

Guitar Notes

Mary Amato

Hear all the songs from the book, sing with the
karaoke tracks, and learn how to write your own songs
on the *Guitar Notes* website, www.thrumsociety.com.



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In memory of my dad, Jack Koepke, whose hearty rendition of “On the Road to Mandalay” was the beloved soundtrack of my childhood car rides; for Mr. James McCauley, my eighth-grade English teacher in Libertyville, IL, whose lesson on song lyrics as poetry made my soul thrum; and for all the singers with whom I have sung, most especially the earliest ones: my sisters—Cathy, Nancy, and Suzanne—and my high school friends-in-harmony, Jane Donndelinger Victor and Mary Donndelinger Neuberger.

1. Wear the white belt.
2. Pick up your guitar.
3. Tune.
4. Play.

—from *Zen Guitar*

by Philip Toshio Sudo



SEPTEMBER 2. TUESDAY.

TRIPP BROODY'S ROOM; 7:33 A.M.

. . . BUMPER-TO-BUMPER DUE TO AN ACCIDENT ON THE
LEFT SHOULDER. RESCUE CREWS ARE ON THE SCENE.
UP-TO-THE-MINUTE TRAFFIC BROUGHT TO YOU BY
MONTGOMERY AUTOPARTS . . .

The clock-radio alarm drills into Tripp Broody's ears,
and his eyelids open. After three slow blinks, he realizes
what he is seeing three feet from his bed: a note taped to
the metal stand where his guitar should be.

He sits up, pushes his long, messy hair out of his eyes,
and reads it.

Dear Tripp,

I know you're going to be mad at me, but you didn't keep up your end of the bargain. You didn't do your summer reading or math packet. You didn't do anything but lock yourself in this room and play the guitar. It's like you're addicted to it. It's unhealthy and isolating. You are capable of getting straight A's. You can have your guitar back if you have all A's at the end of the semester and if you at least attempt to be more social. Don't bring a sour face to school. Nobody likes that. Talk to people this year, okay? It won't kill you.

Love, Mom

P.S. You have brought this on yourself. I really believe that you're going to thank me for this in the long run.

It takes a moment for the reality to sink in. His room is hot and small, the air conditioner wheezing out a pathetically small stream of cold air molecules.

He wants to scream, but he keeps his mouth closed. She must have planned it all out, he thinks, to take his guitar on the night before school begins so that there would be no time to discuss it. She is a thief and a coward.

After pulling on shorts and a T-shirt, he walks into the kitchen, takes her bag of ground coffee out of the cupboard, and pours the coffee down the garbage disposal. Then he walks over to a potted aloe plant, spoons dirt into the coffee bag, apologizes to the plant, neatly refolds the top of the bag, and puts it back in the cupboard.

Finely ground French Roast dirt.

Take that.

LYLA MARKS'S ROOM; 7:34 A.M.

Lyla Marks is lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling, fully dressed, her frizzy dark hair fanning on the white pillow like a fern. Her heart is beating abnormally loudly. She puts her hand over it. *Calm down.*

Her phone buzzes. She knows without looking at the little screen that it's Annie. She doesn't want to hear her friend's voice right now, because she knows that it'll make her heart beat even faster. But she answers.

"What are you wearing?" Annie asks.

"Tangerine top. Blue skirt," Lyla says.

"And the shoes that I picked out?" Annie asks.

"Yeah. I'm lying on my bed. I feel like a corpse."

"That's sick. Stop talking like that. You're freaking me out," Annie says. "We're picking you up in five minutes. Be ready."

Lyla slips her phone into the pocket of her jean skirt. Her black cello case is on its side in the middle of her bedroom floor. She imagines opening the window and pushing the case out, imagines it splitting open when it hits the ground, and the cello splintering into pieces.

"Lyla!" her dad calls.

She picks up her cello and walks out the door.

Her dad is at the bottom of the stairs, looking at his phone. "Dr. Prevski just e-mailed. She said yes to adding an extra fifteen minutes to your lessons so you can work on the Coles audition piece!"

Lyla's heart starts pounding again. "That's great," she says, and busies herself by checking what's in her backpack.

When Annie's car pulls up, Lyla's dad picks up her cello and follows her out. "Play the Bruch piece," he says. "Just the second part. That'll show Mr. Jacoby your range."

"Got it, Dad," she says, and smiles.

"Have a great first day, sweetie!" He puts the cello in the back and says hi to Annie's mom as Lyla gets into the car.

"Lyla, you look adorable," Mrs. Win says.

"Just absolutely adorable," Annie says, and laughs.

"Thank you," Lyla says to Mrs. Win.

"You both look adorable," Lyla's dad says as he closes the back of the car.

"We don't want to look adorable," Annie says. "We want to look sophisticated."

As Mrs. Win is about to pull out, Lyla's dad knocks on the window.

Lyla looks out.

"Where's your head? Put your seat belt on," he says through the window.

"Sorry," she says, and buckles up.

"Ready?" Mrs. Win asks.

"Yeah," Lyla lies.

ROCKLAND SCHOOL; 8:05 A.M.

Tripp wants to turn around and make a run for it. Too many students are streaming through the school doors at the same time, yelling and laughing. As soon as he's inside, a girl next to him screams at another down the hall. "Beanie, you look totally cute!"

Beanie screams back, "Casey, I missed you all summer!"

Tripp turns to the girl called Beanie, who he doesn't know at all, and asks, "Why did you just lie?"

"What?" The girl gives him a look.

"From the sound of your voice, it's obvious you're lying," he explains.

"From the sound of your voice, it's obvious you're an idiot." The girl runs ahead.

Who wants to hear the truth? Nobody. Well, he talked

to someone today. He can tell his mom that. He adjusts his headphones and turns up his music.

Mr. Handlon, the vice principal, is standing outside the main office. "Welcome back, Alex. Nice to see you, girls! Tripp Broody, headphones away or they're mine."

"I promise to put them away when I get to class," Tripp argues.

"Put them away now or they're mine. You know the rules."

Reluctantly, he puts away his music and is pushed forward by the crowd. The shouts and clatter, along with the smell of fresh paint, make him dizzy. He pulls his schedule out of his pocket—Intro to Tech in Room T113—and heads toward the T hallway.

"Hi, Mrs. Sykes!" a girl next to him calls out. "How was your summer?"

It's oval-faced Annie Win, with her friend Lyla Marks, famous at his school. Perfect at being perfect. They are passing him, walking fast, carrying their instruments, happy to see their teachers, happy to be back. "Do your brains sing chipper songs inside your chipper heads all day?" he asks them.

Annie throws him a foul look and pulls Lyla to the bulletin board in front of the music room. Tripp notices what they're reading: MUSIC PRACTICE ROOM SIGN-UP.

"Patricia Kent already has her name up here!" Annie exclaims.

He stands behind them and peers around Lyla's hair to read:

MUSIC PRACTICE ROOMS
AVAILABLE FOR USE
DURING LUNCH PERIOD.
SIGN UP BELOW
FOR THIS SEMESTER.
THE SCHEDULE WILL
BE POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 8,
AND ROOMS WILL OPEN
SEPTEMBER 15.

While Annie writes her and Lyla's names on the first two lines, Tripp scans the bulletin board and sees another notice: BAND/ORCHESTRA STUDENTS NEEDING TO SIGN OUT A SCHOOL INSTRUMENT, PLEASE CONTACT MR. JACOBY ASAP.

"Let's go," Annie says, and they head into the orchestra room.

Tripp gets out a pen. Under Lyla's name he writes:

Tripp Broody (not a band or orchestra person) would like a practice room (if the school has a guitar to borrow).

He begins to leave and then stops and adds:

*This is not a joke. This is a
matter of survival.*

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:15 P.M.

As soon as the final bell rings, Tripp heads to his locker, and his phone buzzes.

Mom calling.

"I'm not talking to you, Mom."

"How was school?"

"I said I'm not talking to you."

"I spoke with your algebra teacher at lunch," his mom says. "She'll only take off two points if you turn in your summer packet at the end of this week."

"I spoke with God today. He'll only take off two points if you confess your sins and return my guitar."

"Very funny. Look, I know it was probably a shock—"

"I can't survive without my guitar."

"See. It's like you're addicted to it. This will be good for you to take a break and focus on—"

"I can't do it."

"I warned you so many times this summer. I know it's a drastic step, but I don't know what else—"

"Is it in the attic?"

"It's not in the house, so don't go tearing it apart. Oh, that reminds me. The guy is supposed to be there at four

to do the termite eradication thing. Take him to the basement and show him that wooden rafter they're eating through. The one I showed you. He's supposed to spray it with poison and put in some kind of traps or something."

"You do realize that you are a termite," he says. "You are eating through my soul."

"Very funny."

"I am an empty shell. I am going to crumble."

"Go home and fill yourself up with math problems. I'm going to check them tonight. Bye."

Tripp closes his phone, slips it into his back pocket, and makes his way down the noisy hallway. When he walks outside, the bright beauty of the day stabs him.



SEPTEMBER 3. WEDNESDAY.

TRIPP'S ROOM; 7:01 A.M.

"Tripp!" His mom's voice bites the room. She's standing in his doorway, holding up the bag of dirt. "Where's my coffee?"

He turns to face the wall and pulls up the sheet. The Termite has arrived.

She marches over. "This is completely immature. Where did you put it?"

"Maybe it went to visit my guitar."

"You better not have thrown it out."

He turns to look at her. "You sound so tense, Mom. It's like you're addicted to it."

She gives him a look. "If you think that by messing

with my coffee, you're going to get your guitar back, you're dead wrong. I can always buy more coffee, Tripp. And I'll be sure to take it out of your bank account."

The Termite storms out. He sticks out his tongue at the door as it slams. Is he immature? Yes. If maturity means you can grow up and take away the one and only thing that gives meaning to your son's life, then why would anyone strive for maturity?



SEPTEMBER 4. THURSDAY.

ORCHESTRA ROOM; 8:56 A.M.

With Mr. Jacoby on the podium, the Advanced Orchestra is playing through a new piece—a new teacher, a new year—and Lyla is waiting for the entrance of the cellos. Her index finger is just above the spot on the A string where her first note will be, but a dark little fantasy is flickering through her mind like a ten-second horror film: when she presses down on the string, a bomb that has been rigged inside the cello will explode.

She knows it's just her imagination, but her palms are sweating and her heart is racing. As a new metronome amplifies an annoyingly loud, incessant clack, the violin bows leap in perfect unison, and all the cellos to her right

pounce on their opening measure, but Lyla's hands do not move.

Her heart is beating too loudly. Maybe the muscles around her heart are squeezing too tightly? Is that possible? *Calm down*, she tells herself. *Jump in on the next measure.*

"Measure sixty-four," the boy next to her whispers, his voice purring with the satisfaction that for once Lyla Marks has lost her place.

She begins to play, and the cello does not explode. Her left hand fingers the pattern of notes, and her right hand holds the bow, but it feels as if her hands belong to someone else and she is merely attached to them.

"More energy!" Mr. Jacoby calls over the rising sound.

After the piece is over and the teacher is giving comments, Annie Win turns around, scrunching her eyebrows and pumping her shoulders up and down to imitate him. Lyla forces a smile.

When class is done, she is relieved to put her cello away.

"Jacoby is a joke. Everything we did is too easy," Annie whispers. "And Jessica needs to brush her teeth. I should tell her."

"You can't just say that," Lyla whispers back.

"Maybe I'll put mouthwash on her music stand." Annie makes another face and pulls Lyla out the door. "Jessica said that Ms. Collivet wants to start a French club and she'll give anybody who joins an automatic A."

"Annie," Lyla interrupts. "I think I might . . . do you think it's possible for someone our age to have a heart attack?"

Annie laughs. "I saw a show on TV where this really young guy had a heart attack and he had a disgusting nipple ring and when the doctor put the defibrillator, or whatever it's called, on his chest, the electricity hit the metal ring and electrocuted the doctor!" Annie starts laughing. "So the moral of that story is, don't try to save anybody who has body piercings."

"Who has body piercings?" Kenneth Chan is on their heels.

"Lyla does," Annie says.

"I do not!"

Annie laughs, and then as soon as Kenneth passes by, she whispers, "He likes you, but his nose is too big."

Lyla hears her own heart beating even above the noise in the hall. She shifts her books, pressing them against her chest to dull the sound. "Annie, has your heart ever been so loud that you could hear it without a stethoscope or anything? "

"No." Annie stops. "Is your heart being weird?"

"Sort of."

"That's what the first week of school does." Annie shrugs it off. "It gives you a heart attack. Hey, remember that time in fifth grade when you swore to me that you could hear your bones grow? For, like, six weeks I tried to listen to my bones." She laughs and leads the way into

the English room, which is noticeably hot and stuffy.

Sweat prickles on Lyla's forehead. *Stay calm.* She has to get through school.

Annie turns and whispers, "If you die of a heart attack and leave me alone this year, you know what I'll do?"

"What?" Lyla asks.

"I'll kill you." Annie laughs.



SEPTEMBER 8. MONDAY.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 8:19 A.M.

As Tripp is walking to class, he notices the music teacher posting a sign on the music bulletin board.

PRACTICE ROOM SCHEDULE 11:26-12:10

ROOM A: PATRICIA KENT EVEN DAYS;

ANNIE WIN ODD DAYS.

ROOM B: LYL A MARKS EVEN DAYS;

TRIPP BROODY ODD DAYS.

"Thank you. Thank you!" Tripp says.

Mr. Jacoby turns and looks at him. "Tripp?"

Tripp nods. "You have just saved my life."

“Well, I don’t know about that. I found one guitar in storage. This program really focuses on band and orchestra.”

“What kind of guitar is it?”

“Acoustic, steel strings, but the strings are shot.” Mr. Jacoby frowns. “You’ll have to provide your own.”

“I don’t mind, as long as I can play. Can I take it home?”

He shakes his head. “No. You’re not in the music program here. Technically, the instruments can be checked out only by students in the program. We’ll keep it in Room B. By the way, two of these girls are serious musicians and would like to practice every da—”

“I’m a serious musician, too.”

“I wasn’t implying that you aren’t. If you decide that you don’t want to use the room, just let me know right away so that I can reassign it. The rules are posted in the rooms: One person per room; the computers in each room are to be used only for music—no video games or surfing the web; clean up after yourself.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Mr. Jacoby heads into the orchestra room, and Tripp continues on his way to class. He has been allotted precisely forty-four minutes of joy every other day, beginning next Monday. Something inside him bubbles up and he leaps into the air.

“What was that supposed to be?” one girl behind him asks another.

"I don't know. Who does that?"

He laughs. "I do."

ABEL PHOTO STUDIO; 3:58 P.M.

The studio is large and white. In the back, a gray cloth is draped on the wall and floor. Lights are set up on either side of the cloth, facing in.

The photographer shows Lyla into a dressing room. While she is changing into her performance dress, she hears her dad taking her mom's cello out of the case. He starts explaining to the photographer that he wants to include one photo in her Coles application and wants to send the other to the local newspaper with a note about her upcoming Kennedy Center audition.

Her phone buzzes. When she sees that it's Annie calling, her heart pounds even harder.

"Where are you?" Annie asks. "I looked for you after school."

"At the dentist, remember?" Lyla whispers. "I told you about it yesterday."

"Are you done? Ask your dad to drop you off here."

"I'm in the waiting room. I haven't even gotten in yet."

"Call me as soon as you're done."

"Okay," Lyla agrees. She tucks the phone into her backpack and hangs it on a hook. Then she takes a deep breath and walks out.

“Great dress,” the photographer says. “Beautiful choice.” He asks her to stand on the cloth, and her dad brings the cello to her.

“This is going to be very easy,” the photographer says, stepping behind the tripod. “Piece of cake. All you have to do is smile.”

Lyla forces a smile.

Click.



SEPTEMBER 15. MONDAY.

ROCKLAND SCHOOL; 11:23 A.M.

Tripp isn't sure where the practice rooms are located. As he turns down the hallway toward the orchestra room, Annie Win passes him, walking in the same direction. Black hair as straight and silky as a doll's, falling all the way down to the middle of her back. Crisp yellow capris. Matching yellow sandals. Ankles that have never been dirty. He imagines that instead of showering, someone merely brushes her off with a feather duster.

She opens the orchestra room door, and when he follows her in, she looks back and scowls. "What are you doing here? You aren't in orchestra or band." Her eyebrows are high and pointed rather than rounded in the

middle. Her voice is like a rapid-fire laser gun.

"I'm installing new carpeting," he says.

"You are so strange," she says.

"Yeah. We're putting it on the walls to dampen the sound. People over in art have been complaining about the violins."

She makes a face, turns, and gets her violin case from the storage room. He notices the dead-end corridor in the back of the room and, guessing that the practice rooms are there, heads toward it.

She is at his heels. "Seriously. Why are you here?"

"I signed up for a practice room."

"I saw your name on the sign-up list, but I thought it was a joke. It's not fair for you to get a room," she says. "Mr. Jacoby told me and Lyla that we can't have rooms every day because somebody else wanted one, too. I thought it was an orchestra person."

He stops and she bumps into him.

"Why isn't it fair?" he asks.

"These rooms are for *music*."

"Yeah, well, you band and orchestra people are not the only musicians in the world."

She stalks into Room A with a slam of the door.

Perfect girls think they own the world.

Tripp walks into Room B and immediately wants to shout with joy. It's small, but perfect. Blank white walls, a workstation with a computer, an electronic keyboard, and cool recording devices. Way better than he expected.

Go, Rockland School. And there's the guitar—waiting just for him.

Eagerly, he closes the door, moves the bench to the side, lays the battered case on the floor, and opens it. The sight of the guitar cracks his face into a smile. He runs his fingertips along two big scratches on the front. Four of the six strings are gone; the two that remain are gummy and old. It's beat-up, but it doesn't matter. It's a guitar.

Tripp pulls a packet of strings out of his backpack and gets to work. The minute the guitar is in his hands, his body is pumped with energy. One by one, he changes the strings, and then he uses the keyboard at the workstation to find the right pitch for each string, ignoring the muffled scales of Annie's violin next door.

Sitting on the floor, he pulls his pick out of his back pocket and strums. He rests his right hand on the body of the guitar, feeling the vibration of the wood, listening to the sound, and something inside him comes alive. It's as if there are six strings inside him, tuned to the same pitches, and when the guitar is strummed, it causes his strings to ring out, too.

Well, well, well, he thinks, the Termite will not be able to devour my entire soul.



SEPTEMBER 16. TUESDAY.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 11:24 A.M.

“Let’s get out of this oven.” Annie pulls Lyla out of the English room.

“It’s an even day,” Lyla says. “I get the practice room today.”

“Hey, when you see Patricia What’s-Her-Name, ask her to switch days with me, then we can both practice on even days.”

“What?”

“That lowly French horn player. She has Room A on even days. Ask her to take it on odd days, and I can take even days with you and we can have the same lunch schedule. We only have morning classes together. It’s not fair.”

The responsibilities of the week are scrolling through Lyla's mind in a continual loop: the new cello piece for the Coles audition, the U.S. history project, French quiz, the club Annie wants them to join, reading for English, algebra problems, science, Saturday's Metz Youth Orchestra rehearsal, the Kennedy Center audition . . . her heart beating faster and louder as the loop goes on.

It's like the story she read last night for English class. "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe. One man murders another and stuffs the body under the floorboards. When the police come, the murderer believes they can hear the beating heart of the victim and so he confesses, but it's really his own heart beating in his ears. No! Her life is not like that at all. She didn't murder anyone. What does she have to feel guilty about? Why is she thinking of that story?

Stay calm, she tells herself, and your heart will slow down.

"Ask her!" Annie repeats.

"Okay," Lyla says.

Annie scowls as they thread their way through the crowd. "You sound like that's a bad idea."

"I said okay."

"Your voice was weird."

"It was not, Annie. Why wouldn't I want us to have the same lunch schedule?"

Annie nods toward a girl down the hall. "Look at Marisse's calf muscles. She probably exercises in her

sleep. She thinks every guy is always drooling over her. I hate her. She's in all my afternoon classes."

They reach the B hallway and say good-bye. Lyla continues past the media center by herself. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

A trio of girls pass by and say hi. Lyla smiles and waves, catching a glimpse of herself in the glass of the trophy case: She is Lyla Marks. Everyone loves her. She is on her way to the music room to practice during lunch because that's what she does. She is a cellist. This defines her, separates her from others. She is the first-chair cellist.

Breathe in, she tells herself. *Breathe out.*

After she takes her cello into Practice Room B and closes the door, she gets it out of the case, lays it on the floor, and stares at it for several minutes. She glances up at the ceiling, checking for hidden cameras that she knows are not there. Lately, she's been feeling as if she's being watched, even when she knows she's not.

Breathe in, she tells herself. *Breathe out.*

Slowly, her heartbeat regulates, the tightness in her chest loosens.

The little room helps. The fact that no one is watching her.

Trash on the music stand catches her eye. The odd-day guy must have left it. Tripp Broody, the guy who criticized her and Annie for being "chipper." She glances up to check that the rules are still posted there from last year.

NUMBER THREE: DISPOSE OF ALL TRASH IN HALLWAY TRASH

CAN. It makes her mad when people don't follow the basic rules.

She breathes and looks at the guitar case. It's scuffed, one lock unhinged, the handle attached with duct tape—the odd guy's domain. Even the case looks like him. In contrast, her cello is unblemished and polished, lying on its side on the floor, like a whale that has washed up on the shore. She should pick it up, resuscitate it with her bow. Instead, she calls up her MP3 files of cello music on the computer and plays them so anyone who passes by the room will think she's practicing. After she is finished eating her lunch, she will practice, she tells herself. She eats her lunch in tiny, tiny bites.



SEPTEMBER 17. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:23 A.M.

An odd day, the only kind of day that counts. Tripp barely hangs on to consciousness through Intro to Tech and Spanish, but then he walks through the orchestra room and opens the door of Practice Room B. It's the energy of the room he loves, this quiet peace that is just waiting to be filled with sound.

Hello, little room.

The room likes him. He can tell. He sets his lunch on the workstation and opens the guitar case. A piece of white paper, folded neatly, is tucked between the strings. An unexpected development.

Dear Odd Day Musician,

We are sharing this room. Please remove your trash from the music stand when you are done.

Thanks.

—The Even Day Musician

Lyla Marks has left him a note. He flips the paper over and writes his reply.

Dear Ms. Even Day,

Thank you so much for the little note you left in the guitar case.

The napkin that I left on the music stand was not trash. I wrote a chord progression on it. Did you throw it away in your quest for a perfect spotless world?

Most Sincerely,

Mr. Odd Day

P.S. Please do not leave negative Even Day vibes all over the room. They will soak into this guitar, which will ruin it. Please clean up after yourself.

He folds it and leaves it on the music stand.



SEPTEMBER 18. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:22 A.M.

Lyla sees the note right away, and as she reads it, her face grows hot.

She was right, and he knows it. She hates people who try to make other people feel stupid just because they choose to follow basic rules of politeness.

She calls up the cello music on the computer and pushes up the volume. She tells herself that she will, in fact, practice the cello today, but only after she writes Mr. Odd her reply.



SEPTEMBER 19. FRIDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:23 A.M.

As Tripp opens the door to Room B, he hears his name and turns around.

Annie Win, violin case in hand, hops into place. "Lyla has your room on even days. If you trade with her, you would get even days, and Lyla and I could have odd days together."

"No," he says.

"Why not?"

"I like odd days."

"They're exactly the same. What difference does it make?"

Tripp shrugs. "Odd days are better than even days." As

he closes the door, she huffs. Poor perfect girls can't have what they want. Too bad. He has Intro to Tech and science on odd days; he needs the little room to survive.

Opening the guitar case, he smiles to see a second note, folded and tucked like the first.

Dear Mr. Odd,

Forgive me for mistaking your chord progression for trash, but you also left a candy wrapper and a crumpled napkin on the music stand. I thought I had chipper vibes, not negative ones. Well, you can make fun of me and my "vibes" for being bothered by trash, but at least I am considerate of others. Clean up after yourself and you won't have to read any more of my "little notes."

—The Even Day Musician

The note is like the pickle in his sandwich: a tangy crunch to make the bread of his morning and afternoon classes less boring. After he plays, he'll have fun writing a reply.

The guitar practically jumps into his arms. He loves this moment, when his fingers are ready to find something: a chord, a pleasing phrase, something worth repeating, something worth following.



SEPTEMBER 21. SUNDAY.

TRIPP'S ROOM; 6:11 P.M.

Josh and his friends sitting on somebody's couch. Josh and his friends knee-deep in snow. Josh shooting a free throw in a crowded school gym. Tripp is staring at the photos on Josh's efriends page. He hardly recognizes his old friend. Since when did he play basketball? He looks happy in Schenectady, wherever that is.

He clicks SEND A MESSAGE. Then he stares at the blank box. After a minute, he clicks X to close the site. He has nothing to write about.

On the wall behind his desk is a photo he took of his dad sitting on a log in front of their tent. It's dark, but the light from the fire shows his wide smile and lights up

all the goofy wind chimes they hung in the trees—the spoons and spatulas, the old hubcap and the bathtub faucet handles, the kiddie xylophone parts they had found by the side of the road. He can smell the smoky warmth of the fire, the scent of the loblolly pines, and the musty smell of the tent.

If they were there right now, they'd be taking one last look at the lake before they had to come back. His dad always said that: "Let's take one last look at the lake."

Tripp forces his gaze back to the computer. What he needs to do is learn a new riff, a new trick. He searches YouTube until he finds a good guitar tutorial and tries to follow along with the guy, but without a guitar, he just gets more frustrated. After a minute, he stands up and yells at the top of his lungs: "I NEED A GUITAR."

He hears the heavy roll of his mom's car pulling up the driveway, flicks off his laptop, closes it, and crawls into bed with the assigned short story for his English class. Edgar Allan Poe. "The Tell-Tale Heart."

The main character murders a guy. Tripp is hooked. The story is gothic and full of orphaned phrases that he plans to adopt:

... hearkening to the death watches
... all in vain
... Villains!

Over the wheeze of the air conditioner, he hears his mother and their neighbor Susan talking in the driveway.

"The Slater Creek Parkway Cleanup Committee needs

a chairperson, Terry; you'd be perfect," Susan was saying. "All you have to do is sign up on the Slater site."

"It's a great cause, Susan, but I don't really have the time—"

Susan. Susan. Susan. Do you really want a termite like Terry Broody on your cleanup committee? Tripp tunes them out and reads on. . . . In the story, the guy's heart is beating so loud, he thinks it is his victim's. A bizarre horror story. This kind of homework he doesn't mind.

When he is done, he stares up at the ceiling, trying to block out the sound track of his mother's entrance into the house, the click of her heels in the kitchen.

"Tripp . . . you home?"

He puts his hand on his chest to see if he can feel the beating of his heart. He cannot. Has he died in bed? He closes his eyes and tries to hear his heart pumping blood through his veins. He gets up and looks at himself in the mirror.

Boom Boom. Boom Boom. He thumps his chest with his palm. Boom Boom. Boom Boom. Over the boom-boom beat, he is dying to play a searing guitar solo. But alas, it is all in vain, all in vain, because Death—in the form of his mother—has eaten away the very thing he loves. Villain! Thy name is Termite!

As if on cue, his mother enters. She sees the book on his bed. "Edgar Allan Poe! Ooh. I remember those stories! Which one are you reading?"

He knows what she is doing. She is trying to engage him

in a cheerful discussion about literature so that he will forget her cruel kidnapping of his guitar. He looks at her in the mirror. "I'm sure you know the assignment, Mom. It's posted on Edline. And, yes, I finished reading it."

"Well . . . I was just stopping in because I learned something interesting today. Did you know that your school offers peer tutoring during lunch hours?"

"No. No. No. No. No."

"It would make such sense. You hate lunch anyway. You've told me that."

He can't tell her about the practice room. She would pull the plug for sure.

"I think I should sign you up for it," she says. "It's a *peer*. You might hit it off. Make a new friend—"

"No. No. No. No. No—"

"I don't understand that word." She turns and leaves. "I'm signing you up."

Villain!

He paces for a while, and then he opens his laptop and calls up the Slater Community Association website. After he finds the page for the Slater Creek Parkway Cleanup Committee, he clicks the sign-up button.

I would like to be chairperson for this committee: yes

Name: Terry Broody

E-mail address: tbroody@broodyrc.com

Comment: I'm so excited to become a part of this great cause.

Submit: Yes

How wonderful of the Termite to sign up for such an important community-building event. Maybe she'll even make some new friends!



SEPTEMBER 22. MONDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:26 A.M.

Tripp Broody has left no trash in the room, not a single piece of paper, and Lyla realizes that she was hoping for another acerbic note.

Good, she tells herself. *I shouldn't waste my time with him.* She sits on the bench and eats half a tuna fish sandwich and an apple and tells herself that, as soon as she is done, she will get out her cello. But after a few bites, she sets down her lunch and opens the guitar case. A note, folded, is tucked between the strings.

Dear Ms. Even,

You are well known for being absolutely perfect. Perfect grades. Perfect behavior. Perfect posture. Perfect attendance. Perfect class president. Perfect cello playing. Perfect best friend who plays perfect violin. I heard you sneeze once. Even that was perfect.

My question is, why choose to get all worked up about a trifle? How long did it take you to throw away my wastepaper products? 3 seconds? 3.5 seconds? Now, how much negative energy have you wasted being mad at me because of it? What is the point? Why couldn't the candy wrapper on the music stand inspire you to write a song? That would be a positive way to handle it. Perhaps I'll write one called "The Even Day Vibes."

-Mr. Odd

Lyla reads it twice, mashes it into a ball, marches into the hallway, and throws it into the trash can. She comes back in and paces, four steps from wall to wall, her heart racing. Then she pulls out her notebook.

Dear Mr. Odd,

Thank you for enlightening me on the subject of why I am so petty and negative and shallow. Here are my apple core and the crusts of my tuna fish sandwich. I truly hope these objects inspire you.

—Ms. Even

She drops her sandwich crusts and apple core on the music stand like little bombs. She feels wicked, better somehow.

She paces. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

Through the walls, she can hear the muted sound of Patricia Kent's French horn. She should go next door and ask if she'd be willing to switch days with Annie, but instead, she gets out the guitar.

Two big scratches run down the front. The ends of the strings at the top are messy, coiled. He didn't even bother to wipe off the dust.

She sits down on the bench with it. There's a worn black strap, but she isn't sure if she should put it on. How different to hold an instrument in her arms, like a big baby, instead of resting it against her body. She lays the fingers of her right hand on the strings. No bow.

Pluck. Pluck. Pluck. Pluck. Pluck. Pluck.

Funny. She was expecting to hear the notes C, G, D, A—the four strings of the cello—plus two more. It takes her a moment to figure out the pitches of the six strings: E, A, D, G, B, E.

She studies the neck. Is it fretted chromatically? Each fret a half note? Can she play a scale?

She experiments until she finds the E major scale. Plays it up and down. Then the E minor. Up and down. Each note rings out in the little room.

The strings are new. She can tell. New strings always have a bright sound.

As her fingers move through the scale, she tells herself that everything will be all right. She is Lyla Marks. She is just playing this guitar for a moment because it feels good to play it, and then she will pick up her cello because she is a cellist, and she is an A student, and she is Annie Win's best friend, and her heart is beating normally, and everything is perfectly fine.

When the period is over, she puts the guitar away reluctantly. She tucks her note for Mr. Odd in between the strings, closes the case, and sets it back in the corner.

"Ah, Lyla." Mr. Jacoby startles her. "Just the person I was looking for."

Guilt shoots through her like adrenaline, and she spins around. Did he hear her playing the guitar? Did he see the apple core and the sandwich crusts on the music stand?

He holds the door for her and she picks up her cello. He follows her to the storage room, where she puts away her instrument. "You did very well on the Bach this morning." He laughs. "That's an understatement. I've never heard anything like it. International Culture Day

assembly is October third, and Mr. Steig is hoping that a music department student will perform a short opening piece, and I'd love you to do something." As they walk out of the storage room, he opens the file he is holding and pulls out the sheet music. "I was thinking of Allegro Appassionato by Saint-Saëns. I bet you know it. Or would you like to do another piece?"

She imagines telling him that she'd rather not play, imagines Mr. Jacoby disappearing in a puff of smoke.

He looks at her anxiously. She hears herself say yes she knows the Saint-Saëns piece and yes she'd love to play and thank you for asking, and his face jumps into a smile as he hands her the music.

"And it goes without saying that I'm hoping you'll want to participate in the juried competitions this year," he says. "The first one is in November, and I was thinking of this piece." He pulls another piece of music out of the file and hands it to her. "Take a look at it and tell me what you think. I'd be happy to meet with you anytime after school or during lunch. I'm so excited to be working with you!"

She glances down at the music. A multitude of black notes race ferociously across the page, setting off ripples of panic that she feels in her chest.

"Better hurry or you'll be late for your next class," he calls out.

She stuffs the music into her folder. *This is a good thing*, she tells herself as she hurries down the hall.



SEPTEMBER 23. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:23 A.M.

It is an odd day, and Tripp Broody is happy to be back in the little room.

Immediately, he smells something fishy and sour and then finds the source: crusts of what must've been a tuna sandwich and a withering apple core on the music stand. He opens the guitar case, reads her note, and laughs out loud. Leaving the trash was probably the worst thing Ms. Even Day has ever done in her A-plus perfectly obedient life. How fun it would be to call Mr. Jacoby in and show him the trash that the perfect Ms. Lyla Marks left behind, but he'd rather keep the exchange of notes going.

He puts her note in his pocket and, as he picks up the

guitar, he notices that the black strap is half around one side of the guitar instead of underneath the body. As he positions the guitar on his lap, he feels like one of the three bears: Someone has been sitting in my chair; someone has been eating my porridge; someone has been playing my guitar.

He will write a new note. But first he wants to play.

“Ode to Apple Cores and Sandwich Crusts,” he thinks to himself, and he begins.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:14 P.M.

Lyla is at her locker, trying to decide what she needs to bring home, when Annie catches up with her.

“Guess who I overheard in the bathroom,” Annie says.

Lyla’s brain is spinning over details. English and science homework will be due on Thursday; algebra and French are due tomorrow. As she puts the books she needs into her backpack, she says, “Give me a clue.”

“They’re in your section in orchestra.”

“Brittany?”

“Yep. And that other girl. The new one who always braids her hair.”

“Julia.”

Annie nods, eyes flashing. “They said Jacoby gave you a solo for next week’s assembly.”

Lyla’s heart pounds. “It’s true.”

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know. I—"

Annie punches her arm. "Because you thought I'd hate you, which I do! You should've heard them. 'Lyla gets everything.' They really hate you." She laughs.

"Oh. Thanks. Great news." She closes her locker and pulls her cell phone out of her purse.

"You are envied, Lyla. That's a good thing. If you didn't have any talent or you were stupid, then nobody would envy you." Annie pulls her down the hall.

"I'm not sure I want to be envied. Do you think we have a kind of reputation . . . like of being . . . perfect?"

"Of course!" Annie says.

"But maybe being perfect isn't such a great thing."

"What is wrong with you? Being perfect is what everybody wants to be."

Lyla's chest tightens. "I don't think everybody wants to be perfect."

"Those are just the poor peasants. Speaking of peasants, did you ask Patricia What's-Her-Name to switch days with me?"

"She said no," Lyla lies.

"NO? Why?"

Lyla shrugs. "Some schedule thing. It was complicated."

"If Lyla Marks asked me to switch days, I'd say yes. Oooh. I hate her."

"You don't even know her. She felt bad about it." Lyla's cell phone rings.

“Let me guess,” Annie says. “How was school today, sweetie?” she asks in perfect imitation of Lyla’s dad.

Lyla has to laugh. “Hi, Dad,” she answers. “. . . yes . . .”

“Remind him that we’re staying for the Sweet Tooth Club,” Annie adds. “And say good-bye, sweetie.”

Lyla turns her back to her and finishes the conversation. As soon as she puts her phone away, Annie pulls her down the hallway.

“We can’t be late.”

Lyla winces. “I don’t know if I even want to be in Sweet Tooth.”

“We need Sweet Tooth.”

“Who says?”

Annie stops. “The Coles Conservatory of Music. I already put it on my Coles application, didn’t you? My mom said they look at stuff like clubs and community service. And Sweet Tooth is brilliant because it’s both a club and a community service project. ‘We donate all our sales to charity.’ Did you seal up your envelope yet?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Double-check. Put it in. When are you going to actually mail yours?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go on Saturday to the post office. I’ll get my mom to drive us and we can mail them at exactly the same time. It’ll be good luck. Just think, next year at this time, we’ll be at Coles and—”

“You keep saying that. We haven’t even applied. We

don't know if we'll even be invited to audition."

"My mom said the fact that we did the conservatory camp this summer gives us an edge, plus we've been stars in Metz Youth Orchestra for the past gazillion years and we aced all the state competitions last year. And now we'll have Sweet Tooth to show we are community-minded. Oh, I already put that lunchtime thing where we tutor little people with small brains to show we're smart—"

"It might not be possible to do all that," Lyla says.

"Shut up!"

"We can't do the lunchtime tutor thing together anyway because of the practice room thing."

"We do the tutor thing on the days we're not in the practice room. Patricia What's-Her-Name deserves to rot. If she traded, then we could do everything on the same days." Annie leans in. "Well, put it down on your application and sign up for it anyway. I already did. We have to do everything we can."

Lyla groans, and Annie gives her a look. "All right, Lyla. We can quit Sweet Tooth after we get in to Coles."

"First of all, we might not get in to Coles. Second of all, we can't just quit Sweet Tooth whenever we want!"

Annie rolls her eyes. "What do you think, they put us in handcuffs? YOU MUST BAKE FOR GOOD CAUSES!"

Lyla laughs. "They might."

"Okay, then we won't quit." Annie steers Lyla down the next hallway. "We'll just take it over and become

Cupcake Dictators and eat all the baked goods and become even more well rounded. Très, très round! That's what we did with *The Quill* last year."

"We did not."

"We did, too. We totally took it over. We made it thirty-two pages instead of sixteen. Color instead of black and white. We got to use the lounge instead of the media center, and basically, Mr. Jordan just said yes to whatever we wanted." Annie pulls Lyla into a classroom and then whispers: "Marisse and Casey are here. Smile."

Lyla forces the corners of her mouth up.



SEPTEMBER 24. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:46 A.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

*You have been playing this guitar,
haven't you?*

-Mr. Odd

Dear Mr. Odd,

I do not play the guitar. I play the cello.

-Ms. Even



SEPTEMBER 25. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:37 A.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

*The guitar is crushed. It wants to be
played. Thankfully, it has me.*

-Mr. Odd



SEPTEMBER 27. SATURDAY.

THE BROODYS' CAR; 11:03 A.M.

Tripp's mom eases the car out of the driveway and puts the air conditioner on full blast. "I bet Lorinda is nervous," she says. "Take those things out of your ears, Tripp. It's rude."

"Lorinda is an unpleasant stick insect who deserves any unhappiness that might come her way," Tripp says flatly, tucking his earbuds into his pocket.

"Don't say that! She's your cousin."

"Lorinda tied me to a chair, put a sock in my mouth, and locked me in Aunt Gertrude's attic when I was four."

"She did not."

"I was traumatized, Mom. You have chosen to block

this and the numerous other acts of Lorinda's evil out of your system. She pinned me down another time and tried to literally replace my pupils with watermelon seeds. I don't care if she is related to us. The girl is insane."

They drive for a while and then his mom pulls into a store parking lot and gets out.

"What are you doing?" Tripp asks.

"Picking up the doves." The door slams. Tripp watches her try to run in her black patent leather heels. She comes out two minutes later carrying a wicker basket shaped like a heart, and she hands it to Tripp. "It's too hot for September," she says. "I'm going to die in this dress."

Through the slats in the basket, Tripp can see a black eye. He lifts the lid slightly. "They're pigeons," he says. "They look drugged."

"Doves." She buckles up and pulls out. "After the wedding ceremony, I'm supposed to open the cage and release the birds. It's like a symbol of their love."

"The basket stinks." Tripp puts it in the backseat. "Somebody sprayed it with fake-flower perfume."

"Better that than bird droppings," his mom says.

When they arrive, the church is packed. A trio of musicians is playing a slow, plodding melody. Piano, flute, classical guitar. The groom and four groomsmen are standing on the right, looking hot and uncomfortable. Tripp is dying to grab the guitar and run.

The parents of the groom walk down the aisle, and then the mother of the bride comes, his mom's older

sister, who always wears the same bitter expression.

Tripp nudges his mom to look at the priest, who is asleep in a chair next to the lectern. "The music bored him to death," Tripp whispers.

His mother's eyes widen. "He better wake up."

Tripp starts to laugh and she shushes him.

The priest wakes up, the wedding begins, and the musicians play another coma-inducing tune.

To stay awake, Tripp slips cracker crumbs that he has found in his pocket into the birds' basket. One of the doves pecks up the crumbs as soon as they drop. The other dove doesn't move. They haven't made a sound. What kind of bird remains silent when imprisoned? he wonders. Shouldn't they be screaming their heads off?

After the ceremony, they all gather in the stifling heat on the steps outside the church. The limousine pulls up, which is the cue for the birds.

Tripp's mom holds up the basket and lifts the lid.

Nothing happens.

She hoists the basket with a quick small motion and one of the doves flies up.

A few people clap, but everyone is still waiting.

She tilts the basket and hoists it up harder. The second bird falls out and lands on the concrete with a dull thud.

Another silence. In one quick move, the groom's father kicks the corpse into the bushes.

No one says a word.

Lorinda gives an exasperated look and pulls on the groom's arm. "Let's just go."

As they get into the limousine, a few people begin to clap and everyone joins in.

"Congratulations!" someone calls out.

Tripp's mom looks like she's going to be the next one to hit the pavement.

"It's not your fault," he whispers. "You did a great job."

She throws him a doubtful glance.

"Really, Mom. They gave you a very elderly bird."

She smiles.

His hugely generous heart has leapt free of the cage of anger to bestow compassion on the lowly Termite in her time of need. He can only hope she will remember this.

POST OFFICE; 2:22 P.M.

Annie gives her application package to the clerk, takes the large padded envelope from Lyla's hand, and sets it on the counter. "They're both going to the same place."

"Anything fragile, liquid, or perishable in these?" the clerk asks.

"Just our fates," Annie says to him, and he laughs.

"An application and a DVD," Annie's mom says. "The girls are applying for a special music school. Priority mail, please."

Annie grins at Lyla. "This is soooooo exciting."

He stamps PRIORITY MAIL on each envelope.

"Do you have a good-luck stamp you can put on it?"

Annie asks.

The clerk smiles again and shakes his head. Annie's mom pays, and, as he tosses their envelopes in a shipping bin, Lyla feels her stomach drop.

"Good luck," he says. "Next in line."

"Now all we have to do is wait," Annie says. "The suspense is going to literally kill me. I'm going to die."

"Yeah," Lyla says. "The headlines are going to read: Two girls got accepted into the Coles Conservatory of Music but died of suspense before finding out." As soon as it is out of her mouth, she knows she's just going through the motions. *I don't want to go to Coles.* She says the truth to herself as they walk out.

"Enough of this!" Annie's mom says. "We're going to celebrate. It was a project just getting those applications together and out the door. What'll it be? Ice cream or frappuccinos?"



SEPTEMBER 29. MONDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:37 A.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

I have superhuman ear cilia to pick up vibes, and your even-day vibes have been all over this guitar. So on Friday I snuck in and stood next to the practice room door and hearkened. At first I thought it was all in vain because there was cello music, but I pressed my ear to the crack in the door and lo and behold what did I hear? The beat-beating of the tell/tale heart? The tiny hooves of reindeer? No. I heard this guitar. Scales.

Liar liar strings on fire, you are playing this guitar. The cello music on the computer is your cover. You have that on so nobody hears you playing the guitar.

So you're a closet guitar player, Lyla Marks. I have two theories. Number One, you secretly want to be a Rock Goddess, but you are worried that people will make fun of you because you are quite the opposite of a Rock Goddess. (Rock Goddesses use picks, play power chords, and wail.) Or Number Two, you read in a book that you can play the cello even more perfectly than you already do if you strengthen your fingers by playing another instrument and so you're just doing this so you can play Bach more beatifically and add mozzarella to your Mozart, which will give you an edge so you become a cello star. Which one is it?

-Mr. Odd Day



SEPTEMBER 30. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:48 A.M.

Dear Mr. Odd,

How pleasant to think of you stalking me. What business of yours is it if I am playing the guitar? You do not own it.

Okay. I am playing it. Are you happy? And I don't have to tell you why. Please do not tell anybody. It's not because I'm embarrassed or anything. It's just that there's a lot of pressure on me. I am playing a solo in front of the entire school on Friday, and I have a Kennedy Center audition on Saturday. I really should be practicing.

—Ms. Even

P.S. Did you put the strings on right? They are messed up at the top. You should ask Mr. Jacoby if it's okay to fix the scratches on the front. There's this wood filler stuff you can get in a tube. Look it up on the Internet.



OCTOBER 1. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:39 A.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

This is the guitar writing. Your secret love for me is safe with Mr. Odd. He does not engage in gossip.

I am somewhat hurt by the casual remarks about "fixing" my scratches. Does everything have to look perfect to be worthy? If you would only hearken! I have a great sound—warm and golden—especially with the new strings that the talented and charming Mr. Odd put on, and, indeed, he put them on right.

Some people clip the ends of the strings off close to the tuning peg and some people make "loops" at the top.

Perhaps Mr. Odd likes the mess at the top. A reminder that life is messy.

-The Guitar

P.S. Scales are boring. If you're going to play, play.



OCTOBER 2. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:36 A.M.

Dear Mr. Odd,

You are indeed odd.

—Ms. Even



OCTOBER 3. FRIDAY.

ROCKLAND SCHOOL AUDITORIUM; 9:04 A.M.

“... and now to play Allegro Appassionato by Camille Saint-Saëns ... here is Lyla Marks.” Mr. Handlon nods at Lyla, who is waiting in the wings.

Applause.

Lyla picks up her cello and walks to the black metal folding chair that is waiting for her onstage. Her dad is standing off to the side with his video camera on a tripod.

Her heart is pounding. Tripp’s words are in her head: If you’re going to play ... *play*. As she sits, she feels the eyes of the audience on her face. Someone calls out something, and a few students laugh.

She imagines that she is not Lyla. She is a fake one, with arms made of metal, the one programmed to perform today. A computer chip in her brain will fire the neurons that will make her fingers move. The real Lyla is still waiting in the wings.

She lifts her bow and begins.

SPANISH CLASS; 10:53 A.M.

Greetings, Ms. Even,

I'm in Spanish class right now and I'm bored out of my finely constructed skull. To stay awake, I could either chew on the spiral binding of my notebook thus inducing metal poisoning or I could ask you this question about the International Culture thing. Please don't take this the wrong way.

I was there first period, sitting in the back, not paying any attention at first because assemblies are always a joke, and then Mr. Handlon introduced you.

Two guys in front of me snicker. "What's she gonna play?" one of them says.

"'The Fart of the Bumblebees' by Mozart," the other guy says, and they both laugh.

"Play some Lady Gaga," the first guy calls out.

Just so you know that wasn't me.

I don't know if you saw it, but a paper airplane flew from the back to the middle of the auditorium, and some people laughed. You looked up then like they were laughing at you, but they weren't. People laugh at flying paper.

You sat down and started to play like it didn't really matter if anybody heard you or not.

Everybody got quiet, the two guys in front of me even. One of them says, "She must practice fifteen hours a day." Awe. Respect.

But that's not why I'm writing.

Here's why I'm writing. I looked at your face really carefully, and I think you're faking it. You make your face look like you're into your music and everything, but I don't think your emotions were real. You weren't really thrumming.

Am I right? I'm not criticizing you. I'm just fascinated by people faking things,

so I guess I just want to know, does playing the cello make you happy?

-Mr. Odd

P.S. I hope you don't think I'm stalking you or anything because I'm not, but I saw you at your locker yesterday, so I'm thinking, why not slip this note into your locker instead of the guitar case because that way you'll get it today instead of waiting until Monday. Not that it makes any difference really.

Tripp finishes writing the P.S. and folds the note. The three vents near the top of Lyla's locker look like the gills of a fish, like the locker is alive and needs to exhale. Tripp feeds the folded end of his note into the top slit and hears the *phump* of it landing in the creature's stomach. Too late to get it back.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 11:26 A.M.

Lyla opens her locker to get her lunch. A small tent of folded paper is sitting on her locker floor, writing scrawled on both sides.

As a locker ahead of her slams and a girl laughs, Lyla opens the note and reads.

It's like the words have been written with fire and she's breathing the flames straight into her lungs.

A freckle-faced girl taps her. "You were so good this morning!" the girl gushes, her arm linked in the arm of her friend.

"Unbelievably good," the friend says.

Lyla feels herself smile and hears herself say thanks. The girls walk on, and Lyla turns to the letter again, holding her breath.

I just want to know, does playing the cello make you happy?

Annie's squeal startles her. She's coming her way. Quickly, Lyla folds the letter and puts it into the back pocket of her jeans.

"We have twenty-seven hours until the Kennedy Center audition!" Annie is breathless. "I'm soooo lucky today is an odd day. I can practice. Come with me and we'll kick Tripp Broody out. Of all days, today you should have the practice room."

Lyla can't think.

Annie pulls her down the hall. "I really want you to sleep over tonight, Lyla. If you don't, I'm going to be neurotic about the audition all night. Ask your dad again."

They walk down the hall. "He said no. He wants us to be well rested. And he thinks we should drive separately."

"He doesn't trust my mom's driving skills."

Lyla laughs. They stop at the intersection where they will go their separate ways.

“Oh!” Annie grabs Lyla’s arm. “Curt said Jacoby put up the sign-up sheet for the talent show. What time slot do you want to go for?”

“Annie, can we talk about this later? I’m feeling so overloaded.” Lyla stops breathing for a moment. She and Annie don’t really talk, do they? Annie just bulldozes over everything Lyla says. She presses her pocket, crinkling the stiffness of the paper.

I just want to know, does playing the cello make you happy?

“Fine, but we’re signing up on Monday before the good slots get taken.”

Lyla stops. “Hey, Annie. Do you have Tripp Broody in any classes?”

“No. Why?”

Lyla hesitates. “He stuck this note in my locker.”

Annie’s voice pierces Lyla’s eardrum. “WHAT? He’s an alien. What does it say?” She lowers her voice to a whisper and comes closer. “Does he like you? You cannot go out with Tripp Broody. I’m going to pick a boyfriend for you, and you’re going to pick one for me, and we’re going to all go out together.”

“I’m not going out with him. It was just a comment. Forget it.”

“What did he say?”

“It was just about the assembly. It was nothing. See you la—”

Annie grabs her. “You can’t just say it was about the assembly. I need details.”

“He said I was good, but that I looked like I was faking it.”

“What is that even supposed to mean? He is soooooo bizarro. Beanie said he made some rude comment to her on the first day. Did I tell you how rude he was when I asked him to switch? Do not listen to him!”

“I won’t. Promise you won’t say anything to him.”

“I have no interest in saying anything to him,” Annie says, heading toward the music hallway and calling back, “We’re talking about this later!”

“It’s not a big deal, Annie!” Frustrated, Lyla turns and walks toward the cafeteria.

As soon as she arrives at her usual table, all her friends tell her how great she was this morning. She smiles and says thank you and tries to embrace the routine. She is Lyla Marks the cellist. This is the way it has always been. She needs to stop thinking odd thoughts about the cello exploding and needs to stop being annoyed by everyone complimenting her and needs to stop panicking when it’s time to practice or play. Mr. Odd is making it worse. It isn’t fair of him to stare at her face during a performance. Who said he’s allowed to put her under a microscope? Before the lunch period ends, she escapes to the

bathroom. There, she takes out her notebook and writes a reply to Mr. Odd. She'll figure out where his locker is and slip it in.

Dear Mr. Odd,

I received your letter about me faking it. What a nice thing to tell someone before a big audition.

Before I start, I will ask the judges not to expect much because I will be playing without a soul and not thrumming, whatever that means. Oh, and I'll make sure to return all the first-place trophies that I have received, since I must have won them by faking it.

—Ms. Even



OCTOBER 4. SATURDAY.

KENNEDY CENTER STUDIO L105; 2:30 P.M.

Violinists are warming up in a separate studio, which is one consolation; a solid wall separates Lyla from Annie's nervous buzzing. Lyla's father is bad enough. He is sitting too close, drumming his fingers on his thighs and eyeing the cellists who are packing up and the two others who are still waiting to audition. "Wouldn't you feel better if you played through your scales?" he asks for the second time.

She is holding her mother's cello, trying to hide the dread on her face. Before she can answer, a woman with a clipboard walks in and calls her name.

Her dad stands up. Lyla nods and stands and gingerly picks up the instrument.

"Be careful going through the door!" her dad whispers, and then adds, "You'll do great."

"Beautiful instrument," the woman says. Then she stops. "Lyla Marks." Recognition flushes over her face. "You're Gwendolyn Marks's daughter!"

Her dad beams.

The woman's eyes get watery. "I heard her with the National Symphony right upstairs," she whispers to them both. "I think I'll stand by the door and eavesdrop on this one!"

Lyla's dad wishes her good luck again, and Lyla follows the woman across the hall.

Six judges are sitting in wooden chairs behind one long table. In the center of the room, an empty chair waits for her.

Lyla turns to fit the cello through the doorway.

"Good luck," the woman whispers.

Lyla sits, trying to imagine what the judges are seeing in her face. Can they tell that she doesn't want to be here? *I will make a mistake*, she says to herself, *and they will reject me, and it will be over*. She feels her mother's ghost crouched inside the cello, peering at her.

She lifts her bow and plays, her fingers marching solemnly up and down the neck. She doesn't make a single mistake.



OCTOBER 6. MONDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:36 A.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

You took it the wrong way. I mean that you're faking your enthusiasm, not your skill. You're copying and repeating something that somebody wrote a long time ago, but you're not into it. You're like a machine. Just tell me if I'm right. I was at a wedding last week, and the musicians were like that. Really good, but not really playing.

Every time I pick up my guitar, I play. I don't copy and repeat music that

somebody else thinks is good. I play what's inside me. That's what I mean by thrumming. When the vibrations of the music make your soul vibrate, you feel the thrum. It's like you're perfectly in tune with the song, as if you are the music and the music is you. It's the only thing I do that feels right. I know Mr. Jacoby thinks I'm not a serious musician because I'm not in band or orchestra, but I think a serious musician is somebody who really thrums.

-Odd



OCTOBER 7. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:37 A.M.

Dear Odd,

Thank you once again, O Wise One, for the enlightenment. I think a serious musician shares his or her music. What is the point of thrumming if you never do it outside of your little room?

I think it's beautiful and profound that Saint-Saëns wrote something down and I can read the music and play it on a stage and add beauty to the world. I think it's my responsibility to add beauty to the world. Perhaps this is why I also dispose of my own trash.

By the way, I came to the music room

yesterday and stood outside the practice room, listening—or should I say, hearkening—to you play. I don't have superhuman ear cilia like you do. I have regular ears, but I could still hear you. Do you ever play a real song or do you always play in that formless way, one guitar solo after another like a string of random phrases? Don't take this the wrong way. You were probably playing your heart out, but how satisfying is it to play that way? Are you happy?

—E



OCTOBER 8. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:42 A.M.

Dear Even,

Thank you so much for your encouraging comments regarding my music. I didn't realize that my songs aren't real. Do songs have to adhere to a form to be real? Do you always know where you are going when you walk? I enjoy peregrinating in a random fashion. Sometimes I enjoy peregrinating and eating a pomegranate at the same time. While I'm doing that, my phrases might meander, but what can I do?

As for your last question, I don't need the Kennedy Center's seal of approval. I am perfectly happy to peregrinate all over the map. Alone.

*Sincerely,
The Formless Peregrinating Meanderer
(Otherwise known as Odd)*

Lyla reads the note several times, and then her phone buzzes with a text message from her dad.

Dad/congrats! You made the KC audition! Just got the call! Couldn't wait to tell you!

Her heart sinks.

Lyla/did Annie make it?

Dad/don't know. I'm so proud of you.

Lyla/thanks dad. got to go. talk later.

She puts away her phone and paces back and forth in the little room. It's a big deal, the Kennedy Center program. She should be excited.

She gets out her cello music, sets it on the music stand, and stares at it. Then she rereads Tripp's note. Finally, she calls up the cello music on the computer, turns up the volume, and picks up the guitar.



OCTOBER 9. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:27 A.M.

No note from Ms. Even. Tripp is disappointed and wonders if he went too far, if he offended her. She has left only cello music on the music stand, which looks ridiculously complicated.

He picks up the guitar and plays.



OCTOBER 10. FRIDAY.

LYLA MARKS'S HOUSE; 7:02 A.M.

The newspaper is open to the Arts page, and Lyla's face is smiling in the featured photo.

Young cellist Lyla Marks is among the four talented string players chosen for solo concerts in the Kennedy Center's Young Strings program.

"Good morning, Star!" Her dad brings two glasses of orange juice to the table.

Lyla's stomach sinks.

Her dad looks at the newspaper over her shoulder.

"I'm so glad we did that photo shoot. Didn't it turn out great?"

Lyla nods. She manages to smile and eat her breakfast, listening to her father go on and on about what this will mean, how he'll call Coles and let them know, how they'll be certain to want to schedule an audition.

Later, when she gets into Annie's car, Mrs. Win smiles nervously and congratulates her, and Annie doesn't say a word. As soon as they arrive at school and get out of the car, Annie erupts.

"Why didn't you tell me you made it? You must have been perfect. Were you perfect?"

Lyla doesn't answer.

Annie pushes through the school doors. "I was better than the idiot who went before me."

"Violins had more competition."

"Shut up."

"It's true, Annie."

"I know what's going to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not going to make it into Coles and you are."

"Stop it."

"I hate you. Stop making every audition."

"Please stop saying that, Annie."

Annie storms ahead.

Kenneth Chan yells to Lyla, "Hey, I saw your picture in the paper!"

Lyla wishes she could go home.

All morning, Annie avoids her. Finally, the lunch break arrives, and by the time Lyla gets to the practice room, she is almost shaking. She closes the door and sits with her face in her hands.

After a few minutes, she pulls out a piece of paper and a pen and begins to write.

Dear Mr. Odd,

I lied. You blew me away when you asked me if playing the cello makes me happy. Nobody has ever asked me that, and it seems profound, and I didn't answer you honestly because the truth is I'm not happy.

When I was playing the solo during the school assembly, I was a machine. I played all the right notes, and all day people kept saying how great it was. But something was wrong, and I didn't even let myself admit it. Then I got your note. Thrumming. That's interesting. I don't think I'm thrumming a lot right now. I want a break from the cello, but I feel guilty about that.

—Ms. Even

She doesn't know if writing makes her feel better or worse. She sets the paper and pen down and plays through the scales on the guitar until the end of the period. Then she rushes out and slips the note into Tripp's locker before she loses her nerve.

ENGLISH CLASS; 12:57 P.M.

Dear Ms. Even,

I'm in English right now. I stopped at my locker after lunch and found your note. I'm going to put this in your locker after class. I thought you might want to get a reply before having to wait until Monday rolls around.

Yesterday, I was at the store—ever go to Broody's Rug + Carpet? Well, it's our store. I had to go there after school yesterday, and there was this mom and this kindergarten kid looking at rugs for the kid's room. And the kid picked out this pomegranate-colored rug with all these colorful swooshes and he called it the "blasty rug," and the mom kept pulling him over to this plain brown rug and saying, "This will match your bedspread, Henry." My mom kept saying how nice brown is because it doesn't show dirt. And Henry kept going back to the "blasty" rug and tracing the swooshes with his finger, making different sounds for each one, like that's what the rug

sounded like to him. And then Henry's mom bought the brown rug behind his back and then she said, "Come on, Henry honey. You're going to love this."

I know it's going to sound morbid, but I had this negative fantasy that Henry died and the mom was eaten alive by guilt because she didn't buy him the blasty rug, and then I felt guilty about fantasizing that a kid dies. I know.

There's something wrong with me. But there's something wrong with moms who think they know what is right for their kids. Maybe the blasty rug was the perfect rug for him, a magic carpet. Maybe he would sit on it whenever he was feeling sad and it would make him feel better. Why do moms smile and lie and say they know what's good for you?

Tell your parents you want to take a break from the cello. Tell them you want to play guitar. No guilt allowed.

-Mr. Odd

P.S. By the way, scales are good, but maybe you need to pick up the guitar and let yourself experiment. Start with one note and let your fingers find a

*place to go; and if you like the tune,
repeat it until it wants to go
somewhere new, then follow it, even if
it peregrinates. This message has been
brought to you by The National
Peregrination Society.*

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:16 P.M.

Lyla is reading Tripp's letter at her locker when Annie shows up. Reluctantly, she slips the note into her backpack and shifts the backpack to her other shoulder.

"I have decided to forget about the Kennedy Center thing," Annie says. "I think we need to focus on the talent show. I just heard that Brittany and three other girls are calling themselves the Canticle Quartet and they signed up for the five thirty audition slot."

Lyla tries to focus on what Annie is saying, but she wants to be alone with the letter, to read it again without interruption.

"Did you hear me?" Annie says. "I'm talking about the auditions for the talent show. We have the three twenty slot, which I think is bad. By the time the auditions are over, Jacoby will have forgotten how good we are. Let's go see if we can change ours."

"Stop obsessing. Just leave it the way it is."

Annie frowns. "I'm not obsessing. I'm strategizing.

Okay. Let's go to my house and practice first and then we have to make banana bread for the bake sale. Text your dad right now. My mom is on her way."

"Stop telling me what I have to do!" Lyla snaps.

Annie makes a face. "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"You're so lying."

"I'm . . . I'm just not feeling good today."

Annie's eyes flash. "It's the article, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That newspaper article. Now that you're famous, you don't want to do a duet for the talent show, do you?"

"No! That's not it. I'm not feeling good," Lyla says. "I have to go to the bathroom. Just go with your mom. I'll call you later."

"You can't be sick," Annie calls after her. "I'm trying to get past the Kennedy Center thing, Lyla. The least you can do is help me out here. You're coming over tonight."

Lyla bites the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. "I'll call you later," she says without looking. She walks into a girls' restroom and reads Tripp's letter three times in a row.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:19 P.M.

Tripp is walking down the hallway, looking for a glimpse of Lyla even though, if he saw her, he wouldn't

know what to say. He can't wait until Monday when he can play in the little room again and find, hopefully, another note.

His phone buzzes. A text message from an unfamiliar number.

This is Benjamin Fick. I am your peer tutor. We'll meet Mondays and Wednesdays at 11:30. Resource Rm. See you Mon.

Tripp stares at the screen of his cell phone. The Termite did it. She signed him up and gave his cell phone number. He wishes there was a phone number he could call: IS YOUR MOTHER A TERMITE? CALL 1-800-555-5555 AND WE'LL GET HER OUT OF YOUR LIFE!

LYLA'S ROOM; 5:00 P.M.

Lyla crawls into bed the minute she is home. She tells her dad she's sick and she texts Annie with the news that she can't come over.

"Head or stomach?" her dad says, touching her forehead.

"Head. Ache, but no fever."

"Well, hopefully, by tomorrow morning you'll be right as rain so you don't miss your Metz Youth Orchestra

rehearsal.” He pats her leg. “I’ll bring you up a strawberry smoothie. Does that sound good?”

She nods, and he leaves.

Her cell phone buzzes. A text from Annie.

Annie/Get well fast. Tomorrow let’s practice after MYO rehearsal. You can’t say no.

Lyla/Sure. See you tomorrow.

Lyla turns off her phone. Tomorrow morning, she will wake up and go to MYO and then practice for the talent show with Annie. Already, she is dreading it.



OCTOBER 13. MONDAY.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 11:21 A.M.

After the bell rings, dismissing Tripp from Spanish, his cell phone buzzes.

Mom/don't forget tutor session in resource room.

Tripp/you're not supposed to text during school.

Mom/I know your schedule. It's lunch. go to tutor.

Tripp/fine. I'm turning off phone.

Tripp puts his phone in his pocket and reluctantly heads toward the resource room. His feet are heavy. The guitar, waiting for him in the little room, acts like an invisible magnet. He can't fight it. He pulls out

his cell phone and sends a message to Benjamin Fick:

Tripp/severe abdominal cramping. going to health room. sorry.

In a perfect world, he would not lie. He would not need to.

He hurries to the music room. As soon as he closes the door to the little room, he feels better. It's like every other part of his life is a bad dream and this is the only part that's real.

The last flurry of notes between Lyla and him was in their lockers, so that means a letter in the guitar case is unlikely, but he opens the guitar case and there it is: another note. He sits on the floor to read it.

Dear Mr. Odd,

Surprise and Happy Monday. I have orchestra first period, so I slipped in here to put this note inside the guitar case.

I love what you wrote about that boy and the blasty rug. I wish his mom had let him get it.

I hope you don't mind this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. I've always wondered about you. I mean, you were basically this nice normal smart kid. You were in my math class in sixth grade, remember? Anyway, you and that one kid were always doing stuff together and then he

moved away. Right after that, you didn't show up, and everybody heard about your dad. When you came back, I wanted to say something like sorry because I kept thinking about how hard it would be to lose a dad and a best friend kind of at the same time. But we didn't know each other and you can't just go up to someone and say sorry. And I didn't know if it would make you feel better or worse. But I just wanted to say it anyway. That's all.

—Ms. Even

P.S. Thanks for the advice to experiment. I will try it out tomorrow when it's my turn in the little room.

P.P.S. I have never eaten a pomegranate. Have you?

The note feels alive in his hands, like a bird with a beating heart. He reads it again, hardly daring to breathe, lingering on the words *sorry* and *dad*. He didn't even know that he needed to hear these words, but somehow Lyla Marks knew.

He pulls out the guitar. Tomorrow, Lyla will be right here with this guitar in her hands, and instead of practicing scales, she will just play, and maybe that will make her happy. The idea of this makes a song leap out of him: an odd melody bouncing out. He repeats the parts he likes and experiments with the parts that don't work. He plays

it over and over, shaping it each time. The “Mr. Odd” song.

Deep into it, there’s a thump on the wall and Annie Win yells: “Too loud!”

He laughs and keeps playing. After a while, the bell rings, announcing the end of lunch. Reluctantly, Tripp stops. He wants to leave a note, but he doesn’t have any paper and he doesn’t want to write anything on the note she left for him.

He takes a pen out of his back pocket. On the curve of the guitar, the part that she will see when she is holding it, he tries writing, but the ink smears off. Using his pen like an engraving tool, he scratches two words into the lacquer: *Just play*.

On the way out, his phone buzzes.

Fick/Hi! Sorry about the abdominal trouble. See you Wed.

Oh joy.



OCTOBER 14. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:26 A.M.

No note tucked between the strings when Lyla opens the guitar case. But when she sets it on her lap, she sees the message scratched into the side—*Just play*—and it lights her up.

She takes a deep breath. She lets her fingers wander around randomly plucking out different combinations of notes until, by accident, she finds something she likes. She repeats it. She plays with it until she has a phrase, the beginning of a melody, and then another phrase and another. She closes her eyes and tries to let the music come through her, when the door opens.

Annie walks in, her violin case in hand, and stares. “What are you doing?”

Lyla's heart pounds. "It's an even day. Why are you here?"

"I'm sneaking in so we can practice our duet."

"That's against the rules."

"Jacoby won't know. He took the beginning orchestra on that field trip. What are you doing?"

Lyla looks down at the guitar in her hands and tries to shrug it off. "It was here and so I just picked it up." She puts it back in the case. "I don't think being here is a good idea, Annie. Remember last year when those two girls broke the rule?"

"They were smoking! We'd just be playing music."

"Rules are rules. Really. I think you should go." Lyla lowers her voice. "Patricia Kent will tell on us. Seriously. And aren't you doing that lunchtime tutoring thing?"

"Just once a week." Annie frowns. "Come on, we need to practice. You didn't want to sleep over on Friday. You were crabby on Saturday. You never want to practice."

"I was sick! We have three whole weeks 'til the talent show audition, Annie."

"You sound like you're doing me this huge favor by letting me play with you."

"That is not fair. That's not what I sound like. Two people are not allowed in practice rooms. I don't like breaking rules. That's all."

"Fine, I'm leaving." Annie storms out, slamming the door.

Heart pounding, Lyla sits. Why does every interaction with Annie leave her feeling guilty? Is it wrong for her to want some time to herself?

She checks outside to make sure Annie is gone, then she gets the guitar out again. It takes a while for the room to feel like hers again, but slowly she begins to calm down and feel the connection to the music. Once she finds it, she doesn't want any intrusions. She hears a melody, and a line of lyrics pops into her head. *"All I want is a little room to play . . ."* she sings. Not bad. She keeps at it until the period ends, too quickly. As she puts away the guitar and walks down the hall, her song keeps playing inside her head. *Now I've got myself a little room to play. . . .*

Annie appears around a corner, and Lyla runs over and hugs her. "Don't be grumpy, Annie!"

Annie pulls away and keeps walking.

"Come on, Annie, we've got the talent show duet down—"

"I don't think you get it, Lyla." Annie stops, her eyes hot and teary. "It's easy for you to say, oh, we don't need to practice. You made the Kennedy Center audition. I didn't." She walks on.

"I'm sorry, Annie. On Friday, I'll come over and we will practice our duet and we will NAIL it." She grabs Annie's arm and smiles. "What do you want to wear for the audition?"

Annie smiles reluctantly. "Something new."

"We can go shopping together," Lyla says.

“Okay. But not today. We have Sweet Tooth and then we need to study for the physics unit quiz.”

Lyla twirls. “The answer to every question is Force equals Mass times Acceleration. I love science.”

“I can’t believe you like Mr. Sanders. He has hairy arms.”

Lyla laughs.

Annie’s eyes widen. “Lyla, he’s looking at you,” she whispers.

Lyla looks around.

“Don’t look,” Annie whispers. “Tripp Broody.”

Lyla catches a glimpse of Tripp before Annie turns her away. She wants to tell him that she wrote a song, that she *played*. “He’s not looking at me, Annie. He’s walking down the hall.”

“He saw you twirl. What class did you say you have with him?”

Lyla tries to make her voice sound casual. “I don’t have a class with him.”

“Yesterday, he was playing way too loud.”

Lyla laughs.

Annie pushes her. “Why didn’t you say hi just now? Has he left you any more notes?”

“Leave me alone, Annie.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. He’s too weird. I saw his name on the schedule for peer tutoring. Benjamin Fick is tutoring him. I think he might be brain damaged.”

“Annie!”

"Pardon moi for telling the truth." She waves and disappears into the stairwell to go to her next class.

He is not brain damaged, Lyla wants to say. He is . . . just a bit odd. In a really interesting way.