

CHAPTER FIVE

I did not speak to Augustus again for about a week. I had called him on the Night of the Broken Trophies, so per tradition it was his turn to call. But he didn't. Now, it wasn't as if I held my phone in my sweaty hand all day, staring at it while wearing my Special Yellow Dress, patiently waiting for my gentleman caller to live up to his sobriquet. I went about my life: I met Kaitlyn and her (cute but frankly not Augustinian) boyfriend for coffee one afternoon; I ingested my recommended daily allowance of Phalanxifor; I attended classes three mornings that week at MCC; and every night, I sat down to dinner with my mom and dad.

Sunday night, we had pizza with green peppers and broccoli. We were seated around our little circular table in

the kitchen when my phone started singing, but I wasn't allowed to check it because we have a strict no-phones-during-dinner rule.

So I ate a little while Mom and Dad talked about this earthquake that had just happened in Papua New Guinea. They met in the Peace Corps in Papua New Guinea, and so whenever anything happened there, even something terrible, it was like all of a sudden they were not large sedentary creatures, but the young and idealistic and self-sufficient and rugged people they had once been, and their rapture was such that they didn't even glance over at me as I ate faster than I'd ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed and ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs were again swimming in a rising pool of fluid. I banished the thought as best I could. I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple weeks. If something was wrong, I'd find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now and then.

And yet still I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying.

Finally I finished and said, "Can I be excused?" and they hardly even paused from their conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of Guinean infrastructure. I grabbed my phone from my purse on the kitchen counter and checked my recent calls. *Augustus Waters*.

I went out the back door into the twilight. I could see

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the swing set, and I thought about walking out there and swinging while I talked to him, but it seemed pretty far away given that *eating* tired me.

Instead, I lay down in the grass on the patio's edge, looked up at Orion, the only constellation I could recognize, and called him.

"Hazel Grace," he said.

"Hi," I said. "How are you?"

"Grand," he said. "I have been wanting to call you on a nearly minutely basis, but I have been waiting until I could form a coherent thought in re *An Imperial Affliction*." (He said "in re." He really did. That boy.)

"And?" I said.

"I think it's, like. Reading it, I just kept feeling like, like."

"Like?" I asked, teasing him.

"Like it was a gift?" he said askingly. "Like you'd given me something important."

"Oh," I said quietly.

"That's cheesy," he said. "I'm sorry."

"No," I said. "No. Don't apologize."

"But it doesn't end."

"Yeah," I said.

"Torture. I totally *get it*, like, I get that she died or whatever."

"Right, I assume so," I said.

“And okay, fair enough, but there is this unwritten contract between author and reader and I think not ending your book kind of violates that contract.”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling defensive of Peter Van Houten. “That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do—God, I do really want to know what happens to everyone else. That’s what I asked him in my letters. But he, yeah, he never answers.”

“Right. You said he is a recluse?”

“Correct.”

“Impossible to track down.”

“Correct.”

“Utterly unreachable,” Augustus said.

“Unfortunately so,” I said.

“Dear Mr. Waters,” he answered. “I am writing to thank you for your electronic correspondence, received via Ms. Vliegenthart this sixth of April, from the United States of America, insofar as geography can be said to exist in our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity.”

“Augustus, what the hell?”

“He has an assistant,” Augustus said. “Lidewij Vliegenthart. I found her. I emailed her. She gave him the email. He responded via her email account.”

“Okay, okay. Keep reading.”

“My response is being written with ink and paper in the glorious tradition of our ancestors and then transcribed by Ms. Vliegenthart into a series of 1s and 0s to travel through the insipid web which has lately ensnared our species, so I apologize for any errors or omissions that may result.

“Given the entertainment bacchanalia at the disposal of young men and women of your generation, I am grateful to anyone anywhere who sets aside the hours necessary to read my little book. But I am particularly indebted to you, sir, both for your kind words about *An Imperial Affliction* and for taking the time to tell me that the book, and here I quote you directly, “meant a great deal” to you.

“This comment, however, leads me to wonder: What do you mean by *meant*? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate, Augustus? A ringing alarm? A call to arms? A morphine drip? Of course, like all interrogation of the universe, this line of inquiry inevitably reduces us to asking what it means to be human and whether—to borrow a phrase from the angst-encumbered sixteen-year-olds you no doubt revile—*there is a point to it all*.

“I fear there is not, my friend, and that you would receive scant encouragement from further encounters with my writing. But to answer your question: No, I have not written anything else, nor will I. I do not feel that continuing

to share my thoughts with readers would benefit either them or me. Thank you again for your generous email.

“Yours most sincerely, Peter Van Houten, via Lidewij Vliegenthart.”

“Wow,” I said. “Are you making this up?”

“Hazel Grace, could I, with my meager intellectual capacities, make up a letter from Peter Van Houten featuring phrases like ‘our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity?’”

“You could not,” I allowed. “Can I, can I have the email address?”

“Of course,” Augustus said, like it was not the best gift ever.

I spent the next two hours writing an email to Peter Van Houten. It seemed to get worse each time I rewrote it, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Dear Mr. Peter Van Houten
(c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart),

My name is Hazel Grace Lancaster. My friend Augustus Waters, who read *An Imperial Affliction* at my recommendation, just received an email from you at this address. I hope you will not mind that Augustus shared that email with me.

Mr. Van Houten, I understand from your email to Augustus that you are not planning to publish

any more books. In a way, I am disappointed, but I'm also relieved: I never have to worry whether your next book will live up to the magnificent perfection of the original. As a three-year survivor of Stage IV cancer, I can tell you that you got everything right in *An Imperial Affliction*. Or at least you got *me* right. Your book has a way of telling me what I'm feeling before I even feel it, and I've reread it dozens of times.

I wonder, though, if you would mind answering a couple questions I have about what happens after the end of the novel. I understand the book ends because Anna dies or becomes too ill to continue writing it, but I would really like to know what happens to Anna's mom—whether she married the Dutch Tulip Man, whether she ever has another child, and whether she stays at 917 W. Temple, etc. Also, is the Dutch Tulip Man a fraud or does he really love them? What happens to Anna's friends—particularly Claire and Jake? Do they stay together? And lastly—I realize that this is the kind of deep and thoughtful question you always hoped your readers would ask—what becomes of Sisyphus the Hamster? These questions have haunted me for years—and I don't know how long I have left to get answers to them.

I know these are not important literary questions and that your book is full of important literary questions, but I would just really like to know.

And of course, if you ever do decide to write anything else, even if you don't want to publish it, I'd love to read it. Frankly, I'd read your grocery lists.

Yours with great admiration,
Hazel Grace Lancaster
(age 16)

After I sent it, I called Augustus back, and we stayed up late talking about *An Imperial Affliction*, and I read him the Emily Dickinson poem that Van Houten had used for the title, and he said I had a good voice for reading and didn't pause too long for the line breaks, and then he told me that the sixth *Price of Dawn* book, *The Blood Approves*, begins with a quote from a poem. It took him a minute to find the book, but finally he read the quote to me. "Say your life broke down. The last good kiss / You had was years ago."

"Not bad," I said. "Bit pretentious. I believe Max Mayhem would refer to that as 'sissy shit.'"

"Yes, with his teeth gritted, no doubt. God, Mayhem grinds his teeth a lot in these books. He's definitely going to get TMJ, if he survives all this combat." And then after a second, Gus asked, "When was the last good kiss you had?"

I thought about it. My kissing—all prediagnosis—had been uncomfortable and sloppy, and on some level it always felt like kids playing at being grown. But of course it had been a while. "Years ago," I said finally. "You?"

"I had a few good kisses with my ex-girlfriend, Caroline Mathers."

"Years ago?"

"The last one was just less than a year ago."

"What happened?"

"During the kiss?"

"No, with you and Caroline."

"Oh," he said. And then after a second, "Caroline is no longer suffering from personhood."

"Oh," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said. I'd known plenty of dead people, of course. But I'd never dated one. I couldn't even imagine it, really.

"Not your fault, Hazel Grace. We're all just side effects, right?"

"Barnacles on the container ship of consciousness," I said, quoting *AIA*.

"Okay," he said. "I gotta go to sleep. It's almost one."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he said.

I giggled and said, "Okay." And then the line was quiet but not dead. I almost felt like he was there in my room with me, but in a way it was better, like I was not in my room and he was not in his, but instead we were together in some invisible and tenuous third space that could only be visited on the phone.

“Okay,” he said after forever. “Maybe *okay* will be our *always*.”

“Okay,” I said.

It was Augustus who finally hung up.

Peter Van Houten replied to Augustus’s email four hours after he sent it, but two days later, Van Houten still hadn’t replied to me. Augustus assured me it was because my email was better and required a more thoughtful response, that Van Houten was busy writing answers to my questions, and that brilliant prose took time. But still I worried.

On Wednesday during American Poetry for Dummies 101, I got a text from Augustus:

Isaac out of surgery. It went well. He’s officially NEC.

NEC meant “no evidence of cancer.” A second text came a few seconds later.

I mean, he’s blind. So that’s unfortunate.

That afternoon, Mom consented to loan me the car so I could drive down to Memorial to check in on Isaac.

I found my way to his room on the fifth floor, knocking even though the door was open, and a woman’s voice said, “Come in.” It was a nurse who was doing something to the bandages on Isaac’s eyes. “Hey, Isaac,” I said.

And he said, "Mon?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. No, it's, um, Hazel. Um, Support Group Hazel? Night-of-the-broken-trophies Hazel?"

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but CLEARLY NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Hazel. Come over here so I can examine your face with my hands and see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could."

"He's kidding," the nurse said.

"Yes," I said. "I realize."

I took a few steps toward the bed. I pulled a chair up and sat down, took his hand. "Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back. Then nothing for a while.

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"Okay," he said. "I don't know."

"You don't know what?" I asked. I looked at his hand because I didn't want to look at his face blindfolded by bandages. Isaac bit his nails, and I could see some blood on the corners of a couple of his cuticles.

"She hasn't even visited," he said. "I mean, we were together fourteen months. Fourteen months is a long time. God, that hurts." Isaac let go of my hand to fumble for his pain pump, which you hit to give yourself a wave of narcotics.

The nurse, having finished the bandage change, stepped back. "It's only been a day, Isaac," she said, vaguely condescending. "You've gotta give yourself time to heal.

And fourteen months *isn't* that long, not in the scheme of things. You're just getting started, buddy. You'll see."

The nurse left. "Is she gone?"

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me nod. "Yeah," I said.

"I'll *see*? Really? Did she seriously say that?"

"Qualities of a Good Nurse: Go," I said.

"1. Doesn't pun on your disability," Isaac said.

"2. Gets blood on the first try," I said.

"Seriously, that is huge. I mean is this my freaking arm or a dartboard? 3. No condescending voice."

"How are you doing, sweetie?" I asked, cloying. "I'm going to stick you with a needle now. There might be a little ouchie."

"Is my wittle fuffywump sickywicky?" he answered. And then after a second, "Most of them are good, actually. I just want the hell out of this place."

"This place as in the hospital?"

"That, too," he said. His mouth tightened. I could see the pain. "Honestly, I think a hell of a lot more about Monica than my eye. Is that crazy? That's crazy."

"It's a little crazy," I allowed.

"But I believe in true love, you know? I don't believe that everybody gets to keep their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody *should* have true love, and it should last at least as long as your life does."

"Yeah," I said.

"I just wish the whole thing hadn't happened sometimes. The whole cancer thing." His speech was slowing down. The medicine working.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Gus was here earlier. He was here when I woke up. Took off school. He . . ." His head turned to the side a little. "It's better," he said quietly.

"The pain?" I asked. He nodded a little.

"Good," I said. And then, like the bitch I am: "You were saying something about Gus?" But he was gone.

I went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop and asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the strongest.

"They all smell the same. They get sprayed with Super Scent," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, they just squirt 'em with it."

I opened the cooler to her left and sniffed at a dozen roses, and then leaned over some carnations. Same smell, and lots of it. The carnations were cheaper, so I grabbed a dozen yellow ones. They cost fourteen dollars. I went back into the room; his mom was there, holding his hand. She was young and really pretty.

"Are you a friend?" she asked, which struck me as one of those unintentionally broad and unanswerable questions.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “I’m from Support Group. These are for him.”

She took them and placed them in her lap. “Do you know Monica?” she asked.

I shook my head no.

“Well, he’s sleeping,” she said.

“Yeah. I talked to him a little before, when they were doing the bandages or whatever.”

“I hated leaving him for that but I had to pick up Graham at school,” she said.

“He did okay,” I told her. She nodded. “I should let him sleep.” She nodded again. I left.

The next morning I woke up early and checked my email first thing.

lidewij.vliegenthart@gmail.com had finally replied.

Dear Ms. Lancaster,

I fear your faith has been misplaced—but then, faith usually is. I cannot answer your questions, at least not in writing, because to write out such answers would constitute a sequel to *An Imperial Affliction*, which you might publish or otherwise share on the network that has replaced the brains of your generation. There is the telephone, but then you might record the

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conversation. Not that I don't trust you, of course, but I don't trust you. Alas, dear Hazel, I could never answer such questions except in person, and you are there, while I am here.

That noted, I must confess that the unexpected receipt of your correspondence via Ms. Vliegenthart has delighted me: What a wondrous thing to know that I made something useful to you—even if that book seems so distant from me that I feel it was written by a different man altogether. (The author of that novel was so thin, so frail, so comparatively optimistic!)

Should you find yourself in Amsterdam, however, please do pay a visit at your leisure. I am usually home. I would even allow you a peek at my grocery lists.

Yours most sincerely,
Peter Van Houten
c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart

“WHAT?!” I shouted aloud. “WHAT IS THIS LIFE?”

Mom ran in. “What’s wrong?”

“*Nothing*,” I assured her.

Still nervous, Mom knelt down to check on Philip to ensure he was condensing oxygen appropriately. I imagined

sitting at a sun-drenched café with Peter Van Houten as he leaned across the table on his elbows, speaking in a soft voice so no one else would hear the truth of what happened to the characters I'd spent years thinking about. He'd said he couldn't tell me *except in person*, and then *invited me to Amsterdam*. I explained this to Mom, and then said, "I have to go."

"Hazel, I love you, and you know I'd do anything for you, but we don't—we don't have the money for international travel, and the expense of getting equipment over there—love, it's just not—"

"Yeah," I said, cutting her off. I realized I'd been silly even to consider it. "Don't worry about it." But she looked worried.

"It's really important to you, yeah?" she asked, sitting down, a hand on my calf.

"It would be pretty amazing," I said, "to be the only person who knows what happens besides him."

"That would be amazing," she said. "I'll talk to your father."

"No, don't," I said. "Just, seriously, don't spend any money on it please. I'll think of something."

It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with Phalanxifor copays, and Mom couldn't work because she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering Over Me. I didn't want to put them even further into debt.

I told Mom I wanted to call Augustus to get her out of the room, because I couldn't handle her I-can't-make-my-daughter's-dreams-come-true sad face.

Augustus Waters-style, I read him the letter in lieu of saying hello.

"Wow," he said.

"I know, right?" I said. "How am I going to get to Amsterdam?"

"Do you have a Wish?" he asked, referring to this organization, The Genie Foundation, which is in the business of granting sick kids one wish.

"No," I said. "I used my Wish pre-Miracle."

"What'd you do?"

I sighed loudly. "I was thirteen," I said.

"Not Disney," he said.

I said nothing.

"You did not go to Disney World."

I said nothing.

"Hazel GRACE!" he shouted. "You *did not* use your one dying Wish to go to Disney World with your parents."

"Also Epcot Center," I mumbled.

"Oh, my God," Augustus said. "I can't believe I have a crush on a girl with such cliché wishes."

"I was *thirteen*," I said again, although of course I was only thinking *crush crush crush crush crush*. I was flattered but changed the subject immediately. "Shouldn't you be in school or something?"

"I'm playing hooky to hang out with Isaac, but he's sleeping, so I'm in the atrium doing geometry."

"How's he doing?" I asked.

"I can't tell if he's just not ready to confront the seriousness of his disability or if he really does care more about getting dumped by Monica, but he won't talk about anything else."

"Yeah," I said. "How long's he gonna be in the hospital?"

"Few days. Then he goes to this rehab or something for a while, but he gets to sleep at home, I think."

"Sucks," I said.

"I see his mom. I gotta go."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he answered. I could hear his crooked smile.

On Saturday, my parents and I went down to the farmers' market in Broad Ripple. It was sunny, a rarity for Indiana in April, and everyone at the farmers' market was wearing short sleeves even though the temperature didn't quite justify it. We Hoosiers are excessively optimistic about summer. Mom and I sat next to each other on a bench across from a goat-soap maker, a man in overalls who had to explain to every single person who walked by that yes, they were his goats, and no, goat soap does not smell like goats.

My phone rang. "Who is it?" Mom asked before I could even check.

"I don't know," I said. It was Gus, though.

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"Are you currently at your house?" he asked.

"Um, no," I said.

"That was a trick question. I knew the answer, because I am currently at your house."

"Oh. Um. Well, we are on our way, I guess?"

"Awesome. See you soon."

Augustus Waters was sitting on the front step as we pulled into the driveway. He was holding a bouquet of bright orange tulips just beginning to bloom, and wearing an Indiana Pacers jersey under his fleece, a wardrobe choice that seemed utterly out of character, although it did look quite good on him. He pushed himself up off the stoop, handed me the tulips, and asked, "Wanna go on a picnic?" I nodded, taking the flowers.

My dad walked up behind me and shook Gus's hand.

"Is that a Rik Smits jersey?" my dad asked.

"Indeed it is."

"God, I loved that guy," Dad said, and immediately they were engrossed in a basketball conversation I could not (and did not want to) join, so I took my tulips inside.

"Do you want me to put those in a vase?" Mom asked as I walked in, a huge smile on her face.

"No, it's okay," I told her. If we'd put them in a vase in the living room, they would have been everyone's flowers. I wanted them to be my flowers.

I went to my room but didn't change. I brushed my

hair and teeth and put on some lip gloss and the smallest possible dab of perfume. I kept looking at the flowers. They were *aggressively* orange, almost too orange to be pretty. I didn't have a vase or anything, so I took my toothbrush out of my toothbrush holder and filled it halfway with water and left the flowers there in the bathroom.

When I reentered my room, I could hear people talking, so I sat on the edge of my bed for a while and listened through my hollow bedroom door:

Dad: "So you met Hazel at Support Group."

Augustus: "Yes, sir. This is a lovely house you've got. I like your artwork."

Mom: "Thank you, Augustus."

Dad: "You're a survivor yourself, then?"

Augustus: "I am. I didn't cut this fella off for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of it, although it is an excellent weight-loss strategy. Legs are heavy!"

Dad: "And how's your health now?"

Augustus: "NEC for fourteen months."

Mom: "That's wonderful. The treatment options these days—it really is remarkable."

Augustus: "I know. I'm lucky."

Dad: "You have to understand that Hazel is still sick, Augustus, and will be for the rest of her life. She'll want to keep up with you, but her lungs—"

At which point I emerged, silencing him.

"So where are you going?" asked Mom. Augustus stood

up and leaned over to her, whispering the answer, and then held a finger to his lips. “Shh,” he told her. “It’s a secret.”

Mom smiled. “You’ve got your phone?” she asked me. I held it up as evidence, tilted my oxygen cart onto its front wheels, and started walking. Augustus hustled over, offering me his arm, which I took. My fingers wrapped around his biceps.

Unfortunately, he insisted upon driving, so the surprise could be a surprise. As we shuddered toward our destination, I said, “You nearly charmed the pants off my mom.”

“Yeah, and your dad is a Smits fan, which helps. You think they liked me?”

“Sure they did. Who cares, though? They’re just parents.”

“They’re *your* parents,” he said, glancing over at me. “Plus, I like being liked. Is that crazy?”

“Well, you don’t have to rush to hold doors open or smother me in compliments for me to like you.” He slammed the brakes, and I flew forward hard enough that my breathing felt weird and tight. I thought of the PET scan. *Don’t worry. Worry is useless.* I worried anyway.

We burned rubber, roaring away from a stop sign before turning left onto the misnomered Grandview (there’s a view of a golf course, I guess, but nothing *grand*). The only thing I could think of in this direction was the cemetery. Augustus reached into the center console, flipped open a full pack of cigarettes, and removed one.

"Do you ever throw them away?" I asked him.

"One of the many benefits of not smoking is that packs of cigarettes last *forever*," he answered. "I've had this one for almost a year. A few of them are broken near the filters, but I think this pack could easily get me to my eighteenth birthday." He held the filter between his fingers, then put it in his mouth. "So, okay," he said. "Okay. Name some things that you never see in Indianapolis."

"Um. Skinny adults," I said.

He laughed. "Good. Keep going."

"Mmm, beaches. Family-owned restaurants. Topography."

"All excellent examples of things we lack. Also, culture."

"Yeah, we are a bit short on culture," I said, finally realizing where he was taking me. "Are we going to the museum?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Oh, are we going to that park or whatever?"

Gus looked a bit deflated. "Yes, we are going to that park or whatever," he said. "You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Um, figured what out?"

"Nothing."

There was this park behind the museum where a bunch of artists had made big sculptures. I'd heard about it but had never visited. We drove past the museum and parked right next to this basketball court filled with huge blue and red

steel arcs that imagined the path of a bouncing ball.

We walked down what passes for a hill in Indianapolis to this clearing where kids were climbing all over this huge oversize skeleton sculpture. The bones were each about waist high, and the thighbone was longer than me. It looked like a child's drawing of a skeleton rising up out of the ground.

My shoulder hurt. I worried the cancer had spread from my lungs. I imagined the tumor metastasizing into my own bones, boring holes into my skeleton, a slithering eel of insidious intent. "*Funky Bones*," Augustus said. "Created by Joep Van Lieshout."

"Sounds Dutch."

"He is," Gus said. "So is Rik Smits. So are tulips." Gus stopped in the middle of the clearing with the bones right in front of us and slipped his backpack off one shoulder, then the other. He unzipped it, producing an orange blanket, a pint of orange juice, and some sandwiches wrapped in plastic wrap with the crusts cut off.

"What's with all the orange?" I asked, still not wanting to let myself imagine that all this would lead to Amsterdam.

"National color of the Netherlands, of course. You remember William of Orange and everything?"

"He wasn't on the GED test." I smiled, trying to contain my excitement.

"Sandwich?" he asked.

"Let me guess," I said.

"Dutch cheese. And tomato. The tomatoes are from Mexico. Sorry."

"You're always such a *disappointment*, Augustus. Couldn't you have at least gotten orange tomatoes?"

He laughed, and we ate our sandwiches in silence, watching the kids play on the sculpture. I couldn't very well *ask* him about it, so I just sat there surrounded by Dutchness, feeling awkward and hopeful.

In the distance, soaked in the unblemished sunlight so rare and precious in our hometown, a gaggle of kids made a skeleton into a playground, jumping back and forth among the prosthetic bones.

"Two things I love about this sculpture," Augustus said. He was holding the unlit cigarette between his fingers, flicking at it as if to get rid of the ash. He placed it back in his mouth. "First, the bones are just far enough apart that if you're a kid, you *cannot resist the urge* to jump between them. Like, you just *have* to jump from rib cage to skull. Which means that, second, the sculpture essentially *forces children to play on bones*. The symbolic resonances are endless, Hazel Grace."

"You do love symbols," I said, hoping to steer the conversation back toward the many symbols of the Netherlands at our picnic.

"Right, about that. You are probably wondering why

you are eating a bad cheese sandwich and drinking orange juice and why I am wearing the jersey of a Dutchman who played a sport I have come to loathe.”

“It has crossed my mind,” I said.

“Hazel Grace, like so many children before you—and I say this with great affection—you spent your Wish hastily, with little care for the consequences. The Grim Reaper was staring you in the face and the fear of dying with your Wish still in your proverbial pocket, ungranted, led you to rush toward the first Wish you could think of, and you, like so many others, chose the cold and artificial pleasures of the theme park.”

“I actually had a great time on that trip. I met Goofy and Minn—”

“I am in the midst of a soliloquy! I wrote this out and memorized it and if you interrupt me I will completely screw it up,” Augustus interrupted. “Please to be eating your sandwich and listening.” (The sandwich was inedibly dry, but I smiled and took a bite anyway.) “Okay, where was I?”

“The artificial pleasures.”

He returned the cigarette to its pack. “Right, the cold and artificial pleasures of the theme park. But let me submit that the real heroes of the Wish Factory are the young men and women who wait like Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot and good Christian girls wait for marriage. These young heroes wait stoically and without complaint for

their one true Wish to come along. Sure, it may never come along, but at least they can rest easily in the grave knowing that they've done their little part to preserve the integrity of the Wish as an idea.

"But then again, maybe it *will* come along: Maybe you'll realize that your one true Wish is to visit the brilliant Peter Van Houten in his Amsterdamian exile, and you will be glad indeed to have saved your Wish."

Augustus stopped speaking long enough that I figured the soliloquy was over. "But I didn't save my Wish," I said.

"Ah," he said. And then, after what felt like a practiced pause, he added, "But I saved mine."

"Really?" I was surprised that Augustus was Wish-eligible, what with being still in school and a year into remission. You had to be pretty sick for the Genies to hook you up with a Wish.

"I got it in exchange for the leg," he explained. There was all this light on his face; he had to squint to look at me, which made his nose crinkle adorably. "Now, I'm not going to *give* you my Wish or anything. But I also have an interest in meeting Peter Van Houten, and it wouldn't make sense to meet him without the girl who introduced me to his book."

"It definitely wouldn't," I said.

"So I talked to the Genies, and they are in total agreement. They said Amsterdam is lovely in the beginning

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of May. They proposed leaving May third and returning May seventh.”

“Augustus, really?”

He reached over and touched my cheek and for a moment I thought he might kiss me. My body tensed, and I think he saw it, because he pulled his hand away.

“Augustus,” I said. “Really. You don’t have to do this.”

“Sure I do,” he said. “I found my Wish.”

“God, you’re the best,” I told him.

“I bet you say that to all the boys who finance your international travel,” he answered.

CHAPTER SIX

Mom was folding my laundry while watching this TV show called *The View* when I got home. I told her that the tulips and the Dutch artist and everything were all because Augustus was using his Wish to take me to Amsterdam. “That’s too much,” she said, shaking her head. “We can’t accept that from a virtual stranger.”

“He’s not a stranger. He’s easily my second best friend.”

“Behind Kaitlyn?”

“Behind you,” I said. It was true, but I’d mostly said it because I wanted to go to Amsterdam.

“I’ll ask Dr. Maria,” she said after a moment.

. . .

Dr. Maria said I couldn't go to Amsterdam without an adult intimately familiar with my case, which more or less meant either Mom or Dr. Maria herself. (My dad understood my cancer the way I did: in the vague and incomplete way people understand electrical circuits and ocean tides. But my mom knew more about differentiated thyroid carcinoma in adolescents than most oncologists.)

"So you'll come," I said. "The Genies will pay for it. The Genies are loaded."

"But your father," she said. "He would miss us. It wouldn't be fair to him, and he can't get time off work."

"Are you kidding? You don't think Dad would enjoy a few days of watching TV shows that are not about aspiring models and ordering pizza every night, using paper towels as plates so he doesn't have to do the dishes?"

Mom laughed. Finally, she started to get excited, typing tasks into her phone: She'd have to call Gus's parents and talk to the Genies about my medical needs and do they have a hotel yet and what are the best guidebooks and we should do our research if we only have three days, and so on. I kind of had a headache, so I downed a couple Advil and decided to take a nap.

But I ended up just lying in bed and replaying the whole picnic with Augustus. I couldn't stop thinking about the little moment when I'd tensed up as he touched me. The gentle familiarity felt wrong, somehow. I thought maybe it

was how orchestrated the whole thing had been: Augustus was amazing, but he'd overdone everything at the picnic, right down to the sandwiches that were metaphorically resonant but tasted terrible and the memorized soliloquy that prevented conversation. It all felt Romantic, but not romantic.

But the truth is that I had never wanted him to kiss me, not in the way you are supposed to want these things. I mean, he was gorgeous. I was attracted to him. I thought about him *in that way*, to borrow a phrase from the middle school vernacular. But the actual touch, the realized touch . . . it was all wrong.

Then I found myself worrying I would *have* to make out with him to get to Amsterdam, which is not the kind of thing you want to be thinking, because (a) It shouldn't've even been a *question* whether I wanted to kiss him, and (b) Kissing someone so that you can get a free trip is perilously close to full-on hooking, and I have to confess that while I did not fancy myself a particularly good person, I never thought my first real sexual action would be prostitutional.

But then again, he hadn't tried to kiss me; he'd only touched my face, which is not even *sexual*. It was not a move designed to elicit arousal, but it was certainly a designed move, because Augustus Waters was no improviser. So what had he been trying to convey? And why hadn't I wanted to accept it?

At some point, I realized I was Kaitlyning the encounter, so I decided to text Kaitlyn and ask for some advice. She called immediately.

"I have a boy problem," I said.

"DELICIOUS," Kaitlyn responded. I told her all about it, complete with the awkward face touching, leaving out only Amsterdam and Augustus's name. "You're sure he's hot?" she asked when I was finished.

"Pretty sure," I said.

"Athletic?"

"Yeah, he used to play basketball for North Central."

"Wow. How'd you meet him?"

"This hideous Support Group."

"Huh," Kaitlyn said. "Out of curiosity, how many legs does this guy have?"

"Like, 1.4," I said, smiling. Basketball players were famous in Indiana, and although Kaitlyn didn't go to North Central, her social connectivity was endless.

"Augustus Waters," she said.

"Um, maybe?"

"Oh, my God. I've seen him at parties. The things I would do to that boy. I mean, not now that I know you're interested in him. But, oh, sweet holy Lord, I would ride that one-legged pony all the way around the corral."

"Kaitlyn," I said.

"Sorry. Do you think you'd have to be on top?"

"Kaitlyn," I said.

"What were we talking about. Right, you and Augustus Waters. Maybe . . . are you gay?"

"I don't think so? I mean, I definitely like him."

"Does he have ugly hands? Sometimes beautiful people have ugly hands."

"No, he has kind of amazing hands."

"Hmm," she said.

"Hmm," I said.

After a second, Kaitlyn said, "Remember Derek? He broke up with me last week because he'd decided there was something fundamentally incompatible about us deep down and that we'd only get hurt more if we played it out. He called it *preemptive dumping*. So maybe you have this premonition that there is something fundamentally incompatible and you're preempting the preemption."

"Hmm," I said.

"I'm just thinking out loud here."

"Sorry about Derek."

"Oh, I got over it, darling. It took me a sleeve of Girl Scout Thin Mints and forty minutes to get over that boy."

I laughed. "Well, thanks, Kaitlyn."

"In the event you do hook up with him, I expect lascivious details."

"But of course," I said, and then Kaitlyn made a kissy sound into the phone and I said, "Bye," and she hung up.

...

I realized while listening to Kaitlyn that I didn't have a premonition of hurting him. I had a postmonition.

I pulled out my laptop and looked up Caroline Mathers. The physical similarities were striking: same steroidally round face, same nose, same approximate overall body shape. But her eyes were dark brown (mine are green) and her complexion was much darker—Italian or something.

Thousands of people—literally thousands—had left condolence messages for her. It was an endless scroll of people who missed her, so many that it took me an hour of clicking to get past the *I'm sorry you're dead* wall posts to the *I'm praying for you* wall posts. She'd died a year ago of brain cancer. I was able to click through to some of her pictures. Augustus was in a bunch of the earlier ones: pointing with a thumbs-up to the jagged scar across her bald skull; arm in arm at Memorial Hospital's playground, with their backs facing the camera; kissing while Caroline held the camera out, so you could only see their noses and closed eyes.

The most recent pictures were all of her before, when she was healthy, uploaded postmortem by friends: a beautiful girl, wide-hipped and curvy, with long, straight deadblack hair falling over her face. My healthy self looked very little like her healthy self. But our cancer selves might've

been sisters. No wonder he'd stared at me the first time he saw me.

I kept clicking back to this one wall post, written two months ago, nine months after she died, by one of her friends. *We all miss you so much. It just never ends. It feels like we were all wounded in your battle, Caroline. I miss you. I love you.*

After a while, Mom and Dad announced it was time for dinner. I shut down the computer and got up, but I couldn't get the wall post out of my mind, and for some reason it made me nervous and unhungry.

I kept thinking about my shoulder, which hurt, and also I still had the headache, but maybe only because I'd been thinking about a girl who'd died of brain cancer. I kept telling myself to compartmentalize, to be here now at the circular table (arguably too large in diameter for three people and definitely too large for two) with this soggy broccoli and a black-bean burger that all the ketchup in the world could not adequately moisten. I told myself that imagining a met in my brain or my shoulder would not affect the invisible reality going on inside of me, and that therefore all such thoughts were wasted moments in a life composed of a definitionally finite set of such moments. I even tried to tell myself to live my best life today.

For the longest time I couldn't figure out why something a stranger had written on the Internet to a different (and deceased) stranger was bothering me so much

and making me worry that there was something inside my brain—which really did hurt, although I knew from years of experience that pain is a blunt and nonspecific diagnostic instrument.

Because there had not been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea that day, my parents were all hyperfocused on me, and so I could not hide this flash flood of anxiety.

“Is everything all right?” asked Mom as I ate.

“Uh-huh,” I said. I took a bite of burger. Swallowed. Tried to say something that a normal person whose brain was not drowning in panic would say. “Is there broccoli in the burgers?”

“A little,” Dad said. “Pretty exciting that you might go to Amsterdam.”

“Yeah,” I said. I tried not to think about the word *wounded*, which of course is a way of thinking about it.

“Hazel,” Mom said. “Where are you right now?”

“Just thinking, I guess,” I said.

“Twitterpated,” my dad said, smiling.

“I am not a bunny, and I am not in love with Gus Waters or anyone,” I answered, way too defensively. *Wounded*. Like Caroline Mathers had been a bomb and when she blew up everyone around her was left with embedded shrapnel.

Dad asked me if I was working on anything for school. “I’ve got some very advanced Algebra homework,” I told him. “So advanced that I couldn’t possibly explain it to a layperson.”

"And how's your friend Isaac?"

"Blind," I said.

"You're being very teenagery today," Mom said. She seemed annoyed about it.

"Isn't this what you wanted, Mom? For me to be teenagery?"

"Well, not necessarily *this* kinda teenagery, but of course your father and I are excited to see you become a young woman, making friends, going on dates."

"I'm not going on dates," I said. "I don't want to go on dates with anyone. It's a terrible idea and a huge waste of time and—"

"Honey," my mom said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm like. Like. I'm like a *grenade*, Mom. I'm a grenade and at some point I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay?"

My dad tilted his head a little to the side, like a scolded puppy.

"I'm a grenade," I said again. "I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there's nothing I can do about hurting you; you're too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I'm not depressed. I don't need to get out more. And I can't be a regular teenager, because I'm a grenade."

"Hazel," Dad said, and then choked up. He cried a lot, my dad.

"I'm going to go to my room and read for a while, okay?"

I'm fine. I really am fine; I just want to go read for a while."

I started out trying to read this novel I'd been assigned, but we lived in a tragically thin-walled home, so I could hear much of the whispered conversation that ensued. My dad saying, "It kills me," and my mom saying, "That's exactly what she *doesn't* need to hear," and my dad saying, "I'm sorry but—" and my mom saying, "Are you not grateful?" And him saying, "God, of course I'm grateful." I kept trying to get into this story but I couldn't stop hearing them.

So I turned on my computer to listen to some music, and with Augustus's favorite band, The Hectic Glow, as my sound track, I went back to Caroline Mathers's tribute pages, reading about how heroic her fight was, and how much she was missed, and how she was in a better place, and how she would live *forever* in their memories, and how everyone who knew her—everyone—was laid low by her leaving.

Maybe I was supposed to hate Caroline Mathers or something because she'd been with Augustus, but I didn't. I couldn't see her very clearly amid all the tributes, but there didn't seem to be much to hate—she seemed to be mostly a professional sick person, like me, which made me worry that when I died they'd have nothing to say about me except that I fought heroically, as if the only thing I'd ever done was Have Cancer.

Anyway, eventually I started reading Caroline Mathers's little notes, which were mostly actually written by her parents, because I guess her brain cancer was of the variety

that makes you not you before it makes you not alive.

So it was all like, *Caroline continues to have behavioral problems. She's struggling a lot with anger and frustration over not being able to speak (we are frustrated about these things, too, of course, but we have more socially acceptable ways of dealing with our anger). Gus has taken to calling Caroline HULK SMASH, which resonates with the doctors. There's nothing easy about this for any of us, but you take your humor where you can get it. Hoping to go home on Thursday. We'll let you know . . .*

She didn't go home on Thursday, needless to say.

So of course I tensed up when he touched me. To be with him was to hurt him—inevitably. And that's what I'd felt as he reached for me: I'd felt as though I were committing an act of violence against him, because I was.

I decided to text him. I wanted to avoid a whole conversation about it.

Hi, so okay, I don't know if you'll understand this but I can't kiss you or anything. Not that you'd necessarily want to, but I can't.

When I try to look at you like that, all I see is what I'm going to put you through. Maybe that doesn't make sense to you.

Anyway, sorry.

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He responded a few minutes later.

Okay.

I wrote back.

Okay.

He responded:

Oh, my God, stop flirting with me!

I just said:

Okay.

My phone buzzed moments later.

I was kidding, Hazel Grace. I understand. (But we both know that okay is a very flirty word. Okay is BURSTING with sensuality.)

I was very tempted to respond *Okay* again, but I pictured him at my funeral, and that helped me text properly.

Sorry.

. . .

I tried to go to sleep with my headphones still on, but then after a while my mom and dad came in, and my mom grabbed Bluie from the shelf and hugged him to her stomach, and my dad sat down in my desk chair, and without crying he said, "You are not a grenade, not to us. Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Hazel, but you are not a grenade. You are amazing. You can't know, sweetie, because you've never had a baby become a brilliant young reader with a side interest in horrible television shows, but the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness."

"Okay," I said.

"Really," my dad said. "I wouldn't bullshit you about this. If you were more trouble than you're worth, we'd just toss you out on the streets."

"We're not sentimental people," Mom added, deadpan. "We'd leave you at an orphanage with a note pinned to your pajamas."

I laughed.

"You don't have to go to Support Group," Mom added. "You don't have to do anything. Except go to school." She handed me the bear.

"I think Bluie can sleep on the shelf tonight," I said. "Let me remind you that I am more than thirty-three half years old."

"Keep him tonight," she said.

"Mom," I said.

John Green

“He’s *lonely*,” she said.

“Oh, my God, Mom,” I said. But I took stupid Blueie and kind of cuddled with him as I fell asleep.

I still had one arm draped over Blueie, in fact, when I awoke just after four in the morning with an apocalyptic pain fingering out from the unreachable center of my head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I screamed to wake up my parents, and they burst into the room, but there was nothing they could do to dim the supernovae exploding inside my brain, an endless chain of intracranial firecrackers that made me think that I was once and for all going, and I told myself—as I’ve told myself before—that the body shuts down when the pain gets too bad, that consciousness is temporary, that this will pass. But just like always, I didn’t slip away. I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown.

Dad drove, talking on the phone with the hospital, while I lay in the back with my head in Mom’s lap. There was nothing to do: Screaming made it worse. All stimuli made it worse, actually.

The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black and silent and uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning when there was the Word, and to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word.

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, and I do not deny that courage. I had been poked and stabbed and poisoned for years, and still I trod on. But make no mistake: In that moment, I would have been very, very happy to die.

I woke up in the ICU. I could tell I was in the ICU because I didn't have my own room, and because there was so much beeping, and because I was alone: They don't let your family stay with you 24/7 in the ICU at Children's because it's an infection risk. There was wailing down the hall. Somebody's kid had died. I was alone. I hit the red call button.

A nurse came in seconds later. "Hi," I said.

"Hello, Hazel. I'm Alison, your nurse," she said.

"Hi, Alison My Nurse," I said.

Whereupon I started to feel pretty tired again. But I woke up a bit when my parents came in, crying and kissing my face repeatedly, and I reached up for them and tried to squeeze, but my everything hurt when I squeezed, and Mom and Dad told me that I did not have a brain tumor, but that my headache was caused by poor oxygenation, which was caused by my lungs swimming in fluid, a liter and a half (!!!!)

of which had been successfully drained from my chest, which was why I might feel a slight discomfort in my side, where there was, *hey look at that*, a tube that went from my chest into a plastic bladder half full of liquid that for all the world resembled my dad's favorite amber ale. Mom told me I was going to go home, that I really was, that I would just have to get this drained every now and again and get back on the BiPAP, this nighttime machine that forces air in and out of my crap lungs. But I'd had a total body PET scan on the first night in the hospital, they told me, and the news was good: no tumor growth. No new tumors. My shoulder pain had been lack-of-oxygen pain. Heart-working-too-hard pain.

"Dr. Maria said this morning that she remains optimistic," Dad said. I liked Dr. Maria, and she didn't bullshit you, so that felt good to hear.

"This is just a thing, Hazel," my mom said. "It's a thing we can live with."

I nodded, and then Alison My Nurse kind of politely made them leave. She asked me if I wanted some ice chips, and I nodded, and then she sat at the bed with me and spooned them into my mouth.

"So you've been gone a couple days," Alison said. "Hmm, what'd you miss . . . A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection. A team won a sporting event, but another team lost." I smiled. "You can't go disappearing on

everybody like this, Hazel. You miss too much.”

“More?” I asked, nodding toward the white Styrofoam cup in her hand.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, “but I’m a rebel.” She gave me another plastic spoonful of crushed ice. I mumbled a thank-you. Praise God for good nurses. “Getting tired?” she asked. I nodded. “Sleep for a while,” she said. “I’ll try to run interference and give you a couple hours before somebody comes in to check vitals and the like.” I said Thanks again. You say thanks a lot in a hospital. I tried to settle into the bed. “You’re not gonna ask about your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Don’t have one,” I told her.

“Well, there’s a kid who has hardly left the waiting room since you got here,” she said.

“He hasn’t seen me like this, has he?”

“No. Family only.”

I nodded and sank into an aqueous sleep.

It would take me six days to get home, six undays of staring at acoustic ceiling tile and watching television and sleeping and pain and wishing for time to pass. I did not see Augustus or anyone other than my parents. My hair looked like a bird’s nest; my shuffling gait like a dementia patient’s. I felt a little better each day, though: Each sleep ended to reveal a person who seemed a bit more like me. Sleep fights cancer, Regular Dr. Jim said for the thousandth time as he

hovered over me one morning surrounded by a coterie of medical students.

“Then I am a cancer-fighting machine,” I told him.

“That you are, Hazel. Keep resting, and hopefully we’ll get you home soon.”

On Tuesday, they told me I’d go home on Wednesday. On Wednesday, two minimally supervised medical students removed my chest tube, which felt like getting stabbed in reverse and generally didn’t go very well, so they decided I’d have to stay until Thursday. I was beginning to think that I was the subject of some existentialist experiment in permanently delayed gratification when Dr. Maria showed up on Friday morning, sniffed around me for a minute, and told me I was good to go.

So Mom opened her oversize purse to reveal that she’d had my Go Home Clothes with her all along. A nurse came in and took out my IV. I felt untethered even though I still had the oxygen tank to carry around with me. I went into the bathroom, took my first shower in a week, got dressed, and when I got out, I was so tired I had to lie down and get my breath. Mom asked, “Do you want to see Augustus?”

“I guess,” I said after a minute. I stood up and shuffled over to one of the molded plastic chairs against the wall, tucking my tank beneath the chair. It wore me out.

Dad came back with Augustus a few minutes later. His hair was messy, sweeping down over his forehead. He lit up

with a real Augustus Waters Goofy Smile when he saw me, and I couldn't help but smile back. He sat down in the blue faux-leather recliner next to my chair. He leaned in toward me, seemingly incapable of stifling the smile.

Mom and Dad left us alone, which felt awkward. I worked hard to meet his eyes, even though they were the kind of pretty that's hard to look at. "I missed you," Augustus said.

My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be. "Thanks for not trying to see me when I looked like hell."

"To be fair, you still look pretty bad."

I laughed. "I missed you, too. I just don't want you to see . . . all this. I just want, like . . . It doesn't matter. You don't always get what you want."

"Is that so?" he asked. "I'd always thought the world was a wish-granting factory."

"Turns out that is not the case," I said. He was so beautiful. He reached for my hand but I shook my head. "No," I said quietly. "If we're gonna hang out, it has to be, like, not that."

"Okay," he said. "Well, I have good news and bad news on the wish-granting front."

"Okay?" I said.

"The bad news is that we obviously can't go to Amsterdam until you're better. The Genies will, however, work their famous magic when you're well enough."

“That’s the good news?”

“No, the good news is that while you were sleeping, Peter Van Houten shared a bit more of his brilliant brain with us.”

He reached for my hand again, but this time to slip into it a heavily folded sheet of stationery on the letterhead of *Peter Van Houten, Novelist Emeritus*.

I didn’t read it until I got home, situated in my own huge and empty bed with no chance of medical interruption. It took me forever to decode Van Houten’s sloped, scratchy script.

Dear Mr. Waters,

I am in receipt of your electronic mail dated the 14th of April and duly impressed by the Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy. Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid *hamartia*: hers, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Were she better or you sicker, then the stars would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of stars to cross, and never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves.” Easy enough to say when you’re a Roman nobleman (or Shakespeare!),

John Green

but there is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars.

While we're on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Hazel reminds me of the Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time." (Off topic, but: What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It's a fine poem but a deceitful one: We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates? Nothing. We're pretty sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus. (Witness also that when we talk about literature, we do so in the present tense. When we speak of the dead, we are not so kind.) You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries, but does not resurrect. (Full disclosure: I am not the first to make this observation. cf, the MacLeish poem "Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments," which contains the heroic line "I shall say you will die and none will remember you.")

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

I digress, but here's the rub: The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of memory. The living, thank heaven, retain the ability to surprise and to disappoint. Your Hazel is alive, Waters, and you mustn't impose your will upon another's decision, particularly a decision arrived at thoughtfully. She wishes to spare you pain, and you should let her. You may not find young Hazel's logic persuasive, but I have trod through this vale of tears longer than you, and from where I'm sitting, she's not the lunatic.

Yours truly,
Peter Van Houten

It was really written by him. I licked my finger and dabbed the paper and the ink bled a little, so I knew it was really real.

"Mom," I said. I did not say it loudly, but I didn't have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"Can we call Dr. Maria and ask if international travel would kill me?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

We had a big Cancer Team Meeting a couple days later. Every so often, a bunch of doctors and social workers and physical therapists and whoever else got together around a big table in a conference room and discussed my situation. (Not the Augustus Waters situation or the Amsterdam situation. The cancer situation.)

Dr. Maria led the meeting. She hugged me when I got there. She was a hugger.

I felt a little better, I guess. Sleeping with the BiPAP all night made my lungs feel almost normal, although, then again, I did not really remember lung normality.

Everyone got there and made a big show of turning off

their pagers and everything so it would be *all about me*, and then Dr. Maria said, "So the great news is that Phalanxifor continues to control your tumor growth, but obviously we're still seeing serious problems with fluid accumulation. So the question is, how should we proceed?"

And then she just looked at me, like she was waiting for an answer. "Um," I said, "I feel like I am not the most qualified person in the room to answer that question?"

She smiled. "Right, I was waiting for Dr. Simons. Dr. Simons?" He was another cancer doctor of some kind.

"Well, we know from other patients that most tumors eventually evolve a way to grow in spite of Phalanxifor, but if that were the case, we'd see tumor growth on the scans, which we don't see. So it's not that yet."

Yet, I thought.

Dr. Simons tapped at the table with his forefinger. "The thought around here is that it's possible the Phalanxifor is worsening the edema, but we'd face far more serious problems if we discontinued its use."

Dr. Maria added, "We don't really understand the long-term effects of Phalanxifor. Very few people have been on it as long as you have."

"So we're gonna do nothing?"

"We're going to stay the course," Dr. Maria said, "but we'll need to do more to keep that edema from building up." I felt kind of sick for some reason, like I was going to

throw up. I hated Cancer Team Meetings in general, but I hated this one in particular. “Your cancer is not going away, Hazel. But we’ve seen people live with your level of tumor penetration for a long time.” (I did not ask what constituted a long time. I’d made that mistake before.) “I know that coming out of the ICU, it doesn’t feel this way, but this fluid is, at least for the time being, manageable.”

“Can’t I just get like a lung transplant or something?” I asked.

Dr. Maria’s lips shrank into her mouth. “You would not be considered a strong candidate for a transplant, unfortunately,” she said. I understood: No use wasting good lungs on a hopeless case. I nodded, trying not to look like that comment hurt me. My dad started crying a little. I didn’t look over at him, but no one said anything for a long time, so his hiccuping cry was the only sound in the room.

I hated hurting him. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the inexorable truth is this: They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and the omega of my parents’ suffering.

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU and it looked like I was going to die and Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, and I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad’s chest that I wish I hadn’t heard, and that I hope she never finds

out that I did hear. She said, “I won’t be a mom anymore.” It gutted me pretty badly.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn’t get it out of my head, how she sounded when she said that, like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn’t.

Anyway, eventually we decided to keep things the same only with more frequent fluid drainings. At the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, and Dr. Simons actually and literally laughed, but then Dr. Maria said, “Why not?” And Simons said, dubiously, “Why not?” And Dr. Maria said, “Yeah, I don’t see why not. They’ve got oxygen on the planes, after all.” Dr. Simons said, “Are they just going to gate-check a BiPAP?” And Maria said, “Yeah, or have one waiting for her.”

“Placing a patient—one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less—an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That’s a recipe for disaster.”

Dr. Maria shrugged. “It would increase some risks,” she acknowledged, but then turned to me and said, “But it’s your life.”

Except not really. On the car ride home, my parents agreed: I would not be going to Amsterdam unless and until there was medical agreement that it would be safe.

...

Augustus called that night after dinner. I was already in bed—after dinner had become my bedtime for the moment—propped up with a gajillion pillows and also Bluie, with my computer on my lap.

I picked up, saying, “Bad news,” and he said, “Shit, what?”

“I can’t go to Amsterdam. One of my doctors thinks it’s a bad idea.”

He was quiet for a second. “God,” he said. “I should’ve just paid for it myself. Should’ve just taken you straight from the *Funky Bones* to Amsterdam.”

“But then I would’ve had a probably fatal episode of deoxygenation in Amsterdam, and my body would have been shipped home in the cargo hold of an airplane,” I said.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “But before that, my grand romantic gesture would have totally gotten me laid.”

I laughed pretty hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

“You laugh because it’s true,” he said.

I laughed again.

“It’s true, isn’t it!”

“Probably not,” I said, and then after a moment added, “although you never know.”

He moaned in misery. “I’m gonna die a virgin,” he said.

"You're a virgin?" I asked, surprised.

"Hazel Grace," he said, "do you have a pen and a piece of paper?" I said I did. "Okay, please draw a circle." I did. "Now draw a smaller circle within that circle." I did. "The larger circle is virgins. The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg."

I laughed again, and told him that having most of your social engagements occur at a children's hospital also did not encourage promiscuity, and then we talked about Peter Van Houten's amazingly brilliant comment about the sluttiness of time, and even though I was in bed and he was in his basement, it really felt like we were back in that uncreated third space, which was a place I really liked visiting with him.

Then I got off the phone and my mom and dad came into my room, and even though it was really not big enough for all three of us, they lay on either side of the bed with me and we all watched *ANTM* on the little TV in my room. This girl I didn't like, Selena, got kicked off, which made me really happy for some reason. Then Mom hooked me up to the BiPAP and tucked me in, and Dad kissed me on the forehead, the kiss all stubble, and then I closed my eyes.

The BiPAP essentially took control of my breathing away from me, which was intensely annoying, but the great thing about it was that it made all this noise, rumbling with each inhalation and whirring as I exhaled. I kept thinking

that it sounded like a dragon breathing in time with me, like I had this pet dragon who was cuddled up next to me and cared enough about me to time his breaths to mine. I was thinking about that as I sank into sleep.

I got up late the next morning. I watched TV in bed and checked my email and then after a while started crafting an email to Peter Van Houten about how I couldn't come to Amsterdam but I swore upon the life of my mother that I would never share any information about the characters with anyone, that I didn't even *want* to share it, because I was a terribly selfish person, and could he please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real and if Anna's mom marries him and also about Sisyphus the Hamster.

But I didn't send it. It was too pathetic even for me.

Around three, when I figured Augustus would be home from school, I went into the backyard and called him. As the phone rang, I sat down on the grass, which was all overgrown and dandeliony. That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I'd created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys "R" Us and building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He'd insisted on swinging on it first to test it, and the thing damn near broke.

The sky was gray and low and full of rain but not yet raining. I hung up when I got Augustus's voice mail and

then put the phone down in the dirt beside me and kept looking at the swing set, thinking that I would give up all the sick days I had left for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish-granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn't let it kill me before it kills me, and then I just started muttering *stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid* over and over again until the sound unhinged from its meaning. I was still saying it when he called back.

"Hi," I said.

"Hazel Grace," he said.

"Hi," I said again.

"Are you crying, Hazel Grace?"

"Kind of?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Cause I'm just—I want to go to Amsterdam, and I want him to tell me what happens after the book is over, and I just don't want my particular life, and also the sky is depressing me, and there is this old swing set out here that my dad made for me when I was a kid."

"I must see this old swing set of tears immediately," he said. "I'll be over in twenty minutes."

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always really smothery and concerned when I was crying, because I did not cry often, and I knew she'd want to *talk* and discuss

whether I shouldn't consider adjusting my medication, and the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up.

It's not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child and the child saying *higher higher higher* or some other metaphorically resonant moment. The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings hanging still and sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid's drawing of a smile.

Behind me, I heard the sliding-glass door open. I turned around. It was Augustus, wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeve plaid button-down. I wiped my face with my sleeve and smiled. "Hi," I said.

It took him a second to sit down on the ground next to me, and he grimaced as he landed rather ungracefully on his ass. "Hi," he said finally. I looked over at him. He was looking past me, into the backyard. "I see your point," he said as he put an arm around my shoulder. "That is one sad goddamned swing set."

I nudged my head into his shoulder. "Thanks for offering to come over."

"You realize that trying to keep your distance from me will not lessen my affection for you," he said.

"I guess?" I said.

"All efforts to save me from you will fail," he said.

"Why? Why would you even like me? Haven't you put

yourself through enough of this?” I asked, thinking of Caroline Mathers.

Gus didn’t answer. He just held on to me, his fingers strong against my left arm. “We gotta do something about this frigging swing set,” he said. “I’m telling you, it’s ninety percent of the problem.”

Once I’d recovered, we went inside and sat down on the couch right next to each other, the laptop half on his (fake) knee and half on mine. “Hot,” I said of the laptop’s base.

“Is it now?” He smiled. Gus loaded this giveaway site called Free No Catch and together we wrote an ad.

“Headline?” he asked.

“Swing Set Needs Home,” I said.

“Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home,” he said.

“Lonely, Vaguely Pedophilic Swing Set Seeks the Butts of Children,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s why.”

“What?”

“That’s why I like you. Do you realize how rare it is to come across a hot girl who creates an adjectival version of the word *pedophile*? You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are.”

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was never enough air in the world, but the shortage was particularly acute in that moment.

We wrote the ad together, editing each other as we went. In the end, we settled upon this:

Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home

One swing set, well worn but structurally sound, seeks new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she or they will look into the backyard and feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It's all fragile and fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your child(ren) will be introduced to the ups and downs of human life gently and safely, and may also learn the most important lesson of all: No matter how hard you kick, no matter how high you get, you can't go all the way around.

Swing set currently resides near 83rd and Spring Mill.

After that, we turned on the TV for a little while, but we couldn't find anything to watch, so I grabbed *An Imperial Affliction* off the bedside table and brought it back into the living room and Augustus Waters read to me while Mom, making lunch, listened in.

"*"Mother's glass eye turned inward,"*" Augustus began. As

he read, I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once.

When I checked my email an hour later, I learned that we had plenty of swing-set suitors to choose from. In the end, we picked a guy named Daniel Alvarez who'd included a picture of his three kids playing video games with the subject line *I just want them to go outside*. I emailed him back and told him to pick it up at his leisure.

Augustus asked if I wanted to go with him to Support Group, but I was really tired from my busy day of Having Cancer, so I passed. We were sitting there on the couch together, and he pushed himself up to go but then fell back down onto the couch and sneaked a kiss onto my cheek.

"Augustus!" I said.

"Friendly," he said. He pushed himself up again and really stood this time, then took two steps over to my mom and said, "Always a pleasure to see you," and my mom opened her arms to hug him, whereupon Augustus leaned in and kissed my mom on the cheek. He turned back to me. "See?" he asked.

I went to bed right after dinner, the BiPAP drowning out the world beyond my room.

I never saw the swing set again.

I slept for a long time, ten hours, possibly because of the slow recovery and possibly because sleep fights cancer and

John Green

possibly because I was a teenager with no particular wake-up time. I wasn't strong enough yet to go back to classes at MCC. When I finally felt like getting up, I removed the BiPAP snout from my nose, put my oxygen nubbins in, turned them on, and then grabbed my laptop from beneath my bed, where I'd stashed it the night before.

I had an email from Lidewij Vliegenthart.

Dear Hazel,

I have received word via the Genies that you will be visiting us with Augustus Waters and your mother beginning on 4th of May. Only a week away! Peter and I are delighted and cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Your hotel, the Filosoof, is just one street away from Peter's home. Perhaps we should give you one day for the jet lag, yes? So if convenient, we will meet you at Peter's home on the morning of 5th May at perhaps ten o'clock for a cup of coffee and for him to answer questions you have about his book. And then perhaps afterward we can tour a museum or the Anne Frank House?

With all best wishes,

Lidewij Vliegenthart

Executive Assistant to Mr. Peter Van Houten,
author of *An Imperial Affliction*

...

"Mom," I said. She didn't answer. "MOM!" I shouted. Nothing. Again, louder, "MOM!"

She ran in wearing a threadbare pink towel under her armpits, dripping, vaguely panicked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sorry, I didn't know you were in the shower," I said.

"Bath," she said. "I was just . . ." She closed her eyes. "Just trying to take a bath for five seconds. Sorry. What's going on?"

"Can you call the Genies and tell them the trip is off? I just got an email from Peter Van Houten's assistant. She thinks we're coming."

She pursed her lips and squinted past me.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to tell you until your father gets home."

"*What?*" I asked again.

"Trip's on," she said finally. "Dr. Maria called us last night and made a convincing case that you need to live your—"

"MOM, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!" I shouted, and she came to the bed and let me hug her.

I texted Augustus because I knew he was in school:

Still free May three? :-)

John Green

He texted back immediately.

Everything's coming up Waters.

If I could just stay alive for a week, I'd know the unwritten secrets of Anna's mom and the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest.

"Keep your shit together," I whispered to my lungs.

CHAPTER NINE

The day before we left for Amsterdam, I went back to Support Group for the first time since meeting Augustus. The cast had rotated a bit down there in the Literal Heart of Jesus. I arrived early, enough time for perennially strong appendiceal cancer survivor Lida to bring me up-to-date on everyone as I ate a grocery-store chocolate chip cookie while leaning against the dessert table.

Twelve-year-old leukemic Michael had passed away. He'd fought hard, Lida told me, as if there were another way to fight. Everyone else was still around. Ken was NEC after radiation. Lucas had relapsed, and she said it with a sad smile and a little shrug, the way you might say an alcoholic had relapsed.

A cute, chubby girl walked over to the table and said hi to Lida, then introduced herself to me as Susan. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but she had a scar extending from the side of her nose down her lip and across her cheek. She had put makeup over the scar, which only served to emphasize it. I was feeling a little out of breath from all the standing, so I said, "I'm gonna go sit," and then the elevator opened, revealing Isaac and his mom. He wore sunglasses and clung to his mom's arm with one hand, a cane in the other.

"Support Group Hazel not Monica," I said when he got close enough, and he smiled and said, "Hey, Hazel. How's it going?"

"Good. I've gotten *really hot* since you went blind."

"I bet," he said. His mom led him to a chair, kissed the top of his head, and shuffled back toward the elevator. He felt around beneath him and then sat. I sat down in the chair next to him. "So how's it going?"

"Okay. Glad to be home, I guess. Gus told me you were in the ICU?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Sucks," he said.

"I'm a lot better now," I said. "I'm going to Amsterdam tomorrow with Gus."

"I know. I'm pretty well up-to-date on your life, because Gus never. Talks. About. Anything. Else."

I smiled. Patrick cleared his throat and said, "If we could all take a seat?" He caught my eye. "Hazel!" he said. "I'm so glad to see you!"

Everyone sat and Patrick began his retelling of his ball-lessness, and I fell into the routine of Support Group: communicating through sighs with Isaac, feeling sorry for everyone in the room and also everyone outside of it, zoning out of the conversation to focus on my breathlessness and the aching. The world went on, as it does, without my full participation, and I only woke up from the reverie when someone said my name.

It was Lida the Strong. Lida in remission. Blond, healthy, stout Lida, who swam on her high school swim team. Lida, missing only her appendix, saying my name, saying, "Hazel is such an inspiration to me; she really is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning and going to war without complaint. She's so strong. She's so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength."

"Hazel?" Patrick asked. "How does that make you feel?"

I shrugged and looked over at Lida. "I'll give you my strength if I can have your remission." I felt guilty as soon as I said it.

"I don't think that's what Lida meant," Patrick said. "I think she . . ." But I'd stopped listening.

After the prayers for the living and the endless litany of the dead (with Michael tacked on to the end), we held

hands and said, "Living our best life today!"

Lida immediately rushed up to me full of apology and explanation, and I said, "No, no, it's really fine," waving her off, and I said to Isaac, "Care to accompany me upstairs?"

He took my arm, and I walked with him to the elevator, grateful to have an excuse to avoid the stairs. I'd almost made it all the way to the elevator when I saw his mom standing in a corner of the Literal Heart. "I'm here," she said to Isaac, and he switched from my arm to hers before asking, "You want to come over?"

"Sure," I said. I felt bad for him. Even though I hated the sympathy people felt toward me, I couldn't help but feel it toward him.

Isaac lived in a small ranch house in Meridian Hills next to this fancy private school. We sat down in the living room while his mom went off to the kitchen to make dinner, and then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

"Sure," I said. So he asked for the remote. I gave it to him, and he turned on the TV and then a computer attached to it. The TV screen stayed black, but after a few seconds a deep voice spoke from it.

"Deception," the voice said. "One player or two?"

"Two," Isaac said. "Pause." He turned to me. "I play this game with Gus all the time, but it's infuriating because he is a completely suicidal video-game player. He's, like, way

too aggressive about saving civilians and whatnot.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering the night of the broken trophies.

“Unpause,” Isaac said.

“Player one, identify yourself.”

“This is player one’s sexy sexy voice,” Isaac said.

“Player two, identify yourself.”

“I would be player two, I guess,” I said.

Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem and Private Jasper Jacks awake in a dark, empty room approximately twelve feet square.

Isaac pointed toward the TV, like I should talk to it or something. “Um,” I said. “Is there a light switch?”

No.

“Is there a door?”

Private Jacks locates the door. It is locked.

Isaac jumped in. “There’s a key above the door frame.”

Yes, there is.

“Mayhem opens the door.”

The darkness is still complete.

“Take out knife,” Isaac said.

“Take out knife,” I added.

A kid—Isaac’s brother, I assume—darted out from the kitchen. He was maybe ten, wiry and overenergetic, and he kind of skipped across the living room before shouting in a really good imitation of Isaac’s voice, “KILL MYSELF.”

Sergeant Mayhem places his knife to his neck. Are you sure you—

“No,” Isaac said. “Pause. Graham, don’t make me kick your ass.” Graham laughed giddily and skipped off down a hallway.

As Mayhem and Jacks, Isaac and I felt our way forward in the cavern until we bumped into a guy whom we stabbed after getting him to tell us that we were in a Ukrainian prison cave, more than a mile beneath the ground. As we continued, sound effects—a raging underground river, voices speaking in Ukrainian and accented English—led you through the cave, but there was nothing to see in this game. After playing for an hour, we began to hear the cries of a desperate prisoner, pleading, “God, help me. God, help me.”

“Pause,” Isaac said. “This is when Gus always insists on finding the prisoner, even though that keeps you from winning the game, and the only way to *actually free* the prisoner is to win the game.”

“Yeah, he takes video games too seriously,” I said. “He’s a bit too enamored with metaphor.”

“Do you like him?” Isaac asked.

“Of course I like him. He’s great.”

“But you don’t want to hook up with him?”

I shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You don’t want to give him something he can’t handle. You don’t want him to Monica you,” he said.

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

"Kinda," I said. But it wasn't that. The truth was, I didn't want to Isaac him. "To be fair to Monica," I said, "what you did to her wasn't very nice either."

"What'd *I* do to her?" he asked, defensive.

"You know, going blind and everything."

"But that's not my fault," Isaac said.

"I'm not saying it was your *fault*. I'm saying it wasn't *nice*."