

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**O**n the flight home, twenty thousand feet above clouds that were ten thousand feet above the ground, Gus said, “I used to think it would be fun to live on a cloud.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like it would be like one of those inflatable moonwalk machines, except for always.”

“But then in middle school science, Mr. Martinez asked who among us had ever fantasized about living in the clouds, and everyone raised their hand. Then Mr. Martinez told us that up in the clouds the wind blew one hundred and fifty miles an hour and the temperature was thirty below zero and there was no oxygen and we’d all die within seconds.”

“Sounds like a nice guy.”

## John Green

"He specialized in the murder of dreams, Hazel Grace, let me tell you. You think volcanoes are awesome? Tell that to the ten thousand screaming corpses at Pompeii. You still secretly believe that there is an element of magic to this world? It's all just soulless molecules bouncing against each other randomly. Do you worry about who will take care of you if your parents die? As well you should, because they will be worm food in the fullness of time."

"Ignorance is bliss," I said.

A flight attendant walked through the aisle with a beverage cart, half whispering, "Drinks? Drinks? Drinks? Drinks?" Gus leaned over me, raising his hand. "Could we have some champagne, please?"

"You're twenty-one?" she asked dubiously. I conspicuously rearranged the nubbins in my nose. The stewardess smiled, then glanced down at my sleeping mother. "She won't mind?" she asked of Mom.

"Nah," I said.

So she poured champagne into two plastic cups. Cancer Perks.

Gus and I toasted. "To you," he said.

"To you," I said, touching my cup to his.

We sipped. Dimmer stars than we'd had at Oranje, but still good enough to drink.

"You know," Gus said to me, "everything Van Houten said was true."

"Maybe, but he didn't have to be such a douche about it. I can't believe he imagined a future for Sisyphus the Hamster but not for Anna's mom."

Augustus shrugged. He seemed to zone out all of a sudden. "Okay?" I asked.

He shook his head microscopically. "Hurts," he said.

"Chest?"

He nodded. Fists clenched. Later, he would describe it as a one-legged fat man wearing a stiletto heel standing on the middle of his chest. I returned my seat-back tray to its upright and locked position and bent forward to dig pills out of his backpack. He swallowed one with champagne. "Okay?" I asked again.

Gus sat there, pumping his fist, waiting for the medicine to work, the medicine that did not kill the pain so much as distance him from it (and from me).

"It was like it was personal," Gus said quietly. "Like he was mad at us for some reason. Van Houten, I mean." He drank the rest of his champagne in a quick series of gulps and soon fell asleep.

My dad was waiting for us in baggage claim, standing amid all the limo drivers in suits holding signs printed with the last names of their passengers: JOHNSON, BARRINGTON, CARMICHAEL. Dad had a sign of his own. MY BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, it read, and then underneath that (AND GUS).

I hugged him, and he started crying (of course). As we drove home, Gus and I told Dad stories of Amsterdam, but it wasn't until I was home and hooked up to Philip watching good ol' American television with Dad and eating American pizza off napkins on our laps that I told him about Gus.

"Gus had a recurrence," I said.

"I know," he said. He scooted over toward me, and then added, "His mom told us before the trip. I'm sorry he kept it from you. I'm . . . I'm sorry, Hazel." I didn't say anything for a long time. The show we were watching was about people who are trying to pick which house they are going to buy. "So I read *An Imperial Affliction* while you guys were gone," Dad said.

I turned my head up to him. "Oh, cool. What'd you think?"

"It was good. A little over my head. I was a biochemistry major, remember, not a literature guy. I do wish it had ended."

"Yeah," I said. "Common complaint."

"Also, it was a bit hopeless," he said. "A bit defeatist."

"If by defeatist you mean *honest*, then I agree."

"I don't think defeatism is honest," Dad answered. "I refuse to accept that."

"So everything happens for a reason and we'll all go live in the clouds and play harps and live in mansions?"

Dad smiled. He put a big arm around me and pulled



me to him, kissing the side of my head. "I don't know what I believe, Hazel. I thought being an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that has not been my experience."

"Yeah," I said. "Okay."

He told me again that he was sorry about Gus, and then we went back to watching the show, and the people picked a house, and Dad still had his arm around me, and I was kinda starting to fall asleep, but I didn't want to go to bed, and then Dad said, "You know what I believe? I remember in college I was taking this math class, this really great math class taught by this tiny old woman. She was talking about fast Fourier transforms and she stopped midsentence and said, 'Sometimes it seems the universe wants to be noticed.'

"That's what I believe. I believe the universe wants to be noticed. I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. And who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it—or my observation of it—is temporary?"

"You are fairly smart," I said after a while.

"You are fairly good at compliments," he answered.

The next afternoon, I drove over to Gus's house and ate peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with his parents and told them stories about Amsterdam while Gus napped on the living room couch, where we'd watched *V for Vendetta*.

I could just see him from the kitchen: He lay on his back, head turned away from me, a PICC line already in. They were attacking the cancer with a new cocktail: two chemo drugs and a protein receptor that they hoped would turn off the oncogene in Gus's cancer. He was lucky to get enrolled in the trial, they told me. Lucky. I knew one of the drugs. Hearing the sound of its name made me want to barf.

After a while, Isaac's mom brought him over.

"Isaac, hi, it's Hazel from Support Group, not your evil ex-girlfriend." His mom walked him to me, and I pulled myself out of the dining room chair and hugged him, his body taking a moment to find me before he hugged me back, hard.

"How was Amsterdam?" he asked.

"Awesome," I said.

"Waters," he said. "Where are ya, bro?"

"He's napping," I said, and my voice caught. Isaac shook his head, everyone quiet.

"Sucks," Isaac said after a second. His mom walked him to a chair she'd pulled out. He sat.

"I can still dominate your blind ass at Counterinsurgence," Augustus said without turning toward us. The medicine slowed his speech a bit, but only to the speed of regular people.

"I'm pretty sure all asses are blind," Isaac answered, reaching his hands into the air vaguely, looking for his mom. She grabbed him, pulled him up, and they walked

over to the couch, where Gus and Isaac hugged awkwardly. "How are you feeling?" Isaac asked.

"Everything tastes like pennies. Aside from that, I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up, kid," Gus answered. Isaac laughed. "How are the eyes?"

"Oh, excellent," he said. "I mean, they're not in my head is the only problem."

"Awesome, yeah," Gus said. "Not to one-up you or anything, but my body is made out of cancer."

"So I heard," Isaac said, trying not to let it get to him. He fumbled toward Gus's hand and found only his thigh.

"I'm taken," Gus said.

Isaac's mom brought over two dining room chairs, and Isaac and I sat down next to Gus. I took Gus's hand, stroking circles around the space between his thumb and forefinger.

The adults headed down to the basement to commiserate or whatever, leaving the three of us alone in the living room. After a while, Augustus turned his head to us, the waking up slow. "How's Monica?" he asked.

"Haven't heard from her once," Isaac said. "No cards; no emails. I got this machine that reads me my emails. It's awesome. I can change the voice's gender or accent or whatever."

"So I can like send you a porn story and you can have an old German man read it to you?"

"Exactly," Isaac said. "Although Mom still has to help

me with it, so maybe hold off on the German porno for a week or two.”

“She hasn’t even, like, texted you to ask how you’re doing?” I asked. This struck me as an unfathomable injustice.

“Total radio silence,” Isaac said.

“Ridiculous,” I said.

“I’ve stopped thinking about it. I don’t have time to have a girlfriend. I have like a full-time job Learning How to Be Blind.”

Gus turned his head back away from us, staring out the window at the patio in his backyard. His eyes closed.

Isaac asked how I was doing, and I said I was good, and he told me there was a new girl in Support Group with a really hot voice and he needed me to go to tell him if she was actually hot. Then out of nowhere Augustus said, “You can’t just not contact your former boyfriend after his eyes get cut out of his freaking head.”

“Just one of—” Isaac started.

“Hazel Grace, do you have four dollars?” asked Gus.

“Um,” I said. “Yes?”

“Excellent. You’ll find my leg under the coffee table,” he said. Gus pushed himself upright and scooted down to the edge of the couch. I handed him the prosthetic; he fastened it in slow motion.

I helped him to stand and then offered my arm to Isaac, guiding him past furniture that suddenly seemed intrusive,

realizing that, for the first time in years, I was the healthiest person in the room.

I drove. Augustus rode shotgun. Isaac sat in the back. We stopped at a grocery store, where, per Augustus's instruction, I bought a dozen eggs while he and Isaac waited in the car. And then Isaac guided us by his memory to Monica's house, an aggressively sterile, two-story house near the JCC. Monica's bright green 1990s Pontiac Firebird sat fat-wheeled in the driveway.

"Is it there?" Isaac asked when he felt me coming to a stop.

"Oh, it's there," Augustus said. "You know what it looks like, Isaac? It looks like all the hopes we were foolish to hope."

"So she's inside?"

Gus turned his head around slowly to look at Isaac. "Who cares where she is? This is not about her. This is about *you*." Gus gripped the egg carton in his lap, then opened the door and pulled his legs out onto the street. He opened the door for Isaac, and I watched through the mirror as Gus helped Isaac out of the car, the two of them leaning on each other at the shoulder then tapering away, like praying hands that don't quite meet at the palms.

I rolled down the windows and watched from the car, because vandalism made me nervous. They took a few steps toward the car, then Gus flipped open the egg carton and handed Isaac an egg. Isaac tossed it, missing the car by a solid forty feet.

"A little to the left," Gus said.

"My throw was a little to the left or I need to aim a little to the left?"

"Aim left." Isaac swiveled his shoulders. "Lefter," Gus said. Isaac swiveled again. "Yes. Excellent. And throw hard." Gus handed him another egg, and Isaac hurled it, the egg arcing over the car and smashing against the slow-sloping roof of the house. "Bull's-eye!" Gus said.

"Really?" Isaac asked excitedly.

"No, you threw it like twenty feet over the car. Just, throw hard, but keep it low. And a little right of where you were last time." Isaac reached over and found an egg himself from the carton Gus cradled. He tossed it, hitting a taillight. "Yes!" Gus said. "Yes! TAILLIGHT!"

Isaac reached for another egg, missed wide right, then another, missing low, then another, hitting the back windshield. He then nailed three in a row against the trunk. "Hazel Grace," Gus shouted back to me. "Take a picture of this so Isaac can see it when they invent robot eyes." I pulled myself up so I was sitting in the rolled-down window, my elbows on the roof of the car, and snapped a picture with my phone: Augustus, an unlit cigarette in his mouth, his smile deliciously crooked, holds the mostly empty pink egg carton above his head. His other hand is draped around Isaac's shoulder, whose sunglasses are turned not quite toward the camera. Behind them, egg yolks drip down the

windshield and bumper of the green Firebird. And behind that, a door is opening.

"What," asked the middle-aged woman a moment after I'd snapped the picture, "in God's name—" and then she stopped talking.

"Ma'am," Augustus said, nodding toward her, "your daughter's car has just been deservedly egged by a blind man. Please close the door and go back inside or we'll be forced to call the police." After wavering for a moment, Monica's mom closed the door and disappeared. Isaac threw the last three eggs in quick succession and Gus then guided him back toward the car. "See, Isaac, if you just take—we're coming to the curb now—the feeling of legitimacy away from them, if you turn it around so they feel like *they* are committing a crime by watching—a few more steps—their cars get egged, they'll be confused and scared and worried and they'll just return to their—you'll find the door handle directly in front of you—quietly desperate lives." Gus hurried around the front of the car and installed himself in the shotgun seat. The doors closed, and I roared off, driving for several hundred feet before I realized I was headed down a dead-end street. I circled the cul-de-sac and raced back past Monica's house.

I never took another picture of him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**A** few days later, at Gus's house, his parents and my parents and Gus and me all squeezed around the dining room table, eating stuffed peppers on a tablecloth that had, according to Gus's dad, last seen use in the previous century.

My dad: "Emily, this risotto . . ."

My mom: "It's just delicious."

Gus's mom: "Oh, thanks. I'd be happy to give you the recipe."

Gus, swallowing a bite: "You know, the primary taste I'm getting is not-Oranje."

Me: "Good observation, Gus. This food, while delicious, does not taste like Oranje."



## THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

My mom: "Hazel."

Gus: "It tastes like . . ."

Me: "Food."

Gus: "Yes, precisely. It tastes like food, excellently prepared. But it does not taste, how do I put this delicately . . . ?"

Me: "It does not taste like God Himself cooked heaven into a series of five dishes which were then served to you accompanied by several luminous balls of fermented, bubbly plasma while actual and literal flower petals floated down all around your canal-side dinner table."

Gus: "Nicely phrased."

Gus's father: "Our children are weird."

My dad: "Nicely phrased."

A week after our dinner, Gus ended up in the ER with chest pain, and they admitted him overnight, so I drove over to Memorial the next morning and visited him on the fourth floor. I hadn't been to Memorial since visiting Isaac. It didn't have any of the cloyingly bright primary color-painted walls or the framed paintings of dogs driving cars that one found at Children's, but the absolute sterility of the place made me nostalgic for the happy-kid bullshit at Children's. Memorial was so *functional*. It was a storage facility. A prematorium.

When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, I saw Gus's mom pacing in the waiting room, talking on

a cell phone. She hung up quickly, then hugged me and offered to take my cart.

"I'm okay," I said. "How's Gus?"

"He had a tough night, Hazel," she said. "His heart is working too hard. He needs to scale back on activity. Wheelchairs from here on out. They're putting him on some new medicine that should be better for the pain. His sisters just drove in."

"Okay," I said. "Can I see him?"

She put her arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. It felt weird. "You know we love you, Hazel, but right now we just need to be a family. Gus agrees with that. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"I'll tell him you visited."

"Okay," I said. "I'm just gonna read here for a while, I think."

She went down the hall, back to where he was. I understood, but I still missed him, still thought maybe I was missing my last chance to see him, to say good-bye or whatever. The waiting room was all brown carpet and brown overstuffed cloth chairs. I sat in a love seat for a while, my oxygen cart tucked by my feet. I'd worn my Chuck Taylors and my *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* shirt, the exact outfit I'd been wearing two weeks before on the Late Afternoon of the Venn Diagram, and he wouldn't see it. I started scrolling through the pictures on my phone, a backward flip-book of the last few

months, beginning with him and Isaac outside of Monica's house and ending with the first picture I'd taken of him, on the drive to *Funky Bones*. It seemed like forever ago, like we'd had this brief but still infinite forever. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities.

Two weeks later, I wheeled Gus across the art park toward *Funky Bones* with one entire bottle of very expensive champagne and my oxygen tank in his lap. The champagne had been donated by one of Gus's doctors—Gus being the kind of person who inspires doctors to give their best bottles of champagne to children. We sat, Gus in his chair and me on the damp grass, as near to *Funky Bones* as we could get him in the chair. I pointed at the little kids goading each other to jump from rib cage to shoulder and Gus answered just loud enough for me to hear over the din, "Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton."

We drank from paper Winnie-the-Pooh cups.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**A** typical day with late-stage Gus:

I went over to his house about noon, after he had eaten and puked up breakfast. He met me at the door in his wheelchair, no longer the muscular, gorgeous boy who stared at me at Support Group, but still half smiling, still smoking his unlit cigarette, his blue eyes bright and alive.

We ate lunch with his parents at the dining room table. Peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and last night's asparagus. Gus didn't eat. I asked how he was feeling.

"Grand," he said. "And you?"

"Good. What'd you do last night?"

"I slept quite a lot. I want to write you a sequel, Hazel Grace, but I'm just so damned tired all the time."

"You can just tell it to me," I said.

"Well, I stand by my pre-Van Houten analysis of the Dutch Tulip Man. Not a con man, but not as rich as he was letting on."

"And what about Anna's mom?"

"Haven't settled on an opinion there. Patience, Grasshopper." Augustus smiled. His parents were quiet, watching him, never looking away, like they just wanted to enjoy The Gus Waters Show while it was still in town. "Sometimes I dream that I'm writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts and memories of my adoring public."

"Why do you need an adoring public when you've got me?" I asked.

"Hazel Grace, when you're as charming and physically attractive as myself, it's easy enough to win over people you meet. But getting strangers to love you . . . now, *that's* the trick."

I rolled my eyes.

After lunch, we went outside to the backyard. He was still well enough to push his own wheelchair, pulling miniature wheelies to get the front wheels over the bump in the doorway. Still athletic, in spite of it all, blessed with balance and quick reflexes that even the abundant narcotics could not fully mask.

His parents stayed inside, but when I glanced back into the dining room, they were always watching us.

## John Green

We sat out there in silence for a minute and then Gus said, “I wish we had that swing set sometimes.”

“The one from my backyard?”

“Yeah. My nostalgia is so extreme that I am capable of missing a swing my butt never actually touched.”

“Nostalgia is a side effect of cancer,” I told him.

“Nah, nostalgia is a side effect of dying,” he answered. Above us, the wind blew and the branching shadows rearranged themselves on our skin. Gus squeezed my hand. “It is a good life, Hazel Grace.”

We went inside when he needed meds, which were pressed into him along with liquid nutrition through his G-tube, a bit of plastic that disappeared into his belly. He was quiet for a while, zoned out. His mom wanted him to take a nap, but he kept shaking his head no when she suggested it, so we just let him sit there half asleep in the chair for a while.

His parents watched an old video of Gus with his sisters—they were probably my age and Gus was about five. They were playing basketball in the driveway of a different house, and even though Gus was tiny, he could dribble like he’d been born doing it, running circles around his sisters as they laughed. It was the first time I’d even seen him play basketball. “He was good,” I said.

“Should’ve seen him in high school,” his dad said. “Started varsity as a freshman.”

Gus mumbled, “Can I go downstairs?”

His mom and dad wheeled the chair downstairs with Gus still in it, bouncing down crazily in a way that would have been dangerous if danger retained its relevance, and then they left us alone. He got into bed and we lay there together under the covers, me on my side and Gus on his back, my head on his bony shoulder, his heat radiating through his polo shirt and into my skin, my feet tangled with his real foot, my hand on his cheek.

When I got his face nose-touchingly close so that I could only see his eyes, I couldn't tell he was sick. We kissed for a while and then lay together listening to The Hectic Glow's eponymous album, and eventually we fell asleep like that, a quantum entanglement of tubes and bodies.

We woke up later and arranged an armada of pillows so that we could sit comfortably against the edge of the bed and played Counterinsurgency 2: The Price of Dawn. I sucked at it, of course, but my sucking was useful to him: It made it easier for him to die beautifully, to jump in front of a sniper's bullet and sacrifice himself for me, or else to kill a sentry who was just about to shoot me. How he reveled in saving me. He shouted, "You will *not* kill my girlfriend today, International Terrorist of Ambiguous Nationality!"

It crossed my mind to fake a choking incident or something so that he might give me the Heimlich. Maybe then he could rid himself of this fear that his life had been lived and lost for no greater good. But then I imagined

him being physically unable to Heimlich, and me having to reveal that it was all a ruse, and the ensuing mutual humiliation.

It's hard as hell to hold on to your dignity when the risen sun is too bright in your losing eyes, and that's what I was thinking about as we hunted for bad guys through the ruins of a city that didn't exist.

Finally, his dad came down and dragged Gus back upstairs, and in the entryway, beneath an Encouragement telling me that Friends Are Forever, I knelt to kiss him good night. I went home and ate dinner with my parents, leaving Gus to eat (and puke up) his own dinner.

After some TV, I went to sleep.

I woke up.

Around noon, I went over there again.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**O**ne morning, a month after returning home from Amsterdam, I drove over to his house. His parents told me he was still sleeping downstairs, so I knocked loudly on the basement door before entering, then asked, “Gus?”

I found him mumbling in a language of his own creation. He’d pissed the bed. It was awful. I couldn’t even look, really. I just shouted for his parents and they came down, and I went upstairs while they cleaned him up.

When I came back down, he was slowly waking up out of the narcotics to the excruciating day. I arranged his pillows so we could play Counterinsurgency on the bare sheetless mattress, but he was so tired and out of it that he sucked almost as bad as I did, and we couldn’t go

five minutes without both getting dead. Not fancy heroic deaths either, just careless ones.

I didn't really say anything to him. I almost wanted him to forget I was there, I guess, and I was hoping he didn't remember that I'd found the boy I love deranged in a wide pool of his own piss. I kept kind of hoping that he'd look over at me and say, "Oh, Hazel Grace. How'd you get here?"

But unfortunately, he remembered. "With each passing minute, I'm developing a deeper appreciation of the word *mortified*," he said finally.

"I've pissed the bed, Gus, believe me. It's no big deal."

"You used," he said, and then took a sharp breath, "to call me Augustus."

"You know," he said after a while, "it's kids' stuff, but I always thought my obituary would be in all the newspapers, that I'd have a story worth telling. I always had this secret suspicion that I was special."

"You are," I said.

"You know what I mean, though," he said.

I did know what he meant. I just didn't agree. "I don't care if the *New York Times* writes an obituary for me. I just want you to write one," I told him. "You say you're not special because the world doesn't know about you, but that's an insult to me. *I* know about you."

"I don't think I'm gonna make it to write your obituary," he said, instead of apologizing.

I was so frustrated with him. “I just want to be enough for you, but I never can be. This can never be enough for you. But this is all you get. You get me, and your family, and this world. This is your life. I’m sorry if it sucks. But you’re not going to be the first man on Mars, and you’re not going to be an NBA star, and you’re not going to hunt Nazis. I mean, look at yourself, Gus.” He didn’t respond. “I don’t mean—” I started.

“Oh, you meant it,” he interrupted. I started to apologize and he said, “No, I’m sorry. You’re right. Let’s just play.”

So we just played.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up to my phone singing a song by The Hectic Glow. Gus's favorite. That meant he was calling—or someone was calling from his phone. I glanced at the alarm clock: 2:35 A.M. *He's gone*, I thought as everything inside of me collapsed into a singularity.

I could barely creak out a “*Hello?*”

I waited for the sound of a parent's annihilated voice.

“Hazel Grace,” Augustus said weakly.

“Oh, thank God it's you. Hi. Hi, I love you.”

“Hazel Grace, I'm at the gas station. Something's wrong. You gotta help me.”

“What? Where are you?”

“The Speedway at Eighty-sixth and Ditch. I did some-

thing wrong with the G-tube and I can't figure it out and—"

"I'm calling nine-one-one," I said.

"No no no no no, they'll take me to a hospital. Hazel, listen to me. Do not call nine-one-one or my parents I will never forgive you don't please just come please just come and fix my goddamned G-tube. I'm just, God, this is the stupidest thing. I don't want my parents to know I'm gone. Please. I have the medicine with me; I just can't get it in. Please." He was crying. I'd never heard him sob like this except from outside his house before Amsterdam.

"Okay," I said. "I'm leaving now."

I took the BiPAP off and connected myself to an oxygen tank, lifted the tank into my cart, and put on sneakers to go with my pink cotton pajama pants and a Butler basketball T-shirt, which had originally been Gus's. I grabbed the keys from the kitchen drawer where Mom kept them and wrote a note in case they woke up while I was gone.

Went to check on Gus. It's important. Sorry.

Love, H

As I drove the couple miles to the gas station, I woke up enough to wonder why Gus had left the house in the middle of the night. Maybe he'd been hallucinating, or his martyrdom fantasies had gotten the better of him.

I sped up Ditch Road past flashing yellow lights, going too fast partly to reach him and partly in the hopes a cop

would pull me over and give me an excuse to tell someone that my dying boyfriend was stuck outside of a gas station with a malfunctioning G-tube. But no cop showed up to make my decision for me.

There were only two cars in the lot. I pulled up next to his. I opened the door. The interior lights came on. Augustus sat in the driver's seat, covered in his own vomit, his hands pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in. "Hi," he mumbled.

"Oh, God, Augustus, we have to get you to a hospital."

"Please just look at it." I gagged from the smell but bent forward to inspect the place above his belly button where they'd surgically installed the tube. The skin of his abdomen was warm and bright red.

"Gus, I think something's infected. I can't fix this. Why are you here? Why aren't you at home?" He puked, without even the energy to turn his mouth away from his lap. "Oh, sweetie," I said.

"I wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes," he mumbled. "I lost my pack. Or they took it away from me. I don't know. They said they'd get me another one, but I wanted . . . to do it myself. Do one little thing myself."

He was staring straight ahead. Quietly, I pulled out my phone and glanced down to dial 911.

"I'm sorry," I told him. *Nine-one-one, what is your*

*emergency?* “Hi, I’m at the Speedway at Eighty-sixth and Ditch, and I need an ambulance. The great love of my life has a malfunctioning G-tube.”

He looked up at me. It was horrible. I could hardly look at him. The Augustus Waters of the crooked smiles and unsmoked cigarettes was gone, replaced by this desperate humiliated creature sitting there beneath me.

“This is it. I can’t even not smoke anymore.”

“Gus, I love you.”

“Where is my chance to be somebody’s Peter Van Houten?” He hit the steering wheel weakly, the car honking as he cried. He leaned his head back, looking up. “I hate myself I hate myself I hate this I hate this I disgust myself I hate it I hate it I hate it just let me fucking die.”

According to the conventions of the genre, Augustus Waters kept his sense of humor till the end, did not for a moment waiver in his courage, and his spirit soared like an indomitable eagle until the world itself could not contain his joyous soul.

But this was the truth, a pitiful boy who desperately wanted not to be pitiful, screaming and crying, poisoned by an infected G-tube that kept him alive, but not alive enough.

I wiped his chin and grabbed his face in my hands and knelt down close to him so that I could see his eyes, which

still lived. "I'm sorry. I wish it was like that movie, with the Persians and the Spartans."

"Me too," he said.

"But it isn't," I said.

"I know," he said.

"There are no bad guys."

"Yeah."

"Even cancer isn't a bad guy really: Cancer just wants to be alive."

"Yeah."

"You're okay," I told him. I could hear the sirens.

"Okay," he said. He was losing consciousness.

"Gus, you have to promise not to try this again. I'll get you cigarettes, okay?" He looked at me. His eyes swam in their sockets. "You have to promise."

He nodded a little and then his eyes closed, his head swiveling on his neck.

"Gus," I said. "Stay with me."

"Read me something," he said as the goddamned ambulance roared right past us. So while I waited for them to turn around and find us, I recited the only poem I could bring to mind, "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams.

so much depends  
upon



THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

Williams was a doctor. It seemed to me like a doctor's poem. The poem was over, but the ambulance was still driving away from us, so I kept writing it.

And so much depends, I told Augustus, upon a blue sky cut open by the branches of the trees above. So much depends upon the transparent G-tube erupting from the gut of the blue-lipped boy. So much depends upon this observer of the universe.

Half conscious, he glanced over at me and mumbled, "And you say you don't write poetry."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**H**e came home from the hospital a few days later, finally and irrevocably robbed of his ambitions. It took more medication to remove him from the pain. He moved upstairs permanently, into a hospital bed near the living room window.

These were days of pajamas and beard scruff, of mumblings and requests and him endlessly thanking everyone for all they were doing on his behalf. One afternoon, he pointed vaguely toward a laundry basket in a corner of the room and asked me, “What’s that?”

“That laundry basket?”

“No, next to it.”

“I don’t see anything next to it.”

“It’s my last shred of dignity. It’s very small.”

. . .

The next day, I let myself in. They didn't like me to ring the doorbell anymore because it might wake him up. His sisters were there with their banker husbands and three kids, all boys, who ran up to me and chanted *who are you who are you who are you*, running circles around the entryway like lung capacity was a renewable resource. I'd met the sisters before, but never the kids or their dads.

"I'm Hazel," I said.

"Gus has a *girlfriend*," one of the kids said.

"I am aware that Gus has a girlfriend," I said.

"She's got boobies," another said.

"Is that so?"

"Why do you have that?" the first one asked, pointing at my oxygen cart.

"It helps me breathe," I said. "Is Gus awake?"

"No, he's sleeping."

"He's dying," said another.

"He's dying," the third one confirmed, suddenly serious. It was quiet for a moment, and I wondered what I was supposed to say, but then one of them kicked another and they were off to the races again, falling all over each other in a scrum that migrated toward the kitchen.

I made my way to Gus's parents in the living room and met his brothers-in-law, Chris and Dave.

I hadn't gotten to know his half sisters, really, but they

both hugged me anyway. Julie was sitting on the edge of the bed, talking to a sleeping Gus in precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable, saying, “Oh, Gussy Gussy, our little Gussy Gussy.” Our Gussy? Had they acquired him?

“What’s up, Augustus?” I said, trying to model appropriate behavior.

“Our beautiful Gussy,” Martha said, leaning in toward him. I began to wonder if he was actually asleep or if he’d just laid a heavy finger on the pain pump to avoid the Attack of the Well-Meaning Sisters.

He woke up after a while and the first thing he said was, “Hazel,” which I have to admit made me kind of happy, like maybe I was part of his family, too. “Outside,” he said quietly. “Can we go?”

We went, his mom pushing the wheelchair, sisters and brothers-in-law and dad and nephews and me trailing. It was a cloudy day, still and hot as summer settled in. He wore a long-sleeve navy T-shirt and fleece sweatpants. He was cold all the time for some reason. He wanted some water, so his dad went and got some for him.

Martha tried to engage Gus in conversation, kneeling down next to him and saying, “You’ve always had such beautiful eyes.” He nodded a little.

One of the husbands put an arm on Gus’s shoulder and said, “How’s that fresh air feel?” Gus shrugged.

“Do you want meds?” his mom asked, joining the circle kneeling around him. I took a step back, watching as the nephews tore through a flower bed on their way to the little patch of grass in Gus’s backyard. They immediately commenced to play a game that involved throwing one another to the ground.

“Kids!” Julie shouted vaguely.

“I can only hope,” Julie said, turning back to Gus, “they grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you’ve become.”

I resisted the urge to audibly gag. “He’s not that smart,” I said to Julie.

“She’s right. It’s just that most really good-looking people are stupid, so I exceed expectations.”

“Right, it’s primarily his hotness,” I said.

“It can be sort of blinding,” he said.

“It actually did blind our friend Isaac,” I said.

“Terrible tragedy, that. But can I help my own deadly beauty?”

“You cannot.”

“It is my burden, this beautiful face.”

“Not to mention your body.”

“Seriously, don’t even get me started on my hot bod. You don’t want to see me naked, Dave. Seeing me naked actually took Hazel Grace’s breath away,” he said, nodding toward the oxygen tank.

“Okay, enough,” Gus’s dad said, and then out of

## John Green

nowhere, his dad put an arm around me and kissed the side of my head and whispered, "I thank God for you every day, kid."

Anyway, that was the last good day I had with Gus until the Last Good Day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

**O**ne of the less bullshit conventions of the cancer kid genre is the Last Good Day convention, wherein the victim of cancer finds herself with some unexpected hours when it seems like the inexorable decline has suddenly plateaued, when the pain is for a moment bearable. The problem, of course, is that there's no way of knowing that your last good day is your Last Good Day. At the time, it is just another good day.

I'd taken a day off from visiting Augustus because I was feeling a bit unwell myself: nothing specific, just tired. It had been a lazy day, and when Augustus called just after five P.M., I was already attached to the BiPAP, which we'd

dragged out to the living room so I could watch TV with Mom and Dad.

“Hi, Augustus,” I said.

He answered in the voice I’d fallen for. “Good evening, Hazel Grace. Do you suppose you could find your way to the Literal Heart of Jesus around eight P.M.?”

“Um, yes?”

“Excellent. Also, if it’s not too much trouble, please prepare a eulogy.”

“Um,” I said.

“I love you,” he said.

“And I you,” I answered. Then the phone clicked off.

“Um,” I said. “I have to go to Support Group at eight tonight. Emergency session.”

My mom muted the TV. “Is everything okay?”

I looked at her for a second, my eyebrows raised. “I assume that’s a rhetorical question.”

“But why would there—”

“Because Gus needs me for some reason. It’s fine. I can drive.” I fiddled with the BiPAP so Mom would help me take it off, but she didn’t. “Hazel,” she said, “your dad and I feel like we hardly even *see* you anymore.”

“Particularly those of us who work all week,” Dad said.

“He needs me,” I said, finally unfastening the BiPAP myself.

“We need you, too, kiddo,” my dad said. He took hold



of my wrist, like I was a two-year-old about to dart out into the street, and gripped it.

“Well, get a terminal disease, Dad, and then I’ll stay home more.”

“Hazel,” my mom said.

“You were the one who didn’t want me to be a homebody,” I said to her. Dad was still clutching my arm. “And now you want him to go ahead and die so I’ll be back here chained to this place, letting you take care of me like I always used to. But I don’t need it, Mom. I don’t need you like I used to. *You’re* the one who needs to get a life.”

“Hazel!” Dad said, squeezing harder. “Apologize to your mother.”

I was tugging at my arm but he wouldn’t let go, and I couldn’t get my cannula on with only one hand. It was infuriating. All I wanted was an old-fashioned Teenager Walkout, wherein I stomp out of the room and slam the door to my bedroom and turn up *The Hectic Glow* and furiously write a eulogy. But I couldn’t because I couldn’t freaking breathe. “The cannula,” I whined. “I need it.”

My dad immediately let go and rushed to connect me to the oxygen. I could see the guilt in his eyes, but he was still angry. “Hazel, apologize to your mother.”

“Fine, I’m sorry, just please let me do this.”

They didn’t say anything. Mom just sat there with her arms folded, not even looking at me. After a while, I got up

and went to my room to write about Augustus.

Both Mom and Dad tried a few times to knock on the door or whatever, but I just told them I was doing something important. It took me forever to figure out what I wanted to say, and even then I wasn't very happy with it. Before I'd technically finished, I noticed it was 7:40, which meant that I would be late even if I *didn't* change, so in the end I wore baby blue cotton pajama pants, flip-flops, and Gus's Butler shirt.

I walked out of the room and tried to go right past them, but my dad said, "You can't leave the house without permission."

"Oh, my God, Dad. He wanted me to write him a *eulogy*, okay? I'll be home every. Freaking. Night. Starting any day now, okay?" That finally shut them up.

It took the entire drive to calm down about my parents. I pulled up around the back of the church and parked in the semicircular driveway behind Augustus's car. The back door to the church was held open by a fist-size rock. Inside, I contemplated taking the stairs but decided to wait for the ancient creaking elevator.

When the elevator doors unscrolled, I was in the Support Group room, the chairs arranged in the same circle. But now I saw only Gus in a wheelchair, ghoulishly thin. He was facing me from the center of the circle. He'd

been waiting for the elevator doors to open.

"Hazel Grace," he said, "you look ravishing."

"I know, right?"

I heard a shuffling in a dark corner of the room. Isaac stood behind a little wooden lectern, clinging to it. "You want to sit?" I asked him.

"No, I'm about to eulogize. You're late."

"You're . . . I'm . . . what?"

Gus gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair into the center of the circle with him as he spun the chair to face Isaac. "I want to attend my funeral," Gus said. "By the way, will you speak at my funeral?"

"Um, of course, yeah," I said, letting my head fall onto his shoulder. I reached across his back and hugged both him and the wheelchair. He winced. I let go.

"Awesome," he said. "I'm hopeful I'll get to attend as a ghost, but just to make sure, I thought I'd—well, not to put you on the spot, but I just this afternoon thought I could arrange a prefuneral, and I figured since I'm in reasonably good spirits, there's no time like the present."

"How did you even get in here?" I asked him.

"Would you believe they leave the door open all night?" Gus asked.

"Um, no," I said.

"As well you shouldn't." Gus smiled. "Anyway, I know it's a bit self-aggrandizing."

“Hey, you’re stealing my eulogy,” Isaac said. “My first bit is about how you were a self-aggrandizing bastard.”

I laughed.

“Okay, okay,” Gus said. “At your leisure.”

Isaac cleared his throat. “Augustus Waters was a self-aggrandizing bastard. But we forgive him. We forgive him not because he had a heart as figuratively good as his literal one sucked, or because he knew more about how to hold a cigarette than any nonsmoker in history, or because he got eighteen years when he should have gotten more.”

“Seventeen,” Gus corrected.

“I’m assuming you’ve got some time, you interrupting bastard.

“I’m telling you,” Isaac continued, “Augustus Waters talked so much that he’d interrupt you at his own funeral. And he was pretentious: Sweet Jesus Christ, that kid never took a piss without pondering the abundant metaphorical resonances of human waste production. And he was vain: I do not believe I have ever met a more physically attractive person who was more acutely aware of his own physical attractiveness.

“But I will say this: When the scientists of the future show up at my house with robot eyes and they tell me to try them on, I will tell the scientists to screw off, because I do not want to see a world without him.”

I was kind of crying by then.

“And then, having made my rhetorical point, I will put my robot eyes on, because I mean, with robot eyes you can probably see through girls’ shirts and stuff. Augustus, my friend, Godspeed.”

Augustus nodded for a while, his lips pursed, and then gave Isaac a thumbs-up. After he’d recovered his composure, he added, “I would cut the bit about seeing through girls’ shirts.”

Isaac was still clinging to the lectern. He started to cry. He pressed his forehead down to the podium and I watched his shoulders shake, and then finally, he said, “Goddamn it, Augustus, editing your own eulogy.”

“Don’t swear in the Literal Heart of Jesus,” Gus said.

“Goddamn it,” Isaac said again. He raised his head and swallowed. “Hazel, can I get a hand here?”

I’d forgotten he couldn’t make his own way back to the circle. I got up, placed his hand on my arm, and walked him slowly back to the chair next to Gus where I’d been sitting. Then I walked up to the podium and unfolded the piece of paper on which I’d printed my eulogy.

“My name is Hazel. Augustus Waters was the great star-crossed love of my life. Ours was an epic love story, and I won’t be able to get more than a sentence into it without disappearing into a puddle of tears. Gus knew. Gus knows. I will not tell you our love story, because—like all real love stories—it will die with us, as it should. I’d

hoped that he'd be eulogizing me, because there's no one I'd rather have . . ." I started crying. "Okay, how not to cry. How am I—okay. Okay."

I took a few breaths and went back to the page. "I can't talk about our love story, so I will talk about math. I am not a mathematician, but I know this: There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. There's .1 and .12 and .112 and an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a *bigger* infinite set of numbers between 0 and 2, or between 0 and a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them, when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I'm grateful."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

**A**ugustus Waters died eight days after his prefuneral, at Memorial, in the ICU, when the cancer, which was made of him, finally stopped his heart, which was also made of him.

He was with his mom and dad and sisters. His mom called me at three thirty in the morning. I'd known, of course, that he was going. I'd talked to his dad before going to bed, and he told me, "It could be tonight," but still, when I grabbed the phone from the bedside table and saw *Gus's Mom* on the caller ID, everything inside of me collapsed. She was just crying on the other end of the line, and she told me she was sorry, and I said I was sorry, too, and she told me that he was unconscious for a couple hours before he died.

My parents came in then, looking expectant, and I just nodded and they fell into each other, feeling, I'm sure, the harmonic terror that would in time come for them directly.

I called Isaac, who cursed life and the universe and God Himself and who said where are the goddamned trophies to break when you need them, and then I realized there was no one else to call, which was the saddest thing. The only person I really wanted to talk to about Augustus Waters's death was Augustus Waters.

My parents stayed in my room forever until it was morning and finally Dad said, "Do you want to be alone?" and I nodded and Mom said, "We'll be right outside the door," me thinking, *I don't doubt it.*

It was unbearable. The whole thing. Every second worse than the last. I just kept thinking about calling him, wondering what would happen, if anyone would answer. In the last weeks, we'd been reduced to spending our time together in recollection, but that was not nothing: The pleasure of remembering had been taken from me, because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It felt like losing your co-rememberer meant losing the memory itself, as if the things we'd done were less real and important than they had been hours before.

When you go into the ER, one of the first things they ask you to do is to rate your pain on a scale of one to ten, and



from there they decide which drugs to use and how quickly to use them. I'd been asked this question hundreds of times over the years, and I remember once early on when I couldn't get my breath and it felt like my chest was on fire, flames licking the inside of my ribs fighting for a way to burn out of my body, my parents took me to the ER. A nurse asked me about the pain, and I couldn't even speak, so I held up nine fingers.

Later, after they'd given me something, the nurse came in and she was kind of stroking my hand while she took my blood pressure and she said, "You know how I know you're a fighter? You called a ten a nine."

But that wasn't quite right. I called it a nine because I was saving my ten. And here it was, the great and terrible ten, slamming me again and again as I lay still and alone in my bed staring at the ceiling, the waves tossing me against the rocks then pulling me back out to sea so they could launch me again into the jagged face of the cliff, leaving me floating faceup on the water, undrowned.

Finally I did call him. His phone rang five times and then went to voice mail. "You've reached the voice mail of Augustus Waters," he said, the clarion voice I'd fallen for. "Leave a message." It beeped. The dead air on the line was so eerie. I just wanted to go back to that secret post-terrestrial third space with him that we visited when we talked on the phone. I waited for that feeling, but it never came: The dead air on the line was no comfort, and finally I hung up.

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I got my laptop out from under the bed and fired it up and went onto his wall page, where already the condolences were flooding in. The most recent one said:

I love you, bro. See you on the other side.

... Written by someone I'd never heard of. In fact, almost all the wall posts, which arrived nearly as fast as I could read them, were written by people I'd never met and whom he'd never spoken about, people who were extolling his various virtues now that he was dead, even though I knew for a fact they hadn't seen him in months and had made no effort to visit him. I wondered if my wall would look like this if I died, or if I'd been out of school and life long enough to escape widespread memorialization.

I kept reading.

I miss you already, bro.

I love you, Augustus. God bless and keep you.

You'll live forever in our hearts, big man.

(That particularly galled me, because it implied the immortality of those left behind: You will live forever in my memory, because I will live forever! I AM YOUR GOD

NOW, DEAD BOY! I OWN YOU! Thinking you won't die is yet another side effect of dying.)

You were always such a great friend I'm sorry I  
didn't see more of you after you left school, bro. I  
bet you're already playing ball in heaven.

I imagined the Augustus Waters analysis of that comment: If I am playing basketball in heaven, does that imply a physical location of a heaven containing physical basketballs? Who makes the basketballs in question? Are there less fortunate souls in heaven who work in a celestial basketball factory so that I can play? Or did an omnipotent God create the basketballs out of the vacuum of space? Is this heaven in some kind of unobservable universe where the laws of physics don't apply, and if so, why in the hell would I be playing basketball when I could be flying or reading or looking at beautiful people or something else I actually enjoy? It's almost as if the way you imagine my dead self says more about you than it says about either the person I was or the whatever I am now.

His parents called around noon to say the funeral would be in five days, on Saturday. I pictured a church packed with people who thought he liked basketball, and I wanted to puke, but I knew I had to go, since I was speaking and

everything. When I hung up, I went back to reading his wall:

Just heard that Gus Waters died after a lengthy battle with cancer. Rest in peace, buddy.

I knew these people were genuinely sad, and that I wasn't really mad at them. I was mad at the universe. Even so, it infuriated me: You get all these friends just when you don't need friends anymore. I wrote a reply to his comment:

We live in a universe devoted to the creation, and eradication, of awareness. Augustus Waters did not die after a lengthy battle with cancer. He died after a lengthy battle with human consciousness, a victim—as you will be—of the universe's need to make and unmake all that is possible.

I posted it and waited for someone to reply, refreshing over and over again. Nothing. My comment got lost in the blizzard of new posts. Everyone was going to miss him so much. Everyone was praying for his family. I remembered Van Houten's letter: Writing does not resurrect. It buries.

After a while, I went out into the living room to sit with my parents and watch TV. I couldn't tell you what the show was, but at some point, my mom said, "Hazel, what can we do for you?"

And I just shook my head. I started crying again.

“What can we do?” Mom asked again.

I shrugged.

But she kept asking, as if there were something she could do, until finally I just kind of crawled across the couch into her lap and my dad came over and held my legs really tight and I wrapped my arms all the way around my mom’s middle and they held on to me for hours while the tide rolled in.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**W**hen we first got there, I sat in the back of the visitation room, a little room of exposed stone walls off to the side of the sanctuary in the Literal Heart of Jesus church. There were maybe eighty chairs set up in the room, and it was two-thirds full but felt one-third empty.

For a while, I just watched people walk up to the coffin, which was on some kind of cart covered in a purple tablecloth. All these people I'd never seen before would kneel down next to him or stand over him and look at him for a while, maybe crying, maybe saying something, and then all of them would touch the coffin instead of touching him, because no one wants to touch the dead.

Gus's mom and dad were standing next to the coffin, hugging everybody as they passed by, but when they noticed me, they smiled and shuffled over. I got up and hugged first his dad and then his mom, who held on to me too tight, like Gus used to, squeezing my shoulder blades. They both looked so old—their eye sockets hollowed, the skin sagging from their exhausted faces. They had reached the end of a hurdling sprint, too.

"He loved you so much," Gus's mom said. "He really did. It wasn't—it wasn't puppy love or anything," she added, as if I didn't know that.

"He loved you so much, too," I said quietly. It's hard to explain, but talking to them felt like stabbing and being stabbed. "I'm sorry," I said. And then his parents were talking to my parents—the conversation all nodding and tight lips. I looked up at the casket and saw it unattended, so I decided to walk up there. I pulled the oxygen tube from my nostrils and raised the tube up over my head, handing it to Dad. I wanted it to be just me and just him. I grabbed my little clutch and walked up the makeshift aisle between the rows of chairs.

The walk felt long, but I kept telling my lungs to shut up, that they were strong, that they could do this. I could see him as I approached: His hair was parted neatly on the left side in a way that he would have found absolutely horrifying, and his face was plasticized. But he was still Gus. My lanky, beautiful Gus.

## John Green

I wanted to wear the little black dress I'd bought for my fifteenth birthday party, my death dress, but I didn't fit into it anymore, so I wore a plain black dress, knee-length. Augustus wore the same thin-labeled suit he'd worn to Oranje.

As I knelt, I realized they'd closed his eyes—of course they had—and that I would never again see his blue eyes. "I love you present tense," I whispered, and then put my hand on the middle of his chest and said, "It's okay, Gus. It's okay. It is. It's okay, you hear me?" I had—and have—absolutely no confidence that he could hear me. I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Okay," I said. "Okay."

I suddenly felt conscious that there were all these people watching us, that the last time so many people saw us kiss we were in the Anne Frank House. But there was, properly speaking, no us left to watch. Only a me.

I snapped open the clutch, reached in, and pulled out a hard pack of Camel Lights. In a quick motion I hoped no one behind would notice, I snuck them into the space between his side and the coffin's plush silver lining. "You can light these," I whispered to him. "I won't mind."

While I was talking to him, Mom and Dad had moved up to the second row with my tank, so I didn't have a long walk back. Dad handed me a tissue as I sat down. I blew my nose, threaded the tubes around my ears, and put the nubbins back in.

I thought we'd go into the proper sanctuary for the



real funeral, but it all happened in that little side room—the Literal Hand of Jesus, I guess, the part of the cross he'd been nailed to. A minister walked up and stood behind the coffin, almost like the coffin was a pulpit or something, and talked a little bit about how Augustus had a courageous battle and how his heroism in the face of illness was an inspiration to us all, and I was already starting to get pissed off at the minister when he said, "In heaven, Augustus will finally be healed and whole," implying that he had been less whole than other people due to his leglessness, and I kind of could not repress my sigh of disgust. My dad grabbed me just above the knee and cut me a disapproving look, but from the row behind me, someone muttered almost inaudibly near my ear, "What a load of horse crap, eh, kid?"

I spun around.

Peter Van Houten wore a white linen suit, tailored to account for his rotundity, a powder-blue dress shirt, and a green tie. He looked like he was dressed for a colonial occupation of Panama, not a funeral. The minister said, "Let us pray," but as everyone else bowed their head, I could only stare slack-jawed at the sight of Peter Van Houten. After a moment, he whispered, "We gotta fake pray," and bowed his head.

I tried to forget about him and just pray for Augustus. I made a point of listening to the minister and not looking back.

The minister called up Isaac, who was much more seri-

ous than he'd been at the prefuneral. "Augustus Waters was the Mayor of the Secret City of Cancervania, and he is not replaceable," Isaac began. "Other people will be able to tell you funny stories about Gus, because he was a funny guy, but let me tell you a serious one: A day after I got my eye cut out, Gus showed up at the hospital. I was blind and heart-broken and didn't want to do anything and Gus burst into my room and shouted, 'I have wonderful news!' And I was like, 'I don't really want to hear wonderful news right now,' and Gus said, 'This is wonderful news you want to hear,' and I asked him, 'Fine, what is it?' and he said, 'You are going to live a good and long life filled with great and terrible moments that you cannot even imagine yet!'"

Isaac couldn't go on, or maybe that was all he had written.

After a high school friend told some stories about Gus's considerable basketball talents and his many qualities as a teammate, the minister said, "We'll now hear a few words from Augustus's special friend, Hazel." *Special friend?* There were some titters in the audience, so I figured it was safe for me to start out by saying to the minister, "I was his girlfriend." That got a laugh. Then I began reading from the eulogy I'd written.

"There's a great quote in Gus's house, one that both he and I found very comforting: *Without pain, we couldn't know joy.*"

I went on spouting bullshit Encouragements as Gus's parents, arm in arm, hugged each other and nodded at every word. Funerals, I had decided, are for the living.

After his sister Julie spoke, the service ended with a prayer about Gus's union with God, and I thought back to what he'd told me at Oranjee, that he didn't believe in mansions and harps, but did believe in capital-S Something, and so I tried to imagine him capital-S Somewhere as we prayed, but even then I could not quite convince myself that he and I would be together again. I already knew too many dead people. I knew that time would now pass for me differently than it would for him—that I, like everyone in that room, would go on accumulating loves and losses while he would not. And for me, that was the final and truly unbearable tragedy: Like all the innumerable dead, he'd once and for all been demoted from haunted to haunter.

And then one of Gus's brothers-in-law brought up a boom box and they played this song Gus had picked out—a sad and quiet song by The Hectic Glow called “The New Partner.” I just wanted to go home, honestly. I didn't know hardly any of these people, and I felt Peter Van Houten's little eyes boring into my exposed shoulder blades, but after the song was over, everyone had to come up to me and tell me that I'd spoken beautifully, and that it was a lovely service, which was a lie: It was a funeral. It looked like any other funeral.

His pallbearers—cousins, his dad, an uncle, friends I'd never seen—came and got him, and they all started walking toward the hearse.

When Mom and Dad and I got in the car, I said, "I don't want to go. I'm tired."

"Hazel," Mom said.

"Mom, there won't be a place to sit and it'll last forever and I'm exhausted."

"Hazel, we have to go for Mr. and Mrs. Waters," Mom said.

"Just . . ." I said. I felt so little in the backseat for some reason. I kind of wanted to *be* little. I wanted to be like six years old or something. "Fine," I said.

I just stared out the window awhile. I really didn't want to go. I didn't want to see them lower him into the ground in the spot he'd picked out with his dad, and I didn't want to see his parents sink to their knees in the dew-wet grass and moan in pain, and I didn't want to see Peter Van Houten's alcoholic belly stretched against his linen jacket, and I didn't want to cry in front of a bunch of people, and I didn't want to toss a handful of dirt onto his grave, and I didn't want my parents to have to stand there beneath the clear blue sky with its certain slant of afternoon light, thinking about their day and their kid and my plot and my casket and my dirt.

But I did these things. I did all of them and worse, because Mom and Dad felt we should.

...

After it was over, Van Houten walked up to me and put a fat hand on my shoulder and said, "Could I hitch a ride? Left my rental at the bottom of the hill." I shrugged, and he opened the door to the backseat right as my dad unlocked the car.

Inside, he leaned between the front seats and said, "Peter Van Houten: Novelist Emeritus and Semiprofessional Disappointer."

My parents introduced themselves. He shook their hands. I was pretty surprised that Peter Van Houten had flown halfway across the world to attend a funeral. "How did you even—" I started, but he cut me off.

"I used the infernal Internet of yours to follow the Indianapolis obituary notices." He reached into his linen suit and produced a fifth of whiskey.

"And you just like bought a ticket and—"

He interrupted again while unscrewing the cap. "It was fifteen thousand for a first-class ticket, but I'm sufficiently capitalized to indulge such whims. And the drinks are free on the flight. If you're ambitious, you can almost break even."

Van Houten took a swig of the whiskey and then leaned forward to offer it to my dad, who said, "Um, no thanks." Then Van Houten nodded the bottle toward me. I grabbed it.

"Hazel," my mom said, but I unscrewed the cap and sipped. It made my stomach feel like my lungs. I handed the bottle back to Van Houten, who took a long slug from it and then said, "So. *Omnis cellula e cellula*."

"Huh?"

"Your boy Waters and I corresponded a bit, and in his last—"

"Wait, you read your fan mail now?"

"No, he sent it to my house, not through my publisher. And I'd hardly call him a fan. He despised me. But at any rate he was quite insistent that I'd be absolved for my misbehavior if I attended his funeral and told you what became of Anna's mother. So here I am, and there's your answer: *Omnis cellula e cellula*."

"What?" I asked again.

"*Omnis cellula e cellula*," he said again. "All cells come from cells. Every cell is born of a previous cell, which was born of a previous cell. Life comes from life. Life begets life begets life begets life begets life."

We reached the bottom of the hill. "Okay, yeah," I said. I was in no mood for this. Peter Van Houten would not hijack Gus's funeral. I wouldn't allow it. "Thanks," I said. "Well, I guess we're at the bottom of the hill."

"You don't want an explanation?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm good. I think you're a pathetic alcoholic who says fancy things to get attention like a really precocious eleven-year-old and I feel super bad for you. But

yeah, no, you're not the guy who wrote *An Imperial Affliction* anymore, so you couldn't sequel it even if you wanted to. Thanks, though. Have an excellent life."

"But—"

"Thanks for the booze," I said. "Now get out of the car." He looked scolded. Dad had stopped the car and we just idled there below Gus's grave for a minute until Van Houten opened the door and, finally silent, left.

As we drove away, I watched through the back window as he took a drink and raised the bottle in my direction, as if toasting me. His eyes looked so sad. I felt kinda bad for him, to be honest.

We finally got home around six, and I was exhausted. I just wanted to sleep, but Mom made me eat some cheesy pasta, although she at least allowed me to eat in bed. I slept with the BiPAP for a couple hours. Waking up was horrible, because for a disoriented moment I felt like everything was fine, and then it crushed me anew. Mom took me off the BiPAP, I tethered myself to a portable tank, and stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth.

Appraising myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, I kept thinking there were two kinds of adults: There were Peter Van Houtens—miserable creatures who scoured the earth in search of something to hurt. And then there were people like my parents, who walked around zombically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around.

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Neither of these futures struck me as particularly desirable. It seemed to me that I had already seen everything pure and good in the world, and I was beginning to suspect that even if death didn't get in the way, the kind of love that Augustus and I share could never last. *So dawn goes down to day*, the poet wrote. *Nothing gold can stay*.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"Occupada," I said.

"Hazel," my dad said. "Can I come in?" I didn't answer, but after a while I unlocked the door. I sat down on the closed toilet seat. Why did breathing have to be such work? Dad knelt down next to me. He grabbed my head and pulled it into his collarbone, and he said, "I'm sorry Gus died." I felt kind of suffocated by his T-shirt, but it felt good to be held so hard, pressed into the comfortable smell of my dad. It was almost like he was angry or something, and I liked that, because I was angry, too. "It's total bullshit," he said. "The whole thing. Eighty percent survival rate and he's in the twenty percent? Bullshit. He was such a bright kid. It's bullshit. I hate it. But it was sure a privilege to love him, huh?"

I nodded into his shirt.

"Gives you an idea how I feel about you," he said.

My old man. He always knew just what to say.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**A** couple days later, I got up around noon and drove over to Isaac's house. He answered the door himself. "My mom took Graham to a movie," he said.

"We should go do something," I said.

"Can the something be play blind-guy video games while sitting on the couch?"

"Yeah, that's just the kind of something I had in mind."

So we sat there for a couple hours talking to the screen together, navigating this invisible labyrinthine cave without a single lumen of light. The most entertaining part of the game by far was trying to get the computer to engage us in humorous conversation:

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Me: "Touch the cave wall."

Computer: "You touch the cave wall. It is moist."

Isaac: "Lick the cave wall."

Computer: "I do not understand. Repeat?"

Me: "Hump the moist cave wall."

Computer: "You attempt to jump. You hit your head."

Isaac: "Not *jump*. *HUMP*."

Computer: "I don't understand."

Isaac: "Dude, I've been alone in the dark in this cave for weeks and I need some relief. HUMP THE CAVE WALL."

Computer: "You attempt to ju—"

Me: "Thrust pelvis against the cave wall."

Computer: "I do not—"

Isaac: "Make sweet love to the cave."

Computer: "I do not—"

Me: "*FINE*. Follow left branch."

Computer: "You follow the left branch. The passage narrows."

Me: "Crawl."

Computer: "You crawl for one hundred yards. The passage narrows."

Me: "Snake crawl."

Computer: "You snake crawl for thirty yards. A trickle of water runs down your body. You reach a mound of small rocks blocking the passageway."

Me: "Can I hump the cave now?"

Computer: "You cannot jump without standing."

Isaac: "I dislike living in a world without Augustus Waters."

Computer: "I don't understand—"

Isaac: "Me neither. Pause."

He dropped the remote onto the couch between us and asked, "Do you know if it hurt or whatever?"

"He was really fighting for breath, I guess," I said. "He eventually went unconscious, but it sounds like, yeah, it wasn't great or anything. Dying sucks."

"Yeah," Isaac said. And then after a long time, "It just seems so impossible."

"Happens all the time," I said.

"You seem angry," he said.

"Yeah," I said. We just sat there quiet for a long time, which was fine, and I was thinking about way back in the very beginning in the Literal Heart of Jesus when Gus told us that he feared oblivion, and I told him that he was fearing something universal and inevitable, and how really, the problem is not suffering itself or oblivion itself but the depraved meaninglessness of these things, the absolutely inhuman nihilism of suffering. I thought of my dad telling me that the universe wants to be noticed. But what we want is to be noticed by the universe, to have the universe give a shit what happens to us—not the collective idea of sentient life but each of us, as individuals.

"Gus really loved you, you know," he said.

"I know."

"He wouldn't shut up about it."

"I know," I said.

"It was annoying."

"I didn't find it that annoying," I said.

"Did he ever give you that thing he was writing?"

"What thing?"

"That sequel or whatever to that book you liked."

I turned to Isaac. "What?"

"He said he was working on something for you but he wasn't that good of a writer."

"When did he say this?"

"I don't know. Like, after he got back from Amsterdam at some point."

"At which point?" I pressed. Had he not had a chance to finish it? Had he finished it and left it on his computer or something?

"Um," Isaac sighed. "Um, I don't know. We talked about it over here once. He was over here, like—uh, we played with my email machine and I'd just gotten an email from my grandmother. I can check on the machine if you—"

"Yeah, yeah, where is it?"

He'd mentioned it a month before. A month. Not a good month, admittedly, but still—a month. That was enough time for him to have written *something*, at least. There was

still something of him, or by him at least, floating around out there. I needed it.

"I'm gonna go to his house," I told Isaac.

I hurried out to the minivan and hauled the oxygen cart up and into the passenger seat. I started the car. A hip-hop beat blared from the stereo, and as I reached to change the radio station, someone started rapping. In Swedish.

I swiveled around and screamed when I saw Peter Van Houten sitting in the backseat.

"I apologize for alarming you," Peter Van Houten said over the rapping. He was still wearing the funeral suit, almost a week later. He smelled like he was sweating alcohol. "You're welcome to keep the CD," he said. "It's Snook, one of the major Swedish—"

"Ah ah ah ah GET OUT OF MY CAR." I turned off the stereo.

"It's your mother's car, as I understand it," he said. "Also, it wasn't locked."

"Oh, my God! Get out of the car or I'll call nine-one-one. Dude, what is your *problem*?"

"If only there were just one," he mused. "I am here simply to apologize. You were correct in noting earlier that I am a pathetic little man, dependent upon alcohol. I had one acquaintance who only spent time with me because I paid her to do so—worse, still, she has since quit, leaving me the rare soul who cannot acquire companionship even

through bribery. It is all true, Hazel. All that and more.”

“Okay,” I said. It would have been a more moving speech had he not slurred his words.

“You remind me of Anna.”

“I remind a lot of people of a lot of people,” I answered. “I really have to go.”

“So drive,” he said.

“Get out.”

“No. You remind me of Anna,” he said again. After a second, I put the car in reverse and backed out. I couldn’t make him leave, and I didn’t have to. I’d drive to Gus’s house, and Gus’s parents would make him leave.

“You are, of course, familiar,” Van Houten said, “with Antonietta Meo.”

“Yeah, no,” I said. I turned on the stereo, and the Swedish hip-hop blared, but Van Houten yelled over it.

“She may soon be the youngest nonmartyr saint ever beatified by the Catholic Church. She had the same cancer that Mr. Waters had, osteosarcoma. They removed her right leg. The pain was excruciating. As Antonietta Meo lay dying at the ripened age of six from this agonizing cancer, she told her father, ‘Pain is like fabric: The stronger it is, the more it’s worth.’ Is that true, Hazel?”

I wasn’t looking at him directly but at his reflection in the mirror. “No,” I shouted over the music. “That’s bullshit.”

"But don't you wish it were true!" he cried back. I cut the music. "I'm sorry I ruined your trip. You were too young. You were—" He broke down. As if he had a right to cry over Gus. Van Houten was just another of the endless mourners who did not know him, another too-late lamentation on his wall.

"You didn't ruin our trip, you self-important bastard. We had an awesome trip."

*"I am trying,"* he said. *"I am trying, I swear."* It was around then that I realized Peter Van Houten had a dead person in his family. I considered the honesty with which he had written about cancer kids; the fact that he couldn't speak to me in Amsterdam except to ask if I'd dressed like her on purpose; his shittiness around me and Augustus; his aching question about the relationship between pain's extremity and its value. He sat back there drinking, an old man who'd been drunk for years. I thought of a statistic I wish I didn't know: Half of marriages end in the year after a child's death. I looked back at Van Houten. I was driving down College and I pulled over behind a line of parked cars and asked, "You had a kid who died?"

"My daughter," he said. "She was eight. Suffered beautifully. Will never be beatified."

"She had leukemia?" I asked. He nodded. "Like Anna," I said.

"Very much like her, yes."

"You were married?"

"No. Well, not at the time of her death. I was insufferable long before we lost her. Grief does not change you, Hazel. It reveals you."

"Did you live with her?"

"No, not primarily, although at the end, we brought her to New York, where I was living, for a series of experimental tortures that increased the misery of her days without increasing the number of them."

After a second, I said, "So it's like you gave her this second life where she got to be a teenager."

"I suppose that would be a fair assessment," he said, and then quickly added, "I assume you are familiar with Philippa Foot's Trolley Problem thought experiment?"

"And then I show up at your house and I'm dressed like the girl you hoped she would live to become and you're, like, all taken aback by it."

"There's a trolley running out of control down a track," he said.

"I don't care about your stupid thought experiment," I said.

"It's Philippa Foot's, actually."

"Well, hers either," I said.

"She didn't understand why it was happening," he said. "I had to tell her she would die. Her social worker said I had to tell her. I had to tell her she would die, so I told her she was going to heaven. She asked if I would be there, and



I said that I would not, not yet. But eventually, she said, and I promised that yes, of course, very soon. And I told her that in the meantime we had great family up there that would take care of her. And she asked me when I would be there, and I told her soon. Twenty-two years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

After a while, I asked, “What happened to her mom?”

He smiled. “You’re still looking for your sequel, you little rat.”

I smiled back. “You should go home,” I told him. “Sober up. Write another novel. Do the thing you’re good at. Not many people are lucky enough to be so good at something.”

He stared at me through the mirror for a long time. “Okay,” he said. “Yeah. You’re right. You’re right.” But even as he said it, he pulled out his mostly empty fifth of whiskey. He drank, recapped the bottle, and opened the door. “Good-bye, Hazel.”

“Take it easy, Van Houten.”

He sat down on the curb behind the car. As I watched him shrink in the rearview mirror, he pulled out the bottle and for a second it looked like he would leave it on the curb. And then he took a swig.

It was a hot afternoon in Indianapolis, the air thick and still like we were inside a cloud. It was the worst kind of air for me, and I told myself it was just the air when the walk

from his driveway to his front door felt infinite. I rang the doorbell, and Gus's mom answered.

"Oh, Hazel," she said, and kind of enveloped me, crying.

She made me eat some eggplant lasagna—I guess a lot of people had brought them food or whatever—with her and Gus's dad. "How are you?"

"I miss him."

"Yeah."

I didn't really know what to say. I just wanted to go downstairs and find whatever he'd written for me. Plus, the silence in the room really bothered me. I wanted them to be talking to each other, comforting or holding hands or whatever. But they just sat there eating very small amounts of lasagna, not even looking at each other. "Heaven needed an angel," his dad said after a while.

"I know," I said. Then his sisters and their mess of kids showed up and piled into the kitchen. I got up and hugged both his sisters and then watched the kids run around the kitchen with their sorely needed surplus of noise and movement, excited molecules bouncing against each other and shouting, "You're it no you're it no I was it but then I tagged you you didn't tag me you missed me well I'm tagging you now no dumb butt it's a time-out DANIEL DO NOT CALL YOUR BROTHER A DUMB BUTT Mom if I'm not allowed to use that word how come you just used it

dumb butt dumb butt,” and then, chorally, *dumb butt dumb butt dumb butt dumb butt*, and at the table Gus’s parents were now holding hands, which made me feel better.

“Isaac told me Gus was writing something, something for me,” I said. The kids were still singing their dumb-butt song.

“We can check his computer,” his mom said.

“He wasn’t on it much the last few weeks,” I said.

“That’s true. I’m not even sure we brought it upstairs. Is it still in the basement, Mark?”

“No idea.”

“Well,” I said, “can I . . .” I nodded toward the basement door.

“We’re not ready,” his dad said. “But of course, yes, Hazel. Of course you can.”

I walked downstairs, past his unmade bed, past the gaming chairs beneath the TV. His computer was still on. I tapped the mouse to wake it up and then searched for his most recently edited files. Nothing in the last month. The most recent thing was a response paper to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Maybe he’d written something by hand. I walked over to his bookshelves, looking for a journal or a notebook. Nothing. I flipped through his copy of *An Imperial Affliction*. He hadn’t left a single mark in it.

I walked to his bedside table next. *Infinite Mayhem*, the ninth sequel to *The Price of Dawn*, lay atop the table next to his reading lamp, the corner of page 138 turned down. He'd never made it to the end of the book. "Spoiler alert: Mayhem survives," I said out loud to him, just in case he could hear me.

And then I crawled into his unmade bed, wrapping myself in his comforter like a cocoon, surrounding myself with his smell. I took out my cannula so I could smell better, breathing him in and breathing him out, the scent fading even as I lay there, my chest burning until I couldn't distinguish among the pains.

I sat up in the bed after a while and reinserted my cannula and breathed for a while before going up the stairs. I just shook my head no in response to his parents' expectant looks. The kids raced past me. One of Gus's sisters—I could not tell them apart—said, "Mom, do you want me to take them to the park or something?"

"No, no, they're fine."

"Is there anywhere he might have put a notebook? Like by his hospital bed or something?" The bed was already gone, reclaimed by hospice.

"Hazel," his dad said, "you were there every day with us. You— he wasn't alone much, sweetie. He wouldn't have had time to write anything. I know you want . . . I want that, too. But the messages he leaves for us now are coming from

above, Hazel.” He pointed toward the ceiling, as if Gus were hovering just above the house. Maybe he was. I don’t know. I didn’t feel his presence, though.

“Yeah,” I said. I promised to visit them again in a few days.

I never quite caught his scent again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

**T**hree days later, on the eleventh day AG, Gus's father called me in the morning. I was still hooked to the BiPAP, so I didn't answer, but I listened to his message the moment it beeped through to my phone. "Hazel, hi, it's Gus's dad. I found a, uh, black Moleskine notebook in the magazine rack that was near his hospital bed, I think near enough that he could have reached it. Unfortunately there's no writing in the notebook. All the pages are blank. But the first—I think three or four—the first few pages are torn out of the notebook. We looked through the house but couldn't find the pages. So I don't know what to make of that. But maybe those pages are what Isaac was referring to? Anyway,

I hope that you are doing okay. You're in our prayers every day, Hazel. Okay, bye."

Three or four pages ripped from a Moleskine notebook no longer in Augustus Waters's house. Where would he leave them for me? Taped to *Funky Bones*? No, he wasn't well enough to get there.

The Literal Heart of Jesus. Maybe he'd left it there for me on his Last Good Day.

So I left twenty minutes early for Support Group the next day. I drove over to Isaac's house, picked him up, and then we drove down to the Literal Heart of Jesus with the windows of the minivan down, listening to The Hectic Glow's leaked new album, which Gus would never hear.

We took the elevator. I walked Isaac to a seat in the Circle of Trust then slowly worked my way around the Literal Heart. I checked everywhere: under the chairs, around the lectern I'd stood behind while delivering my eulogy, under the treat table, on the bulletin board packed with Sunday school kids' drawings of God's love. Nothing. It was the only place we'd been together in those last days besides his house, and it either wasn't here or I was missing something. Perhaps he'd left it for me in the hospital, but if so, it had almost certainly been thrown away after his death.

I was really out of breath by the time I settled into a chair next to Isaac, and I devoted the entirety of Patrick's nutless testimonial to telling my lungs they were okay, that

they could breathe, that there was enough oxygen. They'd been drained only a week before Gus died—I watched the amber cancer water dribble out of me through the tube—and yet already they felt full again. I was so focused on telling myself to breathe that I didn't notice Patrick saying my name at first.

I snapped to attention. "Yeah?" I asked.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay, Patrick. I'm a little out of breath."

"Would you like to share a memory of Augustus with the group?"

"I wish I would just die, Patrick. Do you ever wish you would just die?"

"Yes," Patrick said, without his usual pause. "Yes, of course. So why don't you?"

I thought about it. My old stock answer was that I wanted to stay alive for my parents, because they would be all gutted and childless in the wake of me, and that was still true kind of, but that wasn't it, exactly. "I don't know."

"In the hopes that you'll get better?"

"No," I said. "No, it's not that. I really don't know. Isaac?" I asked. I was tired of talking.

Isaac started talking about true love. I couldn't tell them what I was thinking because it seemed cheesy to me, but I was thinking about the universe wanting to be noticed, and how I had to notice it as best I could. I felt that



I owed a debt to the universe that only my attention could repay, and also that I owed a debt to everybody who didn't get to be a person anymore and everyone who hadn't gotten to be a person yet. What my dad had told me, basically.

I stayed quiet for the rest of Support Group, and Patrick said a special prayer for me, and Gus's name was tacked onto the long list of the dead—fourteen of them for every one of us—and we promised to live our best life today, and then I took Isaac to the car.

When I got home, Mom and Dad were at the dining room table on their separate laptops, and the moment I walked in the door, Mom slammed her laptop shut. "What's on the computer?"

"Just some antioxidant recipes. Ready for BiPAP and *America's Next Top Model*?" she asked.

"I'm just going to lie down for a minute."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"Well, you've gotta eat before you—"

"Mom, I am aggressively unhungry." I took a step toward the door but she cut me off.

"Hazel, you have to eat. Just some ch—"

"No. I'm going to bed."

"No," Mom said. "You're not." I glanced at my dad, who shrugged.

"It's my life," I said.

"You're not going to starve yourself to death just because Augustus died. You're going to eat dinner."

I was really pissed off for some reason. "I can't eat, Mom. I can't. Okay?"

I tried to push past her but she grabbed both my shoulders and said, "Hazel, you're eating dinner. You need to stay healthy."

"NO!" I shouted. "I'm not eating dinner, and I can't stay healthy, because I'm not healthy. I am dying, Mom. I am going to die and leave you here alone and you won't have a me to hover around and you won't be a mother anymore, and I'm sorry, but I can't do anything about it, okay?!"

I regretted it as soon as I said it.

"You heard me."

"What?"

"Did you hear me say that to your father?" Her eyes welled up. "Did you?" I nodded. "Oh, God, Hazel. I'm sorry. I was wrong, sweetie. That wasn't true. I said that in a desperate moment. It's not something I believe." She sat down, and I sat down with her. I was thinking that I should have just puked up some pasta for her instead of getting pissed off.

"What do you believe, then?" I asked.

"As long as either of us is alive, I will be your mother," she said. "Even if you die, I—"

"When," I said.

She nodded. "Even when you die, I will still be your mom, Hazel. I won't stop being your mom. Have you stopped loving Gus?" I shook my head. "Well, then how could I stop loving you?"

"Okay," I said. My dad was crying now.

"I want you guys to have a life," I said. "I worry that you won't have a life, that you'll sit around here all day with no me to look after and stare at the walls and want to off yourselves."

After a minute, Mom said, "I'm taking some classes. Online, through IU. To get my master's in social work. In fact, I wasn't looking at antioxidant recipes; I was writing a paper."

"Seriously?"

"I don't want you to think I'm imagining a world without you. But if I get my MSW, I can counsel families in crisis or lead groups dealing with illness in their families or—"

"Wait, you're going to become a Patrick?"

"Well, not exactly. There are all kinds of social work jobs."

Dad said, "We've both been worried that you'll feel abandoned. It's important for you to know that we will *always* be here for you, Hazel. Your mom isn't going anywhere."

"No, this is great. This is fantastic!" I was really smiling.

"Mom is going to become a Patrick. She'll be a great Patrick! She'll be so much better at it than Patrick is."

"Thank you, Hazel. That means everything to me."

I nodded. I was crying. I couldn't get over how happy I was, crying genuine tears of actual happiness for the first time in maybe forever, imagining my mom as a Patrick. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would've been a good social worker, too.

After a while we turned on the TV and watched *ANTM*. But I paused it after five seconds because I had all these questions for Mom. "So how close are you to finishing?"

"If I go up to Bloomington for a week this summer, I should be able to finish by December."

"How long have you been keeping this from me, exactly?"

"A year."

"Mom."

"I didn't want to hurt you, Hazel."

Amazing. "So when you're waiting for me outside of MCC or Support Group or whatever, you're always—"

"Yes, working or reading."

"This is so great. If I'm dead, I want you to know I will be sighing at you from heaven every time you ask someone to share their feelings."

My dad laughed. "I'll be right there with ya, kiddo," he assured me.

Finally, we watched *ANTM*. Dad tried really hard not to die of boredom, and he kept messing up which girl was which, saying, “We like her?”

“No, no. We *revile* Anastasia. We like *Antonia*, the other blonde,” Mom explained.

“They’re all tall and horrible,” Dad responded. “Forgive me for failing to tell the difference.” Dad reached across me for Mom’s hand.

“Do you think you guys will stay together if I die?” I asked.

“Hazel, what? Sweetie.” She fumbled for the remote control and paused the TV again. “What’s wrong?”

“Just, do you think you would?”

“Yes, of course. Of course,” Dad said. “Your mom and I love each other, and if we lose you, we’ll go through it together.”

“Swear to God,” I said.

“I swear to God,” he said.

I looked back at Mom. “Swear to God,” she agreed. “Why are you even worrying about this?”

“I just don’t want to ruin your life or anything.”

Mom leaned forward and pressed her face into my messy puff of hair and kissed me at the very top of my head. I said to Dad, “I don’t want you to become like a miserable unemployed alcoholic or whatever.”

My mom smiled. “Your father isn’t Peter Van Houten,

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Hazel. You of all people know it is possible to live with pain.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. Mom hugged me and I let her even though I didn’t really want to be hugged. “Okay, you can unpause it,” I said. Anastasia got kicked off. She threw a fit. It was awesome.

I ate a few bites of dinner—bow-tie pasta with pesto—and managed to keep it down.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I woke up the next morning panicked because I'd dreamed of being alone and boatless in a huge lake. I bolted up, straining against the BiPAP, and felt Mom's arm on me.

"Hi, you okay?"

My heart raced, but I nodded. Mom said, "Kaitlyn's on the phone for you." I pointed at my BiPAP. She helped me get it off and hooked me up to Philip and then finally I took my cell from Mom and said, "Hey, Kaitlyn."

"Just calling to check in," she said. "See how you're doing."

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "I'm doing okay."

"You've just had the worst luck, darling. It's *unconscionable*."

"I guess," I said. I didn't think much about my luck anymore one way or the other. Honestly, I didn't really want to talk with Kaitlyn about anything, but she kept dragging the conversation along.

"So what was it like?" she asked.

"Having your boyfriend die? Um, it sucks."

"No," she said. "Being in love."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. It was . . . it was nice to spend time with someone so interesting. We were very different, and we disagreed about a lot of things, but he was always so interesting, you know?"

"Alas, I do not. The boys I'm acquainted with are vastly uninteresting."

"He wasn't perfect or anything. He wasn't your fairytale Prince Charming or whatever. He tried to be like that sometimes, but I liked him best when that stuff fell away."

"Do you have like a scrapbook of pictures and letters he wrote?"

"I have some pictures, but he never really wrote me letters. Except, well there are some missing pages from his notebook that might have been something for me, but I guess he threw them away or they got lost or something."

"Maybe he mailed them to you," she said.

"Nah, they'd've gotten here."

"Then maybe they weren't written for you," she said. "Maybe . . . I mean, not to depress you or anything, but maybe he wrote them for someone else and mailed them—"



“VAN HOUTEN!” I shouted.

“Are you okay? Was that a cough?”

“Kaitlyn, I love you. You are a genius. I have to go.”

I hung up, rolled over, reached for my laptop, turned it on, and emailed lidewij.vliegenthart.

Lidewij,

I believe Augustus Waters sent a few pages from a notebook to Peter Van Houten shortly before he (Augustus) died. It is very important to me that someone reads these pages. I want to read them, of course, but maybe they weren't written for me. Regardless, they must be read. They must be. Can you help?

Your friend,

Hazel Grace Lancaster

She responded late that afternoon.

Dear Hazel,

I did not know that Augustus had died. I am very sad to hear this news. He was such a very charismatic young man. I am so sorry, and so sad.

I have not spoken to Peter since I resigned that day we met. It is very late at night here, but I am going

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over to his house first thing in the morning to find this letter and force him to read it. Mornings were his best time, usually.

Your friend,  
Lidewij Vliegenthart

p.s. I am bringing my boyfriend in case we have to physically restrain Peter.

I wondered why he'd written Van Houten in those last days instead of me, telling Van Houten that he'd be redeemed if only he gave me my sequel. Maybe the notebook pages had just repeated his request to Van Houten. It made sense, Gus leveraging his terminality to make my dream come true: The sequel was a tiny thing to die for, but it was the biggest thing left at his disposal.

I refreshed my email continually that night, slept for a few hours, and then commenced to refreshing around five in the morning. But nothing arrived. I tried to watch TV to distract myself, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Amsterdam, imagining Lidewij Vliegenthart and her boyfriend bicycling around town on this crazy mission to find a dead kid's last correspondence. How fun it would be to bounce on the back of Lidewij Vliegenthart's bike down the brick streets, her curly red hair blowing into my face, the smell of the canals and cigarette smoke, all the people

sitting outside the cafés drinking beer, saying their *r*'s and *g*'s in a way I'd never learn.

I missed the future. Obviously I knew even before his recurrence that I'd never grow old with Augustus Waters. But thinking about Lidewij and her boyfriend, I felt robbed. I would probably never again see the ocean from thirty thousand feet above, so far up that you can't make out the waves or any boats, so that the ocean is a great and endless monolith. I could imagine it. I could remember it. But I couldn't see it again, and it occurred to me that the voracious ambition of humans is never sated by dreams coming true, because there is always the thought that everything might be done better and again.

That is probably true even if you live to be ninety—although I'm jealous of the people who get to find out for sure. Then again, I'd already lived twice as long as Van Houten's daughter. What he wouldn't have given to have a kid die at sixteen.

Suddenly Mom was standing between the TV and me, her hands folded behind her back. "Hazel," she said. Her voice was so serious I thought something might be wrong.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what today is?"

"It's not my birthday, is it?"

She laughed. "Not just yet. It's July fourteenth, Hazel."

"Is it *your* birthday?"

"No . . ."

"Is it Harry Houdini's birthday?"

"No . . ."

"I am really tired of guessing."

"IT IS BASTILLE DAY!" She pulled her arms from behind her back, producing two small plastic French flags and waving them enthusiastically.

"That sounds like a fake thing. Like Cholera Awareness Day."

"I assure you, Hazel, that there is nothing fake about Bastille Day. Did you know that two hundred and twenty-three years ago today, the people of France stormed the Bastille prison to arm themselves to fight for their freedom?"

"Wow," I said. "We should celebrate this momentous anniversary."

"It so happens that I have just now scheduled a picnic with your father in Holliday Park."

She never stopped trying, my mom. I pushed against the couch and stood up. Together, we cobbled together some sandwich makings and found a dusty picnic basket in the hallway utility closet.

It was kind of a beautiful day, finally real summer in Indianapolis, warm and humid—the kind of weather that reminds you after a long winter that while the world wasn't built for humans, we were built for the world. Dad was waiting for us, wearing a tan suit, standing in a handicapped

parking spot typing away on his handheld. He waved as we parked and then hugged me. "What a day," he said. "If we lived in California, they'd all be like this."

"Yeah, but then you wouldn't enjoy them," my mom said. She was wrong, but I didn't correct her.

We ended up putting our blanket down by the Ruins, this weird rectangle of Roman ruins plopped down in the middle of a field in Indianapolis. But they aren't real ruins: They're like a sculptural re-creation of ruins built eighty years ago, but the fake Ruins have been neglected pretty badly, so they have kind of become actual ruins by accident. Van Houten would like the Ruins. Gus, too.

So we sat in the shadow of the Ruins and ate a little lunch. "Do you need sunscreen?" Mom asked.

"I'm okay," I said.

You could hear the wind in the leaves, and on that wind traveled the screams of the kids on the playground in the distance, the little kids figuring out how to be alive, how to navigate a world that was not built for them by navigating a playground that was. Dad saw me watching the kids and said, "You miss running around like that?"

"Sometimes, I guess." But that wasn't what I was thinking. I was just trying to notice everything: the light on the ruined Ruins, this little kid who could barely walk discovering a stick at the corner of the playground, my indefatigable mother zigzagging mustard across her turkey sandwich, my

dad patting his handheld in his pocket and resisting the urge to check it, a guy throwing a Frisbee that his dog kept running under and catching and returning to him.

Who am I to say that these things might not be forever? Who is Peter Van Houten to assert as fact the conjecture that our labor is temporary? All I know of heaven and all I know of death is in this park: an elegant universe in ceaseless motion, teeming with ruined ruins and screaming children.

My dad was waving his hand in front of my face. "Tune in, Hazel. Are you there?"

"Sorry, yeah, what?"

"Mom suggested we go see Gus?"

"Oh. Yeah," I said.

So after lunch, we drove down to Crown Hill Cemetery, the last and final resting place of three vice presidents, one president, and Augustus Waters. We drove up the hill and parked. Cars roared by behind us on Thirty-eighth Street. It was easy to find his grave: It was the newest. The earth was still mounded above his coffin. No headstone yet.

I didn't feel like he was there or anything, but I still took one of Mom's dumb little French flags and stuck it in the ground at the foot of his grave. Maybe passersby would think he was a member of the French Foreign Legion or some heroic mercenary.

...

Lidewij finally wrote back just after six P.M. while I was on the couch watching both TV and videos on my laptop. I saw immediately there were four attachments to the email and I wanted to open them first, but I resisted temptation and read the email.

Dear Hazel,

Peter was very intoxicated when we arrived at his house this morning, but this made our job somewhat easier. Bas (my boyfriend) distracted him while I searched through the garbage bag Peter keeps with the fan mail in it, but then I realized that Augustus knew Peter's address. There was a large pile of mail on his dining room table, where I found the letter very quickly. I opened it and saw that it was addressed to Peter, so I asked him to read it.

He refused.

At this point, I became very angry, Hazel, but I did not yell at him. Instead, I told him that he owed it to his dead daughter to read this letter from a dead boy, and I gave him the letter and he read the entire thing and said—I quote him directly—“Send it to the girl and tell her I have nothing to add.”

I have not read the letter, although my eyes did fall on some phrases while scanning the pages. I have attached them here and then will mail them to you at

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your home; your address is the same?

May God bless and keep you, Hazel.

Your friend,

Lidewij Vliegenthart

I clicked open the four attachments. His handwriting was messy, slanting across the page, the size of the letters varying, the color of the pen changing. He'd written it over many days in varying degrees of consciousness.

Van Houten,

I'm a good person but a shitty writer. You're a shitty person but a good writer. We'd make a good team. I don't want to ask you any favors, but if you have time—and from what I saw, you have plenty—I was wondering if you could write a eulogy for Hazel. I've got notes and everything, but if you could just make it into a coherent whole or whatever? Or even just tell me what I should say differently.

Here's the thing about Hazel: Almost everyone is obsessed with leaving a mark upon the world. Bequeathing a legacy. Outlasting death. We all want to be remembered. I do, too. That's what bothers me



most, is being another unremembered casualty in the ancient and inglorious war against disease.

I want to leave a mark.

But Van Houten: The marks humans leave are too often scars. You build a hideous minimall or start a coup or try to become a rock star and you think, “They’ll remember me now,” but (a) they don’t remember you, and (b) all you leave behind are more scars. Your coup becomes a dictatorship. Your minimall becomes a lesion.

(Okay, maybe I’m not such a shitty writer. But I can’t pull my ideas together, Van Houten. My thoughts are stars I can’t fathom into constellations.)

We are like a bunch of dogs squirting on fire hydrants. We poison the groundwater with our toxic piss, marking everything MINE in a ridiculous attempt to survive our deaths. I can’t stop pissing on fire hydrants. I know it’s silly and useless—epically useless in my current state—but I am an animal like any other.

Hazel is different. She walks lightly, old man. She

walks lightly upon the earth. Hazel knows the truth: We're as likely to hurt the universe as we are to help it, and we're not likely to do either.

People will say it's sad that she leaves a lesser scar, that fewer remember her, that she was loved deeply but not widely. But it's not sad, Van Houten. It's triumphant. It's heroic. Isn't that the real heroism? Like the doctors say: First, do no harm.

The real heroes anyway aren't the people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine didn't actually invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox didn't get smallpox.

After my PET scan lit up, I snuck into the ICU and saw her while she was unconscious. I just walked in behind a nurse with a badge and I got to sit next to her for like ten minutes before I got caught. I really thought she was going to die before I could tell her that I was going to die, too. It was brutal: the incessant mechanized haranguing of intensive care. She had this dark cancer water dripping out of her chest. Eyes closed. Intubated. But her hand was still her hand, still warm and the nails painted this

almost black dark blue and I just held her hand and tried to imagine the world without us and for about one second I was a good enough person to hope she died so she would never know that I was going, too. But then I wanted more time so we could fall in love. I got my wish, I suppose. I left my scar.

A nurse guy came in and told me I had to leave, that visitors weren't allowed, and I asked if she was doing okay, and the guy said, "She's still taking on water." A desert blessing, an ocean curse.

What else? She is so beautiful. You don't get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you: You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Van Houten. You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers.

I do, Augustus.

I do.