agician for the get-saw n-in-half trick. I follow ed his gaze dow n the hall.

D enim m iniskirt. Tight w hite T-shirt. Scooped neck. Extraordinarily olive skin. Legs that m ake you care about legs. Perfectly coiffed curly brow n hair. A lam inated button reading **M E F O R P R O M Q U E E N**. Lacey Pem berton. W alking tow ard us. B y the *band room*.

"Lacey Pem berton," B en w hispered, even though she w as about three steps from us and could clearly hear him , and in fact flashed a faux-bashful sm ile upon hearing her nam e.

"Q uentin," she said to m e, and m ore than anything else, I found it im possible that she knew m y nam e. She m otioned w ith her head, and I follow ed her past the band room , over to a bank of lockers B en kept pace w ith m e.

"H i, Lacey," I said once she stopped w alking. I could sm ell her perfum e, and I rem em bered the sm ell of it in her SU V , rem em bered the crunch of the catfish as M argo and I slam m ed her seat dow n.

"I hear you w ere w ith M argo." I just looked at her.

"That night, w ith the fish? In m y car? A nd in B ecca's closet? A nd through Jase's w indow ?"

I kept looking. I w asn't sure w hat to say. A m an can live a long and adventurous life w ithout ever being spoken to by Lacey Pem berton, and w hen that rare opportunity does arise, one does not w ish to m isspeak. So B en spoke for m e. "Y eah, they hung out," B en said, as if M argo and I w ere tight.

"W as she m ad at m e?" Lacey asked after a m om ent. She w as looking dow n; I could see her brow n eye shadow .

"W hat?"

She spoke quietly then, the tiniest crack in her voice, and all at once Lacey Pem berton w as not Lacey Pem berton. She w as just— like, a person. "W as she, you know , pissed at m e about som ething?" I thought about how to answe r that for a w hile. "U h, she w as a little disappointed that you didn't tell her about Jase and B ecca, but you know M argo. She'll get over it."

Lacey started w alking dow n the hall. B en and I let her go, but then she slow ed dow n. She w anted us to w alk w ith her. B en nudged m e, and then w e started w alking together. "I didn't even *know* about Jase and B ecca. That's the thing. G od, I hope I can explain that to her soon. For a w hile, I w as really w orried that m aybe she had like really left, but then I w ent into her locker 'cause I know her com bination and she still has all her pictures up and everything, and all her books are stacked there."

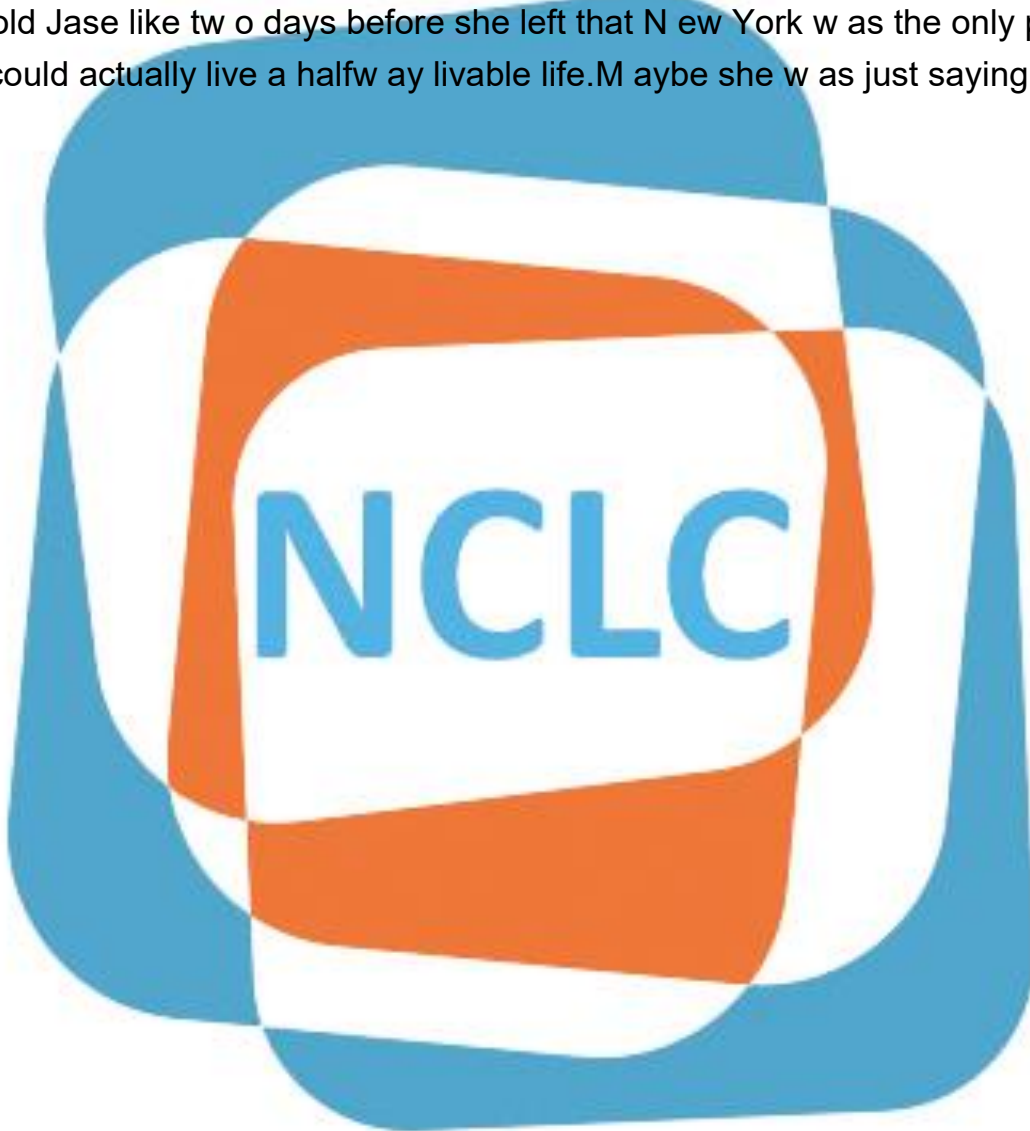
"That's good," I said.

"Yeah, but it's been like four days. That's alm ost a record for her. A nd you know , this has really

sucked, because Craig knew, and I was so pissed at him for not telling me that I broke up with him, and now I'm out a prom date, and my best friend is off wherever, in New York or whatever, thinking I did something I would NEVER do." I shot a look to Ben. Ben shot a look back to me.

"I have to run to class," I said. "But why do you say she's in New York?"

"I guess she told Jase like two days before she left that New York was the only place in America where a person could actually live a halfway livable life. Maybe she was just saying it. I don't know."



“O kay, I gotta run,” I said.

I knew Ben would never convince Lacey to go to prom with him, but I figured he at least deserved the opportunity. I jogged through the halls toward my locker, rubbing Radar's head as I ran past him. He was talking to Angela and a freshman girl in band. “Don't thank me. Thank Q,” I heard him say to the freshman, and she called out, “Thank you for my two hundred dollars!” Without looking back I shouted, “Don't thank me, thank Margo Roth Spiegelman!” because of course she'd given me the tools I needed.

I made it to my locker and grabbed my calc notebook, but then I just stayed, even after the second bell rang, standing still in the middle of the hallway while people rushed past me in both directions like I was the median in their freeway. Another kid thanked me for his two hundred dollars. I smiled at him. The school felt more *mine* than in all my four years there. We'd gotten a measure of justice for the bikeless band geeks. Lacey Pemberton had spoken to me. Chuck Parson had apologized.

I knew these halls so well—and finally it was starting to feel like they knew me, too. I stood there as the third bell rang and the crowds dwindled. Only then did I walk to calc, sitting down just after Mr. Jiminez had started another interminable lecture.

I'd brought Margo's copy of *Leaves of Grass* to school, and I started reading the highlighted parts of “Song of Myself” again, under the desk while Mr. Jiminez scratched away at the blackboard. There were no direct references to New York that I could see. I handed it to Radar after a few minutes, and he looked at it for a while before writing on the corner of his notebook closest to me, *The green highlighting must mean something. Maybe she wants you to open the door of your mind?* I shrugged and wrote back, *Or maybe she just read the poem on two different days with two different highlighters.*

A few minutes later, as I glanced toward the clock for only the thirty-seventh time, I saw Ben Starling standing outside the classroom door, a hall pass in his hand, dancing a spastic jig.

When the bell rang for lunch, I raced to my locker, but somehow Ben had beaten me there, and somehow he was talking to Lacey Pemberton. He was crowding her, slumping slightly so he could talk toward her face. Talking to Ben could make me feel a little claustrophobic sometimes, and I wasn't even a hot girl.

“Hey, guys,” I said when I got up to them.

“Hey,” Lacey answered, taking an obvious step back from Ben. “Ben was just bringing me up-to-date on Margo. No one ever went into her room, you know. She said her parents didn't allow her to have friends over.”

“Really?” Lacey nodded. “Did you know that Margo owns, like, a thousand records?”

Lacey threw up her hands. “No, that's what Ben was saying! Margo never talked about music. I mean, she would say she liked something on the radio or whatever. But—no. She's so *wierd*.”

I shrugged. Maybe she was *wierd*, or maybe the rest of us were *wierd*. Lacey kept talking. “But we were just saying that Walt Whitman was from New York.”

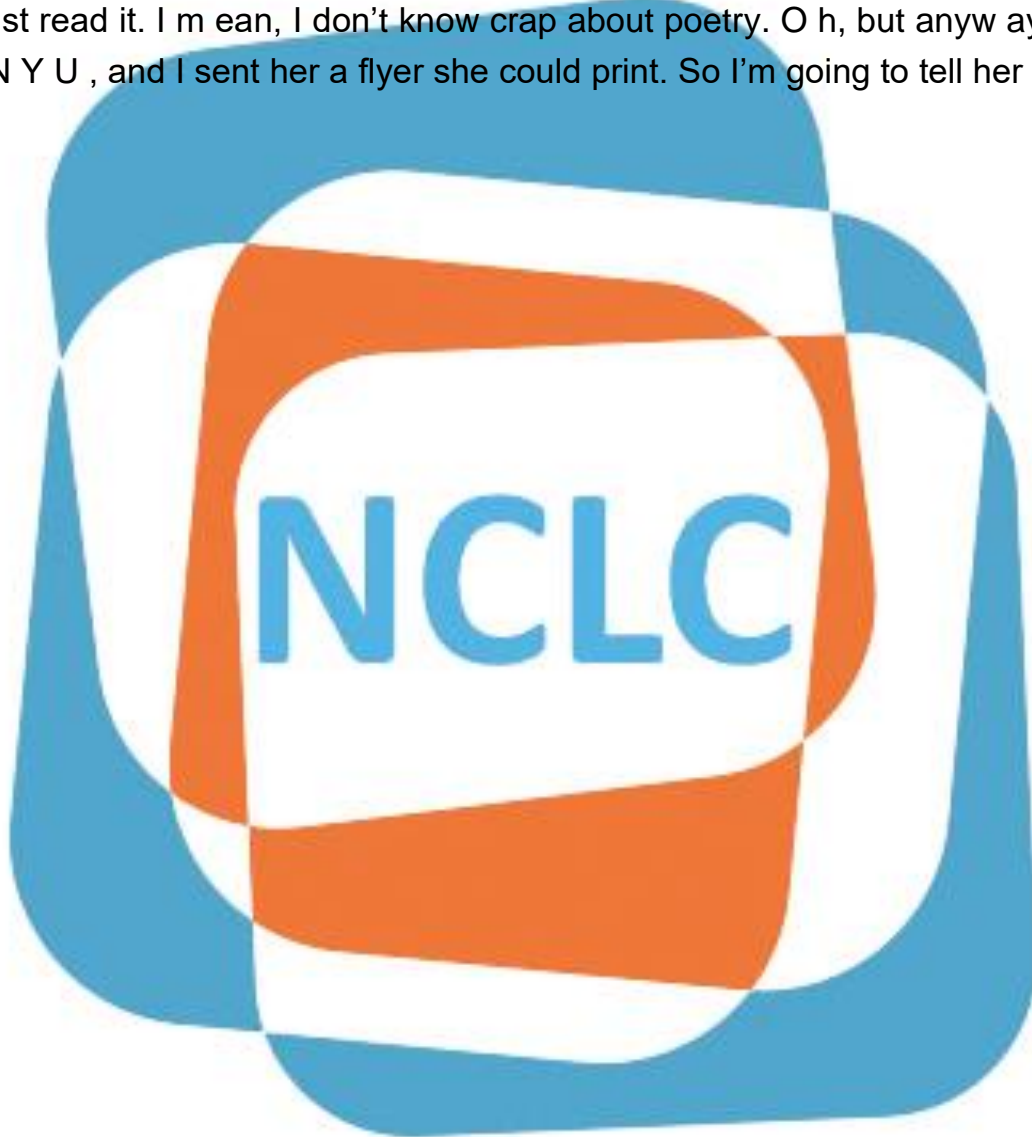
“And according to Omnictionary, Woody Guthrie lived there for a long time, too,” Ben said.

I nodded. "I can totally see her in New York. I think we have to figure out the next clue, though. It can't end with the book. There must be some code in the highlighted lines or something."

"Yeah, can I look at it during lunch?"

"Yeah," I said. "Or I can make you a copy in the library if you want."

"Nah, I can just read it. I mean, I don't know crap about poetry. Oh, but anyway, I have a cousin in college there, at N Y U , and I sent her a flyer she could print. So I'm going to tell her to put them up in



record stores. I mean, I know there are a lot of record stores, but still.”

“Good idea,” I said. They started to walk to the cafeteria, and I followed them. “Hey,” Ben asked Lacey, “what color is your dress?”

“Um, it’s kind of sapphire, why?”

“Just want to make sure my tux matches,” Ben said. I’d never seen Ben’s smile so giddy-ridiculous, and that’s saying something, because he was a fairly giddy-ridiculous person.

Lacey nodded. “Well, but we don’t want to be *too* matchy-matchy. Maybe if you go traditional: black tux and a black vest?”

“No cummerbund, you don’t think?”

“Well, they’re okay, but you don’t want to get one with really fat pleats, you know?”

They kept talking— apparently, the ideal level of pleat-fatness is a conversational topic to which hours can be devoted— but I stopped listening as I waited in the Pizza Hut line. Ben had found his prom date, and Lacey had found a boy who would happily talk prom for hours. Now everyone had a date— except me, and I wasn’t going. The only girl I’d want to take was off trampolining some kind of perpetual journey or something.

When we sat down, Lacey started reading “Song of Myself,” and she agreed that none of it sounded like anything and certainly none of it sounded like Margo. We still had no idea what, if anything, Margo was trying to say. She gave the book back to me, and they started talking about prom again.

All afternoon, I kept feeling like it wasn’t doing any good to look at the highlighted quotes, but then I would get bored and reach into my backpack and put the book on my lap and go back to it. I had English at the end of the day, seventh period, and we were just starting to read *Moby Dick*, so Dr. Holden was talking quite a lot about fishing in the nineteenth century. I kept *Moby Dick* on the desk and *Whitman* in my lap, but even being in English class couldn’t help. For once, I went a few minutes without looking at the clock, so I was surprised by the bell ringing, and took longer than everyone else to get my backpack packed. As I slung it over one shoulder and started to leave, Dr. Holden smiled at me and said, “*Whitman*, huh?”

I nodded sheepishly.

“Good stuff,” she said. “So good that I’m almost okay with you reading it in class. But not quite.” I mumbled *sorry* and then walked out to the senior parking lot.

While Ben and Radar banded, I sat in RHA PAW with the doors open, a slow husky breeze blowing through. I read from *The Federalist Papers* to prepare for a quiz I had the next day in government, but my mind kept returning to its continuous loop: Guthrie and Whitman and New York and Margo. Had she gone to New York to immerse herself in folk music? Was there

some secret folk music-loving Margo I'd never know n? Was she maybe staying in an apartment where one of them had once lived? And why did she want to tell me about it?

I saw Ben and Radar approaching in the sideview mirror, Radar swinging his sax case as he walked quickly toward RHA PAW. They hustled in through the already-open door, and Ben turned the key and RHA PAW sputtered, and then we hoped, and then she sputtered again, and then we hoped some more, and finally she gurgled to life. Ben raced out of the parking lot and turned off campus before saying to



me, "C A N Y O U B E L I E V E T H I S S H I T !" H e could hardly contain his glee.

H e started hitting the car's horn, but of course the horn didn't work, so every time he hit it, he just yelled, "B E E P ! B E E P ! B E E P ! H O N K I F Y O U ' R E G O I N G T O P R O M W I T H T R U E - B L U E H O N E Y B U N N Y L A C E Y P E M B E R T O N ! H O N K , B A B Y , H O N K !"

B en could hardly shut up the whole way home. "You know what did it? Aside from desperation? I guess she and Becca Arrington are fighting because Becca's, you know, a cheater, and I think she started to feel bad about the whole Bluddy Ben thing. She didn't say that, but she sort of *acted* it. So in the end, Bluddy Ben is going to get me some puh-lay-hey." I was happy for him and everything, but I wanted to focus on the game of getting to Margo.

"Do you guys have any ideas at all?"

It was quiet for a moment, and then Radar looked at me through the rearview mirror and said "That doors thing is the only one marked different from the others, and it's also the most random; I really think that's the one with the clue. What is it again?"

"Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" I replied. "Admittedly, Jefferson Park is not really the best place to unscrew the doors of closed-mindedness from their jambs," Radar allowed. "Maybe that's what she's saying. Like the paper towel thing she said about Orlando? Maybe she's saying that's why she left."

B en slowed for a stoplight and then turned around to look at Radar. "Bro," he said, "I think you guys are giving Margo Honey-bunny way too much credit."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Unscrew the locks from the doors," he said. "Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs."

"Yeah," I said. The light turned green and Ben hit the gas. R H A P A W shuddered like she might disintegrate but then began to move.

"It's not *poetry*. It's not *metaphor*. It's instructions. We are supposed to go to Margo's room and unscrew the lock from the door and unscrew the door itself from its jamb."

Radar looked at me in the rearview mirror, and I looked back at him. "Sometimes," Radar said to me, "he's so retarded that he becomes kind of brilliant."

After parking in my driveway, we walked across the strip of grass that separated Margo's house from mine, just as we had Saturday. Ruthie answered the door and said her parents wouldn't be home until six; Myrna Mowntweazel ran excited circles around us; we went upstairs. Ruthie brought us a toolbox from the garage, and then we all stared at the door leading to Margo's bedroom for a while. We were not handy people.

"What the hell are you supposed to do?" asked Ben.

"Don't curse in front of Ruthie," I said.

"Ruthie, do you mind if I say hell?"

"We don't believe in hell," she said, by way of answering.

Radar interrupted. "People," he said. "People. The door." Radar dug out a Phillips-head screw driver from the mess of a toolbox and knelt down, unscrewing the locking doorknob. I grabbed a bigger screw driver and tried to unscrew the hinges, but there didn't seem to be any screws involved. I looked at the door some more. Eventually, Ruthie got bored and went downstairs to watch TV.

Radar got the doorknob loose, and we each, in turn, peered inside at the unpainted, unfinished wood around the knob. No message. No note. Nothing. Annoyed, I moved onto the hinges, wondering how to open them. I swung the door open and shut, trying to understand its mechanics. "That poem is so damned long," I said. "You'd think old Walt could have taken a line or two to tell us *how* to unscrew the door itself from its jamb."

Only when he responded did I realize Radar was sitting at Margo's computer. "According to Omnictionary," he said, "we're looking at a butt hinge. And you just use the screw driver as a lever to pop out the pin. Incidentally, some vandal has added that butt hinges function well because they are powered by farts. Oh, Omnictionary. Will it ever be accurate?"

Once Omnictionary had told us what to do, doing it proved surprisingly easy. I got the pin off each of the three hinges and then Ben pulled the door away. I examined the hinges, and the unfinished wood of the doorway. Nothing.

"Nothing on the door," Ben said. Ben and I placed the door back in place, and Radar pounded in the pins with the screw driver's handle.

Radar and I went over to Ben's house, which was architecturally identical to mine, to play a game called Arctic Fury. We were playing this game-within-a-game where you shoot each other with paintballs on a glacier. You received extra points for shooting your opponents in the balls. It was very sophisticated. "Bro, she's definitely in New York City," Ben said. I saw the muzzle of his rifle around a corner, but before I could move, he shot me between the legs. "Shit," I mumbled.

Radar said, "In the past, it seems like her clues have pointed to a place. She tells Jase; she leaves us clues involving two people who both lived in New York City most of their lives. It does make sense."

Ben said, "Dude, that's what she wants." Just as I was creeping up on Ben, he paused the game. "She wants you to go to New York. What if she arranged to make that the only way to find her? To actually go?"

"What? It's a city of like twelve million people."



“She could have a mole here,” Radar said. “Who will tell her if you go.”

“Lacey!” Ben said. “It’s totally Lacey. Yes! You gotta get on a plane and go to New York City right now. And when Lacey finds out, Margo will pick you up at the airport. Yes. Bro, I am going to take you to your house, and you’re gonna pack, and then I’m driving your ass to the airport, and you’re gonna put a plane ticket on your emergencies-only credit card, and then when Margo finds out what a badass you are, the kind of badass Jase Worthington only *dreams* about being, all *three* of us will be taking hotties to prom.”

I didn’t doubt there was a flight to New York City leaving shortly. From Orlando, there’s a flight to *everywhere* leaving shortly. But I doubted everything else. “If you call Lacey ...” I said.

“She’s not going to confess!” Ben said. “Think of all the misdirection they used— they probably only acted like they were fighting so you wouldn’t suspect she was the mole.”

Radar said, “I don’t know, that doesn’t really add up.” He kept talking, but I was only half listening. Staring at the paused screen, I thought it over. If Margo and Lacey were fake-fighting, did Lacey fake-break-up with her boyfriend? Had she faked her concern? Lacey had been fielding dozens of emails— none with real information— from the flyers her cousin had put in record stores in New York. She was no mole, and Ben’s plan was idiotic. Still, the mere idea of a plan appealed to me. But there were only two and a half weeks left of school, and I’d miss at least two days if I went to New York— not to mention my parents would kill me for putting a plane ticket on my credit card. The more I thought about it, the dumber it was. Still, if I could see her tomorrow But no. “I can’t miss school,” I finally said. I unpaused the game.

“I have a French quiz tomorrow.”

“You know,” Ben said, “your romanticism is a real inspiration.”

I played for a few more minutes and then walked across Jefferson Park back home.

My mom told me once about this crazy kid she worked with. He was a completely normal kid until he was nine, when his dad died. And even though obviously a lot of nine-year-olds have had a lot of dead fathers and most of the time the kids don’t go crazy, I guess this kid was an exception.

So what he did was he took a pencil and one of those steel compass things, and he started drawing circles onto a piece of paper. All the circles exactly two inches in diameter. And he would draw the circles until the entire piece of paper was completely black, and then he would get another piece of paper and draw more circles, and he did this every day, all day, and didn’t pay attention in school and drew circles all over all of his tests and shit, and my mom said that this kid’s problem was that he had created a routine to cope with his loss, only the routine became destructive. So anyway, then my mom made him cry about his dad or whatever and the kid stopped drawing circles and presumably lived happily ever after. But I think about the circles kid sometimes, because I can sort of understand him. I always liked routine. I suppose I never found boredom very boring. I doubted I could explain it to someone like Margo, but drawing circles through life struck me as a kind of reasonable insanity.

So I should have felt fine about not going to New York— it was a dumb idea, anyway. But as I went about my routine that night and the next day at school, it ate away at me, as if the routine itself was taking me farther from reuniting with her.



Tuesday evening, when she had been gone six days, I talked to my parents. It wasn't a big *decision* or anything; I just did. I was sitting at the kitchen counter while Dad chopped vegetables and Mom browned some beef in a skillet. Dad was razzing me about how much time I'd spent reading such a short book, and I said, "Actually, it's not for English; it seems like maybe Margo left it for me to find." They got quiet, and then I told them about Woody Guthrie and the Whitman.

"She clearly likes to play these games of incomplete information," my dad said.

"I don't blame her for wanting attention," my mom said, and then to me added, "but that doesn't make her well-being your responsibility."

Dad scraped the carrots and onions into the skillet. "Yeah, true. Not that either of us could diagnose her without seeing her, but I suspect she'll be home soon."

"We shouldn't speculate," my mom said to him quietly, as if I couldn't hear or something. Dad was about to respond but I interrupted.

"What should I do?"

"Graduate," my mom said. "And trust that Margo can take of herself, for which she has shown a great talent."

"Agreed," my dad said, but after dinner, when I went back to my room and played Resurrection on mute, I could hear them talking quietly back and forth. I could not hear the words, but I could hear the worry.

Later that night, Ben called my cell. "Hey," I said.

"Bro," he said.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm about to go shoe shopping with Lacey." "Shoe shopping?"

"Yeah. Everything's thirty percent off from ten to midnight. She wants me to help her pick out her prom shoes. I mean, she had some, but I was over at her house yesterday and we agreed that they weren't . . . you know, you want the *perfect* shoes for prom. So she's going to return them and then we're going to Burdines and we're going to like pi—"

"Ben," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Dude, I don't want to talk about Lacey's prom shoes. And I'll tell you why: I have this thing that makes me really uninterested in prom shoes. It's called a penis."

"I'm really nervous and I can't stop thinking that I actually kinda really like her not just in

the she's-a-hot-prom -date w ay but in the she's-actually-really-cool-and-I-like-hanging-out-w
ith-her kinda w ay. A nd, like, m aybe w e're going to go to prom and w e'll be, like, kissing in
the m iddle of the dance floor and everyone w ill be like, holy shit and, you know , everything
they ever thought about m e w ill just go out the w indow — ”

“B en,” I said, “stop the dork babble and you'll be fine.” H e kept talking for a w hile, but I
finally got off the phone w ith him .



I lay down and started to feel a little depressed about prom. I refused to feel any kind of sadness over the fact that I wasn't *going* to prom, but I had— stupidly, embarrassingly— thought of finding Margo, and getting her to come home with me just in time for prom, like late on Saturday night, and we'd walk into the Hilton ballroom wearing jeans and ratty T-shirts, and we'd be just in time for the last dance, and we'd dance while everyone pointed at us and marveled at the return of Margo, and then we'd fox-trot the hell out of there and go get ice cream at Friendly's. So yes, like Ben, I harbored ridiculous prom fantasies. But at least I didn't *say mine out loud*.

Ben was such a self-absorbed idiot sometimes, and I had to remind myself why I still liked him. If nothing else, he sometimes got surprisingly bright ideas. The door thing was a good idea. It didn't work, but it was a good idea. But obviously Margo had intended it to mean something else to me.

To me.

The clue was *mine*. The doors were mine!

On my way to the garage, I had to walk through the living room, where Mom and Dad were watching TV. "Want to watch?" my mom asked. "They're about to crack the case." It was one of those solve-the-murder crime shows.

"No, thanks," I said, and breezed past them through the kitchen and into the garage. I found the widest flathead screw driver and then stuck it in the waistband of my khaki shorts, cinching my belt tight. I grabbed a cookie out of the kitchen and then walked back through the living room, my gait only slightly awkward, and while they watched the televised mystery unfold, I removed the three pins from my bedroom door. When the last one came off, the door creaked and started to fall, so I swung it all the way open against the wall with one hand, and as I swung it, I saw a tiny piece of paper— about the size of my thumb nail— flutter down from the door's top hinge. Typical Margo. Why hide something in her own room when she could hide it in mine? I wondered when she'd done it, how she'd gotten in. I couldn't help but smile.

It was a sliver of the *Orlando Sentinel*, half straight edges and half ripped. I could tell it was the *Sentinel* because one ripped edge read "*do Sentinel* May ٦, ٢." The day she'd left. The message was clearly from her. I recognized her handwriting:

٨٣٢٨ *bartlesville Avenue*

I couldn't put the door back on without beating the pins back into place with the screw driver, which would have definitely alerted my parents, so I just propped the door on its hinges and kept it all the way open. I pocketed the pins and then went to my computer and looked up a map of ٨٣٢٨ Bartlesville Avenue. I'd never heard of the street.

It was ٣٤,٦ miles away, way the hell out Colonial Drive almost to the town of Christmas, Florida. When I zoomed in on the satellite image of the building, it looked like a black

rectangle fronted by dull silver and then grass behind. A mobile home, maybe? It was hard to get a sense of scale, because it was surrounded by so much green.

I called Ben and told him. "So I was right!" he said. "I can't wait to tell Lacey, because she totally



thought it was a good idea, too!"

I ignored the Lacey comment. "I think I'm gonna go," I said.

"Well, yeah, of course you've gotta go. I'm coming. Let's go on Sunday morning. I'll be tired from all-night prom partying, but whatever."

"No, I mean I'm going tonight," I said.

"Bro, it's *dark*. You can't go to a strange building with a mysterious address in the *dark*. Haven't you ever seen a horror movie?"

"She could be there," I said.

"Yeah, and a demon who can only be nourished by the pancreases of young boys could also be there," he said. "Christ, at least wait till tomorrow, although I've got to order her corsage after band, and then I want to be home in case Lacey IM's, because we've been IM'ing a lot—"

I cut him off. "No, tonight. I want to see her." I could feel the circle closing. In an hour, if I hurried, I could be looking at her.

"Bro, I am not letting you go to some sketchy address in the middle of the night. I will Tase your ass if necessary."

"Tomorrow morning," I said, mostly to myself. "I'll just go tomorrow morning." I was tired of having perfect attendance anyway. Ben was quiet. I heard him blowing air between his front teeth.

"I do feel a little something coming on," he said. "Fever. Cough. Aches. Pains." I smiled. After I hung up, I called Radar.

"I'm on the other line with Ben," he said. "Let me call you back."

He called back a minute later. Before I could even say hello, Radar said, "Q, I've got this terrible migraine. There's no way I can go to school tomorrow." I laughed.

After I got off the phone, I stripped down to T-shirt and boxers, emptied my garbage can into a drawer, and put the can next to the bed. I set my alarm for the ungodly hour of six in the morning, and spent the next few hours trying in vain to fall asleep.

M om cam e into m y room the next m orning and said, "You didn't even close the door last night, sleepyhead," and I opened m y eyes and said, "I think I have a stom ach bug." A nd then I m otioned tow ard the trash can, w hich contained puke.

"Q uentin! O h, goodness. W hen did this happen?" "A bout six," I said, w hich w as true.

"W hy didn't you com e get us?"

"Too tired," I said, w hich w as also true. "Y ou just w oke up feeling ill?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, w hich w as untrue. I w oke up because m y alarm w ent off at six, and then I snuck into the kitchen and ate a granola bar and som e orange juice. Ten m inutes later, I stuck tw o fingers dow n m y throat. I didn't w ant to do it the night before because I didn't w ant it stinking the room up al night. The puking sucked, but it w as over quickly.

M om took the bucket, and I could hear her cleaning it out in the kitchen. She returned w ith a fresh bucket, her lips pouting w ith w orry. "W ell, I feel like I should take the day—" she started, but I cut her off.

"I'm honestly fine," I said. "Just queasy. Som ething I ate." "A re you sure?"

"I'll call if it gets w orse," I said. She kissed m y forehead. I could feel her sticky lipstick on m y skin. I w asn't really sick, but still, som ehow she'd m ade m e feel better.

"D o you w ant m e to close the door?" she asked, one hand on it. The door clung to its hinges, but only barely.

"N o no no," I said, perhaps too nervously.

"O kay," she said. "I'll call school on m y w ay to w ork. You let m e know if you need anything. A nything. O r if you w ant m e to com e hom e. A nd you can alw ays call D ad. A nd I'll check up on you this afternoon, okay?"

I nodded, and then pulled the covers back up to m y chin. Even though the bucket had been cleaned I could sm ell the puke underneath the detergent, and the sm ell of it rem inded m e of the act of puking w hich for som e reason m ade m e w ant to puke again, but I just took slow , even m outh breaths until I heard the C hrysler backing dow n the drivew ay. It w as 7:32. For once, I thought, I w ould be on tim e. N ot to school, adm ittedly. B ut still.

I show ered and brushed m y teeth and put on dark jeans and a plain black T-shirt. I put M argo's scrap of new spaper in m y pocket. I ham m ered the pins back into their hinges, and then packed. I didn't really know w hat to throw into m y backpack, but I included the doorjam b-opening screw driver, a printout of the satellite m ap, directions, a bottle of w ater, and in case she w as there, the W hitm an. I w anted to ask her about it.

Ben and Radar showed up at eight on the dot. I got in the backseat. They were shouting along to a song by the Mountain Goats.

Ben turned around and offered me his fist. I punched it softly, even though I hated that greeting. "Q!" he shouted over the music. "How good does this feel?"

And I knew exactly what Ben meant: he meant listening to the Mountain Goats with your friends in a car that runs on a Wednesday morning in May on the way to Margo and whatever Margotastic prize



came with finding her. "It beats calculus," I answered. The music was too loud for us to talk. Once we got out of Jefferson Park, we rolled down the one window that worked so the world would know we had good taste in music.

We drove all the way out Colonial Drive, past the movie theaters and the bookstores that I had been driving to and past my whole life. But this drive was different and better because it occurred during calculus, because it occurred with Ben and Radar, because it occurred on our way to where I believed I would find her. And finally, after twenty miles, Orlando gave way to the last remaining orange tree groves and undeveloped ranches—the endlessly flat land grown over thick with brush, the Spanish moss hanging off the branches of oak trees, still in the endless heat. This was the Florida where I used to spend mosquito-bitten, arm-achillio-chasing nights as a Boy Scout. The road was dominated now by pickup trucks, and every mile or so you could see a subdivision off the highway—little streets winding for no reason around houses that rose up out of nothing like a volcano of vinyl siding.

Farther out we passed a rotting wooden sign that said GROVE-POINT ACRES. A cracked blacktop road lasted only a couple hundred feet before dead-ending into an expanse of gray dirt, signaling that Grovepoint Acres was what my mom called a pseudovision—a subdivision abandoned before it could be completed. Pseudovisions had been pointed out to me a couple times before on drives with my parents, but I'd never seen one so desolate.

We were about five miles past Grovepoint Acres when Radar turned down the music and said, "Should be in about a mile."

I took a long breath. The excitement of being somewhere other than school had started to wane. This didn't seem like a place where Margo would hide, or even visit. It was a far cry from New York City. This was the Florida you fly over, wondering why people ever thought to inhabit this peninsula. I stared at the empty asphalt, the heat distorting my vision. A head, I saw a strip mall waver in the bright distance.

"Is that it?" I asked, leaning forward and pointing. "Must be," Radar said.

Ben pushed the power button on the stereo, and we all got very quiet as Ben pulled into a parking lot long since reclaimed by the gray sandy dirt. There had once been a sign for these four storefronts. A rusted pole stood about eight feet high by the side of the road. But the sign was long gone, snapped off by a hurricane or an accumulation of decay. The stores themselves had fared little better: it was a single-story building with a flat roof, and bare cinder block was visible in places. Strips of cracked paint wrinkled away from the walls, like insects clinging to a nest. Water stains formed brown abstract paintings between the store windows. The windows were boarded up with warped sheets of particleboard. I was struck by an awful thought, the kind that cannot be taken back once it escapes into the open air of consciousness: it seemed to me that this was not a place you

go to live. It was a place you go to die.

As soon as the car stopped, my nose and mouth were flooded with the rancid smell of death. I had to swallow back a rush of puke that rose up into the raw soreness in the back of my throat. Only now, after all this lost time, did I realize how terribly I had misunderstood both her game and the prize for winning it.



I get out of the car and Ben is standing next to me, and Radar next to him. And I know all at once that this isn't funny, that this hasn't been prove-to-me-you're-good-enough-to-hang-out-with-me. I can hear Margo that night as we drove around Orlando. I can hear her saying to me, "I don't want some kids to find me swarmed with flies on a Saturday morning in Jefferson Park." Not wanting to be found by some kids in Jefferson Park isn't the same thing as not wanting to die.

There is no evidence that anyone has been here in a long time except for the smell, that sickly sour stench designed to keep the living from the dead. I tell myself she can't smell like that, but of course she can. We all can. I hold my forearm up to my nose so I can smell sweat and skin and anything but death.

"M A R G O ?" Radar calls. A mockingbird perched on the rusted gutter of the building spits out two syllables in response. "M A R G O !" he shouts again. Nothing. He digs a parabola into the sand with his foot and sighs. "Shit."

Standing before this building, I learn something about fear. I learn that it is not the idle fantasies of someone who maybe wants something important to happen to him, even if the important thing is horrible. It is not the disgust of seeing a dead stranger, and not the breathlessness of hearing a shotgun pumped outside of Becca Arrington's house. This cannot be addressed by breathing exercises. This fear bears no analogy to any fear I knew before. This is the basest of all possible emotions, the feeling that was with us before we existed, before this building existed, before the earth existed. This is the fear that made fish crawl out onto dry land and evolve lungs, the fear that teaches us to run, the fear that makes us bury our dead.

The smell leaves me seized by desperate panic—panic not like my lungs are out of air, but like the atmosphere itself is out of air. I think maybe the reason I have spent most of my life being afraid is that I have been trying to prepare myself, to train my body for the real fear when it comes. But I am not prepared.

"Bro, we should leave," Ben says. "We should call the cops or something." We have not looked at each other yet. We are all still looking at this building, this long-abandoned building that cannot possibly hold anything but corpses.

"No," Radar says. "No no no no no. We call if there's something to call about. She left the address for Quinn. Not for the cops. We have to find a way in there."

"In there?" Ben says dubiously.

I clap Ben on the back, and for the first time all day, the three of us are looking not forward but at one another. That makes it bearable. Something about seeing them makes me feel as if she is not dead until we find her. "Yeah, in there," I say.

I don't know who she is anymore, or who she was, but I need to find her.



W e w alk around the back of the building and find four locked steel doors and nothing but ranch land patches of palm ettos dotting an expanse of gold-green grass. The stench is worse here, and I feel afraid to keep w alking. B en and R adar are just behind m e, to m y right and left. W e form a triangle together, w alking slow ly, our eyes scanning the area.

“It’s a raccoon!” B en shouts. “O h, thank G od. It’s a raccoon. Jesus.” R adar and I w alk aw ay from the building to join him near a shallow drainage ditch. A huge, bloated raccoon w ith matted hair lies dead, no visible traum a, its fur falling off, one of its ribs exposed. R adar turns aw ay and heaves, but nothing com es out. I lean dow n next to him and put m y arm betw een his shoulder blades, and w hen he gets his breath back, he says, “I am so fucking glad to see that dead fucking raccoon.”

B ut even so, I cannot picture her here alive. It occurs to m e that the W hitm an could be a suicide note. I think about things she highlighted: “To die is different from w hat any one supposed, and luckier.” “I bequeath m yself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you w ant m e again look for m e under your bootsoles.” For a m om ent, I feel a flash of hope w hen I think about the last line of the poem : “I stop som e w here w aiting for you.” B ut then I think that the / does not need to be a person The / can also be a body.

R adar has w alked aw ay from the raccoon and is tugging on the handle of one of the four locked steel doors. I feel like praying for the dead— saying K addish for this raccoon— but I don’t even know how . I’m so sorry for him , and so sorry for how happy I am to see him like this.

“It’s giving a little,” R adar shouts to us. “C om e help.”

B en and I both put our arm s around R adar’s w aist and pull back. H e puts his foot up against the w all to give him self extra leverage as he pulls, and then all at once they collapse onto m e, R adar’s sweat-soaked T-shirt pressed up against m y face. For a m om ent, I’m excited, thinking w e’re in. B ut then I see R adar holding the door handle. I scram ble up and look at the door. Still locked.

“Piece of shit forty-year-old goddam ned doorknob,” R adar says. I’ve never heard him talk like this before.

“It’s okay,” I say. “There’s a w ay. There has to be.”

W e w alk all the w ay around to the front of the building. N o doors, no holes, no visible tunnels. B ut I need in. B en and R adar try to peel the slabs of particleboard from the w indow s, but they’re all nailed shut. R adar kicks at the board, but it doesn’t give. B en turns back to m e. “There’s no glass behind one of these boards,” he says, and then he starts jogging aw ay from the building, his sneakers splashing sand as he goes.

I give him a confused look. “I’m going to bust through the particleboard,” he explains.

“You can’t do that.” H e is the sm allest of our light trio. If anyone tries to sm ash through the boarded-up w indow s, it should be m e.

H e balls his hands into fists and then extends his fingers out. A s I w alk tow ard him , he starts

talking to me. “When my mom was trying to keep me from getting beat up in third grade, she put me in taekwondo. I only went to like three classes, and I only learned one thing, but the thing comes in handy sometimes: we watched this taekwondo master punch through a thick wooden block, and we were all like, dude, how did he do that, and he told us that if you move as though your hand will go through the block, and if you believe that your hand will go through the block, then it will.”

I’m about to refute this idiotic logic when he takes off, running past me in a blur. His acceleration



continues as he approaches the board, and then utterly without fear, he leaps up at the last possible second, twists his body sideways— his shoulder out to bear the brunt of the force— and slams into the wood. I half-expect him to burst through and leave a Ben-shaped cutout, like a cartoon. Instead, he bounces off the board and falls onto his ass in a patch of bright grass amid the sea of sandy dirt. Ben rolls onto his side, rubbing his shoulder. “It broke,” he announces.

I assume he means his shoulder as I race toward him, but then he stands up, and I’m looking at a Ben-high crack in the particle-board. I start kicking at it, and the crack spreads horizontally, and then Radar and I get our fingers inside the crack and start tugging. I squint to keep the sweat from burning my eyes, and pull with all my force back and forth until the crack starts to make a jagged opening. Radar and I urge it on with silent work, until eventually he has to take a break and Ben replaces him. Finally we are able to punch a big chunk of the board into the minimum. I climb in feetfirst, landing blindly onto what feels like a stack of papers.

The hole we’ve carved into this building gives a little light, but I can’t even make out the dimensions of the room, or whether there is a ceiling. The air in here is so stale and hot that inhaling and exhaling feel identical.

I turn around and my chin hits Ben’s forehead. I find myself whispering, even though there’s no reason to. “Do you have a—”

“No,” he whispers back before I can finish. “Radar, did you bring a flashlight?”

I hear Radar coming through the hole. “I have one on my key chain. It’s not much, though.”

The light comes on, and I still can’t see very well, but I can tell we’ve stepped into a big room filled with a labyrinth of metal shelves. The papers on the floor are pages from an old day-by-day calendar, the days scattered through the room, all of them yellowing and mouse-bit. I wonder if this might once have been a little bookstore, although it’s been decades since these shelves held anything but dust.

We fall into line behind Radar. I hear something creak above us, and we all stop moving. I try to swallow the panic. I can hear each of Radar’s and Ben’s breaths, their shuffling footsteps. I want out of here, but that could be Margo creaking for all I know. It could also be crack addicts.

“Just the building settling,” Radar whispers, but he seems less sure than usual. I stand there unable to move. After a moment, I hear Ben’s voice. “The last time I was this scared, I peed myself.”

“The last time I was this scared,” Radar says, “I actually had to face a Dark Lord in order to make the world safe for wizards.”

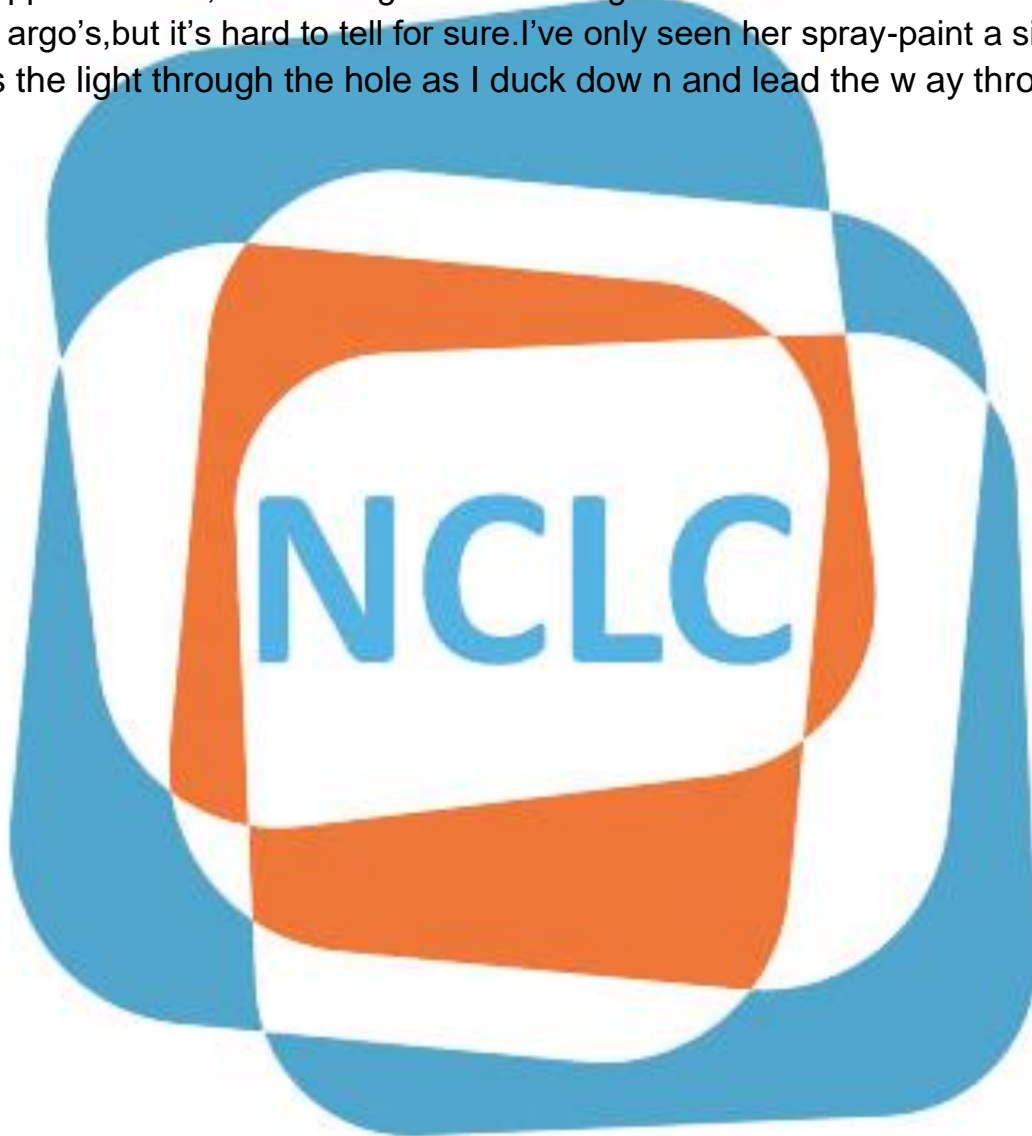
I make a feeble attempt. “The last time I was this scared I had to sleep in Mommy’s room.” Ben chuckles. “Q, if I were you, I would get that scared Every. Single. Night.”

I’m not up for laughing, but their laughter makes the room feel safer, and so we begin to explore. We walk through each row of shelves, finding nothing but a few copies of *Reader’s Digest* from the 1970s lying on the floor. After a while, I find my eyes adjusting to the darkness, and in the gray light we start walking in different directions at different speeds.

“No one leaves the room until everyone leaves the room,” I whisper, and they whisper *okay’s* back. I get to a side wall of the room and find the first evidence that someone has been here since everyone

left. A jagged semicircular, waist-high tunnel has been cut out of the wall. The words TROLL HOLE have been spray-painted in orange above the hole, with a helpful arrow pointing down to the hole “Guys,” Radar says, so loud that the spell breaks for just a moment. I follow his voice and find him standing by the opposite wall, his flashlight illuminating another Troll Hole. The graffiti doesn’t look particularly like Margo’s, but it’s hard to tell for sure. I’ve only seen her spray-paint a single letter.

Radar shines the light through the hole as I duck down and lead the way through. This room is



entirely empty except for a rolled carpet in one corner. As the flashlight scans the floor, I can see glue stains on the concrete from where the carpet had once been. Across the room, I can just make out another hole cut into the wall, this time without the graffiti.

I crawl through that Troll Hole into a room lined with clothing racks, the stainless-steel poles still bolted into walls wine-stained with water damage. This room is better lit, and it takes me a moment to realize it's because there are several holes in the roof—tar paper hangs down, and I can see places where the roof sags against exposed steel girders.

"Souvenir store," Ben whispers in front of me, and I know immediately he is right.

In the middle of the room five display cases form a pentagon. The glass that once kept the tourists from their tourist crap has mostly been shattered and lies in shards around the cases. The gray paint peels off the wall in odd and beautiful patterns, each cracked polygon of paint a snowflake of decay.

Strangely, though, there's still some merchandise: there's a Mickey Mouse phone I recognize from some way back part of childhood. Mottled but still-folded SU N N Y O R L A N D O T-shirts are on display, splattered with broken glass. Beneath the glass cases, Radar finds a box filled with maps and old tourist brochures advertising Gator World and Crystal Gardens and fun houses that no longer exist. Ben waves me over and silently points out the green glass alligator tchotchke lying alone in the case almost buried in the dust. This is the value of our souvenirs, I think: you can't give this shit away.

We make our way back through the empty room and the shelved room and crawl through the last Troll Hole. This room looks like an office only without computers, and it appears to have been abandoned in a great hurry, like its employees were beamed up to space or something. Twenty desks sit in four rows. There are still pens on some of the desks, and they all feature oversize paper calendars lying flat against the desks. On each calendar, it is perpetually February of 1986. Ben pushes a cloth desk chair and it spins, creaking rhythmically. Thousands of Post-it notes advertising The Martin-Gale Mortgage Corp. are piled beside one desk in a rickety pyramid. Open boxes contain stacks of paper from old dot matrix printers, detailing the expenses and income of the Martin-Gale Mortgage Corp. On one of the desks, someone has stacked brochures for subdivisions into a single-story house of cards. I spread the brochures out, thinking that they may hold a clue, but no.

Radar fingers through the papers, whispering, "Nothing after 1986." I start to go through the desk drawers. I find Q-tips and stickpins. Pens and pencils packed a dozen each in flimsy cardboard packaging with retro fonts and design. Napkins. A pair of golf gloves.

"Do you guys see anything," I ask, "that gives any hint that anyone has been here in the last, say, twenty years?"

"Nothing but the Troll Holes," Ben answers. It's a tomb, everything wrapped in dust. "So why did she lead us here?" asks Radar. We are speaking now.

"Dunno," I say. She is clearly not here.

"There are some spots," Radar says, "with less dust. There's a dustless rectangle in the empty room, like something was moved. But I don't know."

"And there's that painted part," Ben says. Ben points and Radar's flashlight shows me that a piece of the far wall in this office has been brushed over with white primer, like someone got the idea

to remodel the place but abandoned the project after half an hour. I walk over to the wall, and up close, I can see that there's some red graffiti behind the white paint. But I can only see occasional hints of the red paint bleeding through— not nearly enough to make anything out. There's a can of primer up against the wall, open. I kneel down and push my finger into the paint. There's a hard surface, but it breaks easily, and my finger comes up drenched in white. As the paint drips off my finger, I don't say anything, because we've all come to the same conclusion, that someone has been here recently after



all, and then the building creaks again and Radar drops the flashlight and curses. "This is freaky," he says.

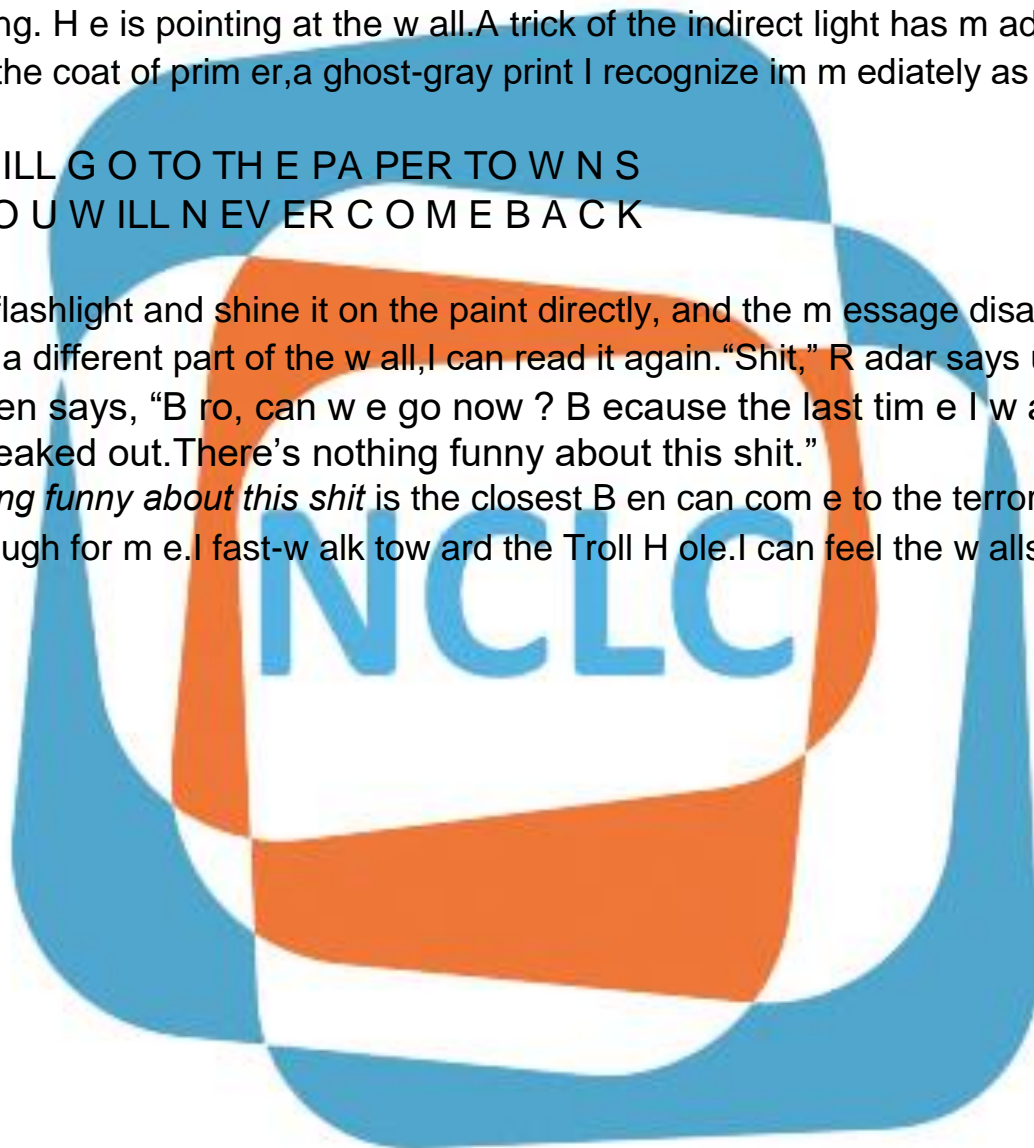
"Guys," Ben says. The flashlight is still on the ground, and I take a step back, to pick it up, but then I see Ben pointing. He is pointing at the wall. A trick of the indirect light has made the graffiti letters float up through the coat of primer, a ghost-gray print I recognize immediately as Margo's.

Y O U W I L L G O T O T H E P A P E R T O W N S
A N D Y O U W I L L N E V E R C O M E B A C K

I pick up the flashlight and shine it on the paint directly, and the message disappears. But when I shine it against a different part of the wall, I can read it again. "Shit," Radar says under his breath.

And now Ben says, "Bro, can we go now? Because the last time I was this scared . . . screw it. I'm freaked out. There's nothing funny about this shit."

There's nothing funny about this shit is the closest Ben can come to the terror I feel, maybe. And it is close enough for me. I fast-walk toward the Troll Hole. I can feel the walls closing in on us.



Ben and Radar dropped me off at my house— even though they'd skipped school, they couldn't afford to skip band practice. I sat alone with "Song of Myself" for a long time, and for about the tenth time I tried to read the entire poem starting at the beginning, but the problem was that it's like eighty pages long and weird and repetitive, and although I could understand each word of it, I couldn't understand anything about it as a whole. Even though I knew the highlighted parts were probably the only important parts, I wanted to know whether it was a suicide-note kind of poem. But I couldn't make sense of it.

I was ten confusing pages into the poem when I got so freaked out that I decided to call the detective. I dug his business card out of a pair of shorts in the laundry hamper. He answered on the second ring.

"Warren."

"Hi, um, it's Quentin Jacobsen. I'm a friend of Margo Roth Spiegelman?" "Sure, kid, I remember you. What's up?"

I told him about the clues and the minimall and about paper towels, about how she had called Orlando a paper towel from the top of the SunTrust Building, but she hadn't used it in the plural, about her telling me that she wouldn't want to be found, about finding her underneath our bootsoles. He didn't even tell me not to break into abandoned buildings, or ask why I was at an abandoned building at 10 A.M. on a school day. He just waited until I stopped talking and said, "Jesus, kid, you're almost a detective. All you need now is a gun, a gut, and three ex-wives. So what's your theory?"

"I'm worried that she might have, um, I guess killed herself."

"It never crossed my mind this girl did anything but run off, kid. I can see your case, but you gotta remember she's done this before. The clues, I mean. Adds drama to the whole enterprise. Honestly, kid, if she wanted you to find her— dead or alive— you already would have."

"But don't you—"

"Kid, the unfortunate thing is that she's a legal adult with free will, you know? Let me give you some advice: let her come home. I mean, at some point, you gotta stop looking up at the sky, or one of these days you'll look back down and see that you floated away, too."

I hung up with a bad taste in my mouth— I realized it wasn't Warren's poetry that would take me to Margo. I kept thinking about those lines at the end Margo had underlined: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." That grass, Whitman writes in the first few pages, is "the beautiful

uncut hair of graves.” But where were the graves? Where were the paper towns?

I logged onto Omnictionary to see if it knew anything more about the phrase “paper towns” than I did. They had an extremely thoughtful and helpful entry created by a user named skunkbutt: “A Paper Town is a town that’s got a paper mill in it.” This was the shortcoming of Omnictionary: the stuff written by Radar was thorough and extremely helpful; the unedited work of skunk-butt left something to be desired. But when I searched the whole Web, I found something interesting buried forty entries



dow n on a forum about real estate in Kansas.

Looks like Madison Estates isn't going to get built; my husband and I bought property there but someone called this week to say they're refunding us our deposit because they didn't presell enough houses to finance the project. Another paper town for KS!
— Marge in Cawker, KS

A pseudovision! You will go to the pseudovisions and you will never come back. I took a deep breath and stared at the screen for a while.

The conclusion seemed inescapable. Even with everything broken and decided inside her, she couldn't quite allow herself to disappear for good. And she had decided to leave her body— to leave it for me— in a shadow version of *our* subdivision, where her first strings had broken. She had said she didn't want her body found by random kids— and it made sense that out of everyone she knew, she would pick me to find her. She wouldn't be hurting me in a new way. I'd done it before. I had experience in the field.

I saw that Radar was online and was clicking over to talk to him when an IM from him popped up on my screen.

OMNICTIONARIAN 96: Hey.

Q T H E R E S U R R E C T I O N : Paper towns = pseudovisions.

I think she wants me to find her body. Because she thinks I can handle it. Because we found that dead guy when we were kids.

I sent him the link.

OMNICTIONARIAN 96: Slow down. Let me look at the link.

Q T H E R E S U R R E C T I O N : K.

OMNICTIONARIAN 96: Okay, don't be so morbid. You don't know anything for sure. I think she's probably fine.

Q T H E R E S U R R E C T I O N : No you don't.

OMNICTIONARIAN 96: Okay, I don't. But if anybody's alive in the face of this evidence ...

Q T H E R E S U R R E C T I O N : Yeah, I guess. I'm gonna go lie down. My parents get home soon.

But I couldn't calm down, so I called Ben from bed and told him my theory. "Pretty morbid shit, bro. But she's fine. It's all part of some game she's playing." "You're being kind of cavalier about it."

He sighed. "Whatever, it's a little lame of her to, like, hijack the last three weeks of high

school, you know ? She's got you all worried, and she's got Lacey all worried, and prom is in like three days, you know ? Can't we just have a fun prom ?

"Are you serious? She could be *dead*, Ben."

"She's not dead. She's a drama queen. Wants attention. I mean, I know her parents are assholes, but they know her better than we do, don't they? And they think so, too."

"You can be such a tool," I said.



“Whatever, bro. We both had a long day. Too much drama. I’ll TTY S.” I wanted to ridicule him for using chatspeak IRL, but I found myself lacking the energy.

After I hung up with Ben, I went back online, looking for a list of pseudovisions in Florida. I couldn’t find a list anywhere, but after searching “abandoned subdivisions” and “Grovepoint Acres” and the like for a while, I managed to compile a list of five places within three hours of Jefferson Park. I printed out a map of Central Florida, tacked the map to the wall above my computer, and then added a tack for each of the five locations. Looking at the map, I could detect no pattern among them. They were randomly distributed among the far-flung suburbs, and it would take me at least a week to get to all of them. Why hadn’t she left me a specific place? All these scary-as-hell clues. All this intimation of tragedy. But no *place*. Nothing to hold on to. Like trying to climb a mountain of gravel.

Ben gave me permission to borrow RHA PAW the next day, since he was going to be driving around, prom shopping with Lacey in her SUV. So for once I didn’t have to sit outside the band room — the seventh-period bell rang and I raced out to his car. I lacked Ben’s talent for getting RHA PAW to start, so I was one of the first people to arrive at the senior parking lot and one of the last to leave, but finally the engine caught, and I was off to Grovepoint Acres.

I drove out of town on Colonial, driving slowly, watching for any other pseudovisions I might have missed online. A long line of cars trailed behind me, and I felt anxious about holding them up; I marvelled at how I could still have room to worry about such petty, ridiculous crap as whether the guy in the SUV behind me thought I was an excessively cautious driver. I wanted Margo’s disappearance to change me; but it hadn’t, not really.

As the line of cars snaked behind me like some kind of unwilling funeral procession, I found myself talking out loud to her. *I will play out the string. I will not betray your trust. I will find you.*

Talking like this to her kept me calm, strangely. It kept me from imagining the possibilities. I came again to the sagging wooden sign for Grovepoint Acres. I could almost hear the sighs of relief from the bottleneck behind me as I turned left onto the dead-end asphalt road. It looked like a driveway without a house. I left RHA PAW running and got out. From close up, I could see that Grovepoint Acres was more finished than it initially appeared. Two dirt roads ending in cul-de-sacs had been cut into the dusty ground, although the roads had eroded so much I could barely see their outlines. As I walked up and down both streets, I could feel the heat in my nose with each breath. The scalding sun made it hard to move, but I knew the beautiful, if morbid, truth: heat made death reek, and Grovepoint Acres smelled like nothing except cooked air and car exhaust—our cumulative exhalations held close to the surface by the humidity.

I looked for evidence she had been there: footprints or something written in the dirt or some memento. But I seemed to be the first person to walk on these unnamed dirt

streets in years. The ground was flat, and not much brush had grown back yet, so I could see for a ways in every direction. No tents. No campfires. No Margo.

I got back in R H A PAW and drove to I-4 and then went northeast of town, up to a place called Holly Meadows. I drove past Holly Meadows three times before I finally found it— everything in the area



was oak trees and ranch land, and Holly Meadows—lacking a sign at its entrance—didn't stand out much. But once I drove a few feet down a dirt road through the initial roadside stand of oak and pine trees, it was every bit as desolate as Grovepoint Acres. The main dirt road just slowly evaporated into a field of dirt. There were no other roads that I could make out, but as I walked around, I did find a few spray-painted wooden stakes lying on the ground; I guessed that they had once been lot line markers. I couldn't smell or see anything suspicious, but even so I felt a fear standing on my chest and at first I couldn't understand why, but then I saw it: when they'd clear-cut the area to build, they'd left a solitary live oak tree near the back of the field. And the gnarled tree with its thick-barked branches looked so much like the one where we'd found Robert Joyner in Jefferson Park that I felt sure she was there, on the other side of the tree.

And for the first time, I had to picture it: Margo Roth Spiegelman, slumped against the tree, her eyes silent, the black blood pouring out of her mouth, everything bloated and distorted because I had taken so long to find her. She had trusted me to find her sooner. She had trusted me with her last night. And I had failed her. And even though the air tasted like nothing but it-might-rain-later, I was sure I'd found her.

But no. It was only a tree, alone in the empty silver dirt. I sat down against the tree and let my breath come back. I hated doing this alone. I hated it. If she thought Robert Joyner had prepared me for this, she was wrong. I didn't know Robert Joyner. I didn't love Robert Joyner.

I hit at the dirt with the heels of my fists, and then pounded it again and again, the sand scattering around my hands until I was hitting the bare roots of the tree, and I kept it up, the pain shooting up through my palms and wrists. I had not cried for Margo until then, but now finally I did, pounding against the ground and shouting because there was no one to hear: I missed her I missed her I missed her I miss her.

I stayed there even after my arms got tired and my eyes dried up, sitting there and thinking about her until the light got gray.