

Summer

Sunday

In the beginning was the Word. That's John 1:1, for those of you keeping score. Truest line ever written.

I could take or leave the Bible, most of it anyway, but something about that bit grabbed me this morning. Like, maybe the fact that May Tingle was hollering it out from the pulpit like every last one of our God-forsaken lives depended on it. Good old fat holy May in her pink frills. Most people have a few different speeds that they operate at. Not May. She's on overdrive all the time, hollering her way through life like one long drama class.

So John didn't mention which Word he was talking about. But here's what I think: that's not the point. The point is that it's all words, the whole world, top to bottom, beginning and end. Maybe that doesn't make sense, but take my word for it, if you don't trust the Book. Step into my shoes for a while and listen. Listen to the needle-words of Dr. Silverman, long and cold, carving up my rotten soul every Tuesday at four-thirty. Listen to the hot-air words of my born-again dad, seeping out of his mouth and settling over me like smog. Listen to the big, fat, righteous, cannonball words of holy pink May, barreling through everything she meets.

Here's what I realized about these people, as I slouched there against the rock-hard pew this morning, biting my lip to stay awake. Dr. Silverman, my dad, May—they're nothing but words. Word mannequins. Word zombies. Under the skin, something's been hollowed out, rotted away, and the words have taken over. Words become flesh.

And me? I'm doing my best to fight them off. *Talk about it*, they keep telling me. Talk about what happened. *Words will heal everything*. But they've got it backwards. Words are

what made it happen in the first place. More words? That'll just bring it out into the world, make it real. And that's the last thing I'm going to do.

In other words, this journal was a dumb idea. Really, royally, flamingly dumb.

"Therapeutic," that's what Dr. Silverman called it: a cold word, a needle-word. "Get it on paper," that's what she said. Oh, OK, Dr. Silverman. Now that I can see on *paper* how whacked I am, I feel like a million bucks.

But I'll play along. For a little while, anyway. It's not like there's anything better to do.

*My soul is wrought to sing of forms transformed
to bodies new and strange! Immortal Gods
inspire my heart, for ye have changed yourselves
and all things you have changed!*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I

Monday

So. Say you're on a plane. On your way to a conference, if you want. Or a cruise, or a family reunion. Wherever it is normal people go.

The big hairy guy next to you is asleep and drooling and starting to ooze over into your seat, and some jackass already ripped out the two crosswords and the Sudoku from the in-flight magazine, so you're slumped against the little window with your neck twisted halfway round so that you can look out.

You'll know when you cross into my state. It'll be right about the time the rolling green hills and the sparkling lakes thin out, and the chicken houses and the trailer parks and the mud-brown clear-cuts take over, and everyone else on the plane loses interest and goes back to their Sudoku. Before long you'll see a river, flat and wide and obviously not in any hurry to get anywhere, with water about the color of used French fry grease. That's the Tallahoma. Now, pay attention.

There's a place where the Tallahoma River suddenly loops back around on itself, like it snuck a peek at what was coming and decided to get the hell back to where it came from. But gravity had other ideas, and by the time they worked it out the river made a big pretzel-twist, sort of a rounded M on its side. You'll think of puckering lips when you see it. And stuck to the outside of the lower lip, the fat one, with three highways coming out like spidery black hairs, is the giant mole that is my city.

Look close, and you'll see a funny thing: there's nothing but white people in the north part of the mole, nothing but black and brown people in the south, like they were heavier and just settled to the bottom. Everything got desegregated like forty years ago, way before I was born,

which meant that the days of oppression and exclusion were over and everyone was free to segregate themselves by choice.

You might even see the actual line, the railroad track, that separates white from black. And right on top of that line, close enough that the paper clips on Miss Tutwiler's desk jingle when the Illinois Central goes by, are the concrete slabs of Julius P. Bork High School. A bubble of togetherness, an oasis of harmony, where kids of every color can actually get to be friends. Then they get to go their separate ways and forget each other's names, and squint at each other years later, in line at the DMV or somewhere.

And if you can just pay attention for a second longer, if you can get out your extra-strength X-ray binoculars and peer down through the clouds and into that one long, narrow window, second floor, northeast corner, you just might catch a glimpse of me in the way, way back of Miss T's English class. Ratty flannel shirt, shaggy hair, blank face. I look a little bit like a hobo, come to think of it. Good thing I quit caring.

At times like these, I could swear I've spent half my life in here. English is fourth period and lunch comes in the middle, but fascist Miss T marches us to and from the cafeteria as fast as possible, to make more time for important things like yelling at Sam Burns. But Sam's not here today, so we're—they're—actually talking about English. I drift in and out.

Miss T has plastered the whole room with posters of book covers. The one by my desk is *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. I haven't read it, but Invisible Man and I have become pretty close. He looks even blanker than I do, maybe because he only has one eye. He's staring out from a blackness that looks like it's eating him up. There's a white X that carves his face into four parts.

Now Miss T has swerved into vocabulary, which I actually like, unlike everything else at school. Words are the enemy, after all. And as Coach Stubbs never got tired of saying—old war-addled Coach Stubbs—the most important thing is to “know yer enemy.” This is not to hold up Coach Stubbs as some kind of wisdom-spouting guru. It took us about half of freshman year just to figure out why he kept calling every opposing soccer team “Charlie.”

But once I started paying attention to words, I found out that they’ve all got secrets and dark histories. Like an interrogator, you’ve got to get under their skin, break them down, figure out what makes them tick. Then they lose their power. It’s actually pretty addictive. Or it would be, if Miss T, along with all my other teachers, hadn’t made a monstrous pact to purge every subject of anything remotely interesting.

“FIASCO,” she is saying. “FI-AS-CO. Repeat after me, please.”

“FIASCO,” drawls the class, sounding like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.

“Fiasco means a failure or disaster,” says Miss T. “Who can give me an example of a fiasco.” Her questions always come out as statements, dying off at the end. She’s as bored as we are.

“Kristin Dabner is a total fiasco,” says Lee Morton in a voice just loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Just ‘cause you couldn’t get past first base,” says Adam Barnwell, slightly louder. A small wave of giggles and indignation makes its way around the room. Sam Burns’ absence has opened a major stupidity gap.

Miss T and her X-ray ears seem not to have noticed—a small miracle. She’s staring out the window, smoothing her stiff gray hair against her blockish head. “Mm-hmm,” she says absently, and reads out the next word like a robot: “Askance. ASS-KANCE...”

But I'm still on FIASCO. This is one that I know. In my mind's eye it's a wiry little Italian guy, with a pencil-thin mustache and slicked-back hair and a murky past. FIASCO snuck into our language through the theater. When an actor screwed up big time, they'd say he made a fiasco—which in Italian means making a bottle. Fiasco, like flask. Before it came to the theater, it came from somewhere else: from the glass blowers' world, the fire-blackened glass blowers who all lived on an island whose name I forget. They made beautiful things, delicate, impossible things, but from time to time they'd slip and end up with a lopsided lump. Then they'd have to give up art for utility: they'd make the lump into a bottle. Screw up your glass and it becomes a bottle, a fiasco.

See? This is how I spend my time, figuring out useless things like that. Other people have girlfriends, jobs, college visits. I have a shrink and a weird obsession. My life, you could say, is a bottle.

The bell has rung, but there's something else. May Tingle is leaping from her seat, fluttering her fat hands in front of her like penguin wings, saying "Wait wait wait, I have an announcement?" Unlike Miss T, May's statements always come out as questions, spiraling up towards a squeal at the end.

Half the class leaves anyway. I feel a sudden twinge of pity. For some reason I picture May getting ready for school, carefully putting on makeup, clambering into her pink frills, striding out the door, dogged and earnest and tragic.

"Um, the Drama Club has decided on our spring production for this year? We're going to do a *musical*. I know"—though no one has expressed excitement—"it's *very* exciting. And we've decided to do a *modern updating* of a famous play? *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare! A musical *Macbeth*. So—"

“Where does the music come from?” someone asks.

“Well,” said May, flustered by this departure from her script, “that’s where *you* come in. We need lots of help—actors and singers and music people to write the music. Plus people to work on the crew? It’s going to be a *huge* production, we’re all very excited.” She glances at Miss T with the flush of triumph.

“So I’ve got all these sign-up sheets, where you can put your name and how you would like to help? I’ll post them around the school, and in a couple of weeks we’ll have auditions. So—”

“This is insane,” says Melissa Crump, blinking furiously. “There’s no way. There’s no way. I mean, how many people can actually sing, and act, at the same time? And who knows how to—to—compose? Isn’t that what you call it? Compose—music?” She shakes her head like she’s smelled something putrid.

“We have many very musically talented people,” says May in her most professional voice. “I happen to be considering the role of Lady Macduff. And I happen to know that we have some composers? For instance—Paul Fisher.” And she looks at me.

“Who?” says Bridget what’s-her-name, who sits right next to me. But several heads swivel in my direction, toward me and Invisible Man. I grimace.

“Wouldn’t you like to be a part of this, Paul?” says May, charging on like a rhino. “I still remember those great songs you wrote for our eighth-grade talent show. This might—this might be great for you, after all that you’ve—”

“I don’t do that anymore,” I mutter, and I sling my backpack over one shoulder and walk out.

I ditch after fifth period and go down to the river. It's ridiculously easy. All I have to do is tell Miss Crotchkiss, I mean Miss Hotchkiss, and Mr. Brainerd that I have an appointment with my psychiatrist. I scare them, like I scare everybody. They think I'm fragile, and they don't know what to say, so they avoid me. I like it that way. If they ever figure out the truth—that the old, broken me is long dead and crusted over—they'll come after me like May did. There will be entanglements.

It's early September, or what romantic people like to call "Indian summer." What this actually means is that just when you're good and ready for some nice fall weather, the thermometer hits about a hundred and ninety and plants start shriveling up and the clay in your back yard turns to shovel-splitting rock, and folks visiting from the North where it's all breezes and fall color wonder why anyone would live in such a God-forsaken place. I don't know how the Indians got their name stuck on this season, but someone should probably apologize.

I pick a random CD on the 10-disc changer. It turns out to be The Drop and Roll. One of the pretentious bands I used to like. They sound horrible coming through the one working speaker in the Oldsmobile, but I leave them on anyway, out of apathy. They whine in their fake-cute harmony as I drive down Veterans Highway, going thirty-five like an old lady as usual, past the fake-Main-Street strip malls and fake-Greek-columned banks and fake-gourmet fast-food billboards—HAVE A TASTE OF TUSCANY WITH THE NEW FLORENTINE HULKBURGER®—and pull off at the bridge.

The sandbar is deserted except for an old black man fishing. We look at each other and have nothing to say. I sit on the sand and stare at the river, where the current licks at a snag.

The feelings bubble up like they always do, here. They try to get in through my lungs, trickling in and then swelling, pressing out. It used to work, but these days they can't break

through the crust. I shake them off and focus on feeling nothing. There's nothing here, I tell myself, only traces. I am a fossil of myself. I dig out an old, mangled pack of cigarettes from my backpack's hidden pocket, and light one for distraction's sake.

Macbeth. Easily one of the top ten dumbest ideas I've ever heard. The only way to mangle Shakespeare worse than having teenagers perform it? Have teenagers sing bad songs between scenes.

What could they sing about, anyway? I try to remember *Macbeth*. I wrote an essay on it in ninth grade, for God's sake, but all that comes to mind is one line: "Out, damn spot!" I think Lady Macbeth says that, in the course of freaking out about something. Freaking out is easy to set to music. I hear plucking violins, kind of quick and crazy. A faint, throbbing bass. It sounds pretty good for a second, before I remind myself of how dumb the whole thing is, and how I don't do music anymore.

"Damn spot"—what does that even mean? I picture a dog, Spot, and hear the psycho violins again. I laugh out loud, a laugh that's half cough.

The old black man glances over and our eyes meet. He holds my gaze and cocks his head slightly, like he's not sure I'm really there.

I finish my cigarette in one violent drag, flick the butt as far into the river as possible, and walk up the slope to the car.

Dear Dr. Silverman,

Congratulations: your journal idea sucks. Massively, triumphantly sucks. If sucking were an Olympic event, this would get a gold medal. If there were Grammy Awards for sucking, you would get Best New Artist.

The point was to get in touch with my feelings, right? Well, it worked: I just read back through it, and I totally got in touch with feeling like a pretentious ass. I mean, if there's one thing I loathe, it's writers using the present tense. Sure, it worked in *Fight Club*. But that's *Fight Club*.

Don't worry, I'll give it a proper burial, probably involving a paper shredder and/or fire. I've even prepared a small poem for the occasion.

ELEGY FOR A MISBEGOTTEN MANUSCRIPT

Alas, poor Journal! I hardly knew you.

I wrote some shitty words into you,

In hopes I'd reach my feelings through you.

Well, I got in touch, and they said "Screw you."

So now I'll let the earthworms chew you.

Yours Most Sincerely,

Paul

Tuesday

OK. One more day. But no more stupid present tense.

Today I walked into school and right into May Tingle. An ambush: she'd been waiting.

"Oh—Paul!" she squealed, a lame charade. May was never going to cut it as an actress.

There was just too much May there.

"I'm glad I ran into you. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry? For calling you out in front of the class yesterday? But I really want you to think about helping us with the music. I know you're just great with music and I think you could bring a lot to the play. There'd be no pressure, you could do it totally on your own since I know you like to—like to work independently? Will you think about it?" She looked at me expectantly, her spiel finished. She seemed nervous.

"Sorry," I said in my monotone, the voice I use when I'm trying to get people to lose interest. "Like I said, I don't do music anymore. I'm sure you can find someone else." I cleared my throat and turned to walk away. But May's big bulk drifted into my path, and she kept talking.

"Do you have something better to do?"

As soon as she said it, she cringed, knowing she had crossed a line. I stared at her. She retreated to her professional voice.

"Look, all I'm saying is this is a chance to have some fun and do something you'll always remember. And it'll look great on your college applications? Please think about it, please please please. The sign-up sheets will be up all week. Thanks Paul!" And she lurched off toward the lockers.

I did my best to forget about *Macbeth*. But damn Spot and the damn violins kept breaking into my head all day. They broke in during Adam Barnwell's train-wreck presentation on the Sumerians. They broke in during Mr. Awful, I mean Mr. Orffel's lecture on sines and cosines. And they broke in during English class, as I sat there for what felt like days, picking at the Van Halen logo etched adoringly into my desk by some ancient headbanger who now probably sells insurance. A fossil of himself.

I knew dinner was going to be an ordeal as soon as I opened the front door. The table was already set with the nice flowery dishes. The house reeked of candles, probably Lemon Ginger, Camille's signature aroma. My father sat dumbly in front of our million-inch TV, his face flooded with light from the shining head of local newswoman Barbie Dinkins. She was crouched over a pothole, pointing, with an expression of lament. A closed caption rattled by along the top of the screen: ...HAVE COMPLAINED ABOUT THE PITIFUL CONDITION OF... In the silence of Camille's No Noise Zone, Barbie seemed godlike.

My father didn't turn around. "Paul," he said by way of greeting.

"Dave," I said in return, and slunk down the hall, trying to avoid Camille. No such luck. She spun around the corner, flashed her dazzling teeth, and kissed me on both cheeks. I stood there to hear her out.

"Paul," she said sweetly. "I hope you had a blessed, blessed day. Your father and I have a surprise for you." She spoke in a near-whisper, so as to obey the terms of the No Noise Zone.

"A Family Dinner," I suggested. That's what the flowery plates meant. It's one of Camille's proudest customs: a chance for us to come together and talk about our feelings. Exactly what I crave the most at the end of a long, shitty day.

"Well, yes," she said, grabbing my hands, "but that's not all. I wonder—have you given much thought to college?"

"College?"

"Yes. It's where people go after high school."

"Yeah, I've heard of it," I said.

"Have you given any thought to it?"

"No, because I'm not going."

She answered with her fake laugh, the one that goes on a fraction too long and sounds faintly maniacal. Camille actually has a whole arsenal of fake laughs, each one finely adapted to a different awkward situation. I can't remember ever hearing her laugh for real. Is anything real for Camille? Maybe she's so far into her fakeness that it *is* her reality. But what—

“Well, I know it's difficult for you to think about right now,” she pressed on. “But I'm sure you'll be very excited once you start looking into it. What an exciting time of life! I remember it like it was yesterday.”

It practically was, I thought to myself. I've never known how old Camille is, but I'm not exaggerating when I say she could pass for twenty-five. One of the many reasons that she and my dad disgust me endlessly.

“Paul,” she said, clasping her own hands together now, like she was praying. She paused for a moment, barely able to contain her eagerness. “We've decided to take you on a *college trip*.” She reached around the corner and produced a fat, paperback book. “See, we bought you this guide to help you narrow down your choices. We're going to take you out of school for a couple of days, and we're going to pile into the van, and we're just going to have a great, great time.”

I stared at her. I might have asked if she were joking, except that Camille never, ever jokes. In fact, the idea of Camille joking is itself a sort of joke. Here are the two things I have learned about this woman:

- a) She is always serious.
- b) There is no way out.

I learned A about five minutes after meeting her. She came laughing. I heard that hollow laugh through the door, from the driveway, before I even saw her face. She laughed when she

kissed me on both cheeks, this woman I'd never seen before, and she laughed when she told me she was marrying Dave. I assumed it was a joke. What kind of schmuck gets married five months after...? It was not a joke. Now I know: the laugh is just the beachhead before the invasion.

But B took me a little longer. It was only when she set up my first appointment with Dr. Silverman that it dawned on me. Naturally, I refused to go. So she closed my bank account, cut off my allowance, and concentrated all her dark powers on making my life a living hell. That's when I started to realize what I was in for.

So I put on my best martyr face, said "Great" without a trace of enthusiasm, and turned to go to my room. "Dinner in fifteen minutes!" she called after me, and added in a singsong voice: "Don't be late!"

Dinner turned out to be another of Camille's nightmare experiments, this one involving lentils and walnuts and some leafy vegetable I've never heard of. It was all squashed into a pile of sludge that looked like it had already been digested, and decorated with a little sprig of parsley on top that was not fooling anyone.

Dave and Camille beamed at each other as she brought in our sludge-laden plates, he with his empty lawyer's grin, she with her best Stepford-wife smile, head at a robotic tilt. We held hands for a blessing in which Camille personally addressed the Lord seventeen times. Once she was sure the Lord was on our side, Dave and I picked up our forks and prodded our lentils, treating each pile like a half-dead elephant. Camille ignored her food and launched right into her Family Dinner agenda.

"So it has been *way too long* since we've done this," she began. "Right? It's so nice to be together. Remember, this is a space where we can talk about anything. Anything that is bothering us, anything we're happy or sad about, whatever. Who wants to go first? OK, I'll go first—"

As Camille babbled on about her non-problems—how she'd been stressing out over money, but then remembered that the Lord always provides; how she'd been resenting a lazy coworker, but then remembered that there was goodness in his soul—I watched my father. In another life we'd visited the Great Salt Lake together. We'd taken a bridge out to an island full of buffaloes, and we'd floated like corpses in the salty water, until we felt too hot and disgusting and raced back to the car to sing silly songs. Now, for some reason, his face reminded me of nothing more than that lake. Flat, desolate, whitewashed by the sun. Hostile to life. Resigned to emptiness.

"OK—Paul's turn. Paul, what's been going on in your life?"

“I’m fine,” I said, taking a bite of the sludge, which tasted like wet wood. “Nothing new.”

“Oh come on,” said Camille, and my father echoed: “Sure, come on, sport. We’re here to listen.” He never said things like that before.

“How about this: tell us just *two things* that have happened to you this week. You don’t have to share your feelings—just tell us what’s been going on.”

I put down my fork and stared across the room, fixating on the shelf that held Camille’s precious collection of knick-knack frogs. One was made of multicolored glass. It had shot out its tongue and caught a tiny glass fly, and the two were frozen at the moment of contact, robbed of closure.

Something devilish stirred inside me. I looked at Camille and said: “Well, actually, something big did happen this week. I discovered that I’m gay. I think I’ve fallen in love with a man.”

Everything was still for a moment, and then she broke out in a quick, strangled peal of laughter. She raised her napkin to her mouth and stared at her plate, blinking, obviously at a complete loss. I’d short-circuited her.

“Paul, that is not a funny thing to say,” my father cut in, and reaching his hand out to hers, he added: “He’s not serious, honey. He’s just—”

“And what if I was?” I said calmly. “Would you disown me? Throw me out? That might simplify things. Thanks for dinner, Camille, I’m absolutely stuffed.” And I stood up and went to my room.

About half an hour later, Camille came to my door and said that she wanted to talk, that she knew I was going through a very confused time and she didn't hold it against me, that she was sorry if I didn't feel comfortable sharing my feelings with her, etc., etc. I said "Don't worry about it" and put my headphones back on. There was no time for conversation; I had to get the damn violins out of my head.

Like I said, I don't do music anymore. The last time I touched an instrument was eight months ago, when I lit my Fender Squier on fire and threw it into the Tallahoma River. That was when I assumed my life was over, before I made the great discovery that I could just bury it and move on. I'm not proud of what I did to that guitar. I probably could have gotten a hundred bucks for it on eBay.

But the violins had to come out, so I found a stolen copy of SoundFactory online, spent about twenty minutes figuring it out, and worked—punching out pizzicato strings, dragging bass lines, massaging piano chords—until midnight, when my mouse hand got too cramped to go on. I burned it to a CD, threw it in my backpack, got my journal out, and here I am.

College. College. I fish out *Concise Etymological Dictionary* from my bedside drawer. I found it at a \$1-a-book fire sale, on the street in front of Dog Ear Books downtown. It's old and in miserable shape: stained and warped from water damage, tattooed with library stamps, whole sections coming loose from the binding. But it's full of secrets.

I thought so: the *lege* in *college* is the *leg* from *legal*, meaning law. A group of persons brought together under the law. Society's law: you will go to college; you will get married; you will get a job, and you will end up smiling emptily at your family over a meal that tastes like wood. That reminds me of something, and I flip through, following a thread: yes, *lege* is related

to *lex*, meaning word, as in *lexicon*, not to mention *log*, as in *logic*. And—how about this!—*lignum*, meaning wood. This makes so much sense I almost laugh.

In the beginning was the Word; in the beginning was the Law; in the beginning was Logic, cold, inescapable Logic. It's all been spelled out for us since day one. I might as well stop fighting it.

Wednesday

Today, aliens invaded Bork High.

It was a totally normal day until halfway through biology class, when I noticed the tentacle reaching slowly through the ceiling vent. Purplish, translucent, testing the air. When it got within range of Melissa Crump it paused, evidently confused by her passionfruit perfume. The tentacle seemed to gather itself for a moment, and then swelled at the tip, trembling, and popped out a tiny droplet of fluid. It fell six feet onto Melissa's head and sizzled briefly, disturbing the air for a few inches around. She didn't notice.

She didn't notice as the thin, purplish stalk began to rise from her scalp; she didn't notice as it sprouted tiny limbs, then limbs upon limbs; and she didn't notice as she began to be enveloped by a fine web of living slime, surrounding her from above and behind. Behind her, though, Allyson Burdock noticed, and she jerked backward in her chair like she'd stuck her finger in a socket. She started to point and moan. Heads turned; and then, chaos.

Amid the screams and screeching desks, Melissa sat transfixed, her buggy eyes wide, as the web began to seal itself off in front of her face.

I glanced at Mr. Wentz, who stood stock still with his back against the wall, brandishing his pointer like a cross. Just as he began to say something, the web slurped shut, Melissa and her desk seemed to dissolve inside it, and the whole package was sucked into the ceiling with a *pfloot*.

More shouting. Wailing. Blustering: "*What the hell is this?*" barked Chip Sanford, like he'd walked in on his cheating girlfriend. I abandoned my backpack and sprinted for the door. Out in the hall, pandemonium had broken out. Here and there, as students scattered like deer, a

slime web would pick one of them off and he'd *pfloot* into the ceiling. Now, down by the bathrooms, a vent clattered off and through it dropped a grotesque form, something like an electrified Bundt cake with a million spider-legs and fluttering tentacles. It shook itself, lifted its glowing body above the crowd, and began to lurch in my direction.

A gruff shout came from over my shoulder, and I was suddenly shoved aside by the squat little form of Principal Boudreaux. "SECURITY! SECURITY!!" he howled, deliriously, and then grabbed a chair and hurled it at the fire extinguisher, without effect. He tried again, broke the glass, yanked out the extinguisher, and defiantly pointed its hose at the advancing creature.

The alien paused, and there was a moment of stillness. A hundred petrified faces flicked on and off in the blinking lights of the fire alarms. Principal Boudreaux stood his ground like David with his sling, sweat coating his combed-over head, nothing moving but the wagging flab on his arms. The alien slowly tilted its pulsing body to expose three nested sets of mandibles, gnashing like a meat grinder. At that moment, sensing opportunity, Boudreaux struck. There was a hiss, an eruption of vapor, and the creature reared backward with a primeval, eardrum-shattering scream.

I took that chance to dash toward the parking lot, dodging shell-shocked freshmen and hurtling over dropped textbooks. As I looked back over my shoulder, the last thing I saw was this: Boudreaux and the alien locked in a death embrace, the fearless principal frantically scrabbling at the monster's maw as its mandibles whirled above his naked head, the grappling titans framed one last time in a flash of fire-alarm gold, like a Renaissance fresco.

You can't blame me for dreaming.

Thursday

I had hardly made it up the parking-lot steps this morning when May was on me. She did her best to make it look like an accident again. I wondered how much of her time she spent planning her random encounters.

“Oh, hi, Paul! How’s it going? Gosh, everyone sure is fired up about *Macbeth*. This girl Meredith is already starting work on the script. It’s gonna be...*awesome*. Once we get a solid cast and, you know, some music and everything.”

I picked up the pace a bit, letting her strain to keep up. “Right. Guess I’ll see you at church.”

At this, something seemed to snap in May, and she actually sent an arm sailing out to stop me in my tracks. I was still marveling at the audacity of it when she said: “Paul, can I tell you something? Do you know Revelation 3:7? When God opens a door, nobody can shut it. When God opens a door—*nobody* can shut it.” She closed her eyes the second time.

“I got it.”

“I really think there is a door opening here, Paul. There’s a door and it’s right there in front of you.” She pointed at the sidewalk. “I think that God wants us to be friends. And I think that God wants you to get involved with this. And I think that God wants—”

“You know what?” I said, desperate, suddenly fumbling through my backpack. “You know what? Here. Here. This is some music I wrote. Take it. God wants you to take it. OK? OK. See you later.” And I left.

As soon as I’d given her the CD, I had a terrible, sinking, exposed feeling. What was I thinking? What about my foolproof survival strategy? Avoid entanglements. Be invisible. The

easiest thing in the world. Most people are more than willing to treat you as invisible; it gives them one less thing to worry about. Now May Tingle comes rampaging into my business like a bull in a damn china shop. Make that a rhino. No, forget it—it's not a china shop, there's nothing breakable here. It's just a big pile of rubble.

The next time I saw her, in Miss Tutwiler's class, she'd lost her rhino-in-a-china-shop look and was just glowing like a firefly. She'd bummed a Discman off someone and had already listened to my music three times. Fine. She can have it. It's the last thing she's getting from me.

"Paul," she said solemnly, holding out the CD like it was a wounded baby bird. "This is just—just—wonderful? As soon as I heard it I thought, wouldn't this be *great* in Act Five, Scene One? There's this scene where Lady Macbeth thinks there's blood all over her hands, and she starts—just—" May wiggled her hands by her head to indicate freaking out.

"Freaking out," I said, despite myself. "I know."

"*Exactly*. Oh my gosh, you've read it. It's totally settled. I can't wait to hear what you'll come up with next. What a gift you have!"

"Well, that one is yours. Do whatever you want with it. That was just a weird, isolated thing though. I'll probably never write anything else in a million years." Shut up, Paul. You're getting tangled.

"Oh, stop it," said May, baring her teeth. Now she was acting like we'd been best friends for years. "I don't want to rush you. I know you can't rush an artist. But listen, we're having a big meeting tomorrow after school? Please please please come. I know everyone else will be excited. OK? And Paul? God bless you." And she flounced off to her desk.

I'll go ahead and state it for the record. My mother is dead. My mom is dead. There it is.

She gave up the ghost, as they say. She cashed in her chips. She bought the farm. She passed on. To where? The Gulf of Mexico, where we dumped her ashes off a charter boat called the *Wahoo*. Dave said that was the best time she'd ever had, deep-sea fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. She always talked about how pretty and calm it was out there, according to Dave. If I die, Dave will probably dump my ashes on Rebel Ridge Hunt Camp, where he dragged me out to shoot deer and had a great time while I puked into a swamp.

My mother's death was horrible and pointless, and it's better that way. There was no way to deal with it, so I just died along with her and turned into a different person. Now I just pretend like she never existed, which is easy since I can't visit her, since she's been eaten up by shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico by now. Or who knows? Maybe the waves have just washed her back up on shore. Maybe she's the sand in someone's castle. It doesn't matter, because she's gone. Gone, gone, gone. Period.

Gone.

Friday

I hate Fridays, as a general rule. The seniors at Bork High are not famed for their sophistication, no matter what day it is. But on Fridays they actually sprout hair, get down on all fours, and turn into a troop of baboons. On Fridays I actually feel sorry for my teachers, awful as they are, because there is no hope of getting anything done.

Half of the kids have just been to the Breakfast Barn, where they've spent an hour shooting spit wads at each other and slugging coffee that tastes like it was scraped off an oil pan. The other half stumbles in twenty minutes late and sleeps through the first three periods, because they started the weekend on Thursday night, before waking up and acting like baboons for the last four. And the other half, the ones who don't have enough of a life to act like baboons, are just intimidated into silence. Don't check my math.

I know all this because I've spent time in each half. Once upon a time I was one of the quiet kids. The good kids. All through middle school I sat in the front row, paying attention, being quiet, a little pupating worm. Then I emerged as something different: someone who went to the Breakfast Barn, who passed notes all day about whose parents were out of town and whose turn it was to con their brother into buying beer. Those days are over, but I still have to go through the Sean Carroll ritual every Friday. It goes like this: Sean, who used to be my best friend, tells me at lunch where the party is that night. He asks if I'm going. I say maybe I'll stop by. He says "All right!" and slaps me on the left shoulder. Then he calls at about 10 PM, and I don't answer. We've got it all worked out.

All of this happened today according to schedule. But then, at the very end of the day, there was a bug in the system.

First, Mr. Brainerd held me up after seventh period. Seventh period is Latin: a throwaway elective I stuffed into the last empty slot in my schedule. I have mixed feelings about Latin. On the one hand, I have learned a surprising amount about words. Like: “elective,” which comes from the same dark place as “legal” and “logic” and “college,” and obviously is part of the same conspiracy. Electives give you the illusion of choice. They’re just another way for the system to keep you happy while it sucks the life out of you. Sure, you can take Latin, or French, or Art, or Band—whatever you want! As long as it’s not weird, or different!

On the other hand, I have to listen to the girls squeal about how hot Mr. Brainerd is. For a man with such a miserable name, he has a lot going for him. The rumor is that he used to play a doctor on a soap opera, before his character was killed off by a patient in a fit of frustrated passion. He wears tight shirts and seems to have some kind of invisible wind machine aimed constantly at his hair. Therefore his classes fill up very quickly with squealing girls who couldn’t tell Latin from a hole in the ground, a fact I wish I had known before signing up. As for Mr. Brainerd, he pays at least as much attention to the girls as they pay to him.

“Mr. Piscator!” bellowed Mr. Brainerd, although I was standing all of six feet from his desk. Piscator means “fisher” in Latin. “A word with you, please. About your Ovid paper.”

Crap. My Ovid paper was a piece of flaming garbage.

“Ovid is my hero,” he began solemnly, once the rest of the class had trickled out. An unusual statement from someone who used to play Dr. McHunk on daytime TV.

“Yes,” I said.

“He is, in my opinion, the greatest poet who ever lived. Totally brilliant. There’s enough...” He stared off into space for a moment, hair ruffling softly, searching for suitably

worshipful words. “There’s enough wit, and cleverness, and beauty in the *Metamorphoses* to put all of English literature to shame.”

“Yes,” I said, waiting for the boom to drop.

“All of that is lost on ninety-nine percent of kids who come through this class. Your paper is the first I’ve seen in a long time that really *got* it. The spirit, I mean.”

My mouth twitched for a second as I processed this. I wrote that paper in about twenty minutes, at two in the morning the night before it was due. The title was “A Pale Scum,” which was a phrase I liked in the *Metamorphoses*: after a huge flood at the beginning of the world, according to Ovid, a pale scum covered everything. The paper wasn’t so much a paper as a random collection of stories, in which the gods come back from Mount Olympus and subject modern Americans to various forms of torture. Whatever the assignment was, I’m pretty sure I did not follow it. Of course I hardly ever follow assignments, but most of my teachers have decided to ignore that fact and give me B’s anyway.

“I really enjoyed it,” Mr. Brainerd went on. “Very creative. Very cool. In fact, I know of an essay contest that I think this would be perfect for. National. Very big. Here, I printed out the info.” He passed me a sheet of paper.

“Thanks,” I said. “I didn’t exactly follow the assignment.”

“Neither did Ovid,” he pointed out, mysteriously. “Neither does life.”

“OK,” I said. “Is that all you wanted?”

“Yeah. Look over that info and I’ll see you on Monday.”

“See you on Monday.”

“Cool,” he said, his standard farewell, and he gave me a whack on the shoulder as I walked out.

You would think I could cover the two hundred yards between Room 304 and the parking lot without too much incident. In this case, you would be wrong.

I was shuffling down the hall with Mr. Brainerd's contest information about three inches from my face—he had printed it out in some subatomic font to cram it all onto one page—when I heard something familiar. Faint, but definitely familiar. Music. So familiar, I thought, I might have written it myself. In fact, I had written it myself.

It was the CD I had given to May Tingle, and it was playing behind the closed door to Miss Tutwiler's classroom. My chest got a little tight, and my first thought was to go immediately to my car, which in retrospect was an outstanding idea. Instead, I snuck up to the door to peek through the window.

All the windows in Bork High, inside and out, are like medieval arrow slits. Bork was built to resist many things, including tornadoes, floods, nuclear bombs, wandering imaginations, and evidently invasion by Mongols. So it's difficult to see anything through the window in the first place. But it's especially difficult because of how Miss T plastered her whole door with multicolored shapes and block letters cut out from construction paper. The letters were meant to spell out words like "READ" and "WRITE" and "KNOWLEDGE" and "POETRY," but Miss T quickly found herself in a losing battle with her students. The enemy's mission is to rearrange the letters so as to spell out obscene words, but not obviously enough to catch Miss T's attention. At this moment they spell "PENILE," from "POETRY" and "KNOWLEDGE" and "WRITE," if you tilt your head at a certain angle. The words have gotten more sophisticated since the start of the year. Miss T's vocab lessons are paying off.

I stuck my face up to the jumble of letters. To see into the room, I had to press one eyeball to the "O" in "KNOWLEDGE." In my piece, the jittery strings were starting to fall all

over each other, nearing the climax. Playing out of some cheap boom box, I thought it sounded like crap.

I could see the tops of a couple of heads, but only one face was identifiable. It was a pretty black girl I recognized from somewhere—just from passing each other in the halls, I guessed. The lights were off in the room, but a shaft of late-afternoon light had burst in through an arrow-slit, and was flooding half her face at a diagonal. She reminded me of the Invisible Man. Her eye, the one that was lit up, seemed to be twinkling. Were those tears?

The music faded out—was it a lot longer than I remembered?—and was followed by the whirr of the CD player resetting itself, the gentle squeaking of desks, and then May's unmistakable voice. "Isn't that *great*?" she said. "If you don't know Paul Fisher, he is great and a *very* interesting person. I asked him to come today, but he couldn't make it." Why is she being so nice to me? That's not necessary. What is she trying to do?

A high-pitched guy's voice piped up that I didn't recognize. "So where are we thinking that piece will go? And will it have words?" What does he mean, where? We agreed on where.

"You know, I was thinking maybe at the very opening," said May. (What?) "Like, the creation scene? With chaos and then order? It kind of works, doesn't it?"

Before I could stop myself, I opened the door and stepped in. Epic mistake. The room was more crowded than I'd thought. "Paul!" May screeched, and all the heads turned in unison: comically, almost, like in a cartoon.

I started mumbling. "Sorry—I—was just walking by and overheard—you. I, um, thought I was busy, but I...got out early."

"Well, great timing?" said May. "We were just talking about your music?"

“Yeah, it rocks, dude,” said a head in the back that turned out to be Dennis Skelton. “‘S wild, man, yeah,” agreed the guy next to him.

“Sorry, but—I thought we said this was going to be in that one scene? I wrote it for Lady Macbeth. What—” But as soon as I said “Lady Macbeth,” the girl closest to me said “Gah!” and put her fingers to her ears. I stared at her. There was a silence.

“Paul, I’m so sorry, you—missed a lot,” said May. “We’ve kind of gone back to the drawing board? And we’re going to do a different play.”

“What? We’re not doing *Macbeth*?”

This time the girl next to me let out a strangled “Nooo...” and put her head down on her desk.

Everyone looked at each other. Dennis Skelton said “Dude...” and slumped in his seat. I noticed Melissa Crump for the first time, rolling her eyes. What was she doing here? Why would you let her anywhere near the theater?

“What? What did I say?”

“Um...” said May. “Some of the drama people have reminded me that...that play? The one you said?”

“Yeah. *Macbeth*?”

I was pelted with boos.

“Right—that play is kind of a bad idea. Like, it’s considered to be cursed.”

“Anyone who puts it on,” said the girl next to me, whispering like something evil might overhear, “or even *speaks its name*, has *horrible* things happen. It’s, like, totally documented. Laurence Olivier’s sword flew offstage and killed someone in the audience.”

“Charlton Heston’s pants caught on fire, look it up,” said the girl next to her, ominously. Theater girls, judging from the horn-rimmed glasses, and the fact that they were babbling about the theater. “May, can he please do the thing? The remedy?”

I looked at May in complete bewilderment. She was wringing her hands, obviously feeling awkward. “There’s this thing that you’re supposed to do...” she said. “Can you just do us a favor and walk out into the hall, turn around three times while saying a bad word, and then knock on the door?”

“*Three* bad words,” demanded Theater Girl One. “One for each turn.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. And I was about to say that they could just do whatever the hell they wanted, as long as it was without me, when I happened to catch the eyes of the girl I’d seen through the door—the girl in the sunbeam. Nice eyes. The kind that seem to really *know* whatever they’re looking at. Dark and teardrop-shaped, kind of Egyptian. Her lips moved—was she actually mouthing something at me? “Please.” That’s what she said: “Please.”

So I went out into the hall, said “Shit, Fuck, Balls” as I turned around three times, and knocked on the door. “Yes?” came the shrill voice of Theater Girl Two. “Ask for permission!” came the apologetic voice of May. I put my forehead against the door and sighed. “May I please come back in?”

“So tell us what you think of this,” said May once the awkwardness subsided. “There’s this amazing book called the—wait a minute. You take Latin too, don’t you?” How did she know that? “So you know the *Metamorphoses*?”

“Ew, *no*,” said Melissa Crump, right on top of things as usual. “Cockroaches are *foul*.” I remembered she was in my World Lit class last year, when we read Kafka.

“Hey Einstein, it’s *meta-mor-pho-ses*, not *meta-mor-pho-sis*,” drawled Dennis Skelton.

“Where have you been, dude?”

May cut in. “Sorry, everybody, we kind of decided this yesterday, and I guess not everyone was in on it? So let’s just, um, chill out, and go over it again.” “Chill out” sounded like Chinese, coming from the terminally uncool May. “Laila?” she went on. “Do you want to go over it again? It was Laila’s idea.”

At this, the girl in the sunbeam started speaking. Is that where I know her from—Latin class? No, it’s sixth period, biology. She sits on the opposite end of the room, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say a word. I’d remember. I have a thing for voices, and hers is really something: musical, dynamic, like I’ve always envied in black people; but with all the sharp edges worn down, so that the words slide over each other like water on stones.

“Well, it’s a poem, actually,” she was saying. The sun had descended far enough to light up most of her face. Already light-skinned, she could have passed for white, bathing in that sun. “A poem in Latin, from about two thousand years ago. It’s basically a collection of myths, Greek and Roman myths about the gods and heroes and so on. It seems kind of random at first, but then you realize it’s all about change. People changing into plants, gods changing into animals. It’s about the different ways that people can change, which mostly have to do with love, or—or—passion.” She hesitated not from embarrassment, but from searching for the exact right word. In fact, she said “passion” like it was something she knew quite a bit about.

“Paul, is that a fair description?” asked May, reveling in her role as moderator.

I blinked. “Yeah—no—totally.” Ordinarily I would have stopped there, but something was drawing me out. “I just—I’m wondering how this is going to work as a musical.”

“I think it’s perfect,” said May. “I mean, I’ve never read it? But it sounds perfect.”

“Well, there’s just a couple of things,” I went on. I might as well. By now I’d already spoken up more in ten minutes than I had all week. “First of all, it’s not exactly PG. There’s all kinds of sex, and blood and guts, and centaurs gouging people’s eyeballs out, and—and—animal rape...” I trailed off. For future reference, there’s nothing to stop a conversation like bringing up animal rape.

“Sweet,” said Dennis finally. “This is what you guys talk about in Latin class?”

“Anyway, the other thing is that it’s—it’s not a *story*. It’s a bunch of little stories, and yeah, there’s a theme to it, but you can’t get, like, attached to one character. I mean, they all die anyway. It’s random. Like she said.”

The room did not know what to make of this. Melissa Crump did, however. “I told you guys,” she said, “we should completely have done *The Music Man*. It’s all, like, *right there* for us. Music. Lyrics. Story. And *nobody* gets raped.”

This opened the floodgates. “Nobody gets raped in *The Music Man*?” someone said in mock disbelief. Someone else, a long-haired kid with zits, said: “Guys, what about *Planet of the Apes*?” From across the room, Dennis yelled “The ending of that movie *blows*!” “Whatever! It’s *awesome*!” came the response. Theater Girl One said to Theater Girl Two, “Shakespeare is like, *rolling over* in his grave right now.”

After a few minutes of general chaos in which *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Princess Bride*, *Star Trek*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* were all put forward as candidates, May finally regained control.

“Please, guys, please, please,” she said. “Laila, what do you think? You seem pretty confident about *Metamorphoses*. What about what Paul said?”

Laila looked into the sunbeam for a few seconds. Something seemed odd about her. She did everything so carefully, like the words she chose made a big difference. It was refreshing, actually.

“It’ll be hard, for sure,” she said. “For one thing, we’ll have to come up with a script from scratch, unless y’all want to get up there and talk in hexameter. But it’s easy to take out the sex and violence, or most of it, anyway. And yeah, there’s a million stories in there, but I thought we could just focus on a few of the most dramatic ones. Like the Orpheus story. And Pyramus and Thisbe.”

Pyramus and Thisbe are secret lovers, like in *Romeo and Juliet*. Pyramus thinks Thisbe gets killed by a lion, so he kills himself, then she finds him and gives a long, sad speech and kills herself too. Sound familiar? Ovid got totally ripped off by Shakespeare. And who gets all the credit?

“Good luck finding a lion,” I said, but it came out kind of snarky, so I added: “But no, that’s a good one. And Apollo and Daphne would have to be in there. Although we’d need some killer costumes.” Daphne gets turned into a tree, which saves her from the lovestruck Apollo. I wasn’t at all sure how we would pull that off. But suddenly, for some reason, this was starting to seem like a really good idea.

“It’s just—” said Laila. “It’s high school. It’s perfect. It’s like Ovid was telling our stories. I can’t explain it.”

May was beaming back and forth at the two of us—lost in the happiness of making things happen—but she broke out of it to say: “Don’t worry about the costumes. That is *right* up my alley? I will give you a lion. And whatever else you need. As long as I don’t have to gouge anyone’s eyeballs.” She paused to laugh at herself. “Anyway, the important thing is, can we all

agree on this? These two obviously know what they're doing. Since we're definitely not doing—not doing—um—”

“The Scottish play,” offered Theater Girl One.

“Since we're not doing the Scottish play, and I haven't heard any other—*realistic* ideas? I say we go with this. In fact, I make a motion in favor of the *Metamorphoses*. *Metamorphoses: The Musical!*” She looked around expectantly.

“Someone's supposed to second the motion,” she added.

“I second it,” I said. “We can do it. It's pretty far out there, but we can do it.”

“I third it,” said Dennis. “It sounds righteous. As long as we've got this dude.” Meaning me.

“Everybody in favor say aye!” said May, breathing heavily, as if she'd been waiting for this her whole life.

A chorus of ayes.

“The ayes have it!” she squealed, and fumbled around for a gavel. She found a stapler and smashed it on her desk, sending a staple flying at the *Planet of the Apes* kid's ear. “This is going to be the best thing *ever* to hit Bork!”

I ducked out of the classroom immediately and took off for the parking lot. Having just thrown a big-ass wrench into the well-oiled machine of my life, I needed time to assess the damage. But when I got there, naturally, the faithful Olds took about five minutes to start. I munched on some Doritos between tries. By the time I got it running, that girl, Laila, had materialized outside my window.

Her car was parked just across and over from mine. A Lexus. She drives a freaking Lexus. A brand-new little sport sedan, gleaming like a wet plum, although the color is probably called Glacial Agate Smoke or something along those lines. Crouched and snarling: a jungle cat, getting ready to pounce on a pile of carrion. The pile of carrion being the Olds.

“Animal rape,” she said when she caught my eye. “Pretty smooth.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so I just watched her for a few seconds as she threw her stuff in the back seat of the jungle cat.

Who is this girl? I can’t figure her out. From a distance, she looks small, weak, fragile. Five-two, tops, and float-away thin, with a big round face like a kid’s. But you get closer and it’s like she dissolves and rearranges. Those eyes jump out and look straight through you, like—I don’t know, like your mom’s eyes might. She seems serious—has she smiled once?—but detached, too, like she’s not taking anything seriously. Plus, I’m not really sure anymore that she’s black. Maybe black mixed with something. Not that it matters, right? But in any case, she’s obviously rich, and therefore not worth talking to. Rich people speak a different language.

I talked anyway. “I don’t know how the hell I’m supposed to come up with the music for this. I’ve never even written a song with lyrics before—forget about songs about...” I was going to say “animal rape,” which would have been lame, but Laila cut in with her hands on her hips.

“I’m going to help you, that’s how,” she said. She stared at me, expecting resistance. How could she know me so well after thirty-five minutes?

“What do you mean?” I shifted in my seat.

“Ever heard of Rodgers and Hammerstein? You can have the music, I’ll take the lyrics. Trust me.”

“Um. OK.”

She cocked her head and looked at me for a few seconds, while I tried to think of something else to say. Finally, like she had just thought of it, she added: “We need to start as soon as possible. Like, tomorrow. I know you’ve got ideas. Write some of them down and we’ll get together and brainstorm. What do you think? My house? Your house?”

“Uh...you don’t want to come to my house. It’s pretty terrible.”

“OK. Mine then. Hold on.” She dug around in her back seat and came up with a pen and a ripped half-sheet of looseleaf. She scribbled something on it and handed it over. An address.

“Two o’clock,” she said, and left.

On the drive home, I realized I had Doritos all over my face.

The word “crush” is all wrong.

And *Concise Etymological Dictionary* is no help. Apparently, it comes from an old French word meaning “to gnash with the teeth.” People started “having crushes” in the 1800’s, but the book doesn’t say why, or what they had before.

“Having a crush” makes it sound like an avalanche, or a shark attack. Maybe that’s what it’s like for other people. For me, it’s more like an infection. A bug gets in somehow, and burrows in somewhere, so that you can’t get it out. Then it starts making more bugs.

Like a virus, it takes over your machinery and uses it to reproduce itself. So those thoughts you were having about, say, the beach? Now they’re thoughts about you and her at the beach. And you’re saving her from drowning. Those thoughts about how much you hate Sam Burns? Now he’s hitting on her, and you’re kicking his ass into next week with some karate moves nobody knew you had.

The new bugs travel through the bloodstream to the various organs, where they burrow in and make even more bugs, until finally your immune system gets a clue and starts fighting it, and you start to feel light in the head and a little bit warmer than usual, and before long every tissue and vein in your body has been reconfigured to respond to the threat, and you’ve got alarms everywhere screaming her name.

It’s ridiculous and pathetic. Not to mention annoying. Let me count the ways.

- I don’t know this girl.

- I have nothing in common with her.

- I have said somewhere between forty and forty-five words to her, depending on whether you count “Um,” and whether “OK” is one word or two.

- I am obviously sick in the head, and so starved of attention that I will obsess over anyone who shows me the slightest shred of it.

For these reasons, I refuse to call this condition a “crush.” Instead I will refer to it as an “infection.” Assuming it persists, which with any luck it won’t.

Saturday

I printed out the directions to Laila's house and headed out at 1:15, just to be on the safe side, even though this meant taking more time out of my busy schedule. I'd had big plans for today, like going down to the river to throw rocks, and trying to beat my high score on Space Pong, which has been frozen at 228,625 for the last three weeks. Instead I slept all morning, after staying up until four-thirty writing music. Then all I had time to do was eat some of Camille's leftover moussaka, or muffedetta, or some such ambiguous substance, before it was time to go.

"I'm off," I said to Dave.

"Where to?" he said, through a mouthful of food.

"Uh, nowhere, I'm just going to this girl's house to help out with the school play."

At this, Camille immediately beamed herself in from the other end of the house. "Stop the *presses*!" she said, clapping her hands. "Are you actually getting *involved* in something?"

Involved. What a horrible word. Rolled into. Enveloped. Smothered.

"Don't worry, it's not contagious," I said. "I'm just doing this one thing."

"What's the play?" asked Dave.

"Who's the *girl*?" asked Camille.

"Guys, please, I'm going to be late." White lie.

"Paul"—in her mom-voice, now—"we want to know where you're going to be, at the very least."

"The play is called the *Metamorphoses*. You wouldn't know it. You wouldn't know the girl either. Laila—I don't know how to pronounce her last name. Rahbani."

Yes, I looked her up in the yearbook last night. It took me a long time to find her, because her picture looked so different: her skin seemed darker, her hair straighter. She was focusing about a millimeter to the left of the camera, like she was looking at something over my shoulder. Suddenly I remembered the tears in her eyes yesterday afternoon. Had I imagined it? She seemed to dissolve and rearrange again. By this point I was having trouble remembering what she really looked like. But does that even make sense? Do we really look like anything?

“Ah,” Dave said, just as I was turning to go. “I know the Rahbanis.” He took another bite, pausing for effect. I should have known. My father’s purpose in life is to know everyone in this sad little city.

He wiped his mouth and went on. “Liberals,” he said, in the tone you would use to refer to a child molester. “Prominent liberals. George Rahbani made a fortune in real estate. Married a black woman. You always hear about them giving money to things.”

“What kind of name is that, anyway?” asked Camille, her brow furrowed in curiosity and/or distaste.

“Beats me. Some kind of Arab, I’d say.”

“An Arab and a black woman! Well. Paul, your friend must be a *beautiful* girl. How hard it must have been for her, though.”

This conversation was offensive on so many levels that I decided not to touch it.

To get to the Rahbani residence, you take Veterans Highway all the way to the end. You cross the river, you duck under downtown's puny skyline, and you keep driving till the potholes cluster like mines and the houses crowd in like cows in a stockyard. This is the side of town we never see. Down here, every fourth or fifth house—shotgun houses, they call them—is charred or crumbling, with hairy vines swallowing a wall, or goldenrods bursting up through a caved-in porch. But the thing that really gets you is how many people there are, and how alive everything is. People sitting out on lawn chairs, people shouting down the sidewalk, kids playing soccer in the street. And dogs, a million dogs, in a thousand shades of mutt.

Veterans Highway dead-ends at Reggie's Stop-n-Go, and you take a right, then a left, and another right, and suddenly you're on a little stub of a cul-de-sac in front of the biggest, weirdest, most out-of-place house you'll ever see.

I don't know what I was expecting, but this, by any stretch of the imagination, was not it. A monstrosity in bright-red brick, brand-new and custom-made from the looks of it, its shape broken up into a jumble of corners and eaves. Giant columns flanking the entrance. A lawn so perfect you could practice your putting. A fountain surrounded by tacky statues: a grinning lion, a guy blowing a horn, an angel of some sort. And to top it all off, right there in front, a marble pot containing an enormous, plastic, neon-turquoise plant.

I was marveling at the sheer awfulness of all this when I realized several things, more or less simultaneously:

- I was about twenty minutes early.
- Laila's car was not here.
- An extremely hairy man, wearing tiny purple shorts and no shirt, and brandishing a tiny shovel, was grinning at me through the window.

Five minutes later, I found myself sitting on a floor pillow, in some kind of parlor, in front of a plate of what looked like tiny fried footballs. A woman with a wild Afro, whom I took to be Laila's mother, had dashed in with the plate and dashed right back out. Now she reappeared with a silver tray, from which she dispensed a miniature cup of tea (I guessed) and two little saucers of dip (I guessed again) for the footballs.

One of the dips was a bland cream color, with green flakes on top. The other was dark purplish-brown. While I was staring at them, George Rahbani, who had been planting pansies, emerged from a hallway. He had put on a robe, which failed to fully contain his chest hair.

"Music man!" he boomed, for the second time. (The first had been as soon as I'd opened my car door.) He lowered himself onto a pillow, dunked a football into the purple dip, and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth. "Eat! Kibbe!"

"Yes, sir," I said. As gracefully as I could manage while sitting cross-legged on the floor, I picked up a football, dipped it gingerly into the cream-colored substance, and took a small bite.

"Wow," I said before I'd swallowed. "This is incredible." I meant it. Kibbe tasted something like the corn dogs from the Bork cafeteria would, if the corn dogs from the Bork cafeteria were awesome, which they decidedly weren't.

"Of course it is," said Mr. Rahbani proudly. "It's been passed down through a thousand Lebanese grandmothers. That's enough to make sewage taste good. Now!" He wiped his mouth and leaned back. "Tell us about your music."

I wasn't sure who "us" was, but just then Mrs. Rahbani came back from the kitchen and sat down with us. She was wearing some sort of gaudy African wrap thing that swallowed her small body. She hadn't said a word to me yet.

“Um,” I started. Nobody had asked me that before. “I—don’t know, I’m really not an expert or anything...”

“Not an expert? Not an expert?” He looked around in mock indignation. “Get out of my house!” I managed a nervous laugh, but he was already moving on: “No, come on. Who are your influences? What do you listen to? What do you like?”

I figured he took me for some kind of classical or jazz musician, which I’m not by any stretch of the imagination. So I fumbled around apologetically for a minute, and he pressed me for the names of some actual bands that I liked, and I came up with a couple—obscure, dark, theatrical, twelve-minute-instrumental kinds of bands that I was sure he never would have heard of in a million years—and to my amazement, Mr. Rahbani already knew everything about them. He laughed a deep, belly-shaking laugh when he saw the surprised look on my face, and Mrs. Rahbani smiled a slight, patient smile that said she’d listened to these conversations before. Then he kept asking me questions in his funny voice—a voice without an accent, really, but with a hint of the exotic in the rhythms and pitches, like someone reciting English without knowing the language—and I gradually opened up and started talking, and we had just started debating the relative merits of *Apocalypse Sponge* (the first album by Futurehound) and *Catacombs of Venus* (their second), when the door opened and Laila walked in.

Caught up in the heat of adapting to a new situation—make that *very* new—I had honestly forgotten why I was there. The jolt of remembering made me drop my kibbe into the purple dip, sending it splattering over the rest of the plate. I groaned and jumped up to do something about it, but Mrs. Rahbani just said “Don’t worry about it, honey,” in a voice so smooth that I knew instantly where Laila had gotten hers.

“I can see you’ve made an impression,” said Laila. Having jumped up, I was now standing perilously close to her—close enough, at any rate, to smell the sweetness of some kind of conditioner, or body wash, or something, which I imagined she must have applied in the shower, the thought of which threatened to wreak havoc if it got loose in my head. Fortunately, she averted disaster by kneeling down to take a dip-spattered kibbe.

“I’m late. Sorry,” she said, simply, with her mouth full.

“Could you go away for a little longer?” said her father. “We’re just getting to know the Maestro here.”

“His name is Paul, weirdo,” said Laila, nudging him in the ribs with her foot. “And no, I can’t, because we have work to do. Come on, Paul.”

So I followed her down a long, red hallway, lined with framed photographs in faded black-and-white. Several featured a mustached man in a faded suit, carrying what looked like a crippling load on his back.

“Your dad—uh—” I said, figuring I should make conversation.

“Knows everything about everything,” she replied. “Better get used to it. Here’s my room.”

This had already become a great day for shattered expectations, and they just kept shattering. This girl, this unaccountable girl, with her flamboyant parents and her plum-colored Lexus and her over-the-top house, has a room that might as well have been trucked in from a convent. Where my walls are lined with tattered music posters, hers are bare slabs of white; where my floor vanishes under stacks of books and piles of empty CD cases, hers stretches toward the bed in a sea of blue carpet; where my big desktop computer peers out from a jungle of cords and speakers, her sleek little laptop sits placidly on an empty desk, with a tiny light

glowing and fading, glowing and fading, breathing in its sleep. At that moment I felt extremely, cripplingly out of place.

“Nice and spartan,” I said politely.

“What does that mean?”

“Oh. Didn’t you have Miss Stephanopoulos last year?”

“I wasn’t at Bork last year.”

“Oh.” Awkward—I should probably have known this. “Well, we had this World History class last year that we all just called Greek History, since Miss Stephanopoulos was obsessed with Greece and didn’t feel like teaching us about anything else. So now we all know everything about Greece, and jack about world history.”

“OK...” She crossed her arms.

“Anyway, Sparta was a city that lived under hard-core military rule. When babies were born, if they didn’t think they were strong enough, they’d leave them up in the hills to die. You’d go into military school when you turned seven, and you’d train for like thirteen years, and then you’d be in the army. And they all thought that having fun was a sign of weakness, so they lived with the bare minimum—they didn’t have any art, or good food, or nice things. That’s where ‘spartan’ comes from.”

I looked at my feet. I was talking way too much, which was a) stupid and b) bizarre. It was all her fault—most people I know don’t *listen* like that.

She squinted at me for a few seconds. “You should be a teacher,” she said finally, and sat down on her bed.

“Yeah, right.” I looked around uncomfortably. I could either sit on her bed next to her, the thought of which was enough to make my throat spasm, or sit in the desk chair all the way

across the room, which was a little awkward. Then there was always the floor, which seemed to play a different role in the Rahbani world than in mine. I chose the chair. She watched me with a faintly amused expression.

“So what does Ovid mean to *you*?” she intoned, in her worst teacher’s voice. I laughed.

“All I know is that Ovid didn’t play by the rules, and neither do I. At least that’s what Mr. Brainerd said about my paper.”

She didn’t answer, and just at that moment, something brushed against the back of my head. I jerked forward in my seat and yelped “Holy shit!” Laila put her hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh, and turning around, I found myself face to face with—what? A gigantic, albino, vampire rat was all I could figure. Standing on its hind legs on her desk, pink eyes gleaming, it had clearly been caught in the act of biting my neck and feeding its undead appetite.

“What— What—”

“Don’t freak out,” she giggled. “It’s just Oscar. You’ve seen ferrets before. Come here, Oscar!” She grabbed a floppy toy from under her bed and wagged it near the floor. Oscar obligingly jumped down from the desk via my leg, humped his white, furry body across the carpet, and proceeded to attack the toy with a fury that only confirmed my suspicions.

“Ferrets. No, I haven’t. Not like that, anyway. What is he, albino?” I stared at him as he backed away from the toy and started leaping wildly up and down with his back arched, like a drunk person on a Pogo stick.

“Look, it’s the war dance!” She smiled at him affectionately. “Yeah, albino. He’s still just a kit, so he’s got a little bit of excess energy. I got him for Solstice last year.”

“Solstice.” I raised my eyebrows at her, as Oscar made a faint snarling noise and dragged the toy out of the room like it was a rabbit carcass.

“What passes for Christmas around here. My family is a little—unusual. They don’t buy into the whole religion thing.”

“Sounds refreshing,” I said, honestly. “Mine buys into it big time. My stepmom makes sure my ass is in a pew every Sunday.”

“I think that’s kind of nice,” she said, leaning back against a pillow and staring at the ceiling. Her shirt hitched up a little bit, exposing a sliver of her stomach. I tried to look away as she went on. “I’ve always wanted to feel like part of a real tradition. But Dad’s family comes from the Middle East, you know. So in his mind, religion is nothing but trouble. He had a great-great-uncle or something who was a priest, and he was killed in a massacre. Because of his religion. Dad always talks about that.”

“He said he was Lebanese?”

“Yeah. My great-grandfather came over when he was fourteen. If he hadn’t, he would have had to serve in the Turkish army. That’s him with the mustache, in the pictures out there.” She waved toward the hall. “He was a peddler, kind of a traveling salesman. One of the first Lebanese people in this area.”

“Cool,” I said. “I wish my family had a history. Boring white people, all the way back.”

“Every family has a history. Sometimes I wish mine were less boring. It might be easier to figure out who I am.”

While I was still chewing on that, she sat up abruptly and said: “OK! Down to business. We need a game plan for this.” She fished a notebook out of a drawer.

“Right. Well, it’s going to be kind of tough until we have a script. Or at least some kind of outline of what they’re going to do.”

“What *we’re* going to do,” she said, wagging a pen at me. “Are you on this team, or not?”

“Sorry. We.” If she knew me, she’d understand. I have to distance myself. It’s a matter of emotional survival. “Anyway, I put down some rough ideas last night.” I reached in my bag and tossed a CD onto her bed. “I mean, *really* rough. Like, ninety-nine percent of it is worthless, I can guarantee you. But maybe there’s something in there we can use.”

“You’re hilarious,” she said, shaking her head. She tossed the CD back to me. “Put it on. My computer’s behind you.”

So I played my music through her crummy laptop speakers, and we sat there listening—me staring at the wall, convincing myself that it was one hundred percent worthless; her cross-legged on the bed, leaning forward with her face propped up on her fists, concentrating so intensely it made me squirm. When she finally looked up, her eyes were red and glistening, just as I’d seen them for the first time through Miss Tutwiler’s window. She reached for a Kleenex while I looked at my feet again.

“Sorry,” she said through the Kleenex, after a brutal silence. “I have a thing with music. It gets to me.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Ha. No, I love it. There are some great ideas in there. A little heavy on the strings, and too much showing off toward the end there, but no—I can tell this is going to be amazing.”

I laughed and scratched my head, not knowing what to say. She was right—I had a weakness for strings, and yes, maybe I tended to show off a little bit. Maybe especially when I was writing for a girl who I had a—an infection for. Somehow, the fact that she noticed that flattered me even more than her compliments.

“You taught yourself to do this?” she was asking.

“I guess. I don’t know. I mean, I took a couple years of piano lessons, but that’s ancient history. I’m not a musician, really, I just like figuring stuff out.” This was lame, but it was also the truest thing I knew to say. “What about you?”

“Choir. Hey, play that second one again.”

I did, and she sang. Not with words—just humming, or somewhere between humming and singing, softly, with her eyes closed and her head tilted: feeling out a melody in a voice full and pure, out of all proportion to her delicate, complicated little body. Outside her small window, the sky had gone dark and the leaves of a spidery little bush were fluttering, anticipating something. I felt, more than heard, the distant shudder of thunder. And then the world seemed to warp, and for a second I was out there with the shuddering thunder, looking down on everything all fragile and small, and the next moment I was spinning back towards Laila’s bedroom, dragged by gravity towards the middle of some galaxy of emotion, and the words—*spartan* and *elective* and *fiasco* and all the rest, the words that swarm around my mind like flies—the words fall away in a gust of wind, and I’m left with just, well, I don’t know what, because now here’s Laila, staring at me with an expression halfway between concern and alarm.

“Are you OK?” says Laila. “That bad, huh?”

I realize that I’m rocking back and forth slightly, like an insane person. I’m also blinking back tears of my own: the first in months. I try to collect myself.

“Jeez, I’m sorry. I had a—a weird—brain—thing. Uh, that was beautiful.” I look around, anxious to change the subject.

“Music gets to you, too,” she says, not looking anywhere but at me.

I clear my throat. “My mom—um. Was a singer.” This is not good.

“Was?” she says gently.

And for whatever reason, because I’m weak, or because I’m a coward, or because I’ve essentially lost the power of speech, I can’t. Can’t go there. “Yeah. Nothing. She doesn’t sing anymore. Listen, I’d better go before the storm hits.” I don’t make eye contact as I stand up and lift my bag, but I can tell that she is staring at me in what I already know is her way—quizzically, head tilted, like she’s trying to see through me.

“OK,” she says. “Well, I guess I’ll see you on Monday.” She gets up, and we both make for the door and nearly bump into each other, and I step out into the hall, nearly tripping over Oscar the ferret, who has fallen asleep next to his toy and is lying there like a speed bump. I walk down the long red hallway, out the front door, and past the turquoise plant, and just as the first swollen raindrops splatter against my car, sending tiny rivulets of pollen and dust down the windshield, I pull out and drive towards home.

A memory. Dredged up from the deep, from under what seems like millions of years' worth, thousands of tons, of sediment, Pale Scum, detritus.

First, the smell of sunscreen, and the slow tingle of drying feet, propped on a dashboard. Wet—how? From a canoe trip, the first of the year: another baptism in the brown muck of the Tallahoma. Now, the light: the dazzling light of a March afternoon, filtered through the pastels of redbuds and oak blossoms, the sun still hunched at winter's angle, golden and immediate. Two tired backs on the leather bench-seat of a worn-down Plymouth, sputtering in a drive-thru lane, and one back is Mom's. The light on Mom's heart-shaped face, buried in her hands, shaking with silent laughter.

I dared her to sing her order, and she did. The tune was something like "The Sound of Music." She got two lines out, chicken nuggets and a milkshake, before she stopped and covered her mouth, and the speaker just crackled, stupefied, and we burst into laughter. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she couldn't stop laughing, and we had to leave. So she said "I'm sorry" to the speaker and wheeled the Plymouth out of line, and we laughed all the way home and made peanut butter sandwiches.

I dared her, and she did—why? Why did she let me in, let me get so close? God damn her, and me, and everything.

Sunday

I'm still not really sure what happened yesterday, but all I can think about is Laila. The infection has gone systemic, and catastrophic. I sweat, I jitter, I drop things. I rehearse our conversations, trying to tease out the hidden meanings.

It might be easier to figure out who I am, she said. I have the same problem, but for the opposite reason. I don't know who I am because I'm nobody—whatever I was has been washed out, paved over, made invisible. She doesn't know because she's everybody.

Teenagers are not supposed to worry about this crap. My excuse is tragedy. What's hers?

At lunch, Camille keeps staring at me over her twelve-grain cereal, like I've got an open sore on my forehead. Finally she speaks.

"So how was your meeting yesterday, Mr. Mysterious? I want to hear more about this play."

"Fine," I mumble through leftover pizza. We ordered Geppetto's last night—an unaccountable break from Camille's despotic health regime. "I'm doing some music. She's going to write some lyrics. A Rodgers and Hammerstein kind of thing." After a few seconds, I add, "They were the guys that did *The Sound of Music*, and..."

"Hey, give me a break, I know who Rodgers and Hammerstein were," she laughs. "I *am* quite a bit older than you, after all."

"How old are you?" This is not very polite, but I've never been concerned with impressing Camille.

"Well, a lady never reveals her age, of course. But I *will* say that I am under forty, and maybe just the slightest hair over thirty-eight."

I try to hide my surprise—she *is* a lot older than me. She finishes her cereal, pushes the bowl aside, and gets her tiny mirror out of her purse, examining her makeup as if suddenly reminded of mortality.

“Knock knock,” she says suddenly, closing her mirror with a snap. This surprises me even more.

“Uh...who’s there?”

“Sam and Janet,” she says with a grin that’s almost childish.

“OK. Sam and Janet who?”

And she breaks into song, in a voice so out of tune that I almost laugh, despite myself:
“*Sam and JAN-et eve-ninngggg...*”

I stare at her. “I...don’t get it. Sorry.”

“It’s from *South Pacific*, knucklehead. I thought you were an expert on Rodgers and Hammerstein? *Some en-chan-ted eve-ning...*”

“Oh. I really don’t know anything about them. I think Laila does, though.”

“Such a pretty name,” says Camille dreamily. “Tell me about her. What’s she like?”

We’re venturing into treacherous terrain. I take my plate to the sink, rinse it off, and cram it into the last slot in the dishwasher. “She’s...I don’t know. A really good singer.”

“Unlike me.”

“She has an albino ferret.”

“Yuck. What’s her sign? I bet she’s a Libra.” For such a hard-core Christian, Camille sure eats up that astrology stuff.

“Jeez, I have no clue.”

“Please don’t say Jeez. Paul, I think it’s wonderful, wonderful, that you’re making friends again. You have so much to share with people. Which reminds me—have you looked at the college book yet?”

“Nope,” I say, turning away to fish a ginger ale out of the fridge. This isn’t *strictly* true. But I figure that showing any interest could be dangerous. After all, this is a war of wills against a highly skilled, highly motivated, thirty-nine-year-old opponent.

“Well, I’d like to get the ball rolling on this trip. I was thinking about maybe the first weekend in December? Then you can get a whole year’s head start on your applications. Early bird gets the worm!”

Applications. The word drives home the reality: I’m teetering on the edge, about to be sucked into the vortex. But what’s the use of resisting?

“Maybe you should make a list,” she goes on, “of the kinds of things that are most important to you. Like...do you want to be at a big place, or a small place? Maybe you want a place with a great music program? Or...?”

“I don’t know what I want,” I sigh. *I don’t know who I am*. This question, which never occurred to me before, suddenly seems very urgent. “How is Dave going to get off for this? He works, like, all the time.”

“Your father said that this is very important to him. He cares about your future, and he cares about us all being together. So he’ll make it work. Please look at the book?”

“I’ll look at the book,” I say over my shoulder, on the way to my room.

*Before her prayer was ended, torpor seized
on all her body, and a thin bark closed
around her gentle bosom, and her hair
became as moving leaves; her arms were changed
to waving branches, and her active feet
as clinging roots were fastened to the ground—
her face was hidden with encircling leaves.—
Phoebus admired and loved the graceful tree,
(For still, though changed, her slender form remained)
and with his right hand lingering on the trunk
he felt her bosom throbbing in the bark.
He clung to trunk and branch as though to twine
his form with hers, and fondly kissed the wood
that shrank from every kiss.
And thus the God:
“Although thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt
be called my chosen tree...”*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I

Monday

All day I'm on edge, longing for and fearing the moment when I pass her in the hall. Longing for: the sight of her, the skin, the hair, the color to paint this statue I've built in my head. Fearing: the revelation of wrongness, the blank indifference, the lack of sparks and sunbeams that will prove that I imagined everything, that she has no interest in me whatsoever, that I'm just the latest in an eternal line of lovestruck losers.

As it turns out, though, I don't see her at all until sixth period. She slips in right as Miss Hotchkiss is closing the door. It's actually cool today, which never happens in September—like that storm sucked all the air out of Alaska and dumped it right on top of us—and Laila's swallowed by a puffy green coat. I watch her back arch as she takes it off. Those big, motherly eyes. That tiny, girlish body. She doesn't even glance in my direction.

I spend most of the period planning the fifteen seconds it'll take to walk out the door at the end of class. It's a tall order. You want to stage a "casual" encounter, but not so casual that she'll miss it. And of course you want to sum up, in one soulful glance, the combination of confidence and detachment and interest and mystery that is Paul Fisher, as far as she knows, or as far as she needs to know. From my seat at the outside wall I'll need a head start, to be sure she doesn't get out first. Better have my stuff put up and backpack zipped ahead of time. But I'll need to be flexible, to manage my speed in response to hers. It'll be awkward if I'm quick out of the gate and then have to slow down. The plan in that case is to pretend to fumble with the straps of my backpack. It's a good plan.

It also makes me feel like I'm about twelve years old. What a head case—this would be great material for Dr. Silverman, assuming hell froze over and I actually told her about it.

Anyway, it's all completely and utterly irrelevant, because just as Miss Hotchkiss says "See you tomorrow" and I slide out of my desk, quickly and calmly, and just as I breeze towards the doorway, glancing backwards ever so briefly to check my straps, and just as my head moves forward to "accidentally" meet her eyes in that soulful glance, Tanisha Simpkins thrusts herself between us and starts babbling to Laila about something I can't understand. Then I'm out the door and she's out of reach, and the chasm is open again.

Fifteen minutes later. Official *Metamorphoses: The Musical* Meeting Number One. As May calls us to order, I feel a poke on my shoulder, and turning around, I find Laila. Predictably, after hours of preparation, I'm caught totally off guard at the moment of truth.

"Oh—Hey," I attempt to say, but it comes out more like a cough as my throat immediately floods itself with phlegm. Me and my body: a real team.

"OK! Let's get started!" says May. "We've got a *loooooooot* to get through today?" She's got several pages of typed, bulleted notes in front of her; probably spent all weekend on it. May's a freak, I think, but probably a useful freak to have around, if you want to try something ridiculous like a high school musical.

"First of all, I want to know if anyone has questions, or comments, or doubts, or...insights? Or words of wisdom? Regarding our choice of a musical. Which, by the way, is our *final* choice. It's official."

"Question," says Melissa Crump, or I think that's what she says—she's smacking her gum too loud to be sure. "I'm wondering, like—maybe we want to think about the title? Kind of a mouthful. Plus people are going to get confused and think it's the thing about the cockroach, and they won't come. People like, I don't know, me."

Long-haired zit guy pipes up, "I was thinking *Metamorphoses: The Metamusical*. Kind of brings in that sci-fi aspect."

"Whoa, that helps *so* much, thanks," says Melissa.

"I think we need to make it shorter, with more, like, pizzazz," says Theater Girl Number One. "How about just *MORPH*?" I hear Laila sigh behind me.

"Oooo, I like *MORPH*," says May, and unrolls an imaginary banner in front of her. "Can't y'all see it? *Coming Soon! Limited Engagement! The World Premiere of...MORPH!*"

“Well, I don’t know,” says Theater Girl Number Two. “We’d better think about it. For now, though, we’d probably better assign some jobs, right?”

“Right,” says May. “So I’ve put together a little list of the positions we’ll need to fill on the crew?”

She runs down the list. I brace myself for a melee (from Old French for “mixture”—see *medley*), but surprisingly, the jobs get doled out without much fuss. People feel important when they’ve got titles, and people feel happy when they feel important. So May gets Director, with Theater Girl One—whose name turns out to be Megan, but pronounced for some reason like Mee-gan—as Assistant Director. Miss Tutwiler, our official faculty sponsor, gets the honorary title of Producer. Theater Girl Two (Amanda) becomes our Stage Manager after explaining to the rest of us what a Stage Manager is. Dennis “I will freaking *rock* some sets” Skelton gets “Production Designer/Technical Director.” Long-haired guy (Arnold), whose dad manages an Electronics World, gets Sound & Lighting. Melissa gets Costume Designer (or “Costume Technician,” as she insists on being called), after agreeing to let May do the lion for Pyramus and Thisbe. After taking care of the leftovers like Publicity, we finally get down to what May calls “last but certainly not least”: the music.

“That’ll obviously be Paul and Laila,” she says, raising her pen. “Co-Musical Directors? Or Musical Co-Directors?”

“Wait,” I say, feeling like I’m falling further and further down some kind of rabbit hole. “I don’t know if I’m—I don’t know if you want to—” But Laila punches me in the shoulder—pretty hard, for such a tiny fist.

“Just put Musical Directors,” she says, as May darts a glance back and forth between us.

“What exactly does a Musical Director do?” I ask.

“Well,” says May, scratching her ear with her pen, “you’ll have to write the music, obviously. I understand y’all already got a good start on that. And you’ll have to help out with auditions. And put together, um, a band, I guess? Or an orchestra? And...teach everyone how to play and sing your music?”

“Dude, don’t sweat it, you’re all over it,” says Dennis. But I’m not so sure. I’m not so sure how I got all mixed up, all melee-d up, in this. How hard can it be just to live a simple life and have everyone stay out of your business? I went to all the trouble to build these walls—why won’t they let me hide behind them?

My instinct is to blow it all off and leave, go to the river or somewhere. But I can feel Laila behind me, giving off some kind of crazy warmth like a little sun. *To hell with it*, I think. *Do it for her.*

“He’s in,” says Laila. “We’re in.”

“I’m in,” I say. “I’m all over it.”

Fall

Monday

A word to the wise. At some point in your life, if you are anything like me, there will be certain temptations. You will be tempted to go with the flow. To take the easy way out. The path of least resistance. And this will seem good, and right, and simple, for months maybe, until one dark day, say in mid-November, when you find yourself wearing a giant cow head made of papier mache.

It will be dark in there, and humid, and there will be a faint smell that reminds you of some kind of European cheese, and you will begin to regret the omelet that Camille fixed you that morning. And that round girl in the pink dress, flitting around you like a giant hummingbird? Not helping.

“How is it? Does it fit? Can you see? How many fingers am I holding up?” May Tingle has her lips pursed in that way of hers: delight, with a thin veil of pity. She thrusts two handfuls of doughy fingers toward my face, but because my eye-holes are about a foot from my actual eyes, and too far apart to look through both at the same time, I can’t get a good count.

“Can’t see,” I mumble through my swaddling of newspaper, paste, paint, and varnish.

“What did he say?” asks May, wide-eyed. Theater Girl Two swallows a laugh, her hands clasped in front of her face.

“I have no idea. But Paul. I just have to tell you. You look a-*maze*-ing.”

At this, May stops fussing with my head for a moment and looks over her shoulder. “Oh my goodness,” she says. “You totally just made a joke! A-*maze*-ing? A-*maze*-ing? I love it!”

Through my right eye-hole I can just make out Theater Girl Two’s blank look. Dennis Skelton’s voice, muffled, comes to the rescue.

“Maze, like labyrinth. Dude’s the Mini-taur. He lives in a—”

“I get it, nuthead,” says TG2, “and hello, it’s ‘Minotaur’? You still haven’t read the script.”

“I read it! I read it! OK, I skimmed it, whatever. But I know what’s up. Girl gets it on with a bull, they end up with this monster hell-spawn thing, half and half, so they build the world’s biggest maze and shut the guy up in the middle of it. It’s just like *Son of Mothman* except with—”

“And then what? Then what happens?”

“Guys,” I say, feeling dizzy by the second, but nobody seems to hear.

“Uh...then...well, there’s the earthquake, and dude busts loose, and...mauls a bunch of Greeks, and goes off to get his unholy vengeance.”

“You are so full of crap,” says TG2, laughing. “How about Theseus? Remember him? He shows up, and the girl gives him the ball of string to find his way through the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur? But don’t worry, it’s not important, it’s not like YOU have to play Theseus or any—whoa. Paul? Paul?”

I’m tipping over. “The head! The head!” squeals May. Someone, Dennis I guess, grabs me, and after a couple of minutes of yanking and shoving I’m finally free.

“That was close!” says May, clutching the cow head like a baby. “What happened?”

“Thanks for your concern,” I mutter, wiping the sweat off my forehead. “I don’t know about this. I can hardly breathe in that thing. Or see, for that matter.”

“Hmm.” May holds the head by the horns and studies it. “More ventilation. Stage manager! Add that to my to-do list, please.”

“But the bottom line is, it looks great,” adds TG2. “And you wear it so well. I’d swear you had played the Minotaur before.”

“Yes! Thanks again for stepping up, Paul. And for such a demanding role.”

“Like Caliban in *Tempest*.”

“Mmm,” says TG1 appreciatively from across the room.

“It’s a man in a cow suit,” I say. “And if by ‘stepping up’ you mean ‘being bribed into humiliating myself in front of an audience of hundreds,’ then yeah, absolutely, you’re welcome.”

“Oooh,” says Melissa Crump, walking in with an armful of fabric. “Do you think we’ll get *hundreds*?”

I excuse myself and retreat to a desk in the corner. Miss Tutwiler’s room is all but unrecognizable. Along the far wall, TG1 is wrestling with an enormous roll of black paper, as two guys cut orange flames out of posterboard: the Hell backdrop, for the scene where Orpheus goes after his dead wife. Three girls are crouched by the window, with the pages of a script spread out on the floor, arguing about “blocking” and other mysterious theater stuff. And with the desks pushed to the walls, the center of the room is crowded with May’s monstrous creations: the Minotaur head, of course, horned and snarling; a lion costume, with pipe-cleaner whiskers and red paint smeared across the face, for the Pyramus and Thisbe scene when she thinks he’s been eaten; two pairs of giant wings, made out of wire hangers and plus-size pantyhose, for the Daedalus and Icarus scene when Icarus flies too close to the sun; and in the middle of it all, May’s magnum opus, her Galatea—the marble statue that comes to life, when its sculptor, Pygmalion, falls in love with it.

Galatea is Laila. May created her by wrapping Laila in duct tape, tight, slitting the tape down the back, painting it white, and adding a head of papier mache. So Laila, now, is always

there—her slender body, with its curves that I could draw in my sleep, looking shyly down on the room from its cardboard pedestal. It feels very wrong.

The real Laila isn't here today. As usual, I can't think about anything else.

After three months, you'd think that one of two things might have happened.

1. Paul got over his dumb obsession and moved on to something healthier, like base jumping, or meth.
2. Paul grew a pair of *cojones* and actually made a move.

And you'd be wrong, because this is what has actually happened: nothing. And not for lack of opportunity, either. I've been in her bedroom, for God's sake, every Tuesday and Saturday for the last twelve weeks. Listening to her sing. Listening to her laugh. Listening to her pick apart the music that I slaved over the night before.

R & H—our private name for our sessions together, from “Rodgers and Hammerstein”—has been great. And it's been torture. There have been tiny breakthroughs here and there, glimpses of light: the time when she called our meetings “the best part of the week”; the time when she squeezed my hand in pleasure after we finally finished the Act I overture, leaving me tingling like a sixth-grader. But the whole time there's been something between us, like a cloud that we can't quite find our ways through. There are things that I won't talk about. And I suspect, more and more, that there are things she won't talk about either.

One Saturday in October, as she lay in a sunbeam on the floor looking over a lyrics sheet, I noticed something new. This was surprising in itself, since there wasn't much to look at in her room in the first place, and I figured I'd been over all of it a thousand times. But there it was: a string of beads, all different colors and shapes, draped over the lamp on her nightstand.

“What are the beads for?” I asked.

She stopped reading and picked at a piece of lint on her cardigan. After a long silence she looked at me, hard.

“I lost something,” she said finally. “That’s to help me remember.”

“Oh,” I started. “Like a...” But she buried her head in her lyrics again, and I could see that I wasn’t meant to follow.

Back in Miss T’s room, May is at the podium, flapping her arms, insisting that everyone suit up in their costumes. I watch her and marvel. Say what you will about May—and I still can’t stand her about eighty-five percent of the time—but I don’t know anyone with more... what is it? Spirit, I guess, is the word. Spirit, from the Latin for “breathe”—see *respire*, and *inspire*. May’s like a great wind that blows over everything in its path. I still don’t know how she talked me into playing the Minotaur. I guess she inspired my ass.

“Please be careful with those whiskers? Dennis, help Nick with his wing, it’s all...limp. And for heaven’s sake, watch where y’all are swinging those trees! Maybe you want to move Gal out of the way for now...she just slides off the pedestal, like...here, I’ll do it. Where in the world is Sarah? I sent her out, like, twenty minutes ago?”

May’s in her element. Everyone has had to admit that she is perfect for this job. And the costumes, it must be said, rock. Not that I’d ever tell her.

I escape attention for a while, but eventually she barks “Minotaur! Where’s my Minotaur?” and drags me out of my desk. I pick up the cow head and sigh. Before I put it on, though, I take a long look at the surreal scene unfolding around me. Who would have thought? Right here in Bork High, room 208, where a few minutes ago there was just a bunch of no-count

kids in a dingy classroom in a beaten-down city, a portal has opened up onto ancient Greece. Here's Dennis the lion, down on all fours and roaring like he was born for it. Here's long-haired Arnold in angel wings, teetering on a desk as Daedalus and looking like he's a second from liftoff. Here's Melissa the laurel tree, shrouded in foliage, dipping her boughs toward the river in the floor. I can hardly recognize them—and yet...somehow, it's like I'm seeing them for the first time. Like you don't know who someone is, really, until you see them transformed. Stupid, maybe, but I don't know.

There's a clatter in the hall, and the door opens to reveal...someone, presumably Sarah, although she's completely hidden inside a thicket of green swim noodles. There's a pause as we all stare.

“Uh...stupid question?” says Dennis. “What the hell is that?”

She lifts off the thicket; camo PJ's underneath, and an expression of triumph.

“Reeds!” shrieks May.

“Reeds,” beams Sarah.

“We added a scene?” says May, apologetically, to the rest of us. “Pan and Syrinx? He chases after her, and she asks the river god for help, and he turns her into reeds. It's going to be great, but, um, we *will* need someone to wear some goat legs. Dennis, maybe?”

“Ahhh,” says Dennis thoughtfully. “I'd really like to. But Paul Fisher *owns* the hell-spawn role.”

“Thanks a lot,” I say as I disappear into the Minotaur.

After I wrestle on and off the cow head for about the twelfth time, we call it quits. I take off right away as usual, to avoid unnecessary talking, and I'm walking alone down the abandoned east-wing hall when I see there's a light still on. Mr. Brainerd's. I glance in quickly on my way past, and he's sitting there at his desk, and he happens to be looking at the door. Shit.

I haven't made it five steps before the door swings open and he calls out: "Hey Paul! Come in for a second, would you?" It's a different voice from the bellowing Mr.-Piscator voice that he uses in class.

"Yeah," I say in a non-committal way.

"Come on in," he says, giving me a pat on the shoulder, and closing the door behind us. "How's everything? Want a drink?"

"A drink?"

He laughed and opened the big cabinet in the back corner. "They let me keep a mini-fridge in here, for my insulin. What they don't know won't hurt 'em, right? Cold one?" He holds out a can of Coors Light, ready to flip it across the room.

"I'm OK, thanks," I say. Drinking with your teacher: that's got to be pretty far up there on the list of awkward activities. "You have diabetes?"

"I've got all kinds of problems," says Mr. Brainerd. "I'm a walking disaster. What—surprised?"

"No...I...well, yeah, a little. Weren't you in a soap opera once?"

"What?" He looks genuinely confused.

"Forget it. So, am I in trouble?"

"Trouble? Are you kidding? You're the best student I've got. Sit. Sit." He motions to a chair next to his own, at his desk. I sit. He cracks open his beer.

“So how’s everything, man?”

“I don’t know. Fine.” Speaking of awkward, this is definitely starting to qualify. Since when are we buddies?

“Listen, I know you’ve been through a lot, and I know it can be a real pain in the ass, folks treating you with kid gloves all the time.”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“And I know you’re a strong dude and you can handle your own business. The last thing you need is advice from an old washed-up asshole like me. But I just want you to know, you can tell me anything, anytime.” He put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a serious look.

“Anything. OK?”

“OK. Thanks.”

“Great. Cool. You know, I wouldn’t be treating just any student this way. I’ve got a lot of respect for you, man. You’re the real deal. Now, remember that essay contest I told you about, like six years ago?”

He pulls out an application form and walks me through it. The deadline, it says, is December 15.

“I thought the deadline was back in October,” I say. “From that information you gave me the first time.”

“Oh.” Mr. Brainerd blinks. “Yeah, right, they moved it back to accommodate more people. Lucky for us, right? I should have taken care of it on that first go-round, but I dropped the ball.”

So we finish going through the form, and I sign it, and he says he'll mail it off tomorrow. Then he asks me if I want to see something cool. Something he's been doing on the side. Sure, why not?

"Just humor me for a sec," he says, rustling through his bottom drawer. "This is just a dumb hobby, but I figure a guy like you might appreciate it."

He comes up with a stack of photographs, eight-by-tens, I guess. He points and nods, and so I flip through the stack. I'm not sure what to say. They're meant to be artistic, I guess—all weird angles and fuzz, and in some of them I can't even tell what's going on. Most of them are of people, especially kids. There's one of a girl, maybe twelve, eating a sno-cone. The picture is very close-up, and the girl's wearing a sort of half-smile and some blue sno-cone juice around her mouth.

"Who's she?" I ask, just to be polite.

"You like that one?" says Mr. Brainerd, leaning in. "No idea who she is, just some girl at the sno-cone place. Took it with the telephoto lens. I didn't quite catch her like I wanted to. You think it's OK though?" He seems almost anxious, like my opinion means a whole lot.

"Sure, it's nice, it's got kind of a...a sadness or something."

"You see that?" he says, beaming.

I keep flipping through. Sitting right next to Mr. Brainerd here, he doesn't really seem like Dr. McHunk. I can see the bags under his eyes, and the pudge on his stomach, and his hair looks greasy.

Here's a bunch of pictures, all in a row, of Bork kids. Some from the hallway, some from the parking lot, some from football games. All of them are super close-up, which has a weird effect on the kids, kind of a glorifying effect. Here's one that's so fuzzy I can hardly make it out,

with a girl in silhouette, turned three-quarters away from the camera. The blurred colored lights in the background practically swallow her up, but I'd recognize her anywhere. I decide not to say anything.

Suddenly I remember to check the time. "Whoa. I've gotta go, my stepmom's going to murder me if I'm late for dinner. Cool pictures." I hop up and grab my bag.

"Thanks, man, thanks," says Mr. Brainerd. "Hey, you know, it's great to hang out with someone who really appreciates stuff like that. Not like those other kids, who just care about the latest single and who's making out with who and all that. You're the real deal. Take care, Paul." One more pat on the shoulder, this one more of a rub, really, on the way out.

Not sure what to make of all this. Not sure what I did to earn BFF status from Dr. McHunk. But you know, whatever, I'll humor him. The really weird thing is, the man almost seems lonely.

Tuesday

Dr. Silverman, you've won. Here I am carrying this journal around in my backpack, like a nine-year-old girl.

I lost it for a while—whether accidentally or on purpose, I don't know. I haven't had time for it anyway, with all the music I've been working on. But last night I felt like writing, and I dug it out of the closet. Now here we are on the sandbar, me and all my mixed-up chicken-scratch thoughts, playing hooky while Miss Crotchkiss teaches the suckers about photosynthesis.

It feels like something's going to happen. You know when the air gets heavy with it? When you can feel it rumbling under your feet, and all the birds and the leaves and things go quiet? They say that some people can sense when an earthquake is coming. Maybe that's my superpower. Or maybe I'm just whacked.

Or maybe it's just the weather. Big cold front coming, the first frost of the season, according to Barbie Dinkins' giant head on our flat-screen. For now it's still warm, way too warm for November. The river feels like dirty bathwater on my toes. But the clouds are scudding across the sky, their tight formations breaking up, an army in retreat.

There's an old black man up towards the bridge. The same one I've seen here before? I'm not sure. Why do I call him an old black man? Isn't he just an old man? Black, white—they're just words, sounds, but we wear them like chains.

What a weird year it's been. Hey, Paul! Paul, from July! Here's a sneak preview: this semester, you're going to write the music for the school play, plan a college trip, dress up like a bull-man, spend about 600 hours with your good friend May Tingle, and fall for a

black-Lebanese girl with a ferret. Riiiiiight. Put it on paper, and it sounds ridiculous. But maybe it's all part of the plan, the program.

There's a commotion at my feet. Ants. Tiny ones, but in a teeming mass, in the crack along the edge of the boat-ramp pavement. Some kind of mating thing? I get down on my hands and knees, with an uneasy glance around; the old man doesn't notice, or pretends not to.

It's an all-out war. There are ants with their jaws locked together, ants dragging other ants by the leg, ants tearing dead ants to shreds. I guess there are two sides, although I can't tell the difference. They must be able to smell each other and figure out who's who.

I keep my eye on one ant, which is hard considering the general chaos, and watch as he—no, *she*, right?—goes about her business. Basically, she just runs around like a crazy person until she runs into another ant. Then she waves her feelers for a second, and if she doesn't like what she sees, or smells, or whatever, she grabs on with her jaws and they wrestle. Once she pins the other ant down, she jumps on top, latches onto a leg or something, and bites it off to seal the deal. Then she starts running around like a crazy person again.

I see, now, that what looks like chaos is anything but—it's just a gazillion individual ants each carrying out the same simple program. Run around. Engage. Inspect. Wrestle. Dismember. Repeat. They don't know how to do anything else. They probably don't even know what any of it is for. They sure as hell don't know that they're being watched by a giant animal with its own problems, or that there are rainclouds gathering across Veterans Highway, or that tomorrow they might all be squashed flat by Joe Redneck and his bass-boat trailer.

And are we any different? Maybe our rules are a little more complicated. Hooray for us. But what does it all add up to? The same pointlessness. The same obliviousness. The same

dumb chaos. If I were peering down at us, crawling all over each other in our teeming-mass world, I wouldn't be too impressed.

No time for deep thoughts, though. It's 3:45. R & H time.

*If he had told it all,
the tale of Syrinx would have followed thus:—
but she despised the prayers of Pan, and fled
through pathless wilds until she had arrived
the placid Ladon's sandy stream, whose waves
prevented her escape. There she implored
her sister Nymphs to change her form: and Pan,
believing he had caught her, held instead
some marsh reeds for the body of the Nymph;
and while he sighed the moving winds began
to utter plaintive music in the reeds,
so sweet and voice like that poor Pan exclaimed;
“Forever this discovery shall remain
a sweet communion binding thee to me.”*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I

Wednesday

Tuesday night. No, it's 1:37, according to the alien-green of my alarm clock. Make that Wednesday morning. Or, if you prefer, A.D. One: After the Debacle.

Outside, the thunder and lightning have passed. Now it's just steady rain, and a north wind in the trees, thrashing them against my window. Probably cold as all hell out there. I've already given up on sleeping—turns out that's difficult to do with a soul that's just been beaten into lifeless pulp—so I might as well grab the *Concise E. D.*

Debacle. From the French for “breaking up of ice on a river during a spring flood.” Are you kidding me? That's perfect. Shattered like ice. If I focus, I can actually feel the shards of myself being carried off, downstream.

So now the recap, the endless second-guessing. What was I thinking? How did I fool myself into thinking I had a chance? How did I let myself go?

As usual, Laila wasn't there when I showed up. Neither was her dad, for once. So I sat with Mrs. Rahbani and scarfed down some *meze*, feeling awkward, while she knitted something colorful in the rocking chair.

I live for Mrs. R's *meze*. It's basically just a bunch of little appetizers, finger foods, but they're different every time. I've learned not to ask what they are exactly, because they always turn out to be things I'm not supposed to like. Squid arms, or fish eggs, or cheese from some poor animal that was never meant to make cheese.

“This is awesome,” I said, wiping crumbs off my face.

“You know,” said Mrs. R., in that voice like water, “in the village where George’s folks come from, the thing at this time of year was snails.”

“Snails.”

“Yeah. You’d wait for that first good storm of the season, just like this one”—she waved a knitting needle at the rumbling thunder outside—“and the whole village would drop what they were doing, and head out to the fields to gather snails. Kids, grandmothers, everybody. You’d try to get out there at dawn, or before dawn, ‘cause that’s when the snails came out.”

“And then what?”

“Cook ‘em and eat ‘em,” she said brightly. “Snails in every pot. One of the highlights of the year.”

“Sounds like a blast,” I said. But the more I thought about it, the nicer it actually seemed, in a weird sort of way. Why don’t people have traditions like that anymore?

“What about...your people?” I asked, encouraged by the randomness of the conversation. “What kind of traditions did they have? Or...” As soon as I said it, I wished I hadn’t. Was this not the sort of thing you were supposed to ask?

But Mrs. R. just thought for a minute, and then spoke, without emotion. “To be honest with you, I didn’t really get a chance to find out. My dad took off when I was a baby. My mom died when I was five. Then I bounced around between aunts and cousins for a while, but they were all just poor and busy and trying to get by. I never learned where I came from, really, or...what people did there.” She looked up. “What about you?”

“Me? I...I don’t know, it’s totally different, but...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I kind of feel the same way. Like I don’t know where I come from. I mean, we weren’t poor or anything, but...” Slow down, Paul. Try again. “I feel like I don’t really have a story to tell. At least, not a good one—not a story that makes sense. Does that...”

“Absolutely,” she said, as if it were the most logical thing she’d ever heard. “But you know what? I think that’s just the way of the world. This world, anyway.”

Just then, the snarl of Laila’s Lexus joined the rumble of the thunder, and Mrs. R. got up to take my plate. I wanted her to keep talking about whatever she was talking about. But all she said, as she moved off toward the kitchen, was: “Funny thing about stories. They don’t write themselves anymore.”

Laila was soaked. She stood there in the doorway for a minute, arms spread helplessly, hair matted to her face. “Towel?” she said finally.

“Uh. One second.” I ran down the hall to the guest bathroom, grabbed one of the pink towels from the rack, and watched as she dried off. She smelled like rain. I didn’t know that was possible.

“That’s a good look for you,” I said, as she brushed the leaves out of her hair. She frowned and threw the wadded-up towel at my face.

“What were you and Mom talking about? Me, probably.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. We’ve got more interesting stuff to talk about than you.”

“Good for you. I bet you a million dollars she was telling you about the snails. Come on, I need to change.”

This is typical. We bicker. On my part, it's a defense against all the things that I really want to say. On her part...well, I have no clue.

"Where's the ferret?" I said uneasily as we walked down the hall, under the watchful eyes of the Rahbani ancestors. Oscar has learned to scare the crap out of me on a regular basis.

"Probably waiting to jump out at you when you least expect it," Laila giggled. "It's because he likes you, you know."

"I'd hate to see him when he decides he doesn't. Wow, I love what you've done with the room." As bare and white as ever. One of my running jokes.

"Thanks. OK, turn around and entertain yourself for a minute. Changing."

"Wow, that did *not* sound right," I pointed out. A stupid thing to say, but now, with a girl stripping behind me and my throat suddenly filling up with phlegm, my defenses had gone into overdrive. I fumbled with my backpack, managing to drop it twice on the floor.

"Done," she said, after what seemed like an hour, and I turned around.

One thing I've learned by now, at this ripe old age of sixteen, is that there are times in life when something more powerful than yourself takes over. I don't know how to describe it, except that it's like there are two people, really, in every body. There's the one that walks around every day, the one that everyone sees, or thinks they see, but it's really just a sham—a flimsy thing, made of words, all patched together and constantly falling apart. Then there's the one inside it, like a tiny ball of light, that shines through only a few times in your life, maybe. And every time it does, it threatens to burn your whole world to a crisp.

This was not the first time it had happened with Laila. But this time it hit me like a thunderbolt. I just stood there, looking at her in her thin white T-shirt and her running shorts, putting her hair up. She seemed tiny, and delicate, and at the same time she filled up the room.

Her skin glowed, like she had a ball of light inside too, and it was fighting to get out. I looked at the curve of her neck where it met her shoulder. I wondered what it would be like to put my hand there.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.” I swallowed.

“What?” She took a step toward me, letting one hand drop. “You have these moments, and I never know what they mean.”

I shook my head. My voice sounded small. “I was just...thinking about stuff. Sometimes...”

“Yeah?” She waited, her eyes big. Big enough to fall in.

For about three seconds there was a war inside my chest, an epic, all-out war, the kind of war that songs are sung about a thousand years later. Then it was over, and I could only grimace and say: “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

She could have backed off then. Or she could have gotten mad; I wouldn’t have blamed her. There must be a million parallel universes where we both just moved on and started working on the musical. But in this one, her face went soft. She took another step towards me. She let her hair fall, and reached out a hand, and said something about how I had a leaf on my shirt, but my hand came up and took hers before she could get there. And my other hand reached out and touched her hair, just touched it, and it was trembling, my hand was, and she blinked and looked up at me with a look that I knew somehow was full of fear and relief.

And then neither of us knew what to do. “Do you want to sit down?” she said quietly. So we sat, clumsily, on the floor. I laughed for some reason, and she laughed back, and then my

laugh started to turn into something else, a cry, so I put my hand to my face, and she brushed it aside and took my head in her hands and kissed me, a simple kiss, on the mouth.

I thought I should say something, but it was impossible with all the light pouring out of me.

Laila lay down on the floor and curled up her knees. I lay down too. She pushed her hair aside, exposing her neck. I reached out and traced my finger down its length, feeling, for a moment, like one of those tiny people you see in pictures on the soft endless dunes in the Sahara.

She closed her eyes and smiled. I thought for a second she was actually going to sleep. For some reason that didn't seem so strange, here, with the rain outside and the house quiet and still, with everything suddenly in its right place, in this one giant moment full of light.

Maybe we should have gone to sleep. But I was there next to her, and I was smelling her smell for the first time, the real one, beneath all the conditioner and body wash and whatever girls wear, and down beneath all that she smelled like good things, like earth, or a forest. So I touched her again, on the shoulder, and then down along the side, and I found that there was nothing under her shirt. Then I touched her hip, barely touching it like a thing made of glass, and followed it up, my fingers bringing her shirt with them. And then I saw it.

There was a scar on her stomach, a gash from her bellybutton down, about as wide as my finger and perfectly straight. Because the light in the room was still on, I got a good look at it in the half-second before she realized. The skin in the middle looked pink and thin.

I must have hesitated, because suddenly her eyes snapped open and she sat up, pulling at her hair, looking flustered.

"Sorry, I..." I tried, but she was shaking her head rhythmically. She stood up and turned to the window.

“Stupid,” she said after a long silence. “Stupid. Stupid.” She put her face in her hands.
“Just go. It’ll be so much easier.”

I scrambled to my feet and stepped toward her, reaching out, searching for words. But when I touched her shoulder, she whirled and stared at me with her eyes blazing. With her hair still wild, she looked like an animal, cornered.

“Go.”

So I went.

No way I was going to school today. The mirror confirmed it: eyes bloodshot, hair everywhere, dignity in shambles.

Instead, I just drove. Got on 63 and headed out, out of town, out of reach, out of the known world. Rolled down the window so that north wind would blast me in the face. Smoked like a train. The risk of Camille smelling me out suddenly seemed pretty trivial.

But 63 got old quick, so I decided on a different approach: random turns, left, then right, then left, then right again. I turned the radio all the way up. “Twinsday” on X105, meaning pairs of songs on a theme. “Life is a Highway” came on, followed by “Highway to Hell.”

Soon the houses and Kwik Stops thinned out, and pastures and pecan groves started to fill the gaps. The roads petered out, from two-lane blacktop to potholed concrete to gravel. I had no idea where I was anymore, and didn’t especially care.

Then I noticed I was climbing, and the snaggleteeth of the downtown skyline started to lurch in and out of view in my mirrors, and the road stopped dead at a rusted gate. No point in stopping now. I got out, slithered under the chain-link, and hiked uphill with my jacket pulled up against the wind.

At the top, I laughed in spite of myself. The dumb left-right game had led me straight to what had to be the strangest place in three counties. It was some kind of mine—sand, I guessed: the most precious thing in this God-forsaken state. The whole hilltop had been stripped bare and eaten away, leaving deep Martian gashes of red and orange. Old backhoes stood around, frozen in place, like dinosaurs stunned by a comet.

Towering above it all was a cell-phone tower dressed up as a tree. A huge, ugly tree, with a tapering metal-paneled trunk and a few plastic sprigs of green at the top. Who did they

think they were fooling? I walked around back and found a door in the trunk. Incredibly, it was open.

The ladder inside had fifty-seven rungs. It was dark, and they were slippery. On any other day, I wouldn't have dreamed of climbing the thing. But today I was fearless.

At the top, another door, with the barest scrap of a platform inside. I braced myself and pushed it open. The wind rushed in, stinging my eyes and forcing a cough. But I could see everything.

Everything: the miniature gray towers of downtown, shrouded in haze; the arrow-straight slash of Veterans Highway; the fat brown coils of the Tallahoma, looping around the city like a snake in ambush; the flat chess-board of cotton land to the south; the crumpling of the horizon with more hills, and more cell-phone towers, to the east.

I shuffled myself onto the platform, wrapped an arm around the safety bar by the door, and lowered my legs outside, ever so slowly. The wind whipped at my jeans. I swallowed.

This was insane. On the other hand, I was probably the tallest human being for miles, maybe tens of miles, in any direction. It felt good, seeing the world so small. So I sat there for an hour and a half and thought.

I tried to think about anything but Laila. Of course, that was hopeless.

They talk about the five stages of grief. I forget what they are, but the idea is that you go through each different feeling in order, and then you're done. In my opinion, this is a load of crap. Or maybe that's how it works for other people, and I'm just a freak. But in my freak brain, it seems like all the feelings just pile on at once and duke it out until they're all too bloody to keep going.

Denial—that's one. Maybe she's just confused. Or scared. She *wants* to be with me, but doesn't know how. I should just try harder, be more aggressive.

Despair. Is that one? Confused, scared—bullshit. You just got rejected, loser. A moment of weakness, and now it's over, and you're left humiliated. You'll never be able to show your face again—especially not to her.

Anger. Definitely one of the five. Who does she think she is, leading me on like that, *kissing* me for Christ's sake, and then stomping on me like a cockroach? And with no warning, no explanation, no...*reason*. You don't need a girl like that.

A word came up, a nasty, slimy word, from the depths: Bitch. It felt good, and evil, to say. I said it out loud, into the wind. Bitch.

And with that, all sorts of things started coming to the surface. All the things I hated about her, but never allowed myself to see. I hated the way her voice changed when she talked to her black friends. I hated the way she pretended to know everything about music, like her stupid choir had taught her all these secrets that I'd never learn. I hated the way she shut herself off the second she started to feel anything. I hated the dark hairs on her arms. I hated her family's retarded made-up holidays.

Most of all, I hated her for making me feel again, for shattering all the ice I'd worked so hard to build. For fooling me into thinking I could go back to the way I was.

And then, without warning, a different memory came bubbling up.

Mom. In her red-plaid old-lady nightgown, arms crossed, just inside the front door. Eleven fifteen on a Friday night. I shut the door and stood there, waiting for it.

"Well?" was all she said.

"It's ten minutes, Mom. Give me a break."

“Fifteen minutes. Last time it was twenty.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I got held up.” I headed toward the kitchen. But she grabbed my arm and thrust her face into mine, her jaw clenched.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No,” I said, too loud, twisting my arm to get loose. “Jesus, Mom, why do you always think that?”

That got her started. “What am I supposed to think? You spend all night out with those...whoever the hell they are—I don’t even know because they won’t show their faces. You can’t get yourself home on time. This one *simple rule* and you can’t follow it. It’s no wonder your grades are in the toilet. When are you going to act like a grown-up?”

“Whenever you start trusting me? Whenever you stop treating me like a freaking criminal? Guess what, Mom? Nobody else has an eleven o’clock curfew. Not one single person I know.”

“Because their parents don’t give a God damn. They don’t care enough to stand here waiting for them to get home. Wondering what’s happened to their kid this time. Arrested? Killed? Lying in a gutter some—”

“What the hell are you talking about? How am I supposed to get myself killed between eleven and eleven fifteen? Are you fucking insane? Can we even have a rational—”

“Don’t you *dare*...” she said slowly. “Don’t you *dare* talk to me like that.”

We stood there in silence for a long minute, Mom rubbing her arms in a violent motion, up and down, up and down.

“Someday...” she said finally, and her voice trailed off. “Maybe you’ll know what it’s like to have an only child. To have so much hope and...disappointment, wrapped up in that one place. But for your sake, I hope not.”

I stared at the wall, letting her words seethe there in the space between us.

“Well,” I said then, quiet and hot. “I hope you never know what it feels like to be someone’s biggest failure.”

That was six weeks before she died. Before I made her die.

In my fake tree, at the top of the world, I cried and cried.

*Circe infected it before that hour,
polluting it with monster-breeding drugs.
She sprinkled juices over it, distilled
from an obnoxious root, and thrice times nine
she muttered over it with magic lips,
her most mysterious charm involved in words
of strangest import and of dubious thought.
Scylla came there and waded in waist deep,
then saw her loins defiled with barking shapes.
Believing they could be no part of her,
she ran and tried to drive them back and feared
the boisterous canine jaws. But what she fled
she carried with her. And, feeling for her thighs,
her legs, and feet, she found Cerberian jaws
instead. She rises from a rage of dogs,
and shaggy backs encircle her shortened loins.
The lover Glaucus wept. He fled the embrace
of Circe and her hostile power of herbs
and magic spells. But Scylla did not leave
the place of her disaster; and, as soon
as she had opportunity, for hate
of Circe, she robbed Ulysses of his men.
She would have wrecked the Trojan ships, if she
had not been changed beforehand to a rock
which to this day reveals a craggy rim.
And even the rock awakes the sailors' dread.*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV

Thursday

Today, again, school seemed impossible. But on the second day they call home. So I had two choices: suffer the humiliation of showing my face in public, or suffer being eaten alive by Camille. By eight AM, enough reason had set in to choose the former.

I went in with one mission: avoiding Laila at all costs. Thinking about her was painful enough. Seeing her—or, worse, speaking to her—would have been catastrophic. Like falling into boiling lava. But as it turned out, I was so intent on this that I failed to account for May Tingle.

She pounced in the east-wing stairwell after first period.

“Paul! Paul Paul Paul,” she babbled. “We sure missed you at rehearsal yesterday. It was our first run-through, you know? Gee, it would have been great to have you there. Is everything OK?” At moments like these, May talked so fast that her words almost disappeared into each other. In fact, this was one of her greatest social weapons: talking so fast that she just wore down her opponents.

“Fine,” I said quickly, shifting my weight to my escape foot.

She kept looking at me. Expecting something more.

“I was sick.”

“Oh. Uh-oh!” She took a step back and waved theatrically at the imaginary germs between us. “Just kidding. I’m sure you’re not contagious! But I hope you’re feeling better? We need you feeling *one hundred percent*. Listen, did y’all get together on Tuesday and finish up those two pieces?”

I felt my face twitch. “Uh. Yeah, we’re...almost there.” I inched toward the stairs. There was a pause, as the stream of kids quickened around us. The bell was about to ring. But May was staring at me, with her head cocked at a slight angle, and I thought I saw something flash behind her eyes.

“Did something happen? Something with Laila?”

“What are you talking about?”

“She wasn’t here yesterday either. It’s OK, I know there’s”—she leaned in conspiratorially—“*stuff* going on between you two. You can talk to me about it? Was there a...problem?”

By now, I would almost rather have been talking to Laila herself than having this conversation with May.

“If there was...*stuff* going on,” I said carefully, “it would be none of your business. OK? I’m going to class now.”

“Wait. I’m sorry. It’s totally, *totally* none of my business. But...” She hesitated for a split-second, and that thing flashed behind her eyes again, like a cloud.

“Just say whatever you’re going to say.”

“Maybe...” she started, in a stage whisper. “Maybe it’s best for you if things don’t work out? With...*her*, I mean. You know?”

At this point, indignation started taking over from denial. “What the hell do you mean, *with her*? What do you know about anything?”

May folded her hands, as if trying to marshal some deep Christian restraint. “All I mean is, with everything that she’s...*been through*...maybe you don’t want to get caught up in all that. You know?”

“No,” I said emphatically. “No. I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me, May.”

The bell rang. We were alone now in the stairwell. May being late to class was usually inconceivable. But she just stood there, staring, her expression now verging on pity.

“You really don’t know.”

“No.”

“About Laila. And where she was last year.”

“I kind of had my own shit to deal with.”

“Well.” She folded her hands again. “I can’t say I know the whole story. But...” And she lowered her voice further, barely audible now, despite the fact that there was nobody around for miles.

“Laila was gone from school all last year because she was *pregnant*.” May thrust the last word away from her, like a disgusting thing.

I stood there blinking. An intercom crackled somewhere.

“And...OK, I really shouldn’t even be telling you this, but I think it’s best if you know. What I heard was that she got pregnant by someone...*older*. Like, a married man.”

May looked like she was going to cry. I just stood there, blinking. Finally, after a minute, the words started swarming in my brain again.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said, shaking my head. “It doesn’t make any sense. What happened to the baby?”

She looked at me, then, like a parent at a child. “What do you *think* happened to the baby? What *always* happens when girls...when girls like that get pregnant. You’re irresponsible and you get yourself into a situation, and then you take the easy way out.” Her voice was rising now, full of righteousness.

A sick feeling was starting to wash over me, sucking at my head, making the stairwell spin.

“You’re sure about all this.”

May hesitated again. Then she said, firmly, “Yes. Paul, she is not a good person. I know you are better than that. I care about you and I don’t want you to get caught up in that kind of...that kind of stuff.” With that, she touched my hand lightly, and turned and went up the stairs.

I sat down, the waves crashing around me.

Friday

I'm done. There's nothing more to say. And the world's got too many words in it already.

I'd love to burn this thing, but I think I'll bury it instead, bury it in the back yard in something indestructible like Tupperware. Or I'll cram it into a bottle, a *fiasco*, and float it down the Tallahoma. That way, maybe someone will find it in ten thousand years, some future-Paul with cold-fusion jet boots and a virtual-reality girlfriend, and he'll read about how screwed up the world used to be. Anything this screwed up needs plenty of documentation.

So I'll leave you with this conversation. Call it Exhibit A.

Friday evening. Dinnertime. A covered platter sits ominously on the dining-room table. DAVE sits watching the news, while CAMILLE paces around the table, fussing with silverware. Finally, PAUL walks in the front door. He has been out with Sean Carroll, who stole some dope from his older brother. Paul is high as a kite.

C. About time! Where on earth have you been?

P. *(Puts his backpack down in the middle of the floor.)* Where on Earth...that is a good question.

C. Dave, it's dinnertime. Dave! Paul, please get your father. What do I have to do to make dinner happen around here?

P. *(Without moving.)* DAVE!

D. Jesus! All right already, I'm coming!

P. You can call me Paul.

D. What?

P. I mean, don't bother with the whole Jesus thing.

D. Did I miss something? Honey, I'll be right there, I gotta wash my hands.

C. *(Sighs.)* How was your day, Paul?

P. Um...it was OK. Miss T threw a stapler at the intercom.

C. Why would she do that? Here, let's go ahead and start. I don't want the seitan to get cold.

What would you like to drink?

P. Do you really want to know?

C. What you want to drink?

P. No. Do you really want to know why Miss T threw the stapler? Or were you just saying that?

Because you asked, and then you kept talking about something else.

(Pause.)

C. OK. Why did she throw the stapler?

P. Because she was mad at the front office. They kept breaking in with stupid announcements when she was trying to get us to pay attention. She nailed that thing, too. What did you say this was?

C. The dish? Seitan. Seitan scaloppine. It's a meat substitute.

P. You said "seitan."

C. Seitan.

P. We're eating seitan.

C. Yes. It's a meat substitute.

P. Well, hell.

C. Paul, are you all right? And where is...oh, here he is. David, sit down, for heaven's sake.

What's going on with Paul? He doesn't seem like himself today.

P. You could ask me. I'm actually right here.

D. Girl trouble. I'd know that look anywhere.

P. Yes. Girl trouble. Too many girls. Not enough time.

C. I wonder if he's feeling all right. He looks a little pale.

P. You would too if you were facing seitan for the first time.

C. OK, I get it now. Very funny. Now, shall we eat before it gets cold? And by the way, I was hoping to talk about our plans for the big *college trip*! I was just checking on some airfares before dinner.

D. Buy your tickets on a Wednesday. Walt Baxter says that's when you get the best deals.

C. I was thinking that February looks pretty good. We could take Paul out of school for—

P. Month of Mud.

C. What's that?

P. That's what the Anglo-Saxons called it. Before the Roman calendar. February was the Month of Mud.

C. Well, that is fascinating.

D. Very interesting.

C. So here's what I'm thinking. Paul has Presidents' Day off. That's a Monday. So, let's say we leave right after school on Thursday. That way he'll only miss a day of school, and we'll have three full days.

P. I want to talk about my girl trouble.

C. Oh. Well, that's great. Wonderful. Why don't you tell us all about it.

D. I knew it was girl trouble.

P. The trouble is girls. Girls are the trouble.

D. I'm with you there, bud.

C. Was it one girl in particular? Was it that lovely...mixed girl? What was her name again?

P. Mixed. She sure is.

C. Is that not what you're supposed to say?

D. No, I don't think so. Biracial, I think.

C. I can't keep up. How are you supposed to keep up? Paul, what happened—did she break up with you?

D. Since when were they dating?

C. David. Really. You should pay more attention.

P. The whole thing was mixed. Mixed up.

C. I know exactly how you feel.

P. You do? That's amazing.

C. Let me tell you about this guy I dated in high school. Teddy Bostwick. Oh, was he dreamy. Quarterback of the football team.

D. Probably a real meathead.

C. Hello, Mr. Jealous! Actually, I'll have you know that Teddy was very bright. We did Model UN together, and we went all the way to Washington, D.C. He was Tonga. I was...what was I? Rhodesia.

P. That's not even a real country.

C. It used to be. Anyway, he asked me to sign a treaty with him. Tonga and Rhodesia.

And...well, let me just say that it was a very...intimate treaty.

P. Hot.

D. All right, that's about enough of that.

C. I was on cloud nine. I thought we were going to get married and have ten little quarterback Model UN babies. But the night after we got back to school—the *night after!*—I saw him at the drive-in, that creep, with the top down on his Camaro. And Josie what's-her-name in the front seat. Creep!

P. What a creep.

D. So what ever happened to him? You ever look him up on that...website, that Friendsite or whatever?

C. *Yes*. And you know what? He ran for mayor and won. In our hometown. As a Democrat. Naturally.

D. So he was a meathead.

C. Well, I should have known. He certainly was liberal with his treaties.

D. Do you know what I just love about Democrats?

P. I know. The fact that they're secretly undead. That they take off their masks at night and feast on human flesh.

D. Very funny. No. It just came to me this morning, while I was listening to Jim Dangerfield.

What I love is that they whine and whine about greed, about the greed of all these big, evil corporations and all these big, evil lobbyists. And all the while they're gobbling up our tax dollars to line their own greedy little pockets.

C. That is so true.

P. It came to you because Jim Dangerfield said it.

D. Excuse me?

P. That's the reason that it came to you this morning. Because you heard it on the radio.

C. Paul.

D. It's true no matter who says it.

C. Can we get back to the college trip now? I took the liberty of putting together a list of a few schools that we should target. Obviously, we're limited a bit by time, so they have to be pretty close together. Now, I started with Edmonds, because I know Paul was interested in them.

P. I was?

C. Sure. Remember? You said you liked the campus, when you were there for that soccer camp.

P. I liked the cafeteria. They had soft serve ice cream.

C. Well, we have to start somewhere. Now, if we're going to Edmonds, we might as well see Beechford while we're in the area.

D. Good school. Quality school.

C. Isn't that where what's-his-name went? The man from TV.

D. What are you planning to study?

P. Me?

D. No. The other aspiring college student in the room. Yes, you.

P. Dance, I think. Modern dance. Or textiles.

C. You know, if you're not going to be serious, maybe we should talk about this some other time.

P. How do you know I'm not serious?

D. Dance?

P. OK. Why don't you just tell me what I want to study in college?

C. I always thought you'd be a great lawyer, like your father.

P. That was a joke. I didn't actually want you to tell me.

C. You've always been good at arguing. I mean that as a compliment. It's a real gift.

D. Stuart Cope says that the bottom's gonna drop out of the job market for lawyers. Give it five, ten years, with the economy and all. Might be bad timing for Paul.

C. Well, I think in the end, he'll need to just follow his heart.

D. Better follow the money while he's at it. Hard times coming.

C. Money can't buy everything.

D. Sure makes things easier.

P. Robots.

C. Sorry?

D. Now, there's an interesting field. Lot of growth there. I saw something on the news just the other day, about how in ten, fifteen years we're all going to have robots cleaning our houses, running our errands—

P. No. I mean, that's what you are. It just hit me. Robots.

C. What are you talking about?

P. People feed you programs. The media. The government. 1's and 0's. Do this. Say that. And you just spit out the results.

C. That's not a very nice thing to say.

P. It's OK, it's not just you. It's grownups. And you're never going to change. You can't. Not until someone feeds you a different program.

C. That's not true at all. David, will you talk to him? I'm going to wash up. All I wanted was to have a nice family dinner. I guess that's too much to ask. (*Exit CAMILLE.*)

P. I'm gonna go stare at my walls for a while. (*Gets up, unsteadily.*)

D. Paul.

P. Dave.

D. Listen. I'm not going to pretend I can stop you from doing drugs.

P. Drugs? Never heard of them.

D. Don't think I'm stupid. Just don't bring that crap around here. All right? Camille will kill you if I don't.

P. (*Robotically.*) I will not bring that crap around here.

D. Go take a shower or something. You look horrible.

P. Aye aye, sir.

(*Exit PAUL and DAVE.*)

Winter

*The wrath of Jove was not content with powers
that emanate from Heaven; he brought to aid
his azure brother, lord of flowing waves,
who called upon the Rivers and the Streams:
and when they entered his impearled abode,
Neptune, their ancient ruler, thus began;
“A long appeal is needless; pour ye forth
in rage of power; open up your fountains;
rush over obstacles; let every stream
pour forth in boundless floods.” Thus he commands,
and none dissenting all the River Gods
return, and opening up their fountains roll
tumultuous to the deep unfruitful sea.*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I

Wednesday

Like I said, in the old days they called February the Month of Mud. They weren't kidding.

There's mud everywhere. Spattered on every wall and smeared over every surface. Mud on my car. Mud *in* my car. Mud under my fingernails. Mud on my shoes. Glaciers of mud oozing down our driveway. Mountains of mud growing in the gutters. Drunk figure-eights of mud on the soccer field, where someone had a little too much fun in a four-wheeler. Zigzag trails of mud down the Bork halls, where kids tracked it in from the mud-caked parking lot. Mud without end, amen.

I'm no weatherman, but something's gone screwy when you go a whole year waiting for the slightest drop of rain, and then three months where it won't stop. Three months where the only suspense every morning is whether it'll be spitting, sprinkling, drizzling, misting, showering, pelting, pouring, or drenching. Three months where you run out of rain-words, and invent enough new ones to put an Eskimo to shame. Three months where you wait for the blue sky to peek out every two weeks or so, just to tease you into thinking it's coming back, only to be swallowed up by the next round of gray. Three months where you learn to pick out everyone you know by the color of their raincoats. As Dave likes to say, what's next? Locusts? Boils?

And they say it's not going to stop. They say there's a monster storm moving in tomorrow, the same one that spun off six tornadoes and flattened a bunch of trailer parks yesterday, in Waco or Wichita Falls or somewhere. They say the river's going to rise big-time, higher than anyone can remember. And by "they" I mean Barbie Dinkins on Channel Four, who

could be making the whole damn thing up for all we know. Actually, if she really was making it all up, I think she'd have to be my new hero.

Anyway, who cares? I'm getting out of here, and going to look at Colleges! We leave tomorrow evening, and from listening to Camille, you'd think we were off to Disney World with a stop at Mardi Gras.

The implications of this trip are starting to sink in. Just sharing a house with these two people is a Discovery Channel-worthy feat of survival. How am I going to make it through four days with them, *alone*?

We held auditions this afternoon.

Yeah, it's a little late in the game for that. But we didn't even know we had to, until our "producer," Miss Tutwiler, who hadn't done an ever-loving thing besides unlocking her classroom for us at 3:45 twice a week, suddenly came forward with this long-lost Bork Rule about how any school-sponsored production must be open to the student body at large. So instead of the highly efficient method we *had* been using—namely, letting May Tingle ambush people in the hallway and hound them till they agreed to join us—now we had to listen to over-the-top Hamlet monologues and tone-deaf *Cats* renditions from every band geek and drama queen at Bork. You can imagine our excitement.

"It's just a formality, just a hoop you have to jump through," said Miss T in a weary voice, once we ganged up and pressed her on it. "Sit and listen for a couple of hours, and then toss a few bit parts to the most desperate ones. Then it's done."

Easy for *her* to say—she didn't have to actually sit and listen. That job fell to May, as Director, TG2, as Assistant Director, and yours truly, as the sole Musical Director ever since Laila Rahbani went AWOL. So we lined up on one side of a table, waited a few minutes for the line to build up in the hallway, and let the first victim in at 4.

It was a wretched little freshman with braces, smudged, thick-lensed glasses, and a backpack that barely fit through the door. He stepped a few inches inside the room, folded his hands, and waited.

"Name, please!" barked TG2.

"Um," said the freshman. "Hubert. Hubert Head."

Pause. "Really?"

He glanced up with a frightened look.

“OK, Hubert Head. Here’s how this is going to go. You’re going to read or sing whatever you brought. Then we’re going to ask you to read something that we’ve prepared for you. If we like what we hear, we’ll decide where to put you, and we’ll post our decision with the rest of them, outside the library tomorrow morning.”

“OK.”

“OK. What do you have for us, Hubert Head?”

He didn’t say a word of introduction, or warning. He didn’t even put his backpack down, even though it forced him to hunch over, arms dangling, like some kind of ape. Instead he just squinched his eyes shut and started emitting a faint, high-pitched, wavering hum. He sounded like that wizened old imam from Miss Stephanopoulos’ *Mysteries of the Middle East* video, issuing his call to prayer. Without a doubt one of the top seven or eight strangest noises I’ve ever heard.

Then, without warning, it stopped, and a flood of squeaking syllables followed:

“...kla-ho-ma where the wind comes swee-ping down the plain...”

And that was it. He looked up at us, wide-eyed. We shifted in our seats. Finally May recognized the problem.

“And the wavin’ wheat...?” she warbled, raising her eyebrows helpfully. *“Can sure smell sweet?”*

But Hubert Head’s brain had evidently stopped. He just stood there, the sweat collecting on his brow.

“Thanks so much, Hubert?” said May. “How about you go take a breather, maybe drink some water or something? Come on back when you’re ready to finish up. How’s that?” And,

with a look of stupendous relief, Hubert Head pushed up his glasses on his nose and scuttled out the door.

“Well, it can’t get any worse,” muttered TG2. “Next!”

Two girls in cheerleader outfits came flouncing into the room.

“Um, we’re really only taking one at a time?” said May. But one of the girls raised a manicured finger to her lips, while the other blew a giant bubble with her gum. They took up positions on either side of the doorway, and then, after a moment of apparent confusion, giggled and switched positions. They stood there solemnly for a minute, and then the girl on the left produced a roll of paper, which the girl on the right proceeded to unroll. It was a sign made with a lavender-colored Sharpie and covered with glittery heart stickers. The sign read “KRISTY 4,” and then “PRESIDENT” was crossed out and “SCHOOL MUSICAL!!” was crammed in underneath.

While we were processing this, the first girl reached around the corner, brought out a tiny pink CD player, and pushed play. A twangy guitar started up. And then a third girl, who I guessed was Kristy herself, came running around the corner, ran headfirst into the unrolled sign, and crashed to the floor.

A torrent of giggles. “Y’all said that would *work!*” squealed Kristy, and as the other two squealed in response, she suddenly remembered her script, leapt to her feet, picked up an imaginary microphone, and started singing and shaking her hips along with Shania Twain. After a minute Shania ended abruptly and Whitney Houston took her place, and by now Kristy’s helpers had collected themselves and were shaking pom-poms in a semi-coordinated fashion, while Kristy belted out “I Will Always Love You” in a voice loud enough to raise the dead.

“Wow,” said May, and since Kristy didn’t show any signs of letting up: “Wow! Thanks! THANKS! Wow!”

Kristy nodded to her assistants, who stopped the music. All three girls clapped in unison, like trained seals.

“Well!” said May. “I love that...that *spirit*!”

“Kristy,” said TG2. Kristy nodded brightly. “Uh...just a question. What sort of part do you see for yourself?”

“Oh my God,” said Kristy, smacking her gum. “Can I be Sandy? I would *die*. Ever since I was a little girl I used to—”

“Whoa,” TG2 interrupted. “Sandy?”

“Hello?” said Kristy, craning her head forward. “Sandy? From *Grease*?”

“Right,” I said. “What about a part from the *Metamorphoses*, since that’s the play we’re actually putting on? Just a thought.”

“Meta-whaaaa?”

“*Metamorphoses*. The word on that big sign right outside the door. That’s the play we’re putting on.”

“Uh-uh. Y’all are *not*.”

“Uh...pretty sure we are, actually. Speaking as the Musical Director, I mean.”

“Yeah, pretty sure,” said TG2.

Kristy put her hands on her hips and spun around to face her two underlings, who had gone red in the face and were snuffling into their hands. “Oh my God, you *whores*!” she squealed, as they burst into laughter and ran out of the room, leaving the sign and the pink CD player on the floor.

TG2 was the first to break the silence.

“Next time I try to tell you that it can’t get any worse? Just punch me.”

After that, things settled down a bit. A long-haired kid named Ubaldo brought his electric guitar and amp in and did a Spanish version of “Purple Haze.” May Tingle’s little brother August performed “Music of the Night” from *Phantom*, complete with a choreographed dance routine. A cute sophomore in pigtails came in and said she had written a song for “the love of her life, Paul Fisher,” but that was as far as she got before Dennis Skelton started snickering around the corner and killed the prank. And then, unexpectedly, Kristy reappeared.

“OK!” she said, smacking her gum. “I’m ready, like, for real this time. But y’all are gonna have to explain to me what you’re doin’.”

“Well,” said May uncertainly, “we’re doing a musical that we’ve adapted from a book called *Metamorphoses*—”

“Whoa! Hello? How ‘bout just *Morph*?” said Kristy. “That would save people like *so* much trouble.”

TG2 sighed. “We’ll take that into consideration. Anyway, it’s a collection of Greek and Roman myths that—”

“Y’all mean, like, Hercules and all them.”

“Yeah. Well, I mean, he’s not actually in here, but that’s the idea.”

“What would y’all do that for?”

This was a stumper. Everyone looked at me for some reason.

“Why not?” I said.

“But why?” said Kristy, cocking her head to one side.

“I don’t know...because people have been telling these stories for, like, thousands of years? Isn’t that a good enough reason?”

“But...like...dragons, and fairies, and stuff? What does that have to do with us?”

“Yeah, there aren’t any dragons or...OK, whatever. Look, it’s not about that. It’s about the stuff below the surface. There are lessons in there about...everything, you know, love, bravery, anger, uh, betrayal...uh, you know...love...”

“You said that,” pointed out TG2.

“Whatever. The point is, the stories just give you something to hold onto. I mean, that’s what stories are for, right?” Hadn’t Laila said something like that to me once, in another lifetime?

Kristy stood there for a moment with her head cocked, smacking her gum. Then her face lit up, and she said:

“Like the Bible!”

“*Totally*,” said May happily.

I was about to say no, not at all, but then I couldn’t think of a great reason why not, so I just said: “Maybe, yeah. Sure. Like the Bible.”

“*Awe-some!*” squealed Kristy, and did her seal-clap again. “OK, hey, can I be Mrs. Hercules?”

Thursday

So just now I'm walking down the east-wing hall from sixth to seventh period, humming under my breath and tapping my palm with a pencil, trying to work out one of the stickier parts of Apollo's song to Daphne, when the door to the girls' bathroom opens in my face and a girl steps out with her head down and nearly runs me over, and despite the fact that there are about seven hundred other girls at this school, it of course turns out to be Laila.

"Oh. Sor—" she begins, and then she sees who I am, and looks dead at me with those teardrop eyes.

Here's the thing about Laila. It doesn't matter that I've hardly seen her in three months. It doesn't matter that I trained myself to stop having the dreams, the dreams about monstrous half-born babies, the dreams about drug-lord fathers coming to kill me in my sleep, even the dreams about just the softness of her mouth and the line of her hipbone under my fingers. It doesn't matter that I tracked down all those memories and wadded them all up and stuffed them down into some dark little corner of a sub-sub-basement of my brain. It wouldn't matter if I had sent them to Antarctica. Because she has those eyes. And that voice. And once you run into something like that, you can't just forget it. It becomes part of you. You grow around it.

"Hi," I said, trying to suck all the emotion out of the word first.

"Hi."

"You been doing OK?"

"Fine."

"We, uh...missed you."

"Who?"

“Me. May. The musical.”

“I did my part. I finished all the lyrics.”

“Yeah, and then kind of disappeared.”

“Yeah, well. Sorry.”

I was just trying to decide whether there was anywhere else this conversation could possibly go, when the door to the men’s room opened and someone stepped out. It was Mr. Brainerd. Laila started fumbling for something in her backpack. Mr. Brainerd stopped to keep from running us over, and then he looked at Laila, and then at me. Then he looked at Laila again, for what seemed like a long time. Laila fumbled around in her backpack. Mr. Brainerd looked back at me, with his mouth slightly open.

“Paul,” he said, as if he’d suddenly had a thought. “Are you...busy this afternoon? I’d love to meet with you about that Ovid paper. I know it’s been a while.”

“Kind of, yeah. Got to pack for my trip.”

“Cool.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Uh, how about Monday, then?” He seemed kind of flustered or something, which was weird coming from Dr. McHunk.

“We don’t have school on Monday,” I pointed out.

“Right!” He laughed awkwardly. “Tuesday, then. Are you free Tuesday afternoon?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great! Cool. See you then.” He slapped me on the shoulder and walked off. I turned around. Laila had disappeared.

How weird was that?

*The royal maid,
unwitting what she did, at length sat down
upon the bull's broad back. Then by degrees
the god moved from the land and from the shore,
and placed his feet, that seemed but shining hoofs,
in shallow water by the sandy merge;
and not a moment resting bore her thence,
across the surface of the Middle Sea,
while she affrighted gazed upon the shore—
so fast receding. And she held his horn
with her right hand, and, steadied by the left,
held on his ample back—and in the breeze
her waving garments fluttered as they went.*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II

The storm broke at dusk. First came the wind, wolf-howling through the backyard pines while I threw clothes into a suitcase. Then the thunder, the kind that you feel before you hear it, trembling in the floor and the walls like a train. Then the rain, fat, scattered drops at first, smacking against my window like they'd been spat out. And within ten minutes, just like that, it was on us, dark gray turned to purple-black, trees whirling in wild drunk circles, lightning flaring up the world like a strobe light, rain flinging itself in solid sheets against the house. And then the doorbell rang.

"What in the world?" called Camille from the next room, where she was on the computer checking on our flight. "Paul, can you get that, please?"

"Remember, we're out the door in thirty," yelled Dave from the bathroom.

I went to the door and opened it. And there she was. In a T-shirt, hugging herself, soaked, shaking. Fear and sadness pouring from her face.

A huge thunderclap went off right over our heads.

"What are you doing here?" I said, dazed. "How did you even know—here, what am I saying, come inside for God's sake. I'll get you something."

She didn't say anything, but when I brought her a towel and a blanket, she stepped back out onto the porch and waited for me to follow. We sat on the swing, getting wet. The wind flung bits of wreckage at us. Twigs, acorns, pinestraw. She put her feet up and hugged her knees. I waited.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, in a small, flat voice, staring at the ground.

"It's OK. I know. It's OK."

"No, you don't. You don't know." She shook her head.

“OK. Then maybe...maybe we can talk about it? Whatever you want. We can talk about it.” I had no idea what we were talking about. Another flash of lightning.

She took a breath. “There are a lot of things I should have told you. I should have told you at the beginning. Then you would have known to stay away.”

“I don’t care. I already know about...about where you were last year.”

She looked straight at me then, for the first time, a fierce look. “Really. What do you think you know?”

“I...well...” It was a hard thing to say. “That you were...pregnant.”

“Yeah? And?”

“And...I don’t know, that’s it. And you got it, you know, taken care of.”

“No,” she said, a half-moan, hugging her knees tighter, stuffing her face into the hollow between them.

I waited for her to explain, but she didn’t.

“No? What do you mean? Which part?”

“No, I didn’t get it *taken care of*. I sure as hell thought about it. But I couldn’t do it.”

Deep breath. “You don’t understand how hard it is. You don’t understand. Until it happens.”

I blinked. “So...” I wasn’t sure how far to push. “What...”

“So I had the baby,” she said, looking back at me. “I had the baby. He was a little boy. A little, tiny boy. Only he came at twenty-four weeks. That probably doesn’t mean anything to you. Why should it? You’re a normal teenager. You’re not supposed to know these things.”

I looked at my hands in my lap. “I guess that’s really early.”

“His eyes weren’t even open all the way,” she said, and she looked at me again, and her face started to crumple. “He couldn’t even see.” Now she started to cry. She hid her face

between her knees again. I reached out a hand, unsure of what to do with it, and put it on her shoulder.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” I said.

“Yes, I do.” Deep breath. “He came at twenty-four weeks and they said he wasn’t going to make it. His heart was slowing down and my body wasn’t moving fast enough. So they put me to sleep and cut me open.” She looked like a baby herself, curled up tight against the edge of the swing. More thunder, but way off now, off toward the river. I waited, looking at my hands.

“By the time I woke up he was gone,” she said. “Dead. My baby was dead.”

We sat there for a minute. The rain was steady now. “I’m really, really sorry,” I said, even though it felt like a small and useless thing to say. Then we sat a while longer. But there was another question there, eating me up, and finally I had to ask it.

“Is it OK if I ask whose...who...who the father was?”

She didn’t answer. Was she angry? Sad? Did those words even make sense? Or did people like Laila have other feelings, feelings that I couldn’t even imagine, too big and dark and complicated for words?

Then she said: “It doesn’t matter. It’s not important.” But she started shaking again, and I realized she was crying.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Yes, it does matter. That’s why I came here, to tell you. To warn you.”

“To *warn* me?”

Under the blanket, I could tell that she was clutching her legs so tight that it must have hurt.

“I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to—”

“You have to promise me something,” she said suddenly. “Swear on your fucking life that you won’t tell anyone. Swear it right now.”

“OK, OK, I promise. I swear. But why?”

She put her hands on top of her head now, rubbing it violently.

“Because. Because he said he’d hurt me, OK?”

“What the hell? Hurt you? Who was it? What did he do to you?”

“Nothing!” she said, and anger welled up in her voice. “Not a single fucking thing! It was me, it was my fault, I fucked up. I let him. I fucking asked for it. He said come to his house, and I said yes. He said let me help you with your homework, and I said yes. He said—God—” The crying came on strong now, gasping, making her body heave. “He said, *don’t you want to get more comfortable*, and I said yes. *Yes!* I fucking said it. Yes.”

My heart was beating itself against my chest now. Help her with her homework? Who would— What kind of— And then, suddenly, like a slot machine rattling to a stop, everything fell into place.

“Oh my God,” I said, my throat tight. A sudden urge to throw up. “It was him. It was him.” Nodding now.

“John,” she said into her knees, in a voice that seemed to come from the far side of a canyon. “*Call me John*, he said.”

There was no need to say it, but I had to get the words away from me.

“John Brainerd. Mr. Brainerd.”

The rain had died. The world dripped. We sat there in the dark, letting those words hover in the air between us.

“I’m going to kill him,” I said finally.

She buried her face again, tugging at her hair.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” I said, staring at her. “How are you going to let him get—”

“Stop! Stop it! You’re making it worse!” She was crying again. “It was my fault. *My* fault.”

“How can you *say* that?” I said, angry now. “The man is a...a...” I couldn’t think of any words that were bad enough. “Do your parents know?”

“Are you insane? You think he’d still be alive?”

I rubbed my hands together, trying to think straight, but there were a billion things all tangled up in my head. “So you came here because...”

“Because he saw us today, and he knows that there...that there’s something...between us...and—”

“And you think he’s going to say something, or do something about it, on Tuesday.”

“Yes. And you can’t go. Please. Please don’t go.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m going. I’m going to call the cops, or...or...”

Now she started crying harder than ever. She dropped her hands from her face and leaned against the chain of the swing, sobbing, helpless. So I reached out and pulled her towards me and wrapped my arms around her. We sat for a minute like that, and then she said, “I’m scared,” into my chest. So I held her tighter, and I felt like throwing up, and as the thoughts kept spinning around my head and the image, the horrible image, kept lurching up into my eyes, I said the only thing I could think of to say. I told her what my mom had never told me.

“It’s not your fault,” I told her. “It’s not your fault.” And I kept saying it, until she stopped shaking and the clouds broke open and the moon came up over the pine trees.

After that, how could I get on a plane?

But then, how could I do anything? How can you do anything at all, when you're a pile of rubble, the rubble left by an earthquake?

So I just watched myself walk Laila to her Lexus. I watched myself wipe her eyes with my sleeve and tell her, without any basis whatsoever, that everything was going to be OK. Then I watched myself watch her drive off. I watched myself climb into Dave's candy-apple Mustang, watched myself cold-shoulder Camille's questions all the way to the airport, and watched myself sit on the tarmac for an hour while the next storm cell swept through and spat more water at the drowned earth. Just waiting for the questions to stop spinning.

When they did start to settle, the first one, the one in front, was the hardest and the worst. And it was the one that I couldn't stop answering.

What happened that day?

Do I really want to know? No. And yes. It's like paging through an earthquake story for the body count, for the shock-and-horror quote from the witness survivor. Like clicking through the online gallery for the money shot, the one that says Graphic in red, with the corpses lined up along the rubble-strewn road. You want to see it, you have to see it, because the ugliest deaths cast a light on life, don't they? Because we can kid ourselves that we're more than just sacks of guts, more than just jars of a chemical soup, and we build all our things upon flimsy things on top of that desperate lie, and then the universe gets an itch and throws an earthquake at some wretched city of sticks and mud, or a demented pedophile at some sweet beautiful girl, and for a few minutes or a few days the trapdoor is flung open and all the horrible things that live underneath come scuttling out, and you can't turn away because not seeing, not knowing, is worse.

So I had to know, and since I couldn't, and never would, I had to fill it in myself. The after-school meeting. The glances, the soft words, the hand on the shoulder. The getting into the car, the seatbelts, the wondering. The laughter. The house: the table, the chairs, the drink, the drinks. The hand on the shoulder, again, and on the face. The questions, the hints, the encouragements. The thrill, and then the confusion, and then, finally, the horror, gaping and black.

I had to feel my own feelings, too: Anger. Disgust. But jealousy, too. And arousal. As much as I tried to deny it.

Why does she blame herself?

For a minute, I admit it, I blamed her too. I hated her for a minute, hated her for being weak, for smiling, for laughing, for doing whatever she did to help it happen. I hated her for doing with a monster what she wouldn't do with me. I did.

And then I remembered a conversation we had once, her propped up on her bed, me sprawled on the floor, the dust drifting in its sunlit galaxies over our heads.

It was one of the few times that she really opened up to me. She talked about a rough time she had gone through, a year or two earlier. Her best friend from middle school had moved out of town. Her dad was working all the time, and when he got home he was fighting with her mom about stupid stuff, and she felt lonely and sad and wasn't doing well in school. There was something about a guy, too, she mentioned in a vague way. She started losing weight, "because that was something I could control"—I remember her saying that.

At the time, I didn't think much of it. Obviously that was all over with, and now everything was fine. Now she had it all: friends, a great family, a sweet car, plenty of money,

and guys—well, one guy at least, a little scraggly and half-whacked and not exactly the best conversationalist, but maybe, hopefully, still worth something—draped all over her.

“So then what?” I asked. “How’d you get through it?”

She chewed on her fingernails for a while then, which she did whenever she was thinking hard. And here is what she said: “Eventually, everything came apart. And then I just had to put it back together.”

I didn’t really know what she meant. But now I do. Now I see that whatever she has, the happiness, the OK-ness, she earned the hard way. First she had stumbled and fallen, just like any of us could. The world spins too fast, and there are holes that will swallow you up, if you lose your balance. Or if the people who love you let you slip from their hands. She was lucky to have the chance to climb back out. Jesus, she was fifteen.

Why hasn’t she spoken up?

Because she’s scared of him. So what? Get the cops on his sorry ass. No matter how much she blames herself, it’s a crime to have sex with a minor, right? A felony, I’m pretty sure. Note to self: check on that later.

But maybe I don’t understand this either. Maybe there are fears that run deeper than reason. And what the hell do I know about speaking up anyway? Not like I’ve done much of it lately.

Where did Mr. Brainerd come from?

It feels wrong now to put the “Mr.” in front of his name, like doing that makes him legitimate, makes him a man. But what is he, if he’s not a man? Can you be two things at once, like the Minotaur, a man and a bull? Hell yes you can. I know a few things about that myself. So how different is he, really, from the rest of us? Maybe he fell into a hole too, somewhere

back down the road, and not one but two things climbed out. Mr. Brainerd the man, who really does care about his students, maybe, and about Latin, and really does think that Ovid is a genius, and that I'm the real deal. And Mr. Brainerd the monster, trailing him like a shadow, growing strong and fat there in the darkness of ignorance or denial or neglect or just the darkness of solitude, and finally, one day, taking the reins.

The second Laila told me her secret, I remembered that afternoon in his classroom, with the photographs and the Coors Light. I made me feel sick to remember it. But he didn't seem like a monster that afternoon. He just seemed weak, and sad.

Why did May Tingle lie to me?

Maybe she didn't. Maybe she really believed that Laila had gotten it "taken care of." Maybe that was the rumor, and May bought in. But since when does May spread rumors? And why would she go out of her way to spread it in my direction? Something else had to be going on there. Note to self: check on that too.

Now the rain was slacking again, and the plane sputtered to life and sped down the runway and lifted off, the ground falling away like a held breath. For a minute, before the clouds took us in and pushed us gently back out again into a bigger, quieter space, I saw it all there below us: the city on the edge of the black river, lights blinking and shuttling like a giant motherboard, its rhythm and order and logic hiding fears and madnesses that I couldn't even imagine. And then, up in the stars over the blanket of cloud, the last question, the big one, came.

What do I do now?

Friday

Two campus tours this morning, and honestly, I don't think I could tell you the difference. Maybe it was just that my mind was a thousand miles away, but they seemed pretty damn similar. Two sunswept manicured quads with dudes playing Ultimate Frisbee. Two fountains in chlorinated blue, two prank-friendly busts of founding fathers, two clock-towers stalked by ghosts. Two Old Campuses, in faded brick, and two New, with their curves and plate-glass and their classrooms piled high with electronics. And two overeager tour guides, with their pink polo shirts and their white teeth.

Actually, I lied. Here's the difference: at the second place, pink-polo guy took us inside the library. And right there in the middle of the second-floor stacks, where Henry David Thoreau rubs shoulders with Hunter S. Thompson, I had what can only be called a bookgasm.

It was embarrassing—especially when the rest of the group moved on, and pink-polo guy had to come back for me.

“Hey dude,” he said, trading his tour-guide chirp for the drawl of the frat boy. “Movin’ on. See something you like?”

“I’ve, uh, just never seen this many books before.”

“What, you don’t have one point six million volumes in your high school library?” He didn’t laugh at the joke. I guess that’s the style now, in college.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “They hardly even let us in there.” I cast one more longing look down the shelves—shelves upon shelves upon shelves, with no end in sight, a glorious fluorescent-lit Labyrinth—and turned to follow the pink polo.

“So what are you into?” he said when I caught up. “Gonna rock some poli-sci? Some anthro? No, that’s not it. You look like...like a creative-writing type of dude. That or music. There are dudes like you all over Schnell Hall.”

I didn’t want to give him the pleasure of being right. “Yeah, I don’t know. I’m really just doing this for my stepmom. She gets off on this whole college thing.”

“For your stepmom.”

“Yeah. I’ll probably just take some time off, you know, once I graduate. Work construction or something. I don’t really—”

“Hey man,” said Pink Polo suddenly, stopping in his tracks and jabbing two fingers at my chest. Now his voice had changed again, low and aggressive. “You want to know something? That’s bullshit. I saw you back there with those books. I knew a kid like you, back in high school. Smart as hell, but he had some shit he was going through, and he let it get in his way. Went and did exactly that, worked construction. You know where he is now?”

“Uh...no.”

“He’s on the street. His name is Joe. I saw Joe last time I went home. Joe’s on the street now, walking around with the crazy eyes.” Pink Polo made the crazy eyes, to demonstrate. “Got his brain all shot to hell by speed or smack or some shit. You know that?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

Pink Polo stared at me for a few seconds longer, then he flashed those white teeth again. “Come on, bro,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder. “I’m not trying to scare you. I just don’t like seeing bad things happen to good people, you know?” Then he turned toward the tour group, not missing a beat, and dove back into his spiel: “OK, who here knows what makes this tree right here special...”

So the day got off to a pretty weird start. But wait—it got weirder.

We had lunch at an Ethiopian place, that's right, Ethiopian, a place that Camille had found on the Internet and had been drooling over for the past three weeks. We all sat on floor pillows and ate with our fingers and listened to Camille badger the waiter with questions about Ethiopia. It sounds a little bit like *meze* at the Rahbanis', with the minor exception that none of it was any good. Then we stopped back in at our hotel, and Camille got sick.

I mean real sick, nasty sick, like Dave and I had to get out of the room to avoid the gross bathroom noises.

"Wow," said Dave, as we stood in the lobby watching a basketball game on TV.

"Yeah," I said. "Pharaoh's revenge?"

"I don't think Pharaoh was in Ethiopia," said Dave, laughing, "but yeah, something like that."

We watched the game for a few minutes, and then Dave said: "She was kind of asking for it, right?"

At that I couldn't help laughing, and we both laughed, hard enough that the fat old guy on the couch turned around and gave us the stink-eye.

Back in the room, Camille finally emerged, her hair all matted with sweat, looking like she'd had a good ass-kicking. I felt sorry for her, in spite of myself.

"It's two-thirty," she croaked. "Y'all better get on to the next tour. I don't think I'm going to make this one." Then a look came over her face, and she whirled back into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Dave sighed. "Well, I guess we better get a move on. Which place is next? I've already lost track."

“It’s the Baptist place,” I said. “The one with, like, twelve students. Do we have to go?”

“You heard the boss,” said Dave, grabbing his jacket. “Come on, you’re navigating. Set the course, Mister Chekov!”

(Note to self: add “washed-up Trekkie” to the list of things to loathe about Dave.)

Our rental car is a Solstice convertible. Why? Because all those fancy frills like, say, storage space are much less important than getting Dave his cargasm. (Yeah, I’m just going to go ahead and own that –gasm thing.) So we crammed ourselves in and pulled out onto the six-lane strip in front of the hotel, and immediately found ourselves in the world’s biggest traffic jam.

We sat there for a good ten minutes, Dave tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, listening to all the cars bleating their horns around us like a chorus of toads. Did you know that most car horns honk in the key of F? I was just starting to drift off into daydream-land, the horns blending into a brass quartet in my head, when all of a sudden Dave did something that he hasn’t done in years: he surprised me.

“The hell with it,” he muttered, and he spun the wheel around, floored it right in the scrunched-up face of an angry guy in an SUV, and took off in the opposite direction. Then he grabbed the GPS, ripped it off its dashboard mount, and threw it into the back seat.

“Um,” I said. “I’m pretty sure the campus was—”

“You know what? Screw the campus. We’re doing something fun for once, damn it. You and me. Father, son.”

“Right. Fun. OK.”

I wasn’t really sure how to process this. What did fathers and sons do together, anyway? Apparently neither of us could remember, because we ended up just driving, driving clear past

the traffic jam and clear out of town. The road snaked through hills and pastures, and Dave grinned like a lunatic as he “stretched the car’s legs” (his words). And then we found ourselves coming into another town, and suddenly we rounded a tight curve and Dave blurted out “Holy mackerel,” and he slammed on the brakes—setting off another chorus of honks behind us—and swerved into a gravel parking lot. We sat there in silence for a minute, in our little cloud of gravel-dust, taking in the scene in front of us.

“PROMISED LAND PUTT-PUTT,” said the sign, in lettering that couldn’t have been updated since about the mid-sixties.

The marquee underneath read: “BEEN IN THE ROUGH LATELY? LET JESS BE YOUR CADDY. JOIN S FOR A HOLEY GOOD TIME.”

“Played any golf lately?” asked Dave finally.

“Uh, let me think—no. Nope.”

So we got two balls, a red and a green, from the little old guy with the lazy eye at the counter. We picked out clubs, Dave hefting and sighting each one like he was gearing up for the Masters. And we stepped out on the course.

There wasn’t a soul around, and judging by the amount of debris—not trash, just dirt, sticks, grime—there hadn’t been too many around in the past, say, ten years. The Promised Land was ours.

Hole One featured a plaster snake holding an apple. You had to hit the ball through the snake’s coils to get it to the hole. But if you got the angle wrong, you’d land in a concrete bunker with a little tableau set up in the middle, naked Barbie and Ken dolls with fig leaves.

I went first. I seized up a little on my backswing, and the ball dribbled into the bunker, coming to rest in a little puddle of sludge at Ken’s feet.

“All right, time to separate the men from the boys,” said Dave, cracking his jaw. “It just takes a little English, that’s all.” He stepped up to the tee, waggled his hips, looked up, looked down, waggled his hips some more, and took a solid whack at it. The ball caromed off the snake, rolled straight back toward the tee, bounced down the steps toward the clubhouse, and disappeared under a hedge. Dave put his hands on his hips.

“Mulligan,” he said, raising his eyebrows hopefully.

“No way, man,” I said. “You’re totally hitting it from there.”

After Eden, we both started to get the hang of it. It took me three shots to get past the burning bush at Hole Three, but I made up for it with a highlight-reel hole-in-one at Four—smacking it over the water hazard, off the deck of the Ark, and into the cup on top of Mount Ararat.

“Your foot was over the line,” Dave pointed out. “Just saying.”

“You’re making up rules,” I shot back. “That kind of crap might work on the Seniors Tour, but not here.”

“The Seniors Tour! All right, hot shot. I’m just getting warmed up.”

He made a hole-in-one of his own at Six, where the cup was the blowhole of Jonah’s whale. By the time we got to the ninth and last hole, we were neck-and-neck.

“How in the world does this one work?” said Dave, squinting up at the hole. The green ramped up like a half-pipe, with a bunch of cardboard clouds at the top. In the middle of the clouds, a good six feet off the ground, was the end of a pipe, a real pipe. At its other end, it disappeared into the ground.

“It’s the rapture hole,” I said in wonder. “You hit it up there into heaven, and try to get it in the pipe.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Dave. “OK, champ. You’re up. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I stepped up to the ball and hit it square. It shot up the ramp, made a long, graceful arc between the clouds, and plummeted into the hole with a *shump*. The single most beautiful thing I’ve ever done.

“Holy crap,” said Dave, squinting.

“You can’t say that,” I pointed out. “This is the Promised—” But I was interrupted by an unearthly sound. It was a recording of some sort, coming through ancient speakers and groaning slowly to life after years of silence. Eventually, as we stood there and looked around in bewilderment, it resolved itself into the Hallelujah Chorus. Two cardboard angels lurched out of hidden compartments in the ground—one of them sticking in mid-lurch, and twitching there, half-risen, like a person caught in quicksand.

“Wow,” said Dave.

“Do I get a prize?” I asked.

“I’d say this is its own reward,” he said, and I couldn’t argue with that.

When the Hallelujahs died down and the angels sank back into the ground, it was Dave’s turn. He waggled his hips and tapped the ball up the ramp. It rolled straight back down. He tried again: same thing.

“Maybe put some English on it?” I suggested. Dave scowled, thrust the ball back on the tee, and creamed it. It shot up the ramp at an angle and flew off the lip, and for two of the longest seconds ever, we watched it soar in slow-motion toward the clubhouse, until our reverie was broken by the awful sound of shattering glass.

“Shit,” said Dave under his breath, and he ducked like a guilty schoolboy, which was pretty hilarious considering we were the only people for miles around. We both sat there with our backs against the side of the ramp, and we laughed and laughed until the man with the lazy eye stomped out shaking his fist, and Dave waved a few bills at him and he yelled a few choice things at Dave, and then we hightailed it out of there and drove to the Burger Barn down the road and got milkshakes.

On the Burger Barn patio, next to the shrieking kids in the ball-pit, under an umbrella dressed up like a poppyseed bun, Dave did the unthinkable: he surprised me again. That's twice in one day, for those of you keeping score.

"Your mom and I went to the Promised Land once," he said between slurps of his vanilla shake.

I was too startled to turn this into a joke. "That place? Promised Land Putt-Putt? You've been there before?"

He stared out across the parking lot, where a little group of birds was squabbling over a French fry. "It must have been in seventy-eight, seventy-nine. Freshman year of college, for me—she was still in high school. I drove cross-country one weekend, picked her up from her parents' house, and we took a road trip. Didn't have a clue where we were going. Didn't care." Slurp. Laugh. "Actually, at one point we made it into a game—take your next left turn, then your next right, then your next left, and so on. You wind up in some pretty off-the-wall places."

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to spoil it. Dave never, ever talked about Mom.

"She was different then," he went on, picking at the perforated strip on his straw wrapper. "She would do anything. Fearless. And singing, always singing..." He trailed off. "Anyway, if I remember right, she whupped me in Putt-Putt. They've added that last hole since then—I'd remember that for sure. But she whupped me fair and square. That's a real blow to your pride when you're a teenaged boy. I knew I had a keeper, though."

Dave never talked for this long about anything, period. I'd almost forgotten what his voice really sounded like. For a second it felt like old times, like that trip to the Great Salt Lake, maybe, and the island full of buffaloes. But then he stopped, and just stared at his straw wrapper. I figured I should say something.

“What else did you do? On the road trip?”

He thought about it. “I can hardly even remember. All I remember is how it ended. I was driving this old lemon, a busted ’68 GTO that I thought I could fix up but couldn’t. We broke down out on 43 and I said I’d figure out what the matter was.”

“But you couldn’t.”

“No. What the hell did I know? She’s sitting there by the side of the road getting madder and madder, while I’m under the hood poking at stuff. Finally she blew up and we called a tow truck. Didn’t talk to each other the whole way home. That was our first taste of married life, in a way. But we were just teenagers. Out of our element.”

“Being a teenager sucks,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” he said, turning to face me. “I’d give anything to be that young again.”

This took me aback. “But...I mean, it’s like the worst of both worlds. You’re not a kid anymore. You have to worry about all the grown-up crap. But you don’t know enough to deal with it all yet. You’re stuck in the middle.”

“Exactly,” said Dave, jabbing his plastic spoon into his milkshake. “The middle is the place to be. It’s where everything happens. The highs, the lows. The change. You’re a caterpillar, you’re a butterfly.”

“I’d rather just be a butterfly. At least you’ve got wings.”

“Yeah,” said Dave as he stood up, jangling his keys in his pocket. “And you’re stuck with them.”

Wouldn't you know it? He's right—Dave and his dumb philosophy of The Middle. It's right there in the word, hidden in plain sight, like one of those Magic Eye posters at the mall where you stand at arm's length and make your eyes blur, and out pops the unicorn or the sailboat. *Middle* comes from the same place as *meta*. *Meta*, change, as in *metamorphosis*. To change is to be in the middle—between bull and man, girl and tree, beast and god. It's a blessing and a curse, your hope and your doom. Isn't that Ovid's whole thing?

And me? I thought I had changed, but I haven't, not really. I was too scared. Scared of betrayal—betrayal of myself, of my mom, of my life as it was. So I just buried that life and built something flimsy and new on top of it. There was no middle. Just like there was no middle for Laila, when she buried her secret and moved on. We thought we had found shortcuts, but there's no such thing.

So? So what? Where does that leave me? Nowhere, really. In a pitch-dark hotel room, with the rattling A/C and Dave's whistling nose, and someone yelling in muffled Spanish a couple of floors up, and the freeway surging like the sea, and the city stretching, shifting itself in the night, indifferent. In the middle of a big world. Without much of a map.

Saturday

7:25 AM. Dave, still in the doghouse, has been deployed by Sgt. Camille to fetch donuts. The Sergeant is in her giant fluffy bathrobe, hunched over the sink like a pink elephant, doing her face. I'm splayed on the bed watching the news on mute. Clearly a huge day for news, judging by the shouting-caps headlines and the furrowed brows of the anchors:

WORLD'S BIGGEST BEAVER DAM VISIBLE FROM SPACE

WOMAN BEDBOUND BY GIGANTIC CHEST

Now, double-furrowed brows signal a turn to something even more serious. Here's a bedraggled-looking reporter in a poncho. Here's a lurching shot from a helicopter: an eighteen-wheeler flooded to its windows, scattered cars floating around it like water-beetles. Here's a road sign, blurred by the raindrops on the camera lens: Veterans Highway, Exit Only.

"Holy crap," I say, sitting up. "It's us. Look."

Camille hunches over toward the TV. With her makeup half-done, she looks like a punk. Or a zombie. It's a good look for her, actually. She takes in the scene for a minute, and then says "Oh my gosh, it's *us*," like she's making a brand-new discovery.

THREE DEAD, EIGHT MISSING; WATERS STILL RISING, shouts the caption. More looks of concern from the anchors in the studio, and now more lurching footage, this time of a flooded neighborhood. Several houses are flooded up to the roofline. Two guys in a john boat are paddling down what used to be a street, from the looks of it. The helicopter veers off to the left, and just before they cut back to the studio, I catch a glimpse of a convenience-store sign: REGGIE'S STOP-N-GO.

“Jesus,” I say, and Camille forgets to correct me. “That’s Laila’s neighborhood. I recognize it.”

“She lives *there*?” says Camille. “Lord, Paul—that’s where you’ve been going all this time? It doesn’t look very...safe.”

“Yeah, well, her house is...whatever, that’s not the point. Can I get a little bit of concern here? My friend’s neighborhood just got eaten by the Tallahoma River.” I’m standing now, staring at the TV, stupidly expecting more answers, even though they’ve long since moved on to a horse rescue in Texas.

“So terrible,” says Camille slowly. “I’m sure she’s OK. But goodness, how do you come back from something like that?”

“Her house is on a big hill. Maybe it’s fine.”

We keep staring at the TV for a while, out of sheer inertia. The A/C shudders on and off. In the silence, I can’t stop thinking of her, as much as it hurts.

Finally Camille says: “Paul, is Laila in some kind of trouble?”

Let me tell you something about female intuition. You may be one of those people who never put much stock in it. And in that case, you never had a mom. Because we hadn’t been in the door three seconds yesterday before Camille smelled us out. Maybe it was the milkshakes on our breath, or the scorecard peeking out of Dave’s shirt pocket. But I swear it was like we were just putting out some kind of chemical, Eau de Naughtiness, and those invisible feelers of hers caught it in a split-second and brought her to attention like a pointing Labrador.

And now she’s sending those feelers straight into my brain. I should be more careful in the future to avoid confined spaces.

“No,” I say uneasily. “Maybe.”

“I know it’s none of my business,” she says, turning the painted half of her face towards me. “But I saw the two of y’all talking that night, and bless her heart, I just...I just saw such a sadness in her.”

“Bless her heart” is a Camille-ism usually reserved for panhandlers, whores, and people with one-car garages. In this case, though, it sounds pretty sincere.

I keep quiet. Eventually she adds: “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. I just can’t help wondering if there’s some way I could help.”

“No,” I say quickly, and then: “I appreciate it. But she’s got...I don’t know, she’s just got a bunch of stuff she has to work out.” A meaningless thing to say.

Then I make the mistake of looking at Camille. And she just looks so goofy, in her enormous pink robe and her half-done face. And I feel so helpless, and ignorant, and alone, and I have these questions all clawing and scraping and gnashing at my insides, and in a fit of weakness I just let go. I let it out. I tell her all about it.

In general terms, of course. No names. I don’t even tell her that a teacher is involved. And I sure as hell don’t tell her that I’ve got a meeting with the man in a couple of days.

When I’m done, Camille surprises me even more than Dave surprised me yesterday. She turns away, and after a minute her makeup starts to run, and I realize that she’s crying.

“Sorry,” I say uncertainly. “I didn’t—”

“No,” she says, and she reaches out and takes my hand. “Don’t be. I am so thankful that you shared this with me.”

I look at the flowers on the bedspread. “I don’t really know what to do.”

“Paul.” Still holding my hand. “I want to tell you something that I have never told a soul. Is that OK?”

“Sure.”

She takes a big breath. “I had something like that happen to me, once.”

“You did?” I blink.

“Not nearly as serious,” she says quickly. “Thank God. I was only twelve. It was in church, not in school. The man who led our youth group. He—” She shudders. “I won’t go into it. But he got me alone one day, one afternoon, and he said all these nice things to me, things no one had said to me before. And then he did things to me that he shouldn’t have. And I was so young, and stupid, and confused. I didn’t understand.” Camille dabs at her half-melted face.

“You didn’t tell anyone?” I say in disbelief.

“I convinced myself it was my own fault,” she says, shaking her head. “And I convinced myself that no one would believe me, if I spoke up. That I was just a little girl, and my word didn’t count for a thing.”

“So what happened to him?”

“He left soon after that. Said he got a job somewhere else. I never heard anything from him again. Probably still out there, doing Lord knows what, the creep.”

Another shot to the gut, in a week full of them. Where do I start? “But...but...you never told *anyone*?” For some reason, this refuses to compute.

Camille reaches for the remote, turns the TV off, puts her hands in her lap with a sigh. “Sometimes, when something awful happens, the easiest thing in the world to do is to keep it inside. Just wall it off, away from everything else. Like it happened in some other world, some dream-world. Does that make sense?”

“Weren’t you afraid to go back to church? Didn’t it make you...I don’t know...question things?”

“Are you kidding? I was terrified. I threw up, like, a hundred times that next Sunday. I still remember like it was yesterday—I shut myself in the bathroom all morning, and my mom thought I had gotten my first period.” She sees my face. “Sorry—TMI? But anyway, you know what? That thing, that horrible thing, made my faith even stronger in the long run. It’s hard to explain.”

She stops there, and we stare into the black hole of the TV screen.

“But it hurt me,” she suddenly adds, her voice startling out of the deep silence. “It left a big, big scar inside. Keeping it in like that, I mean.” Camille looks at me with an expression of anguish, one that I’ve never seen on her before. “Paul, you need to help your friend speak. She needs to speak. You can really help her. And maybe no one else can.”

All of a sudden I feel like a giant fist has come smashing through the hotel roof and opened up a giant skylight, and the light is pouring through over Camille and I’m seeing her for the first time. I want to say other things. I want to hear more about her life. I want to know more about that other world of hers, the dream-world. Weirdly, I even want to tell her more about me. But there’s a scratching at the door, and she shuffles off to open it, and it’s Dave piled high with donuts and coffee, and he stomps in griping about the guy who cut him off in the drive-thru lane, and just like that the window slams shut.

Sunday

Sweet privacy, at last. Camille finds the church in the Yellow Pages with the corniest ad, drags Dave along for support, and eventually lets me sleep after three or four half-hearted yells in my direction—whether out of pity, indifference, or just exhaustion, I don't know.

As soon as they're out of earshot down the hall, I dig out my phone and call Laila. I don't have the faintest idea what I'll say. Funny how that works. Wasn't it just a few months ago that I had to rehearse every word I spoke in her presence like I was Laurence freaking Olivier? But now I don't care. I just want to hear her voice. I just want to know she's OK. I guess this is what it feels like to be close, really close, to someone. Like a hand sliding into a glove.

But somehow I know that I won't get her. I hear it in my mind before the real thing: no rings, just a pause, then a click and the hiss of static, and the voice of an anonymous woman, too smooth, too round, too cool. I'm sorry. (Click, hiss.) *Laila*. (Click.) Is not available. If you'd like to leave a message, please stay on the line.

That one word, *Laila*, muffled and distant, like a cry from a locked room. They've got her in there. The anonymous voicemail woman, and everyone else. Trapped in a locked room, in a world of walls.

What does that even mean? I think I'm losing my mind. Time for a shower. I've got to clean myself up. After all, it's Sunday.

Monday

Speaking of female intuition. (Because I was.)

2:17 PM: Plane touches down.

2:34 PM: Bags collected.

2:45 PM: In the Mustang.

3:12 PM: Walking in the front door. On a beeline for bed, to catch up on sleep after a restless night. But...

3:13 PM: Phone rings. Don't recognize the number. Against my better judgment, I pick up anyway.

"Hello?"

"Paul?"

Couldn't be. But that voice— "Hello?"

"Paul? It's May. May Tingle."

"Hi, May." I'm tempted to ask where she got my number, but really I'd rather not know. Maybe she asked God for it.

"Thank God. I couldn't get a hold of anyone else."

"Wow, I'm flattered. Did you just take the Lord's name in vain?"

"What?"

"You took the Lord's name in vain." Tiredness and May: two things that never fail to bring out my feistier side.

"No I didn't. That wasn't in vain."

"Fine. What *is* in vain, anyway?"

“What?”

“What does that mean, ‘in vain’? What counts? What’s the rule?”

“Gee, Paul, I don’t know. I never thought about—”

“You said ‘Gee.’ That’s short for ‘Jesus.’”

“It is *not*!”

“I think it is.”

“It’s a horse term? Like, you know, ‘Gee’ and ‘Haw.’”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Paul! This is no time for *jokes*? We have a crisis!” May has that exhilarated tone that she gets whenever drama presents itself.

“A crisis. OK. Let’s hear it.”

“Do you know where all of our stuff is? The costumes? The props? The set?”

“No, I don’t know.”

She breathes loudly into the phone. “We’ve been keeping it in the fieldhouse. My little brother plays JV football and he talked the coach into setting aside some space.”

“Fieldhouse? Since when do we have a fieldhouse?”

“You know. That little shed down the hill.”

“Oh, OK.” If it’s a shed, why not call it a shed? I waited for a punchline, but it wasn’t coming. “So?”

“*Down the hill*, Paul.”

Suddenly it hit me. “Oh.”

“Right.”

“Oh. Shit.”

Bork is a high school, literally: it's built on a steep-sided mound that towers over the Tallahoma floodplain. Score the one window seat in Miss Tutwiler's classroom, and you get a sweet view of the river about a mile away, and the gnarly old cypresses that line its banks, and the old Illinois Central trestle that soars overhead. Legend has it that the Bork mound is a Choctaw burial mound, or at the very least an ancient shell midden, which explains the ghosts that are routinely heard behind the walls (after hours, mostly, and mostly by freshman, once they've been sufficiently terrorized by upper-class storytellers).

But that's just the school itself. The rest of the lot, including the athletic fields, is downslope on the floodplain itself. In fact, folks call the football field "The Swamp," because when the river's high enough, a game there tends to be more closely related to mud wrestling than it is to football.

And now, according to this morning's news, the river's higher than it's been in recorded history.

"Well, so much for costumes."

"Don't *say* that," says May in a pained voice. "I think there's still a chance? I think there's still hope. I'm going in, on a rescue mission."

"Wow. Good luck."

"But I don't have a car."

And so it is that I find myself in the Volvo, hightailing it down Crestview on one hour of sleep, the directions to May's place scrawled on a paper towel on the passenger seat. The last rainclouds broke up yesterday, apparently, and now the sky is perfect blue and eerily calm, but still the river rises. Every few blocks, on the right side of the road especially, there are traffic cones and cop cars and ominous flashing signs: ROAD CLOSED DUE TO HIGH WATER.

DETOUR □. The streets are mostly empty, and I feel like I'm driving through some post-apocalyptic wasteland, which would be pretty kick-ass in a video game, but doesn't turn out to be all that cool in real life.

I follow the paper-towel instructions, but I start to wonder if I got something wrong, because the neighborhood I wind up in can't be May's: it's full of trailers and collapsing roofs and half-dismantled cars on lawns, the kind of neighborhood that Camille would take one look at and have a coronary on the spot. But sure enough, the street names keep matching up, and in a few minutes I'm pulling up to 815 Riggs.

815 Riggs is a lemon-yellow double-wide with a sagging porch. Several of its window panes have been redone in cardboard. Most of the grass in the yard is dead, and cheap plastic toys are strewn everywhere. In the dirt driveway, a man, or maybe a boy, is just visible under the hood of a rusted-out car on blocks. The thumping of hip-hop from a cranked-up stereo makes me wince, even from a couple of streets over.

As I sit there in something like shock, the door to the double-wide opens and May comes bustling out. She's got a giant bundle of stuff under one arm, and a wailing, diaper-clad kid in the other. Halfway to the Volvo, she stops and whirls and an old woman's face appears in a window. They yell at each other. May gesticulates, the best she can, considering the load she's hauling. Then she walks back up to the door, the old woman appears, humped over, smoking a cigarette, and May passes the kid off. They yell at each other some more.

Finally May makes it down to the curb, tosses her stuff in the trunk, and flounces into the front seat. She seems upset.

"Well!" I say cheerfully. "Let's roll."

We sit.

“Uh, I don’t have a clue how to get to Bork from here.”

May sighs. “Take a right up there,” she says, pointing. As the Volvo lurches forward, she adds: “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“See what?”

“Where I live. It’s embarrassing.”

“Oh. No worries. Seems like a...” What’s the word? “Vibrant neighborhood.” I glance over at May out of the corner of my eye. I hardly recognize her, this May, with the sad eyes, and the lines of worry in her face. She’s a real person, suddenly, not a cartoon, not a stock type. I feel a fleeting pang of guilt for the way I’ve always treated her. Casually. Thoughtlessly. To mask the guilt, I turn on the radio.

Within ten minutes, we’re turning into the front lot at Bork. It’s all but abandoned. Out of a sense of half-hearted mischief, I pull into the spot marked “ASST PRINCIPAL.” The paint is smudged, revealing some midnight prankster’s valiant effort to scrape off the “T.”

May, in full commando mode, jumps out and grabs her things. “Put these on,” she barks, handing me what looks like a pair of giant boots with straps.

“What are they?”

“Waders. Haven’t you ever been duck hunting?”

“Um...”

With a fair amount of tugging, I manage to get the things on. We make a pretty grotesque pair, May and me. She’s got a frilly pink blouse on under her waders; I’ve got on a corduroy jacket over my black Spinal Tap T-shirt (“THIS ONE GOES TO ELEVEN”). I can’t help thinking of that reality show, the one where they pair you with someone from a different walk of

life, and the two of you collaborate to do something gross or embarrassing. What's it called?

Bedfellows.

"We look like we're on *Bedfellows*," I point out.

"Excuse me?" says May.

"*Bedfellows*. The TV show."

"We don't get cable," she says, giving me yet another chance to feel awkward.

We walk around back, where the portable classrooms teeter on the edge of the bluff, and take a minute to survey the scene. The Swamp is laid out below us in all its glory. For the first time, I feel that the nickname doesn't do it justice.

"Wow," I say, breaking a long silence. "So...not looking so good."

The Swamp is now The Lake. Two sets of goalposts rise from the brown water like the trunks of drowned trees. About halfway across, the shed—the Fieldhouse—is visible, a squat windowless block of beige vinyl. Some of it is visible, anyway. The water's at about doorknob level.

May sets her jaw. "There's still hope," she says. "Never say never. Come on—are you in, or are you out?"

"Where do you get all these cliches from, if you don't have cable?"

We start down the hill. About halfway down we start squishing. Three-quarters of the way down, the squish turns to more of a squelch. Before long, we're up to our knees.

"Is this safe?" I say. "Just a silly question."

"It's just water," says May gruffly.

"Yeah, but how deep does it get?" I squint down at the water and stick an exploratory hand in. I can't see more than about an inch down through the murk.

“Look,” says May, pointing over at the shed, still a good fifty yards distant. “Look at the door to the fieldhouse? It can’t be deeper than three feet.”

“People drown in three feet of water. What happens if it gets in my waders, and I lose my balance and fall in a hole? What happens if I hit my head on a stump or a rock, or a piece of football equipment, or something? Are you going to carry me out?”

“Yes, I’ll carry you out,” she sighs. “I accept full responsibility.” She glances skyward, as if she’s clearing this with the Lord.

We plunge in. We haven’t gone ten steps before water starts to trickle into my waders. It’s a lot colder than I expected.

“There are snakes in here,” I suggest. “Got to be. I swear I just saw one.”

“*Please* don’t talk about snakes?” says May, with a panicky edge to her voice that shuts me up for a good while.

By the time we make it out to the shed, I’ve long since quit worrying about reptiles and moved on to hypothermia. Remember that old Jack London story they make you read in freshman English? The one where it’s winter in the Yukon and the dude gets stuck out there in the woods with his dog, and he realizes his hands have gone too numb to build a fire and he decides to kill the dog and stick his hands in the carcass to warm up, only he’s too numb to even get a hold on the knife to do it? And then, as he drifts off to sleep, the big sleep, he realizes he doesn’t feel the cold anymore, and this is actually a pretty nice way to go? Yeah, well, my feet—more like footsicles by now—have a bone to pick with Jack London. Freezing sucks, Jack. There’s nothing nice about it. But maybe I’m being melodramatic?

“OK,” says May through gritted teeth. Suddenly, blessedly, we’re there. She fumbles with the doorknob, pushes it, leans into it—nothing.

“Could use a hand here,” she mutters.

“Good thing you don’t need a foot.” I slosh over to the door and, on the count of three, we heave on it together. Nothing. Another count, another heave. Now something gives way, just enough for me to stumble and plunge an arm into the ice water. Over my head, May lets out a startled noise, somewhere between a shriek and a yap. I look up: through the cracked door, a face lurches into view, white, stiff, and staring.

“Oh, good grief,” says May. “It’s Galatea. It’s the statue.” She giggles, and then catches herself. “Oh. Oh, no. She’s going to be ruined. Come on, we have to get in there.”

Two more heaves and we’re in. In with the floating wreckage, with the shoulder pads and disembodied JV helmets, with the stench of wet plaster and jockstraps, with the papier-mache corpses and the swim-noodle logjam and the angel wings bobbing in the sludge like oil-slicked seabirds. We stand there in the doorway, waist-deep and sopping, and as we take in the catastrophe in front of us, it begins to dawn on me how stupid this whole thing was. Not just this rescue operation—the whole thing, the musical itself, the past six months. The thought that we could somehow be more than just a bunch of kids.

May stands next to me, perfectly still in her pink blouse and her waders. I figure she’s trying to decide whether to give it up and head back, or just to break down and cry. I give it about even odds either way, but as it turns out she does neither. Instead she sloshes right into the shed without a word, and starts picking things up—swim noodles, scraps of construction paper, the half-melted Minotaur mask—and stuffing them into a trash bag.

“What are you doing?” I ask, as gently as possible.

“What do you think I’m doing? What did we come here for?”

“May, this is hopeless. This stuff is all ruined.” As if to drive home my point, Galatea drifts in between us, face down, one arm dangling from its shoulder by a tattered strip of duct tape.

May turns to face me. “I have spent six months on this,” she says, slowly, in a near-whisper. “I said from the beginning that this would be the best thing ever to hit Bork High. If you think that I’m going to abandon it all right here and now, after everything we’ve done, then you’ve got another darn think coming. Got it?”

By now I’m all out of comebacks, and when May says “darn,” she means business. So I take a trash bag, and we grab what we can, and slosh our way back across the Swamp and back up the hill and back to the car, where May, who has thought of everything as usual, produces a pair of pink jumbo-sized towels. We throw the bags in the trunk, towel off until we’re just dripping instead of sopping, and drive home in cold, wet, frustrated silence.

As we pull up in front of the lemon-yellow double-wide, I get the sudden urge to say something.

“You were wrong about Laila,” I say.

“Laila? What about her?”

“She didn’t get an abortion.”

May stares out the window.

“She had the baby,” I go on. “I mean, she tried to. But it died.” I’m not sure why I’m saying this. It’s not my truth to tell. But I need it to be out there, in the open, where it can’t be twisted or ignored or beaten into submission.

May is silent. The engine shudders. Then she says: “I know.”

“What do you mean, you know? How could you know?”

“I mean, I didn’t know what actually happened. But I knew that I didn’t know. I knew it wasn’t right to...to tell you what I told you.”

“Whatever,” I say dismissively. “That was the rumor. You bought in. I probably would have too.” This conversation is getting way too serious.

“No...it’s not that simple.” May smooths one of the ruffles on her blouse. “There were lots of rumors. I picked that one.”

“Why?”

Now she opens the door, steps out, cranes her head back in the window. “Prejudice?” she says. “Jealousy? Lots of reasons, I guess.”

I give her a blank look, and she adds: “News flash? I’m not the perfect Christian I might look like. I’m sorry, Paul. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“OK.”

“Thanks for all your help. I really appreciate it.” And with that, she turns, grabs her bag and the waders out of the back, and trudges off towards her sad yellow house.

*“Come, finish with my murder your black deed,
so nothing wicked may remain undone...
And if I'm prisoned in the solitudes,
my voice will wake the echoes in the wood
and move the conscious rocks. Hear me, O Heaven!
And let my imprecations rouse the Gods...”*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI

Tuesday

What would you do?

Not that it matters. Not that you even exist. No one will ever read this, after all. Dr. Silverman, you sure as hell won't. God, I guess you might, being omniscient and all, but I wouldn't blame you for skimming. Still, it's a nice delusion, imagining that I'm not alone. Like that warm numbness when you're freezing to death and you can't get a hold on your knife to kill your dog.

Laila is AWOL again. Her robot voicemail lady and I are getting to know each other pretty well. So it looks like it's up to me to handle—what? What am I supposed to be handling? At 3:30 this afternoon I'm going to walk into Mr. Brainerd's room, into the labyrinth, and I don't have the faintest idea what to expect. Sometimes, in my head, he comes at me with an ax. Sometimes it's an ice pick. Isn't that what deranged perverts use? Sometimes I kick his ass. Sometimes I come up with something brilliant and devastating to say, and he breaks down and confesses everything and turns himself in. Sometimes I run screaming and call the cops myself.

And sometimes, he just offers me a Coors Light, and talks to me about my Ovid paper.

But for whatever reason, avoiding it is not an option. I have to walk in there and do something. I just have to. It might be the one single important thing I ever do.

“Mr. Piscator.”

“Mr. Brainerd.”

The rest of the class has trickled out of the room, laughing, shoving, fishing out their cell phones, oblivious. Mr. Brainerd sits at his desk, thumbing through papers. My stomach seems to be in the process of turning itself inside out.

“No beer today,” he says, once we’re alone. “Sorry.” He looks up and flashes those white teeth, but there’s something a little manic in his expression. Or am I imagining things?

I feel a sudden spasm of hate. “Whatever,” I say dully. “You wanted to talk about my paper.” *A lie*, I add, with my eyes.

“Yeah...I do. Hold on.” He steps over to the door and eases it shut. The noise in the hall dies, and I notice the ticking of his wall clock. In the silence, I can hear the gears turning, once a second. *Shhhhtick. Shhhhtick.*

“Exciting stuff, Paul. I just got word that we’re...that you’re a finalist. *A finalist.*”

“Really.”

“Pretty cool, right? But I’m thinking bigger. I’ve got some ideas. Other contests. Maybe even getting it published. What would you think about that?”

“Published.”

“Paul,” he says, ruffling his hair, “you know that I think you’re an extremely talented writer. I don’t see many like you. Not many at all. It would just kill me not to see you really *own* that, you know? Really live up to that potential. What do you think?”

I shift my weight. “Honestly? I think that I wrote that in, like, twenty minutes. At about two in the morning. I think that it’s a load of crap. I think that anyone who picks it as a finalist is probably full of crap too.”

A look of pain comes across Mr. Brainerd's face. "Paul," he says again. Standing up from his desk now. Clasping his hands. "I know it's been hard for you. I know there's been a lot of hurt in your life, and it's hard to...to see the positives, sometimes. But Paul. I want to *help you*, man! I want to be *here* for you!" He rests his hand on my shoulder, cocks his head, gives me a look of wild-eyed eagerness. The corner of his mouth twitches.

Up close, here, he looks sad and old again. The bags under his eyes look like craters. It's so pathetic that all my fear, all my caution, suddenly evaporates. I push his hand away and take a step back. Here we go, then. Into the breach.

"Just like you were there for Laila?"

"What? What are you talking about?" His brow wrinkles. I search his face for the lies I know are written all over it. But he is keeping them close. For a second, I hesitate.

"Paul?"

"I know," I say in a hoarse voice, my throat clenched tight. Again, louder: "I know. All about it. What you did."

"You know what I did." He puts his hands on his hips. His movements are slow now, careful. "Why don't you tell me what you mean."

"Laila Rahbani," I say. "A good friend of mine. You know her too." I put my hand on the arm of the desk next to me, for support.

"Yes, I do." Mr. Brainerd has an eerie calm about him, as if he's got all the time in the world. "I had her in class last year."

"I know...what happened." My voice falters again. Why can't I just do it? Say it? *Call him out?*

Mr. Brainerd sighs deeply and sits back down in his chair, slow and careful. He motions for me to sit down too. I keep standing. If he lunges for me and I have to break for the door, it will give me a tiny advantage. Having this thought makes me feel ridiculous. *This is not a movie. In a movie, I would know what I was doing.*

“OK. Paul, I need to be honest with you.” He folds his hands on top of his desk. “Your Ovid essay wasn’t the only reason I called you in today.” *Really.* “Laila Rahbani was the other reason.”

“Yeah.”

“I realize that you two are friends. I realize that she may have told you some...some things.”

“Yes.”

“Listen, I hate to go into this kind of...private stuff. I’m only doing it because I want to clear up any misunderstandings that are out there. OK?”

I wait. The clock ticks. *Shhhtick.*

He sighs again. “Laila had a really hard time in my class last year. I think she was going through...” A wave of the hand. “A lot of crap in her life. Whatever. It’s not an easy age for anyone. So. I offered her a little bit of extra help. After school tutoring, that kind of thing.”

“That kind of thing?”

He frowns at me. “Will you let me finish, please?”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, while my stomach finishes its double-knot.

“Anyway, it didn’t stick. She quit showing up, and she wound up failing the final. No big surprise. So she came to see me the next afternoon. Basically in hysterics. Said her dad was going to kill her. Well, I felt sorry for her, but...” He looks toward the window. “What she did

next just...really, really disappointed me. Basically she asked for a higher grade. And she threatened to...well, to spread lies, if she didn't get it."

We stare at each other.

Mr. Brainerd shrugs his shoulders, palms up. "So. I don't know what she's told you. To be honest with you, I don't want to know. I'm sure she's been a good friend to you, and for all I'm concerned, you don't need to even bring this up with her. I just wanted to make sure you're not misinformed. I'm sure you can understand that."

I stare at him. To my left, in my peripheral vision, I can see the blue sky out the one tiny window. A still, clear blue, so deep it seems painted, like the back of a snow globe. A second ticks by as I hesitate. *Shhhhtick.*

What if this is all wrong? What if this world I've been living in isn't real? What if the monster I've seen in him isn't a monster at all? What if it's just some image of myself?

I could forget about it all right now. I could walk out and leave it behind. I could let Mr. Brainerd's truth be The Truth.

And honestly, I don't know what convinces me otherwise. Maybe it's my heart, my dumb crush on a girl who'll never return it. Maybe it's my brain, sifting through all the evidence, clicking through all the memories, doing the moral math. Maybe it's some spirit, working me like a puppet. But suddenly I feel myself reject Mr. Brainerd's truth, gag on it like something rotten, spit it back out.

Shhhhtick.

"You're lying to me," I say, my voice a lot louder than I expected. "It's a nice story. Maybe you even believe it yourself. But I know better. I know her."

“Paul,” he says, flashing those teeth again, manic. “You’re sixteen, for Christ’s sake. What can you possibly know?” He starts to get up from his chair, slow, careful.

Adrenaline is a wonder drug. I don’t know if you’ve ever really felt it—I mean, *really*. God forbid you ever have to. But it will turn you into a different person. Lungs pumping, heart racing, hair on end. That blue sky in the corner of your eye will vanish, and the world will suck in around you, and all you will see or smell or hear is what’s right in front of your face. You’ll be an animal, ready, alive.

I take one step toward the door, keeping my eyes locked on his. “I know that you took her home. I know that you got her drunk.”

“Paul, you’re...you’re not thinking straight. Please. Come on.” Teeth bared now.

“I know that you told her nice things. I know that you looked for her...her weaknesses. I know that you put your dirty fucking hands on her.” My voice is dull, steady, like a computer.

“OK, Paul. You need to stop. This is not cool.”

“I know that you put your dirty fucking body on top of hers. I know that you kept her from screaming.” Backing away, slowly, slowly. Three steps from the door now, maybe four. “I know that you gave her a God damn baby to carry.”

“*Paul!*” He comes toward me now. I spin toward the door, paw at the knob. Nothing. He’s locked it, the bastard. I jump aside, get a desk between us.

“A baby to carry. A God damn baby.” There’s a wildness in my voice. “This lost, depressed, fifteen-year-old girl. The one thing that could break her forever. That’s what you did. Isn’t it?”

“You little fucking asshole,” he says through a clenched jaw. The niceness, the politeness, the hey-man cool-guy act—it’s gone now, shed like snakeskin. He glances around quickly. Looking for a weapon?

“What do you want to do to me?” I say. “Come on. I don’t care. I came here to tell the truth. Now I’m done. You can do whatever you want. Right? Or are you still going to deny it?”

He stares at me, breathing hard. I can hear the gears turning in his head, just like the clock, only faster, louder. *Shhtick. Shhtick. Shhtick.* He’s doing the math.

“Sit down,” he says.

“No.”

He grimaces. His eyes flash. “This is really stupid, Paul. You don’t know what you’re getting into here. You have no idea.”

“Yeah? Because I’m only sixteen, right?”

“Don’t be stupid. Sit down. Let’s talk, like grownups.”

“No, thanks. Is this how grownups act? They get kids drunk? They take secret pictures of girls? They get their students pregnant?”

And what happens next seems to happen all at once. I’ll remember it in freeze-frames, stop-motion, like flashes from a strobe light. Mr. Brainerd yells something—I think it’s “God damn it.” He picks up a desk. He flings it in my direction, sending the desk in front of me clattering to the floor, and me falling on my back. He steps toward me, then pauses, grabs his head in his hands, hunches over. He rocks back and forth, holding his head. His breath gets heavy and ragged, like he’s crying. “Jesus,” he mumbles through his ragged breath. “Jesus.”

And then there’s a pounding on the door, so loud and unexpected that it makes us both jump. The knob rattles. A gruff voice shouts: “*Open this door,*” and then, “*What’s going on in*

there? Open this door right now.” For a second, before the cops burst in, before it’s all suddenly, miraculously over, before he’s plucked out of my life forever by the hand of God, Mr. Brainerd looks up at me. And of all the freeze-frames, that’s the one that will stand out. That’s the one that will burn itself into my memory. Him hunched over a desk, sweating, hair ruined, eyes red, with a look of pure fear. An animal caught in the headlights.

Wednesday

(12:48 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *r u ok*

(12:49 AM.) *i guess*

(12:51 AM.) *scarred 4 life prob but yeah ok i guess*

(12:52 AM.) *was it you*

(12:55 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *yes*

(12:55 AM.) *thanks i figured*

(12:56 AM.) *why did u do it*

(12:56 AM.) *call the cops i mean*

(1:00 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *trd f kping quiet i guess*

(1:01 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *wried abt u*

(1:01 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *maybe*

(1:03 AM.) *i had it under control lol*

(1:06 AM.) *so u told ur parents*

(1:08 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *dad stl hvng hrt atck*

(1:11 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *idk if i cn evr come bk 2 school*

(1:12 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *everyone will know*

(1:12 AM.) *why*

(1:13 AM.) *no one has to know*

(1:14 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *yeah right*

(1:19 AM.) *so what happens now*

(1:20 AM.) *a trial*

(1:20 AM.) *do u have to testify*

(1:23 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *gd night paul*

(1:24 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *maybe ill call this wkend*

(1:24 AM.) *oh ok night*

(1:32 AM. From: LAILA CELL.) *thank you*

*And now one vast expanse,
the land and sea were mingled in the waste
of endless waves—a sea without a shore...
When Jupiter beheld the globe
in ruin covered, swept with wasting waves,
and when he saw one man of myriads left,
one helpless woman left of myriads lone,
both innocent and worshiping the Gods,
he scattered all the clouds; he blew away
the great storms by the cold northwind.
Once more
the earth appeared to heaven and the skies
appeared to earth.*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI

I figured I would never see her again. But I guess that would have made kind of a shitty ending. So instead, at 7:13 AM this morning, that's AM, the phone rings.

Not many ring tones will wake me up at 7:13 AM, but "Some Enchanted Evening" is one I don't hear too often. If hell ever freezes over and she actually starts to call me on a regular basis, I guess I'll have to change it. That or risk mortal embarrassment.

"Hi," I mumble, bracing the phone under my cheek on the pillow.

"Hi."

She's changed. I realize it immediately. Usually when you talk to her on the phone—if you're ever lucky enough, that is—she sounds far away, distracted, like she's always on her way to somewhere else. Her voice slips through your fingers. This is different. She's here. She's whole. I can't explain it. And God knows how I could get all that out of one syllable. Maybe that's love. But what do I know? I'm only sixteen, for Christ's sake.

"Did I wake you up?"

"No."

"Yes, I did."

"Yes. What time is it?"

"7:13 AM."

"7:13...AM. Ante Meridiem."

"Yep."

"Wow. I was dreaming. You were there."

"Really? What was I doing?"

"Um...you were...yeah, never mind. It was kind of freaky. There were Minotaurs. Listen, uh...wait...what's going on? Is everything OK? Is it really 7:13?"

“No school today,” she says, and I can tell she’s smiling. “Did you hear?”

I roll over and whack my head on the nightstand. “Ow. No, I didn’t hear. They didn’t get the memo in Never Never Land.”

“Canceled due to High Water.”

“Isn’t the flood, like, going down now?”

“Classic Bork, I guess. The whole city’s under water on Tuesday, and they have school anyway, and then they’re like ‘What the hell? Where is everybody?’ So they turn around and cancel it on Wednesday. Probably just for appearances.”

“Wow.” I manage to sit up. “So I guess I can sleep in.”

“Nope,” she says cheerfully. “You’re coming over here. My dad wants to take us out in a canoe.”

“A canoe.” I rub my eyes. “Am I still dreaming?”

“He’s completely insane. But he wants to see you. So I guess you don’t have a choice.”

“I guess not. Wait. Can I even get to your house? Isn’t it all flooded over there?”

“Yeah. Pretty much. But they’ve got one lane of Veterans open, and it’s high ground between there and us. Thank goodness. So are you coming? Or are you a wuss?”

“Those are my choices?”

And so it is that the Volvo and I set off through the wasteland yet again.

I can’t say I’ve ever really paid attention to the contours of the city before. The hard angles of streets and buildings have a way of hiding the curves of the land. But now, with the flood, it’s like the illusion has flipped. The maps have been redrawn. It’s upslope and downslope, not uptown and downtown. Crest and valley, not crossroads and strip. Isn’t there some Pacific island somewhere where they’ve never heard of east and west, north and south?

They just talk about *towards the mountain*, or *towards the sea*. A bicycle-wheel world, instead of a gridiron world. I wonder what else they do differently.

Anyway, now I see as plain as day the city's slow tilt toward the river, the sag from north to south that mirrors a sag from rich to poor, from white to black and Latino, from gatehouses and trimmed boxwoods to gutted cars and crabgrass. Driving down the raised roadbed of Veterans Highway, I pass the high-water line after two miles or so—a thin stain of dead leaves and trash, snaking through the middle-class neighborhoods to my left and right. Soon I come to the water itself, dull and brown in retreat, pooled around the storm drains and oozing over the sidewalks. At a creek bridge I look down to my right and see a row of shotgun houses squatting in water to their windowsills.

Before long traffic cones and police cars start to appear, and the roads that peel off downhill towards the housing projects on my left are closed. Between the square brick buildings, I catch a glimpse of half-submerged cars in a parking lot. What are these people doing right now? The people who live here?

But the roads to Laila's house are open—and when I pull into the driveway, the house looks just like I left it. The columns, the tacky statues, the turquoise plant. All these things seem strangely comforting.

I ring the doorbell. Mrs. Rahbani answers, wearing one of her colorful dresses, and without a word she takes me in her arms and gives me a long hug. Then she leads me inside and introduces me to the Guatemalan family sitting around the dining room table. The Romeros. They had nowhere else to go. Four kids, three grownups, and a tiny, ancient woman. They all look at me with the same expression: shyness, guilt, uncertainty.

George Rahbani emerges from the back of the house, with an armful of life jackets and water bottles that he dumps by the front door. He's wearing a ratty old baseball cap and a camo jacket that he got from God knows where, and for the first time since I've known him, he's clean-shaven. He walks over to me with his big strides, puts his hands on my shoulders, and gives me a solemn, meaningful look.

"Paul," he says, maybe for the first time ever. "Thanks for coming over. And thanks for everything you've done for Laila. We owe you. More than you know."

He looks so uncharacteristically serious that it makes me squirm. "No big deal," I say.

"Yes, it is," he says, wagging a finger at me. "It is a big deal. Not many boys would have done what you did. Don't you forget that."

I don't know what he means, exactly. What did I do? I listened to Laila. I believed her. That's all. And then I went in, the idiot hero, and nearly got myself killed by a rapist. A lot of difference that made. But maybe there are things I don't understand.

As I'm mulling this over, Mr. Rahbani claps his hands loudly and shouts: "Now! Who is joining us on this intrepid expedition? This aquatic adventure? Romero! *Vamos!* Hector! Lucia! We have two spaces, *dos*, maybe *tres*. Yes?"

But the Romero's just smile shyly and look around at each other. Finally they're spared by Laila's appearance at the door to the hallway. She waves at me from across the room, a small, private wave.

"Ah! There is that daughter of mine," says Mr. Rahbani, striding over, throwing a big arm around her shoulder, tipping her little body off balance. "Women!" he adds, with affection. "We are going out in a canoe into a swamp, and you spend an hour getting ready. What you do in there, I will never know. OK then! We are off."

He blows a theatrical kiss at his wife, and the three of us file out the front door. Mr. Rahbani's big Jeep has an old, faded-green aluminum canoe strapped to its roof. Behind it, Laila's Lexus sports a little yellow kayak. Underneath its unlikely cargo, the Lexus looks slightly annoyed, or embarrassed.

"What's with the two boats?" asks Laila doubtfully. "Can't we all go in the canoe?"

"Absolutely not," says her father over his shoulder, as he arranges things in his trunk. "You and the Maestro get your own boat. Who needs some old man crowding in?"

"You're sending us in the Hulk," she says, crossing her arms. "Alone. Into a swamp."

"The Hulk?" I ask mildly.

"Well, not *alone* alone," says Mr. R., backing out of the trunk. "I'll be there in the kayak. What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know. Snakebite. Drowning. Attack by rednecks."

"Hypothermia," I add.

"Wow!" says Mr. R. "This enthusiasm is just too much! We'd better go before anyone gets any more excited!" He double-checks the straps on the boats, and having apparently run out of objections, Laila gets in the Lexus and stares at me until I get in with her.

"I haven't lifted a paddle in about six years," I say as we follow Mr. R.'s jeep out the driveway and down the street.

"Well, it's not rocket science," says Laila casually.

She drives like she always does, in fits and starts, heavy on the brake. There was a time when that seemed lovable. Then there was a time when it seemed extremely irritating. Now it just seems like part of her, like her garbled text messages and her ever-so-slightly bent nose.

As the kayak shifts and bumps ominously, I look over at her, out of the corner of my eye, pretending to rest my face on my hand and stare off into space. She's as inscrutable as ever. That's a word I'm trying to use more often. Inscrutable. *Scruta* means scraps, rags, junk. (Like scrotum, but that's another story.) So to *scrut* someone, I guess, is to search through all the crap, the junk, to get at the real things, the valuable things, hidden inside. Laila doesn't make that easy. She keeps her real self close. Somehow I think that's part of what attracts me to her. The challenge of it all.

We wind through the neighborhood, moving downhill down streets I've never seen, and probably never would have. Some houses look completely abandoned; others are bustling with people, sitting on their porches and talking on their lawns, folks with nowhere to go and nothing else to do. After a couple of minutes we get to a dead end, marked by wood posts with red reflectors. Behind the posts are nothing but bare trees.

"Hear that?" I ask. "Banjos."

"Thanks. Very helpful," she answers as we pull off on the shoulder. "Just remember, whatever happens, it's my dad's fault."

Mr. R. and I hoist the canoe off the Jeep and carry it down into the woods. As my sneakers sink into the muck, I find myself thinking fondly of May's waders. It won't be the last time. The water starts about twenty yards in, and past that point, there isn't a scrap of dry land to be seen. Something splashes, a splash slightly too big for comfort. Over my shoulder, a bird, or something, cuts loose with a screech straight out of a Tarzan soundtrack.

Mr. R. slings a very skeptical Laila onto his back, and ferries her out to the edge of the water. We clamber into the canoe—the Hulk—with me in the stern. I shove a paddle into the

muck to push off. The water bubbles around my paddle, and the smell of rotten eggs wafts into our faces.

It takes us a few minutes to work out the kinks. The Hulk has about the same turning radius as the Titanic, and I start out by paddling us straight into a stump, making the boat rock and Laila scowl over her shoulder. Mr. R. gives us a cheerful Army salute as he zips past in the kayak.

“Do you actually have a plan,” Laila yells, “or is the idea just to get lost as quickly as possible?”

Mr. R., spinning the kayak around nimbly, holds a finger to his lips. “You’ll scare off all the wildlife,” he says in a low voice.

“Exactly.”

He rummages around in the pack between his knees and produces a compass. “Just follow me. I was practically born in these woods. And for goodness’ sake don’t say the L word.”

“Lesbians?”

“I think he means ‘lost.’”

“Where does he think he’s going?” says Laila, to no one in particular. “It all looks the same to me.”

But as we plunge into the swamp, the yellow kayak leading us on like a bobbing beacon, the trees get steadily bigger and the water gets steadily blacker and the animals—birds, frogs, other things I can only imagine—get steadily louder. A long ripple just ahead of us resolves itself into a snaky silver fin, making Laila shudder and lift her paddle over her head. Every so

often we pass through a shallower stretch, and I can see flowers blooming just under the surface, violets I think, like they've been preserved under glass. Are they dead, and just frozen in place?

I'm not getting much help from Laila, but that's OK. The soreness feels good. After a while the trees thin out ahead of us, and we come into a clearing, where white birds flap off croaking and the sun warms my skin. Mr. R. has paddled up against a cypress stump and is munching on a granola bar.

"Snack?" I say.

"Sure."

We find a stump of our own and dig out some trail mix from the bag that Mrs. R. packed. Trail mix never tasted so good. Sitting there in the sun and the trees, slouched on the hard aluminum seat with my head leaned back, I marvel at the fact that we're still within the city limits. We might as well be in Peru.

"I have to pee," says Laila matter-of-factly.

"Have fun with that."

We munch for a few minutes more. Then she breaks the silence again.

"I'm a little scared, Paul."

"What? This isn't so bad. We haven't seen a single snake. Or a single redneck, for that matter."

"No...I mean..."

"Oh."

We consider this for a while. Brains slow down in the sun: that's a scientific fact.

Eventually I say: "But it's over, right? You're safe. He's going to jail. Right?"

“I hope so,” she says softly. “I hope to God so.” I can just see the side of her face. It ripples faintly, catching the light from the water.

“But if there’s a trial?” she adds, turning around to look at me. “If I have to testify?”

“You’ll do it.”

“I don’t know if I’m strong enough.”

I dip a finger in the water, drawing circles, making a little eddy.

“You know what? I didn’t think I could say the things that I said. To him, I mean. But when it came to it...I don’t know. Something stronger took over.”

“What did you say?” she asks.

I shake my head, remembering. “Jeez. All kinds of stuff. I told him he was a liar. I told him to do whatever he wanted to me, that I didn’t care, that all I wanted was to come in there and tell the truth. You know. Clint Eastwood type stuff.” I laugh, a hollow laugh.

“Did he lie to you?”

“Yeah. He told me that you failed his final, and then tried to blackmail him into raising your grade. That was his story.”

“He really said that?” She looks off into the woods, her lips pursed. “What a...what a...” She trails off, searching in vain for a word that’s bad enough.

“Yeah. And you know...” I scoop water onto my paddle, watch it roll off the blade. “I think he might have actually believed it. Or part of him believed it. It’s weird. It’s like there were two different people in there, fighting for control. Two different people living in two different worlds.”

“Whatever,” she says in a flat voice. “One person, two people, ten people, I don’t care. He’s a monster and I hope he rots somewhere forever.”

This makes me uncomfortable, for a reason I can't put my finger on. I zip up the trail mix and pull out a bottle of water. Over our heads, the sky is a blue so deep it sucks you in, sucks you up and away.

"Did he try to hurt you?" says Laila.

"He threw a desk at me. I have a bruise on my shin. Not exactly Purple Heart material."

"God," she says. "He could have killed you. I can't believe I let you go in there."

"No...he couldn't have. I don't think he had it in him. I can't explain it. But I think he was too weak."

We sit in silence a while longer. Then she asks, as if it's suddenly occurred to her: "Why didn't you believe him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said he told you that story. About me trying to blackmail him. Why didn't you believe him? Why did you take my word over his?"

I haven't really thought about that since it happened. I take a minute to think about it now.

"I almost did, to be honest," I answer slowly. "I hesitated. But then..."

"What?"

"I don't know. It was almost like...this sounds weird. But it was like I heard voices in my head, telling me what to believe."

"Voices."

"Kind of. You know when you have to make a tough decision? And you think you're alone, but really...really...there's all these people standing behind you? People who...maybe

aren't around anymore, but they're part of you, part of the equation. And you just have to sum it up. People like my...I don't know. Whatever. That doesn't make sense."

"Yes it does," says Laila firmly, looking over her shoulder at me. "It does make sense. Plenty of sense."

People like my mom, I was about to say. But still, even now, I can't go there. I can't open up that box. Those memories are like violets, covered by the flood, preserved under glass.

Mr. R. has cast off from his stump, and he gives us a big wave as he paddles toward the far side of the clearing. We back the canoe out and follow after him.

"We're going *farther*?" asks Laila in disbelief.

"He knows what he's doing, right?" I say. "He was an Eagle Scout, or something. Right? Or he was in the Special Forces. He knows exactly what he's doing."

"He's lived in the city his whole life. I don't think he's been in a boat in twenty years."

"Nice. Comforting. Hey...do you smell something?"

"Yeah. I thought it was you."

"If I smell like that, I'm in trouble. That's a dead smell."

The stench gets stronger as we thread our way through a stand of small trees, their bare twigs splotched with fuzzy maroon: flowers, I realize as one of the twigs nearly rakes my face. They seem out of place, almost garish against the bleak gray and black of the swamp. But further on, we duck under a thicket of spindly bushes with swollen buds in a pale gray-green. Life waiting to burst. A flood is nothing in the face of life.

Then we drift under some low-hanging vines and out into another clearing, and the source of the smell becomes obvious. There's a miniature island at the far end of the clearing, a

little hill flooded to its shoulders, and washed up against it is an enormous bloated animal. I think it's probably a cow, although it's anyone's guess since the head isn't visible.

"Ew. No," says Laila, more or less to herself. "Gross. Dad, don't go over there. You're not going over there. Right? Great. Of course. You're going over there." And sure enough, Mr. R. aims straight for the dead cow. I dig in with my paddle, trying to keep pace.

"What are you doing?" Laila asks. "Why are we going *toward* the corpse? Hello? Am I the only sane person here?"

"Wow, that's *really* gross," I say helpfully, trying to avoid breathing through my nose. "Look—is there something moving on it?"

"You know, this would really be a good time to—" But Laila stops short, because just at that moment Mr. R. gets to within ten yards or so of the cow, and without warning it explodes in yellow. A riot of yellow. A storm of yellow. Enveloping the cow, spiraling outward, now swallowing Mr. R. in a whirling cloud. And before we know it the clearing has filled with fluttering shapes, flashing gold with every turn, and I feel like the canoe is spinning too, like we're in a snow globe turned upside down. As I sit there paralyzed, one of the yellow shapes flutters down onto the sleeve of my jacket.

"Butterflies," I say. The butterfly rubs its wings together thoughtfully, pokes its long tongue out, prodding my sleeve. Its wings are brownish on the back, mottled, like dead leaves. When they open the yellow is almost blinding, like the flash of a spotlight. I hold it out toward Laila.

"Um, no thanks," she says. "It's been crawling around on a dead cow." But her voice is soft. I hear that unfamiliar music in it again. The warmth, the wholeness. The sound of Laila herself, still muffled by the weight of the world, but finding her way free.

The sun is high now. We make our way through the cloud, staring, and turn toward
home.

Spring

*“And, O thou tree of many-branching boughs,
spreading dark shadows on the corpse of one,
destined to cover twain, take thou our fate
upon thy head; mourn our untimely deaths;
let thy fruit darken for a memory,
an emblem of our blood.”*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV

Wednesday

Today, the seventeenth of May, is Mulberry Day. That's not some Anglo-Saxon holiday. It's not anyone's holiday. I made it up myself, this morning, because on the twisted old trees along the front walk of Bork, the first few mulberries are ripening, swelling with black juice, turning from white to red to that shirt-staining purple. For a few days they'll hang there, half-hidden ornaments, as the kids shuffle to and from the cars and buses, noses buried in books as they cram for finals, or more likely buried in cell phones as they make their summer plans. Then, just as the last days of school are ticking down, just about the time the thermometer hits ninety-five and the sidewalks start to shimmer, the birds will find them. They'll swirl down in a squealing cloud, and the trees will tremble with their weird tin-whistle sounds that no one else seems to notice, and then as soon as they came they'll be gone, gone with the mulberries into the haze of summer.

If I sound even fuller of crap than usual, there's a good reason for it. I'm nervous. That's right. Nervous. Today isn't just Mulberry Day. It's also the eve of the day chosen by the Cosmic Powers that Be, a.k.a. the Bork Scheduling Committee, for the universal premiere of *Morph: The Musical*.

Of course, this isn't the *Morph* that might have been. The Tallahoma River took care of that. It didn't help that Assistant Director Mee-gan vanished in March to go live with her dad in Singapore, or that Production Designer Dennis came down with mono in April, or that college visits and standardized tests and Model UN and a hundred other things competed for everyone's time. In fact, there was a low point, around spring break, when those of us still standing

wondered if *Morph* might be just as cursed as the Scottish Play. Luckily no one's pants, to the best of my knowledge, have caught on fire. Yet.

And the John Brainerd scandal didn't help either.

Naturally, all they told us at first was that he was out on sick leave. Then the *Herald* splashed a red-eyed mug shot halfway across the front page, with the headline: *BORK SHOCKER. Award-Winning Teacher Accused of Sex with Student.* And for the next couple of weeks, that was all anyone could talk about. The rumors, and the fuzzy memories, swarmed like bees: I think Brainerd tried to come on to me, once. I'm pretty sure. I saw Brainerd sitting in his car once, looking at a magazine. Probably a dirty magazine. Remember that weird girl who left after freshman year? Maybe Brainerd raped her too. Probably. Hey, you know there's going to be a trial. You know we're all going to have to testify. You know it's going to drag on for months, years maybe.

The papers dug deep, constantly updating a "Brainerd File" that grew after a few days to take up half of Page Two. They had to dig deep, because there wasn't an awful lot to work with. Brainerd was an only child. His parents died when he was six. He went to live with his grandmother, who was addicted to sleeping pills. He was a straight-A student but didn't seem to have many friends. One guy thought he remembered, maybe, one time, little Brainerd burning ants with a magnifying glass. Otherwise, his record was pretty damn clean. He was the guy next door. Oh, and he was in a soap opera once. But just as an extra.

No one ate it up more than the local news crews, who took to lurking on the Bork sidewalks every day at the last bell, hoping to pry whatever juicy anecdotes they could out of camera-friendly Latin students. I tried as hard as humanly possible to avoid them, to avoid all of it. But sooner or later someone connected the dots and remembered that I had stayed late to talk

to Mr. Brainerd that day, the day the cops came. Once Channel Four found out, they pounced on me on my way to the parking lot.

“Paul Fisher?” said a blonde lady, covered with makeup, shoving a mic into my face. Barbie Dinkins.

“Yeah.”

“I’m here with Paul Fisher,” she said breathlessly into the camera. “Our sources tell us that Paul was with John Brainerd at the time of his arrest. Paul, would you mind talking to us for a few minutes?”

“Whatever.”

“What exactly was your relationship with John Brainerd?” Barbie waved at the cameraman to get a better angle, blocking my path down the steps.

“He was my Latin teacher.”

“And why did you stay late on that particular day?”

“To talk to him about an essay I wrote.”

“Very interesting. Paul, did you have any idea of John Brainerd’s dark secrets?”

“No.”

“Tell us a little more about that afternoon. What was your reaction when the police arrived on the scene? And can you describe John Brainerd’s reaction?”

“Sure. He went crazy. He started speaking in tongues. He threatened to blow up the whole building.”

“*Really.*” Barbie’s hand trembled on the mic.

“No. I made that up. What do you want me to say? They put him in handcuffs and took him away. He didn’t look too thrilled about it. That was it.”

“Fuck,” said Barbie, turning to the camera and drawing a finger across her throat. “Pack it up, Jerry. Kid’s useless. What the fuck is it with this place?” And with that Channel Four slouched off, grumbling.

With all the rumors flying, it was hard to get a handle on the truth. But there was one part of it that nobody doubted—nobody at Bork, I mean. That was the identity of the victim. Within two days everyone had put two and two together and settled on Laila. But it’s a funny thing. Once they’d settled on her, it was like everyone agreed to drop it, to leave it alone, not to mention her name. No one breathed a word about her to Channel Four, or to the *Herald*, or to anyone else. They say high school is all cliques and backstabbers and outcasts, but I caught a glimpse of a different Bork then. A Bork that circled its wagons.

This went on for a couple of weeks, like I said. And then, just like that, it was over. Brainerd pled guilty. He confessed to everything and got a twelve-year sentence. No trial. All the air came out of Barbie Dinkins and the *Herald* reporters. As soon as the next juicy thing came along—the mayor’s divorce, as it turned out—they dropped Brainerd like a hot potato. As for the Bork student body, whose collective attention span is possibly even shorter than Barbie Dinkins’, they—we—just went right on with our lives. Picked right up where we left off. With the minor exception that now we had a sub to torture in Latin class.

And Laila herself? No one saw her or heard from her for a while, least of all me. And then, one Tuesday in April, she reappeared, in a gray T-shirt. There were glances and whispers. The crowds parted in the hallway to let her pass, surrounding her with a little bubble of uncertainty, for the first two or three class changes. Then everything went back to normal.

Laila didn't say much. I don't know what she could possibly have said, anyway. But when she passed me for the first time, on my way to Miss T's, she made sure to come up close, and she reached out and squeezed my hand.

Thursday

“Lighting! Where is Lighting?”

May Tingle is even more out of breath than usual. It might have something to do with the fact that she’s running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Or the fact that she’s wearing a white beard and a toga, ready to loose the fiery bolts, and bid the Southwind blow. May is our Zeus. Inevitable, really.

“You mean Arnold?” comes the reply, from behind a curtain somewhere. “I think he’s taking a dump.”

May leans a hand on one of our Styrofoam columns, lets out a long sigh, yanks at her beard and scratches her face underneath it. “On in TWENTY, people!” she yells, to no one in particular. “Where is my chorus? I need my chorus up here in front! Robed and ready!”

Right on cue, a little cluster of freshmen in bedsheets comes scurrying past, practicing a song—one of mine, naturally—*sotto voce*. A pair of giant wings bobs by in the opposite direction, whacking one of the columns as it passes and nearly bringing down the whole temple on May’s head. It’s Ubaldo, the Ecuadorean guitar-slinger, in character as Icarus.

“Good grief, be careful! The last thing we need is more destruction!”

“Sorry. The wings—one of them, maybe, bigger than the other? I walk, kind of, in circles, see?”

“OK, we’ll get that looked at. Costumes? Melissa? Where is Costumes? Hello, do I have to do everything myself?”

Ubaldo totters off in search of Costumes, and as the corridor clears out between us, May notices me for the first time. I’m perched up on Mount Olympus—that is, the covered stack of

beanbag chairs that stands in for it—with the Minotaur head, my faithful companion, sitting next to me.

May cocks her head at me. “Paul? Is that you up there? Isn’t there something you’re supposed to be doing?”

“Not really,” I say. “I went over everything one last time with the chorus. I went over the Syrinx song again with Kristy. We ended up writing the lyrics on her hand with a Sharpie. That was the only way.”

“OK. Well...come on down, and help me make sure everyone’s in the right place? I don’t know where the time goes. We’re on in fifteen.”

“OK.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, just...I don’t know.”

“You’re not *nervous*.”

“Nervous? No. Maybe.”

“Paul, all you’ve got to do is wander around out there with a cow head on for five minutes. You have, like, two lines, and one of them is ‘ROAR.’”

“It’s ‘ARRR,’” I point out. “Yeah, it’s not that. I just—”

“You’re just nervous about all this music you’ve written? And you feel like you’re baring your soul in front of everyone? And you’re realizing how much has changed since you got into this, and you’re feeling kind of bittersweet and mixed up about it all?”

“Um...yeah, you pretty much nailed it.”

“Guess what? It’s not just you. And Paul...this is, like, a side thing for you. An afterthought. You have so many talents. So many places you’re going. For me? This is, like, everything. This is the whole past year. This is my *baby*.”

“OK.”

“So if anyone’s allowed to be nervous, it’s me.”

“OK.”

She gives me a long look, a look I swear I got from my mom a thousand times. Then she spins around on her heel and barks: “On in TEN! Do I have Lighting? Do I have Costumes?”

The Minotaur and I clamber down from Mount Olympus, and head off in search of work. As we slip past, though, May puts out an arm and stops me for a moment, grinning.

“Hey,” she says. “This is going to be a-*maze*-ing. Get it?”

And you know what? She’s right. It is amazing. *Morph* is freaking amazing. This is the first time I’ve been able to just sit back and watch it. Crouching there in the wings, peeking out at the packed auditorium, listening as the overture—*my* overture, with the rumbling drums and the spiraling strings, chaos gathering into order—rings out from the big Bork speakers: it’s like an out-of-body experience. The chorus files on stage for the first song, and they absolutely nail it. Wild applause from the seats, almost startled, like they’d been expecting—what? A bunch of no-count kids?

The first big scene stars Kristy the cheerleader as Syrinx, and this guy Dan, a football player, as Pan, the goat-god. I call Dan “Dan, Dan, He’s Our Man” because that’s what Kristy and the rest of the cheerleaders say at the football games. Dan’s scene is the one I was probably the most worried about. He doesn’t have to do a whole lot—we made sure of that—but Kristy’s got to sing, and run, and turn into a clump of reeds (lowered from a rope by Dennis Skelton), all

more or less at the same time. All this for a girl who thought that Greece was a mythical island that had vanished into the sea. But even if Kristy's confused about a few things, she's a born performer. And now that it comes down to showtime, she owns this role. She twirls, she poses, she flashes a smile at the audience. She doesn't botch a single line. And when the reeds magically appear and swallow her up, I swear I hear a gasp or two from the seats.

Best of all, though, is the Orpheus scene. Orpheus is Hubert Head, the pint-sized, shell-shocked freshman. Hubert turned out to have some pretty serious musical chops, once we spent some time with him. The trouble was that you never knew what you were going to get. At one rehearsal he'd be freaking Pavarotti, and at the next he'd relapse into catatonic terror. But somehow he convinced us to cast him as Orpheus, a pretty meaty role: his beloved Eurydice gets killed by a snake, he heads down to the underworld to fetch her, charms everyone with his kick-ass lyre playing, talks Hades into giving up the girl, and then loses her forever anyway when he goofs and looks back on his way up.

So we're all biting our nails when Hubert's time comes up. But from the second he opens his mouth, I know it's all good. When the demons come scuttling out and yank Eurydice back into the underworld, and Hubert launches into his song of grief—a simple song, just three minor chords on the closest thing to a lyre-sound I could find on the Internet—scattered applause breaks out before the end of the first verse, kind of startled again, like no one expected pipes like those on a kid that pitiful-looking. By the time the song's over, I swear to God you could hear a pin drop in that auditorium. Principal Boudreaux's in the front row, one of the stage lights catching his face, and I'm pretty sure I spot a tear in his eye.

So once we get to intermission, everyone is riding a serious buzz. The curtain comes down and the chorus comes skipping off stage, giggling and clapping their hands. We trade

high-fives in the wings. Dennis Skelton gives me a flying chest-bump. I politely decline Dan the football player's offer to do the same. Against all odds, everything is working. Everyone is happy.

And then comes Act Two, Scene One. The Minotaur.

The lights go down in the auditorium, the curtain rises, and the chorus files back out to sing their little introductory song. I still regret that we couldn't line up an orchestra, or at least a few real musicians, to play my music. But with everything else we've had to worry about over the past few months, it's probably better this way. And it sounds pretty good coming through the speakers. It sounds *really* good once the sopranos kick in with their harmony toward the end of the piece. In fact, I'm so absorbed in listening that I almost miss my cue.

"You're on!" hisses May in my ear, loud enough to make me jump, as the stage lights dim and the stagehands drag our makeshift Labyrinth into place. I grab my cow head, wrestle it on, and make my way onstage—slowly, one step at a time, since I can't see a damn thing. And there, in the exact middle of the Labyrinth, I wait.

Out in the seats, the coughs and whispers fade as the music starts up again: just drums, low, rumbling. Arnold has rigged it so that I'm backlit, only visible in silhouette. I can see the audience, but they can't see me. I turn my head ever so slowly, surveying the darkened faces. I wonder if Laila's out there.

And now a light appears, stage left. It's Dennis as Theseus. Against the extremely vocal wishes of May Tingle, Dennis insisted on carrying the closest thing he could swing to a real torch: a cheap cigarette lighter, tweaked to shoot out a flame about ten times normal size, and tied to the end of a metal rod. May finally relented on the condition that Dennis clear it with Principal Boudreaux, since the use of open flames on school property is pretty much discouraged

under most circumstances. Dennis said he cleared it. It now occurs to me that he was probably lying.

So Theseus launches into his soliloquy, a short speech about how dark and freaky it is in the Labyrinth, and how grateful he is for the string that what's-her-name gave him to find his way out. Meanwhile, I'm standing there thinking: why doesn't the Minotaur have more lines, anyway? Hell-spawn have feelings too. Wouldn't this scene be more effective if we got to hear both sides of the story?

But I've got to give it up to Dennis: he's in rare form. In rehearsals May kept having to yell at him. "Project!" she would say. "Project!" Well, he's projecting. He's Al Pacino out there. He's Charlton Heston. And the way he's brandishing that sword—Arnold's old plastic "Conan the Barbarian" sword from when he was a kid—you'd think he was Theseus' long-lost great-great-grandson.

Now Theseus emerges into the center of the Labyrinth. My time has come.

"ARRR!!" yells the Minotaur, as loud and monstrous as I can muster.

"Aha!" yells Theseus. "At last! Your reign of terror must end!"

The drums swell.

Theseus lunges with his sword.

And now he's practically on top of me. *Hey, we didn't practice it this way*, I think. And I realize that Dennis has stumbled on something, that he's fallen into me, that he's now trying to push himself off.

"Foul play, monster!" bellows Theseus. A pretty decent ad-lib.

Someone in the crowd gasps.

I catch a whiff of something odd. A smell I don't recognize. In the heat of the moment, I don't think much of it.

Until Theseus leans forward, turning his head to avoid being overheard, and in a calm, steady, and very serious voice, whispers six words that will forever be immortalized in the annals of Bork history:

“Dude. You're kind of on fire.”

And the next thing I know the crowd is talking, getting to their feet, pointing, and Dennis is waving wildly toward the wings, and my cow-head which was hot to begin with is suddenly very hot indeed, and it's filling very quickly with a smell that I realize is burning varnish, and now I'm starting to wrestle with the thing, trying not to panic, but wanting it off of my head very, very much, and very, very soon. And someone's yelling, and the lights in the auditorium are coming on, and a figure is running across the stage toward me, waving something that I can't identify through my tiny eye-holes. Something red. And then there's a *ffft* and a big cloud of white, and voices around me, and someone tugging at my head, and it's suddenly not hot at all, it's cold. Really, really cold. Jack London cold.

And the last thing I remember, as the world spins and my eyes roll shut, is thinking: *It's real. The curse is real.*

Friday

That would have been a pretty sweet ending. I'd love to see the look on Dr. Silverman's face, on the off chance that a snowball fight broke loose in Hell and I actually showed her this journal.

It wouldn't be 100% honest to stop there, though. Yeah, I blacked out for a few seconds. Yeah, I brought *Morph* to a screeching halt as Principal Boudreaux and his minions raced onstage, and the audience milled around wondering if they should do something, and Camille knelt over me blubbering like a baby because she thought I was dead. Yeah, I got a pretty memorable chemistry lesson about what happens when you take a lung-filling hit of CO₂. But after a quick trip to the hospital, I was fine. Along with a brief lecture on fire-extinguisher safety, the doctor pointed out that it was a good thing the Minotaur's eye-holes were as small as they were. Probably kept some oxygen in and saved me from suffocating to death.

About half the *Morph* cast and crew were standing around in the ER waiting room when I got out. A little cheer went up when they saw I was OK. Then we had an impromptu meeting just outside. Dennis sheepishly pointed out that he had tripped over Orpheus' lyre, which someone had forgotten to schlep offstage at intermission. We agreed that the show must go on, that we would send out word that the Friday night performance of *Morph* would proceed as scheduled, with a new set of safety precautions in place.

And my mysterious, extinguisher-wielding assailant? It didn't take me long to learn that it had been none other than May Tingle. Outside the ER, while the rest of us strategized and commiserated, May stood off to the side and looked at her feet. I could tell she was shaken up.

“Hey,” I said to her as the meeting broke up. “Why the long face? You probably saved my life.”

“I could have killed you,” she said, looking up with an anguished expression. “I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Hey, whatever. Somebody had to do something. I’m glad it was you.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Do you think *Morph* is cursed?”

I laughed. “The thought did kind of cross my mind. But you know what? I don’t give a crap. I don’t give a single, solitary, flying crap. There’s no doubt in my mind that we’ve got to keep going.”

“Do you think God wants us to do this?” May suddenly seemed very small, and scared. Like a kid.

“Yes,” I said emphatically. “I don’t know a whole lot about God. But if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that He wants *Morph* to go on.”

And go on it did. Friday’s performance, it turned out, was even better than Thursday’s. Yeah, we flubbed a few lines. Dan, Dan, He’s Our Man had a little bit of a brain outage in the middle of the Pan scene, and stood there staring at Kristy for a full minute and a half before she prompted him. I thought that my “ARRR!!” wasn’t quite as strong as it had been the night before. I guess it didn’t matter, though, because the crowd went wild after everything I did. My brush with death seemed to have been a really good thing for *Morph*. Now it wasn’t just a school play. It was a story.

And most importantly, we made it all the way to the end. We got to lower Icarus by a rope into the cardboard waves. We got to send Dennis out in his lion suit—a suit that had turned out even better than the first one thanks to May’s working overtime after the flood—to snort and

snarl at the star-crossed lovers. And we got to watch Galatea—whose body was no longer Laila’s, naturally, but the taller, rounder, big-boobed body of Melissa Crump—come lurching to life, thanks to some smoke and mirrors from Arnold the lighting virtuoso. The crowd ate it up. We had so many curtain calls, and so many standing ovations, at the end that I lost count.

Afterwards, we all went *en masse* to my house. That’s right: my house. Camille was feeling all warm and fuzzy towards everyone after my near-death experience, and she demanded that we let her throw a celebratory party. There was nothing I could do, as usual, to talk her out of it. So everyone piled into my living room, still sporting our togas and face paint and pipe-cleaner whiskers, and we all, even May, sipped on the champagne that my dad had bought against Camille’s better judgment, and we marveled at our successes and we laughed at our failures, and we made fun of Dan Dan He’s Our Man until he got all sensitive and brooded over the chips bowl in the corner, and Kristy had to go and sit in his lap and cheer him up.

After a while the conversation turned nostalgic.

“Man,” said Ubaldo, who hadn’t said a word all night. “This was good, very good play. Maybe in top five, ten plays, in my life, you know.”

“Top *ten*?” said Arnold. “How many freaking plays have you been in?”

“Oh...sure, many plays. I come from family of actors, you know, in Ecuador.”

“Wow,” said Kristy, giggling. “They have *actors* in Ecuador? I totally thought, like, everyone just walked around naked and ate coconuts.”

“Now he tells us,” added Melissa. “He probably could have been giving us, like, lessons this whole time.”

“No no,” said Ubaldo mildly. “You all very good, very good. What do you say? Oscar. You are all Oscar.”

We all had a good laugh at this. But Ubaldo wasn't finished.

"But you know...I think, I always think, about play that *could have been*. Right?"

"What, like, if it weren't for the whole flood thing?"

"Yeah, that little, minor hiccup, with the city disappearing underwater for a week?"

"And that asshole Brainerd?"

"And what's-her-face ditching us for Suriname?"

"Singapore, dude."

"For some dumb country nobody's ever heard of? And what about Dennis getting stupid mono? What's up with that, Dennis?"

"Mono is, like, the kissing disease, right? He must have been getting a little something on the side."

"You know what?" May broke in, running a finger along the rim of her barely-touched champagne glass. "Yeah, all those things set us back? And maybe the costumes weren't as nice, and the sets weren't quite as fancy. And we missed out on some rehearsals that probably would have tightened a couple of scenes up here and there. But..."

"I know what she's going to say," interrupted Amanda. "And I bet I can say it quicker. All that stuff brought us closer together. It made it a better play in the end. Right?"

May smiled. "Right. Amen to that."

"Amen to that," we chorused, and the clinking of glasses rippled across the room.

Then Melissa turned to Dennis and said, "Yeah, who were you smooching on, anyway?"

Dennis, who had been unusually quiet, just smiled and looked down at his glass.

"He doesn't want us to know," said Arnold. "It was probably his cousin. Or some forty-year-old lady."

“Yeah, some cougar lady. Rawr.”

“Dude,” said Dennis, shaking his head. “You guys have it all wrong. You have no idea.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He just smiled and kind of sighed. “I’ve been wanting to tell you for, like, a while. But I figured you already knew.”

Crickets.

“I’m gay, man.”

Someone laughs involuntarily, and then shuts up.

“Whoa,” said Melissa.

“What does he say?” whispered Ubaldo.

“Well, that’s...uh...” said Amanda. “That’s great, Dennis. I don’t think anyone really expected that.”

“I thought it was obvious,” said Dennis.

“No...not exactly. But hey...you know what? Can we toast to that? To Dennis?”

“To gay Dennis,” said Arnold, and the room filled with the clinking of glasses again.

“Wait,” said Dan Dan He’s Our Man, blinking, behind the curve as usual. “Is he saying...he likes *dudes*?”

We all laughed at this. But I noticed that May wasn’t laughing. In fact, she was staring a hole into her champagne.

Dennis noticed too. “Hey, you know,” he said. “I figured not everyone would be cool with that. That’s OK. I just couldn’t, like, keep it to myself anymore, man. This is who I am. You can take it or leave it.”

May looked like she was wrestling with something. “No, it’s fine,” she said finally, in a tight voice. “That’s your choice. It’s not a choice I would make. But you’re free to make it.”

Dennis kind of laughed and glanced around. I tried like hell to come up with some way to change the subject, but I wasn’t quick enough.

“No, dude,” he said. “It’s not a choice at all. It just kind of happened. I mean, what kind of dumbass would choose to be gay, anyway? It’s kind of a pain in the ass.”

There was another silence, while everyone tried really, really hard not to laugh. Finally Dennis caught on and said, “Yeah, yeah, OK, I get it. I was asking for it. But no, seriously, man. I want you to know that this is not something I chose. Just like, you know, May didn’t choose to be a girl. And Ubaldo didn’t choose to be from El Salvador. Or wherever. And Dan didn’t choose to have, like, forearms the size of freaking trees. OK, maybe he kind of did. But you know what I’m saying.”

“Totally,” said Melissa. “I mean, I never chose to like guys. I never woke up one morning and was like, Wow, I think I might try guys. It was more like I woke up and was like, Wow. Guys. I really, really like guys.”

“I couldn’t have said it better, dude,” said Dennis.

“I just...just forget it,” said May, looking like she really, really wanted to be somewhere else. “That’s not what my religion teaches, OK? That’s all I’m going to say.”

“That’s cool,” said Dennis. “You know what? I’ll make you a deal, man. We can still be friends. Hell, it’ll be easier now that I’m out of the closet. I’ll stop coming on to you all the damn time.” Laughter. “And you can hang out with me, and maybe make your own decision about the whole gay thing.”

“What, you mean, like, decide whether *she’s* gay?” asked Dan, falling farther and farther behind.

“No...” groaned Amanda. “He means, like, she can decide whether that’s something she can live with.”

Dennis looked at May. May looked at her champagne glass. Her face scrunched up and turned a couple of shades pinker than usual, like there was a battle going on behind it. And then a funny thing happened. Call it a miracle. You might as well, because we don’t get too many of those around here.

I don’t know if the two sips of booze had loosened her up a bit, or if she was still high off *Morph*, or what, but May’s face went kind of soft, and she looked up at Dennis. And she folded her hands. And she said, in a steady voice: “God loves you. That much I know. And so I love you too.”

“I love you too, dude,” said Dennis.

“And God works in mysterious ways. And your point of view is just as good as mine.”

“Yeah. Amen.”

“And you can teach me about yours, just like I can teach you about mine.”

We all sat there quietly, looking from one to the other.

“Dude,” said Dennis solemnly. “That is some beautiful shit. Come here and give me some sugar.”