



OCTOBER 15. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:37 A.M.

Tripp is in the practice room, convinced that the peer-tutor police will burst onto the scene at any moment with Benjamin Fick and seize him. But how could he possibly concentrate on Newton's laws or graphing coordinates or calculating the standard deviation from the norm with the little room waiting for him?

When he opens the guitar case, he is disappointed to find no note tucked between the strings. But Ms. Even has left a piece of paper under the guitar: notes for a song.

Little Room Song

Chorus!

Now I've got myself

A little room to play

~~I will play all day~~

All my worries will fade away

As soon as I start to play

Start on DB
Go to EC
Then move up 2 frets

~~Get ready, it's time for a test~~

Fill in the blank, it's time for a test

As soon as I'm done, it's on to the next

Tests - multiple choice

true or false

pressure!

Pressures

time

schedule

always being

perfect

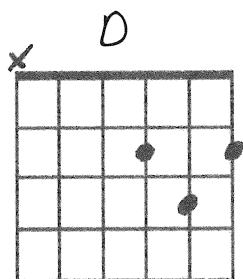
True or false, choose the one that's best

(Start singing on B)

Inspired, he writes her a message.

Dear Ms. Even,

I hope you don't mind that I read the notebook page you left underneath the guitar. It looks like you're brainstorming a song? I want to hear it. I noticed that you tried writing out the notes you're playing. Guitar players either write chords or what's called tablature. You might find it easier to make chord diagrams. Here's an example.



← This is the top of the guitar. Put your fingers on the dots. X means don't play that string.

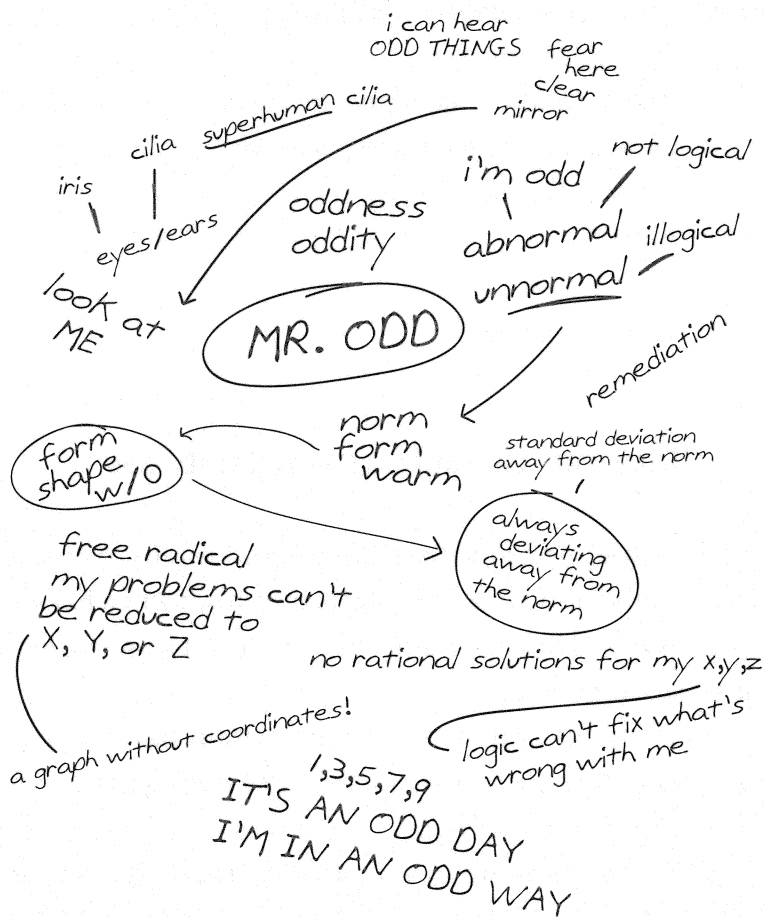
As for pomegranates, I think the only part you eat is the seeds, and I don't think I've ever eaten an actual seed, but I don't know for sure. Yesterday after school, I did some research on pomegranates when I should have been

working on my history report. The pomegranate is called la granada in Spanish. In French, it's called la grenade, which makes me think of hand grenades, and pomegranates do sort of look like hand grenades. They are full of nutrients and antioxidants which are good for us, whatever those are. So maybe they are like healthy grenades. If I were a doctor, I would lob them at sick people.

-Mr. Odd

Tripp picks up the guitar. Something good is happening. He can feel it in the guitar. He can feel it in the little room. Strands of thought twine themselves together into a decision in his mind. He'll stop peregrinating and actually write words for a whole song of his own. If she can do it, he can do it. The "Mr. Odd" song. He writes the title in the center of the page and brainstorms everything he can think of that has to do with it.

Then he plays the melody that has been bouncing around in his brain lately and under his breath. He pulls out the parts from his brainstorm that he likes and he experiments.



He sings:

*I'm a graph without coordinates,
A shape without form,
Always deviating away from the norm.
Logic can't fix what's wrong with me.
I'm odd. I'm odd. I'm odd.
Indeed.*

He laughs. It's a start.

PRACTICE ROOM HALLWAY; 11:56 A.M.

Lyla tiptoes past Practice Room A and listens. Annie's violin is loud and clear. Lyla shifts over to Practice Room B and listens. Tripp is singing! She grins and leans in, her ear close to the door.

Just after Lyla notices that Annie's violin has stopped, the sound of Annie's shriek comes. The door to Room A opens and Annie flies out.

"Lyla! I was coming to get you. My mom just texted about Coles. You heard, didn't you?"

In a flash, Lyla knows what must have happened. It's all over Annie's face. Her mom must have texted her with the news that Coles has accepted her application and wants to schedule an audition. Annie must think that Lyla received the same great news and was coming to find her.

Annie grabs her in a hug.

The guitar playing in Practice Room B has stopped.

"I knew we'd make it, Lyla!" She grabs Lyla again and spins around, laughing.

Lyla tries to steady herself, noticing the door to Practice Room B is open a crack.

"Isn't it great?" Annie says. "How come you're not smiling?"

"I'm in shock," Lyla says. "Yeah, it's great." She forces out a smile.

THE METRO; 4:43 P.M.

"I waited for you." Benjamin Fick's voice sounds like he swallowed sandpaper.

"My bad," Tripp says into the phone. "No offense, but I will die if I get tutored." There's silence on the other end, so Tripp adds, "Best of luck helping other math-challenged people. Really."

"Ms. Kettering knows you didn't show," Benjamin says. "She said that if you don't show again, she'll call you and your mom in for a conference."

Tripp is in too good of a mood to let even this bring him down. He smiles. "Tell Kettering that we're meeting in the cafeteria because I like the smell of rancid meat. I'll study on my own and boost my grades to make you look good. It's a win-win."

There is a moment of silence while Benjamin considers becoming an accessory to this crime. "Fine," Benjamin says, and hangs up.

Fine is fine is fine, indeed.



OCTOBER 16. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:24 A.M.

Annie has been talking nonstop about Coles ever since yesterday. Finally, Lyla's time in the practice room arrives. When she closes the door, the silence is so peaceful, it makes her want to cry. She opens the guitar case and smiles to see another letter. Tripp wants to hear her song.

She calls up the recording program on the computer and plugs in the microphone. Last year, Ms. Peabody taught her how to make a recording so that she could analyze her progress on solos; she never thought she'd be using it to record herself singing and playing the guitar. She picks up the guitar and hits the record button and then stares at the screen, not sure if she can really do it.

Tripp might not like the song or the sound of her voice. She takes a breath and tells herself that she is just going to record it for herself, to hear what it sounds like. She starts again. Halfway through, she makes her first mistake and stops. It takes three tries, but she finally gets through it without making a noticeable mistake. Before she has a chance to regret it, she searches the web for Tripp Broody, finds his efriends page, and sends him a message.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 16
[Attach: LittleRoomSong.MP3]

Hey Tripp, you wanted to hear my song, so I recorded it and attached it.

She decides to add something else to the message, so that it's not just the song. That way, if he doesn't like the song, he'll have something else to comment about.

BTW, did you hear Annie screaming yesterday? We have been invited to audition for this school in Boston called Coles Conservatory of Music. Great music school. Grades 10-12. You live in dorms and they have teachers for all the regular classes, like math and science, but half the day is devoted to music. If you go there, you basically know you're going to make it as a pro. Annie and I made this

pact to apply, but now every time I think about it, I get panicky. I don't think I want to audition for it anymore, but there's no way I can get out of it.

—Ms. Even

Done.

She takes another breath and hits SEND.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY, 3:11 P.M.

Tripp's afternoon classes crawl by. The thought of doing homework and spending the evening listening to the Termite drone makes him want to lie down in the middle of the hallway and be trampled by the herds. Why can't the Winds of Fate blow something interesting in his direction, he wonders, to prevent him from succumbing to the slow death of boredom?

As soon as he is dismissed from his last class, he pulls out his cell phone. He can't quite believe what he's seeing. There is a message in his efriends in-box: Lyla Marks has sent him a song.

He's desperate to hear it, but he doesn't want the noises of the hallway to compete. Quickly, he grabs his books out of his locker and leaves.

He runs to the Metro, catches the subway headed uptown, and settles in a seat. He adjusts his earbuds and opens the MP3 file.

This pure sound streams into his ears: the guitar first, then Lyla's voice dancing out neatly, line after line.

*Fill in the blank, it's time for a test.
Soon as I'm done, it's on to the next.
True or false, just choose the one that's best,
Through the halls, I'm running out of breath.*

*But now I've got myself a little room to play,
Now I've got myself a little room to play,
All my worries fade away
As soon as I start to play.*

*Someone measures every step of mine,
A to B straight down the line.
Everybody's waiting all the while.
I'm supposed to show up and smile.*

*But now I've got myself a little room to play,
Now I've got myself a little room to play,
All my worries fade away
As soon as I start to play.*

*Now no one's watching me,
No one hears.
I walk into the room
and I disappear.*

*Why do I choose this way to follow?
All the answers are due tomorrow.
Everybody's waiting all the while.
Maybe I won't show up and smile.*

*'Cause I've got myself a little room to play,
Now I've got myself a little room to play,
All my worries fade away . . . they fade away
As soon as I start to play.*

As soon as Tripp gets home, he downloads Lyla's MP3 to his laptop, puts on his headphones, and listens to it again.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 16

Ms. Even: How do I describe your song? When I was about eight, we were driving to this property we have in the woods, and we were passing through a small town, and this squirrel caught my eye. We were at a stop sign and the squirrel was on a telephone pole next to our car. As we started going, it started running next to us . . . just this effortless, beautiful squirrel gallop along a tightrope of telephone wire. When it reached the next pole, and the next, it kept going, like it was keeping me company. I wanted to tell my dad to look, but I thought that might break the spell and the squirrel

might stop. That's how I felt when I listened to your song. I loved it.—Mr. Odd

<To: Tripp Broody> October 16

That means a lot. Thanks. I want to hear one of your songs.

Tripp looks at himself in the mirror. She wants to hear one of his songs. What has he gotten himself into? He can't do this. He makes a face. Then he grabs a pencil and holds it like a microphone. "*I'm going to sing a song for you,*" he sings. Then he stops. "No, I'm not," he says, and chucks the pencil across the room. It bounces off the wall and lands on his pillow. He sounds ridiculous. He cannot do this. He goes back to his computer. Another message pops up.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 16

Hey, what's your cell number in case I need to call. . . .

She wants his cell number? Is she going to actually call him sometime and expect him to be able to talk? He runs his fingers through his hair. Then he sits down. *No problem,* he says to himself, *just type in your number and hit SEND.* He takes a deep breath in, does it, and lets the breath out. Why was that so scary?



OCTOBER 17. FRIDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:27 A.M.

Odd day. Tripp's got the little room. From his pocket, he pulls a list that he made and sets it on the music stand, just in case.

Things to say if Ms. E actually calls
The blasty rug you ordered is in.
Have you ever had your appendix
removed?

How do you think Western Civilization
will end?

He gets out his guitar and tries to concentrate. He

wants to finish his song. He wants to have the guts to record it for Lyla.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:14 P.M.

Lyla leans against her locker and looks at Tripp's name in her contact list. All she has to do is press CALL.

Funny. She can play all the right notes on the cello in front of six Kennedy Center judges and she can't get her finger to press CALL. Send a text—that'll be easier.

Hey, Mr. Odd. What're you doing?

She puts Tripp's name in the "to" box and hits SEND just as Annie screeches behind her.

"Did I just see Tripp Broody's name?" Annie tries to grab her phone.

"Don't be so grabby."

"You were sending him a text!"

"Is that illegal?" Lyla quickly pockets her phone.

"What's going on with you and Tripp Broody?"

"Nothing." She turns and busies herself putting folders she doesn't need into her backpack. "He asked about a math assignment."

"Why?"

Lyla stands up and closes her locker. "We ran into each other in the hall and—I don't know—he asked me about math and I said I'll text you."

"So you're best friends with Tripp Broody?"

"I've had a total of one conversation. Stop making such a big deal about it."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"Promise you're not going to hang out with him."

"Okay. Okay."

"Good. Okay. What are you doing tonight? Hot date with Tripp? Just kidding. My mom said since we have to be back at school at seven, you can just stay for dinner."

"What?"

"We'll practice all our music and then we can make the poster and eat dinner. Then my mom can take us back for the bake sale."

"I forgot about that."

"What do you mean you forgot?"

"I mean I forgot."

"We get beaucoup community service points for this. What's wrong with you, Lyla? Our poster has to be better than Marisse's. We're voting for president next week." Annie's phone buzzes. "My mom is in the parking lot. Come on."

"I'll meet you down there. I left my science notebook in Sanders's room. I have to run and get it."

Annie shakes her head. "You're officially losing your mind. Hurry up."

Lyla heads toward the science hallway, turning to watch Annie run in the opposite direction. When Annie is out of sight, she opens her phone. He has texted back.

Tripp/hi even. i'm texting you.

Lyla/no way.

Tripp/ok. I'm not.

Lyla presses CALL. He doesn't answer.

She ends the call.

Three seconds later her phone rings.

"Hi," she says, and winces. Kind of a lame way to start.

"This is Broody's Rug and Carpet. That blasty rug you ordered is ready for pickup."

She laughs.

"That's my opening line," he says. "I worked on that all night."

"I like it. Hey, did you really like my song?" She winces again. Why did she ask that? It sounds like she's trying to get a compliment.

"Indeed," he says.

She smiles, her mouth making a little sound, and she wonders if he heard it. "Now it's your turn to do a song," she says quickly.

"I'm a formless meanderer."

"Lame excuse."

"I don't sing."

"Liar. I heard you."

"When?"

"Wednesday. Practice room."

"What! Were you spying? I was NOT singing."

"You were humming along. Jacoby does that when he's into it."

"Are you stalking me?"

"You have a good voice. You sound like hot chocolate."

"Your ear cilia aren't working."

"Ha."

"I sound like a wounded aardvark."

"I had an aardvark when I was young!"

"You have got to be kidding."

"Not a real one. A small fuzzy one. It had big ears. My mom brought it back for me from some trip she took."

"Most kids have teddy bears. Having an aardvark is so odd . . . it's actually . . . *uneven*."

She laughs. "I don't know what ever happened to it. I loved that aardvark. What does an aardvark sound like anyway?"

"Like me trying to sing."

"You're not an aardvark; you're a chicken."

"You are insulting my aardvarkian ancestors."

She laughs again. "Where are you?"

"Outside on the wall by the maple tree. Where are you?"

"Science hallway."

"Are you coming out?" He sounds nervous.

"I have to meet Annie."

"Okay. Talk to you later—"

"Wait. When can I pick up my blasty rug?"

He laughs.

"I want to hear your song soon," she adds.

"Okay."

TRIPP'S HOUSE; 6:33 P.M.

Tripp is standing at the kitchen sink, eating leftover Chinese food out of the carton. Soy sauce spills onto the counter, and his mom wipes it up.

She tosses the sponge in the sink and carries a basket filled with small bottles of sparkling water to the dining room and sets it next to a plate of brownies.

"What are you going to do tonight?" She comes back into the kitchen and pulls the coffeepot out of the coffeemaker.

"Well, if I had my guitar . . ." He looks out the window. The sun is setting. The sky is drained of color, with only a hint of orange at the horizon. He wants to finish his song and practice it a thousand times until it's good enough to record.

She rolls her eyes. "Please don't start this now, Tripp."

He puts down his fork. "I have gone forty-six days

without it. I am forty-six times closer to insanity.”

She fills up the pot and pours it into the coffeemaker. “You can’t see it, but that guitar has been nothing but trouble.”

“What?”

“It was okay at first, but then you started isolating yourself. Every day after school. All day Saturday and Sunday—”

“I had nothing else to do. Josh moved away.”

“Exactly. You should have been out making new friends. And then your grades started sliding and they’ve been downhill ever since. You have been using it to waste your time when—”

“Just because you don’t value music doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be able to play. I don’t tell you that I think you’re wasting your time on whatever it is you’re doing tonight.”

She groans. “This is called duty.” She flips on the coffeemaker and grabs a stack of small white napkins. “Susan signed me up to be chairperson for the Slater Creek Parkway Cleanup Committee, and I’m too nice to back out, so I’m hosting the meeting.” She walks the napkins into the dining room and calls back. “And I do value music.”

He feels a pang of guilt about the cleanup committee, but it is quickly replaced by anger. “You do not.”

She storms back into the kitchen, hand on her hip. “You think I’m a monster.”

He grabs his coat and walks past her to the front door.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Bike ride," he says.

"No way."

"I finished my homework."

"It's dark—"

"I have a light." He opens the front door just as a woman is about to knock.

"Cindy!" his mom chirps. "Welcome, welcome!"

"Hi, Terry!" the woman chirps back. "Oh my Lord, is this Tripp? You've grown!"

"Indeed," Tripp says. "Miraculously, the local termites have not stunted my growth."

The woman's laugh has a hollow ring.

"I'm going for a ride on Slater Creek Parkway," he adds. "As a user of the bike path, I thank you in advance for your committee's cleanup efforts."

The woman thinks this is hilarious.

His mom fakes a smile and calls out: "Be careful and wear your helmet, Tripp."

In the cool air, Tripp rides to the parkway, a road that follows a narrow creek with a thin strip of woods on either side. He breathes in the muddy smell of the creek and the woods, a rich smell that reminds him of his dad, and his throat closes. A thought emerges: *I wish it had been Mom instead of Dad.* As soon as he thinks it, he fears lightning will strike. It's horrible, but true.

As he coasts down a hill, he sees a young deer in the

grassy area between the picnic tables and small parking lot, her head bent, nibbling the grass.

Tripp holds his breath and starts to brake. Farther beyond the deer, he sees an approaching car on the road. The deer raises her head, the patch of fur at her neck so white, and she looks right at Tripp. Her ears twitch. "Please don't be spooked," Tripp whispers.

The deer bolts away from Tripp and leaps onto the road. The car screeches and swerves. Tripp sees the flash of the deer's tail as she makes it to the other side and disappears into the shadows of someone's backyard. The car passes by, and the road is quiet again.

Tripp's heart is pounding. He stands for a long minute, straddling his bike, feeling like he is the one who just escaped being hit. He wants to call Lyla and tell her what just happened, talk to her about how sad it is when you see a deer in such a crowded area because they have no place to go. He has this feeling that she would understand, but what if she thought it was strange that he called out of the blue? He rides on and, when he gets to the stoplight, turns onto the busy street. The pawnshop is just five blocks up; the guitar he noticed the last time he passed is still in the window, propped against an ugly green chair. After he locks up his bike, he walks in and asks the big bald guy behind the counter if he can see the guitar.

"You just want to play it or are you actually interested in buying?" the guy asks, without moving.

“I’m interested in buying,” Tripp says.

The guy gets it for him, and Tripp plays until the guy says it’s closing time already and he gets kicked out.



OCTOBER 18. SATURDAY.

BANK OF AMERICA; 10:01 A.M.

Tripp walks into the Bank of America and looks around. He has been to the bank only two or three times his entire life, and he's not entirely sure how it works. Four people are waiting in line to see one of the three women who are sitting behind windows. Tripp joins the line, pulling out the black book that has his account number and deposit and withdrawal forms. While he waits for his turn, his phone buzzes and he grins.

Lyla/Hey what's up?

Lyla texting out of the blue. Nice surprise indeed.

Tripp/I'm at the bank.

Lyla/Robbing it?

Tripp/taking out money I saved. gonna buy a guitar.

Lyla/Cool! Hey how did you learn to play if you don't have one?

Tripp/I have one but my mom confiscated it.

Lyla/harsh

Tripp/she locked it in a closet at her store.

Lyla/steal it back

Tripp/honking lock on it.

Lyla/wait. won't your mom be mad if you buy one?

Tripp/beds are meant to hide things under

Lyla/Good luck with that. I gotta go. I'm on a break at MYO rehearsal.

Tripp/What's MYO? The Merry Yogurt Organization?

Lyla/Metz Youth Orchestra. Bye.

"Next," the woman on the end says.

He steps up, slips the form under the glass partition, and smiles.

"Photo ID," the teller says.

Tripp wasn't expecting that. He pulls his school ID out of his pocket while she looks at the form and taps something into the computer. After a moment, she slips the form back to him. "Sorry, I can't process this. It's a minor account and the custodian"—she checks the screen—"Terry Broody, has essentially placed a freeze on it."

“A freeze?”

“You can’t withdraw funds without her signature.”

“She can’t do that. It’s my money.”

“The way the account is set up, she can. Sorry.” She gives him a fake smile. She isn’t sorry at all.

He leaves and rides back home.

Depressed, he opens up the desk drawer in the kitchen and slips his black book back in. Her checkbook catches his eye. He takes it and hides it in the back of the freezer, underneath a bag of frozen lima beans. If she can freeze his account, he can freeze hers.

TRIPP’S ROOM; 12:47 P.M.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

I couldn’t get a guitar. My mom froze my bank account. I’m beyond mad.—Mr. Odd

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

I’m so sorry! Maybe you should write a song about it.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

Ode to Rage. IF I HAD MY GUITAR I’D BE FINE.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

You know how in that note you said, tell your parents you want to take a break from the cello? Well, there's only my dad. My mom died when I was six. She was a cellist and she performed all over the world and she was on a flight going from one country to another and something went wrong and the airplane went down in the ocean. It was weird—there wasn't room on that flight for her cello because of some mix-up and she had agreed to have it sent on the next flight. I remember my dad crying when the cello was delivered.

When I got older I thought the fact that the cello survived was like a sign that I was supposed to play it. When you and I first started exchanging notes, I thought we had nothing in common, but we are sort of living parallel lives. We both have one parent, and we both don't have any brothers or sisters, and we both feel pressured even though it's in different ways.

I think your mom is insane to take away the one thing that makes you feel sane. Why don't they get it? It's like the blasty rug. Okay. This is ridiculously long.—Ms. Even

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

It is weird how we have so much in common. One

day you had a mom and the next day you didn't. Same with me. One day he was my normal dad and then a blood vessel inside his brain exploded and he was dead. Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and imagine my brain exploding. Do you ever have morbid thoughts?

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

Sometimes I imagine my cello exploding. And sometimes I look at myself in the mirror, and my own face looks like a mask to me.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

When I ride the Metro, and it goes under, I stare at my reflection in the window and it's like a dark ghost version of me is whooshing along at the exact same speed outside the train. And it's like, "Who are you?"

Okay, here's something else weird about me. You know how I said that the kid (Henry) had a connection with the blasty rug, like he was hearing the rug's vibe and humming along with it? Well, I have a Vibe Theory. Ever since I can remember, I've felt like everything has a vibe, which I could sense. Inanimate things, like socks and pencils and stuff. Hard to explain, but I would look at a bunch of pencils and one would call out to me, "Pick me! I'm the happy pencil!"

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

That's funny. I've always tried to hear things that I shouldn't be able to hear. You know how dogs can hear a high-pitched whistle and we can't? Annie just reminded me how I thought I could hear my bones grow in the fifth grade. Speaking of hearing things . . . Did you write a song? If so, I could come to the practice room at lunch tomorrow and you could play it for me. Okie-dokie?

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

I did write a song, but no okie-dokie on coming to the practice room. I'm not good at in-person stuff.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

Bawk bawk.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

I'm not a chicken. I'm an aardvark. Remember? I'm just finishing the lyrics. I haven't even had a chance to play it with guitar.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 18

Okay. Monday is an even day. You can have the

practice room at lunch, but you have to record your song and send me the MP3.

<To: Lyla Marks> October 18

Deal.

He can't believe he has just agreed to record and send his song. Tripp steps away from the computer and looks at himself in the mirror to confirm the truth: Yes, he looks absolutely insane.



OCTOBER 19. SUNDAY.

TRIPP'S ROOM; 7:13 P.M.

Tripp is singing when his mom walks in with a plate of warm brownies.

"Were you singing?" she asks.

"Are those brownies?" A deft subject change.

"Superchunk chocolate." She smiles, obviously unaware of the fact that her checkbook is currently on ice. "I thought you might need something to keep you going," she says. "Your Intro to Tech teacher finally put up the review sheet on Edline. And there's a new physics worksheet posted. How's that unit going?"

Fie, villain! I see right through your wily ways, he thinks. Mere melted chocolate will not warm my heart toward the

*tedious task ahead. Nor will it warm my heart toward you,
O Termite in Residence.*

She hands him the plate. He is craving a scoop of vanilla ice cream for the warm brownies, but he doesn't dare bring attention to the freezer, where the checkbook is hidden. He breaks a brownie in half and stuffs it into his mouth.

"How are your tutor sessions going?"

Pang of guilt. He chews and swallows. "Well, Benjamin Fick is certainly a nice young man," he says.

"That tone." She shakes her head. "There is no need for sarcasm. He's probably nice."

"Indeed. Sarcasm is the enemy of the people."

His mom sighs and starts to leave. "By the way, have you seen my checkbook?"

Superchunk pang of guilt. "I am not allowed to bank. I believe that includes writing checks."

Her glance is full of suspicion. "It was right where I always keep it."

Tripp shrugs, mouth full.

You scream. I scream. We all scream for frozen things.



OCTOBER 20. MONDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:23 A.M.

How odd it feels to be going to the little room on an even day. Patricia Kent arrives at Room A just as Tripp is opening the door to B.

"Lyla Marks has that room," she says.

"I know. She's letting me use it for today."

Patricia gives him a strange look, so he adds: "It's all good" and a smile.

Once he's inside, he pulls his lyrics from his pocket, sets them on the music stand, and gets out the guitar. Scratched into the back near the top are two words: *Just sing*.

He laughs. Lyla Marks snuck in before orchestra and defaced school property. For him.

He sings and plays, and he even likes the way it sounds.

*Woke up today, saw my face in the mirror.
Eyes don't lie, message is clear.
I can hear it. I can see it. I can say it.
I'm odd.*

*I'm a graph without coordinates, a shape without form,
Always deviating away from the norm.
Logic can't fix what's wrong with me.
I'm odd. I'm odd. I'm odd. Indeed.*

*I've got superhuman cilia in my ear,
Which gives me the ability to hear the fears
And lies that people hide behind, and what's more,
I can hear which crayon's happy in a box of sixty-four.*

*I'm a graph without coordinates, a shape without form,
Always deviating away from the norm.
Logic can't fix what's wrong with me.
I'm odd. I'm odd. I'm odd. Indeed.*

But when he turns on the recorder, he can't seem to get a line out without making a mistake. The period ends before he has anything worth saving. He is a failure.

After turning down the main hallway, he sees Lyla with a group of friends walking in his direction. Urgent

need for a plan. What if she says hi? What if she doesn't? What if she asks about the recording?

A few feet away, a drinking fountain calls to him. He races over, grateful to have something else to steer toward. The group of girls walks by, and he is just about to breathe and continue on to class, when he hears Lyla's voice. "I'll catch up in a minute!" She steps out of the group and walks over to the fountain. His feet have frozen, but his face is hot. "Excuse me," she says without really looking at him. As he moves aside, she slips a note on top of his notebook and bends over to get a drink. Then she's gone.

He ducks into the nearest bathroom and reads it.

Dear Mr. Odd,

Okay. I admit it. I snuck by the practice room and listened in at the door again, hoping you'd be singing your song. And you were! Fun song, indeed! I love everything about it. Plus you can sing. I knew it.

—Ms. Even

P.S. Teach me some chords or something. I want to learn more.

Tripp looks at himself in the mirror and grins.

*To the One Who Spies on Unsuspecting
Aardvarks,*

I should be paying attention in

science, but I'd rather write you a letter. You should be ashamed for spying. But thank you for saying you liked my song. When I tried to record it, I choked.

Maybe if you want to learn more about playing guitar, you should start with the 12-bar blues because it's easy and it's the basis of a lot of songs. I learned all about the different blues progressions off the Internet. Once you learn the basic chord progression, you can play it in any key. The easiest key to start with is probably E. So here's a chord progression:

E-E-E-E7

A7-A7-E-E

B7-A7-E-E

-Odd

P.S. Since you gave up the little room today, you can use it tomorrow. Write a blues song. You can mix up the chords, use less, use more, whatever.

When the bell rings, he hurries to Lyla's locker and slips in the note.

LYLA'S ROOM; 7:16 P.M.

<To: Tripp Broody> October 20

Dear Odd,

I would have replied right away, but after school I had to practice. Thanks for the tips and the offer to have the room, but Annie is in Room A on odd days. If she knew we traded days, she'd want me and you to switch so that I'd always have the little room on odd days, and to be honest, I am kind of enjoying a break from Annie. That sounds horrible. I feel guilty about it, but it's true.—Even

<To: Lyla Marks> October 20

Okay, twist my arm. I'll take the little room two days in a row. I'll try to find a way to make it up to you. Stop feeling guilty about everything. It's okay to want a break from Annie.—Odd

<To: Tripp Broody> October 20

Stop feeling guilty? Okay. The next song I write will be "The Guilt Song." I'm like the murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart"—when I'm feeling guilty or panicky, my heart pounds like that. Boom. Boom.

—Ms. Even

<To: Lyla Marks> October 20

Dear Ms. Even: How fascinating that you can relate to the murderer in "Tell-Tale Heart." If I hear any boom booms coming from the floor in the room, I'll rip up the boards in search of a still-beating heart. I like the idea of "The Guilt Song." Maybe a boom boom beat. I have massive quantities of guilt. I'll write one, too, and we'll see who finishes first. My problem is that I tend to have ideas throughout the day instead of when I sit down to write.—Odd

<To: Tripp Broody> October 20

You need a notebook you can keep in your pocket.—Ms. Even



OCTOBER 21. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:25 A.M.

When Tripp opens the guitar case, there is a pocket-size homemade notebook waiting for him, paper cut to size and stapled at the fold. On the front cover, a sketch of a guitar. On the back: *Brought to you by the Thrum Society.*

He records his “Mr. Odd” song—the whole thing this time without stopping once—and e-mails her the MP3 file. It isn’t perfect, but it’s done and it feels good. Then he opens the notebook and starts writing song number two. “Guilty.” He writes the title in the center of a page and jots down anything and everything that comes to mind, searching for connections and rhymes.





OCTOBER 22. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:44 A.M.

Lyla is singing her song again. She doesn't know quite where this voice of hers came from. It's as if there's a creature living inside her that she never realized was there. And now it's coming out in this song.

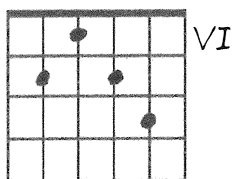
*Guilt on my sleeve and the bottom of my shoe.
Guilt under my collar sticks to me like glue.
Swallowed it on Sunday, and it's eatin' me alive.
Buried it on Monday, but it just won't die.*

*'Cause it's beating beating beating
Like a telltale heart.
Can't make it stop once it starts . . .*

When she's done, she glances up. A small notebook of her own has been slipped under the door. She picks it up. The first page has a note:

Ms. Even,

I was going to slip this blank notebook under the door, but I couldn't help stopping to listen to your new song. So then I decided to write you a note in it first. Your song rocks. I know you can't sing too loudly in here, but I could hear all this energy. Are you playing it in E, which is the key I gave you the blues progression for? If so, try a Hendrix chord in place of the E7 when you get to the beating part. I think it would sound cool. Here's the diagram for the chord, which is named after Jimi Hendrix, of course. God of Guitar. I'm going to make you some guitar-playing videos and send you the links.



The Roman numeral VI means you play this on the 6th fret

Lyla opens the door. The hallway is empty.



OCTOBER 23. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:37 A.M.

“Hello.” Tripp looks into the camera and freezes. He stops and resets it so that the camera is focused only on his hands, not on his face. He starts again. “Here’s my tip of the day. One way to get a cool percussive sound out of your strum is to stop the strings from vibrating with your palm. Try strumming once, then instead of strumming again, just thump your right hand down on the strings, then strum again normally. Experiment with the rhythm. . . .”

He demonstrates and moves on to another tip. Before the period is over, he uploads four tip files, posts them on YouTube, and sends Lyla the links.



OCTOBER 24. FRIDAY.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:16 P.M.

Lyla pulls the notebook Tripp gave her from her pocket and rereads the lyrics for her guilt song, wishing that she could slip through the laws of time and space and float in a bubble of invisibility. If she could, she'd spend as much time as she wanted writing songs. Instead, she is supposed to meet Annie by her locker and go shopping with her mom to pick out new performance outfits.

Her phone buzzes. Annie. Reluctantly, Lyla puts away the notebook, closes her locker, and answers as she starts walking.

"Hey, Annie—I'm just leaving my locker now and—"

“Why didn’t you tell me first?” Annie’s voice is clipped with anger.

“What?”

“The talent show. If you wanted to do a solo, you should’ve told me first. And since when do you play the guitar?”

Lyla’s heart pounds. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where are you?”

Annie hangs up.

Confused, Lyla changes direction and heads toward the music wing. The sign-up sheet for the talent show is posted in the hallway outside the orchestra room. In Tripp’s handwriting, her name is written in the 4:30 audition slot: *Lyla Marks guitar and vocal solo*.

The orchestra room door opens and Annie walks out.

“Annie! Tripp wrote that. It’s a joke. Look, I’m crossing it off.”

“Tripp?”

“We were talking about the talent show, and he was joking about how I should play the guitar instead of the cello, and then he must’ve written that.”

Annie glares, turns without a word, and begins walking down the hall toward the front entrance.

Lyla follows. “Don’t be mad.”

Annie keeps walking.

“Come on, Annie. Stop.”

Annie stops, pressing her lips together, her eyes darkening. “I asked you the other day what’s going

on between you and Tripp, and you said nothing.”

“We had a conversation. Do I have to report every single conversation I have with anybody?”

“I’m not mad, Lyla,” Annie says quickly. “I just know he’s not right for you. He’s abnormal, Lyla. He doesn’t have any friends and—”

“Annie, you’re talking about him like he’s a boyfriend. He’s not. Forget it. Look, I’m not doing a solo. It was a joke.”

They stand looking at each other awkwardly. Then Annie looks at the place on the sign-up sheet where Lyla had crossed out what Tripp had written. “You’re not going to do a solo?”

“No.”

“Do you still want to go shopping?” Annie asks.

Lyla winces internally and tries not to show it.

“Now what?” Annie’s eyebrows raise. “You can’t go?”

Annie gives her an opening, and a lie comes spilling out. “I want to, Annie. But my dad called and said that I have a dentist appointment. But we can go this weekend!”

“Whatever you say, Lyla.” Annie walks away.

“Don’t be mad at me!” Lyla adds. “Be mad at my dad. Or the dentist. Or my teeth.”

Annie disappears, and the hallway is quiet. She feels guilty but also relieved. A long walk home sounds just right. She waits until she’s sure Annie is gone, and then heads out. In front of the school, the maple tree is blazing red against the brilliant blue sky. Every leaf seems

to be singing with color. She takes a breath and starts walking.

Her phone buzzes, and she is happy to see Tripp's name. "You got me in trouble with Annie," she says. "The guitar solo sign-up thing . . ."

"I didn't think about that. Sorry."

"Yeah. I'll get you back."

"Are you threatening me with revenge of some sort, Ms. Even?"

"I'm signing you up for the talent show audition. Four twenty time slot. Don't be late."

"Villain! Erase it."

"What good is playing music if you don't share it?"

"Music doesn't have to be shared to be worthwhile."

"Yes, it does." She crosses the street. "Otherwise it's like one hand clapping."

"If I'm alone in the forest and I sing a song, isn't that good for my soul? Isn't that worth something?"

She laughs. "Okay. True. I sing in the shower."

"Aha!"

"But music is better if it's shared."

"Have you ever sung in public?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I play the cello. That's what I do."

"*Bawk.*"

"I'm not the chicken. I'm auditioning for the talent show with Annie."

“Okay. I will admit it. I’m a chicken. Erase me.”

“The truth comes out.”

“Did you erase me?”

“I never wrote you in.”

He laughs. “Good. Well, I hope the rest of your day is . . . odd.”

She laughs. “Oooh. Well, in that case, I hope the rest of your day is nice and even. Bye.”

“Adios.”

She closes her phone.

Lining the street is a row of old oak trees, each one holding up its chorus of crimson and gold leaves. Lyla looks up and smiles as a cool breeze rustles her hair.

Whenever she’s with Annie, she feels tense, but when she talks with Tripp, something nice happens inside her: a vibration, a thrum. It’s as if a tiny wind chime is suspended inside her soul, she thinks, and his words are the wind that makes it ring.



OCTOBER 25. SATURDAY.

TRIPP'S ROOM; 1:23 P.M.

Guilty

Cheating and lying + *conniving*
Fraud and forgery
Aggravated screaming
Dreaming of conspiracy
Flawed in every ~~way~~ *thought*
I'm a twisted guarantee
I'm a menace I'm a thorn
I should never have been born

oh
I'm guilty... I'm guilty
Doin' time for my crime

Do this
3 times

War
~~All kinds of~~ crimes

Won't deny 'em

~~I'm~~ Busted

Tried without a trial

No lawyer by my side

~~I think I'm gonna die~~

I'm hanging
out to dry

I'm guilty... I'm guilty
Doin' time for my crime

x3
guitar solo
here



OCTOBER 27. MONDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:39 A.M.

Tripp is playing in the little room when his cell phone buzzes. He brightens when Lyla's name appears.

"Hey," he says. "It's against the rules to use cell phones during the school day. Where are you?"

"In the girls' bathroom." Lyla giggles. "I'm calling because I've got a dare for you."

"If it has anything to do with the girls' bathroom, I'm not doing it."

"Tomorrow at lunch . . . come to Room B."

"But it's an even day."

"That's the point. I'll let you in. And then we'll play each other the songs we've been working on. I finally

figured out the chorus for my Hendrix-chord guilt song.”

“What about Jacoby’s rule? There can’t be more than one person using a room at the same time.”

“You make it sound like a law of physics. Jacoby’s Rule: If Mr. Odd and Ms. Even are ever in the same room at the same time, they will cancel each other out in total annihilation, like when matter and antimatter collide.”

“You’re blowing my mind. First, I never thought Lyla Marks would break a rule, and second, you sound like a science geek.”

“I love physics. Force equals Mass times Acceleration.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll accelerate my mass to the little room tomorrow.”

Lyla laughs, and the sound makes him happy.



OCTOBER 28. TUESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:31 A.M.

Tripp is almost at the door to Practice Room B when he loses his nerve and turns around. He is heading back to the orchestra room when he hears Patricia Kent's voice in the hallway ahead. She is coming this way. He turns back and quickly knocks on Room B's door.

The door opens and he slips in.

Lyla is wearing blue jeans, a soft green T-shirt, and a scarf with lots of fringe. Her brown eyes have this intense warmth, as if they have some superhuman power to mend broken bones or unlock doors, he thinks.

"You made it!" she whispers.

The guitar is out, propped against the bench, like an old friend. He relaxes a bit.

"Did Jacoby see you?" she asks.

"No," he whispers back.

They listen to the sound of Patricia approaching. Her door closes.

Lyla puts her finger to her lips. "Wait 'til she starts playing," she says.

After a minute, the French horn begins.

Lyla holds up her lunch. "I'm eating tuna fish," she says.

"No pomegranate?" he asks.

"Just tuna."

He nods. "I can smell."

"Sorry," she says. "I'll open a window."

"Yes, please," he says. "The one with the ocean view."

She laughs.

"I'm just realizing this room is the size of a Pop-Tarts box," he says.

"Tuna fish-flavored Pop-Tarts. Sorry."

"This is momentous," he says.

"The smell?"

"No. Being in the same room at the same time . . . I'm nervous."

Lyla smiles. "*That's* what is so different about you."

"That I'm nervous?"

"That you admit it. Most people don't say that kind of thing out loud. Most people pretend they're not nervous about stuff like this."

“What does that make me?”

Her eyebrows raise. “Odd?” She is about to add that she is nervous, too. But he has crouched to look at the cello lying sideways on the floor.

“Play me some Mozart-arello on the cello,” he says.

“No. Play me your new song on the guitar.” She picks it up and hands it to him.

He sits on the floor and strums a chord, then sings. *“Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play . . .”*

She laughs.

“Okay. Let your song rip.” He holds out the guitar to her.

“I’m too nervous. It’s easier to play my cello in front of a million people than it is to play one guitar chord in front of you.”

“I won’t look.”

“I’ll only do my song if you do yours,” she says.

“Okay, but you go first.”

She takes out the notebook he had given her and opens it up so that she can look at the lyrics if she starts to forget.

“Nice notebook,” he says.

She smiles and he turns so that his back is to her. The wall is absolutely blank.

She plays and sings, her voice sliding into the room, picking up confidence and strength as she goes.

*Guilt on my sleeve and the bottom of my shoe.
Guilt under my collar, sticks to me like glue.
Swallowed it on Sunday, and it's eatin' me alive.
Buried it on Monday, but it just won't die.*

*And it's beating beating beating like a telltale heart,
Beating beating beating like a telltale heart,
Beating beating beating like a telltale heart.
Can't make it stop once it starts.*

*Guilt on my tongue leaves a bitter taste.
Guilt in my bloodstream, running through my veins.
Hide it on Tuesday, but I got no choice.
Friday rolls around and you can hear it in my voice.*

*'Cause it's beating beating beating like a telltale heart,
Beating beating beating like a telltale heart,
Beating beating beating like a telltale heart.
Can't make it stop once it starts.*

*Don't tell me you can't hear it when I walk into the room,
Louder every minute, going boom boom boom.*

When she gets to the final chorus, her voice opens up
and envelops him.

*Beating beating beating like a telltale heart,
Beating beating beating like a telltale heart,*

*Beating beating beating like a telltale heart.
Can't make it stop once it starts.*

She finishes and there is silence. "You didn't like it?"
He turns around. "It was amazing. Really. I'm stunned."
Lyla smiles. "Yeah?"

"Where did that come from? It's so . . . not Bach."

She laughs. "I know. A month ago, if you would've told me that I'd write a song like this, I'd say you were crazy. I used to think that, in order to write a song, I'd have to hear it in my head, and then I'd sit down with a pen and write it out in notation. That's the way you see Mozart and Beethoven doing it in movies about them. But your way, of just playing until you find something by accident, makes a lot more sense. It's like every song is a series of accidents."

"Your song is a really good accident."

His smile makes her smile.

"Well, anyway," she says, "I'm not sure how to end the song."

He takes the guitar. "Maybe go back to the Hendrix E chord and punch up the rhythm?" He tries it and teaches her a new strumming rhythm and her eyes light up. She takes the guitar back and practices.

"That's great." He watches her. "I can't believe how fast you learn."

"All that cello," she says. "Let me borrow your pick."

Tripp hesitates.

"I'm not going to steal it," she says.

"It's . . .

"Ssh!" She whispers. "I thought I heard Jacoby's voice."

"His rule is stupid."

"He's afraid if there are two people in here, we'll talk instead of play."

"Two students talking to each other. Call the police."

Lyla listens until she's sure the teacher isn't there. "Okay. It's your turn." She hands him the guitar and turns to face the wall. "No wailing or we'll get kicked out."

"I'm not going to sing."

"*Bawk.*"

"My lyrics aren't great." He pulls out the notebook that she'd given him.

"Nice notebook," she says, and smiles.

He opens it to his lyrics page and reads over his notes. "What's interesting is that we both wrote in the key of E." He plays a chord.

She smiles. "We're on the same wavelength. Come on, sing."

He's nervous, but he sings.

*Cheating, lying, and conniving,
Fraud and forgery,
Aggravated screaming,
Dreaming of conspiracy,
Flawed in every thought,
I'm a twisted guarantee,*

*I'm a menace, I'm a thorn.
I should never have been born.*

*I'm guilty, oh guilty,
I'm guilty, oh guilty,
I'm guilty, oh guilty,
Doin' time for my crime. Boom Boom Boom.*

*War crimes, won't deny 'em,
Busted, tried without a trial,
No lawyer by my side,
I'm just hanging out to dry.
I'm a menace, I'm a thorn.
I should never have been born.*

*I'm guilty, oh guilty,
I'm guilty, oh guilty,
I'm guilty, oh guilty,
Doin' time for my crime. Boom Boom Boom.*

When he's done, she leaps to her feet. "I think they're polyphonic!"

"Polyphonic?"

"Two different melodies that fit together! Lots of baroque music is polyphonic. Bach was all over it. This is so cool. Let's record both our songs and play them at the same time and see if they fit."

They record Lyla's song first and then Tripp's at the

same tempo. Then, they layer them in the same file and play them back. Each phrase neatly overlaps the other, their voices fitting together in harmony.

Lyla's eyes sparkle. "The opposite of annihilation!"

Tripp laughs. "Indeed."

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:16 P.M.

As Lyla walks down the hall, she pulls out her cell phone and calls Tripp.

"Howdy," he answers.

She presses the phone against her ear so she can hear him over the hallway noise. "Hey, do you have Sanders for science?" she asks.

"No. I have Peakly."

"Are you on chapter three? Didn't you think it was interesting? The whole eardrum thing." There is a tap on her shoulder. She turns—it's Tripp—and she almost screams.

"Sorry!" He laughs.

She looks around for Annie. "It's just—"

"You don't want anybody to see you talking to me?"

"No! It's not that. It's just Annie. She'd make a huge deal out of it. She wouldn't leave it alone."

"Well, some people make a big deal about everything. Anyway, you're lucky you have Sanders for science. Peakly's voice is so annoying. I try to block it out."

"But the sound unit is so interesting! My voice is

literally playing a tiny little teeny drum in your ear.”

“What?”

“How sound works. Right now, I’m talking and the sound is coming out of me as a wave of air, each air molecule pushing on the next until it travels all the way to your ear. When the wave reaches your eardrum, your eardrum vibrates, and that’s how the sound gets in you. So my voice is literally playing a little drum in your ear. Tell me that’s not cool.”

“You really are a geek. And it’s cool.”

Lyla spots Annie down the hall. “You have to go.”

“I do?”

“Annie’s coming.”

“Okay, science guru.”

He leaves and she rushes over to her locker and makes herself busy, pretending to text.

“So,” Annie says. “Who are you texting?”

“My dad.” Lyla puts away her phone and crouches down to pull her French book from the stack on the bottom. “I was just reminding him that we’re staying for Sweet Tooth.”

“What’s this?” Annie pulls the notebook Tripp gave her out of Lyla’s back pocket.

Lyla stands up and grabs it back. “Nothing.”

“Wow!” Annie says. “Somebody’s touchy.”

Lyla sees the suspicion in Annie’s face, but she smiles as if nothing is wrong.



OCTOBER 29. WEDNESDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:25 A.M.

The room is empty without Lyla. Tripp misses her immediately. He opens the guitar case and finds a note.

Dear Mr. Odd,

Since you are inspiring me to write songs that I never thought I'd write, it's my turn to inspire you. Your assignment is to write a waltz. $\frac{3}{4}$ time. That means the beat of the song is

1, 2, 3,

1, 2, 3,

1, 2, 3,

Get it?
—Ms. Even

He gets it. A challenge. A dare.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY, 3:13 P.M.

Lyla sees Tripp in the crowded hallway, and her face breaks into a smile. She starts looking for Annie and then catches herself because she remembers that Annie said she had to leave early today for an orthodontist appointment.

“Howdy, Mr. Odd,” she says. “You look positively chipper.”

He laughs. “I am! Because of what you told me yesterday about the physics unit, I actually paid attention, and guess what.”

“You learned something?”

“You’re going to hear about it when you have science tomorrow. It’s cool.” His eyes get bigger. “It validates my Vibe Theory.”

“What’s that?”

“Remember when I told you that I’ve always felt like I could feel the vibes of inanimate objects?”

She nods and laughs. “You can hear which crayon in the box is happy.”

“Exactly. Well, Peakly said that everything vibrates.”

“Even dead things?”

“Everything. Even dead things. Even pomegranates. This pencil, even though it’s perfectly still, is vibrating because all matter is made up of molecules, and all molecules are made of atoms, and all atoms vibrate all the time.” He holds the pencil to her ear. “Can you hear it?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s your problem.”

“I thought I had a problem,” she says. “I just never knew what it was.”

Tripp smiles. “Every vibration is a sound; therefore everything has a sound.”

“Therefore you can hear the pencil?”

“We can’t hear the pencil because it’s vibrating at a rate we can’t detect, but it’s making a sound.”

“Like the dog whistle thing!” she says.

“Exactly.”

“So if I had the eardrums of a dog, maybe I could actually hear my bones grow!”

He grins.

She goes on. “The other day, I walked out and saw the maple tree, you know, the one in front? And the leaves were so red, I had this feeling that they were actually singing.”

“I’m not the only odd one.”

She grabs his pencil and tucks it behind her ear. “Now we’re both physics geeks.”

"I'm also chipper because I'm writing a song," he says.

"Hmmm, let me use my superhuman cilia and listen to your thoughts." She closes her eyes as if she is in a trance. "Could it be . . . are you writing a waltz?"

"Yep. I decided to call it 'The Pomegranate Waltz.'"

"I want to hear it."

"I can hear the melody for the verses and the chorus, but I haven't come up with any lyrics yet."

They reach her locker and she stops. "We could work on it together in the little room on Thursday," she says.

"A collaboration," he says. "Batman and Robin."

"Bonnie and Clyde."

"Bert and Ernie."

"Jekyll and Hyde."

"Shouldn't we be naming musicians?" he asks.

She laughs.

THE METRO; 4:09 P.M.

As soon as Tripp sits down on the Metro train, his phone buzzes, and he almost groans out loud when he sees that it's his mom calling.

"Tripp! I want to talk with you about something." Her voice has that forced cheerful buzz. "I think it's something you'll like. I've made an appointment with an advisor at Crenshaw—"

BOOM! The walls cave in. "You have got to be

kidding,” he says. “I’m not going to change schools.” The doors shut and the train pulls out. “Tell me that you’ve made an appointment because they need new carpeting.”

“I’ve been thinking that it might be a good place for you. Small class sizes. Top-notch teachers.”

“Making me go to a tutor session is one thing. But you cannot make me go to a new school.”

“You’re not getting anywhere at Rockland and —”

“I’m actually starting to like science, Mom.” The train rumbles around a curve.

“You didn’t turn in your algebra homework. I saw the zero on Edline this morning.”

“I’ll get my grades up.”

“Which is what you said during the entire second semester last year, and it didn’t happen. Anyway, I made an appointment —”

“—which you will cancel,” Tripp says.

“—for tomorrow at five thirty.”

“No.”

“Hear me out.” Her voice sweetens. “It’s just a preliminary interview. If you come with me to Crenshaw and behave yourself during the interview and genuinely have an open mind about listening to what it might offer you, then I will let you have your guitar back.”

The earth screeches to a stop in its orbit.

“You will let me have my guitar back?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Right after the interview. We’ll drive straight to the store and get it.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“It’s a deal.” He agrees, hangs up, and immediately calls Lyla.

She answers in a whisper. “Hello, Mr. Odd.”

“Why are you whispering?” he asks.

“I’m in my private lesson with Dr. Prevski, but she just went to the bathroom.”

“I’m getting my guitar back tomorrow.”

“Hurray!” she whispers. “That’s great.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you go. Adios.”

“Au revoir.”

“Ta-ta. That’s good-bye in Thai.”

“Is not. Cheerio. That’s good-bye in Old English.”

“May the force be with you.”

“That’s what science geeks say.”

“Takes one to know one.” He gets off the train and sees a musician playing. “Lyla, wait! Listen . . .” He holds out his phone so that she can hear the sound of the echoing trumpet. “I’m in the Metro. Somebody’s playing.”

“We should do that,” Lyla says. “Got to go.”

He closes his phone and stands still. It’s an old jazz song that he has heard before. His favorite elementary school teacher used to sing it all the time. “What a Wonderful World.” The trumpet’s soaring voice rides into the air. Tripp imagines each note causing a ripple effect in

the air, sending wave after wave of sound into his ears. He imagines the sound playing his tiny eardrums and the vibration of the drum sending the waves of sound through his entire body, striking against the strings of his soul.

The musician catches him watching, and they share a wordless nod of appreciation, musician to musician, while the song goes on.

LYLA'S HOUSE; 9:42 P.M.

Lyla is dishing up bowls of ice cream for herself and her dad when her phone rings. It's on the table closest to him, so he picks it up and looks at the display.

"Who is Tripp and why is she calling so late?"

Lyla jumps over to the table and takes the phone. "Oh . . . it's a he. I mean, he's a him. He's probably calling about homework. He's in my algebra class." She answers, pressing the phone into her ear. "Hi."

"So, if everything has a sound," Tripp says, "then the moon must have a sound."

Lyla glances at her dad. "Hold on, Tripp. Let me get my backpack. I can read you the assignment."

Tripp laughs. "Wow, Ms. Even. Is that the first time you've ever called me by my actual name?"

"Why can't he check Edline?" her dad asks.

"Does this mean I have to call you Lyla?" Tripp asks.

“Hold on.” Lyla lowers the phone. “Dad, it’s not a big deal. He’s just missing the algebra assignment.” Before her dad can say another word, she grabs her backpack and takes it into her bedroom. “Okay, I’m back,” she says into the phone.

“I *am* missing the algebra assignment, but that’s not why I called,” Tripp says.

Lyla throws her backpack on her bed and closes her door. “I didn’t want to have to explain anything to my dad.”

“Sorry. I called at a bad time.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m in my room now.”

“So the question is: what sound do you think the moon makes?”

Lyla walks over to the window. The overhead light in her room throws a superimposed image of her reflection on the glass. She presses her face to the window, cupping her hand around her eyes to block out the light. The crescent moon’s whiteness is brilliant and wild, as if its source of light is coming from its own state of mind.

“I think it’s wailing,” Tripp says, and he starts singing this funny falsetto.

Lyla’s dad opens her door, and Lyla turns to her desk and picks up a pencil. “You’re supposed to do problems one through six. Got it?”

“You turned into a mean algebra machine,” Tripp says. “Why can’t you say, ‘Excuse me, Dad, but I’m trying to listen to the moon?’”

She walks over to her backpack on the bed and puts the pencil in the side pocket. "I can't really give you the answers, Tripp. You have to figure out the solutions yourself."

"Hurt me, Ms. Even," Tripp says.

Her dad's presence in the room is like a black hole, pulling her in when she'd rather be talking with Mr. Odd. Reluctantly, she says good-bye. As she closes the phone, her dad hands her the bowl of ice cream.

"It seems rude of this Tripp to call and expect you to give him the answers."

She turns her back so that that he can't see her smile. She likes the sound of Tripp's name in the room, even if her dad has no idea who he is. "He's not rude," she says, glancing out the window. "Just . . . well . . . odd."



OCTOBER 30. THURSDAY.

PRACTICE ROOM B; 11:33 A.M.

Tripp knocks on the practice room door and it opens.
“Mr. Odd!”

Tripp steps in and smiles. He remembers a report he wrote in the sixth grade about how monarch butterflies migrate from the north every year to the same fir trees thousands of miles away in Mexico and imagines that stepping into this room feels as good to him as landing on a Mexican fir tree must feel to a migrating butterfly.

“Let’s hear your ‘Pomegranate Waltz’!” She hands him the guitar and sits on the bench.

He sits on the floor and tunes up. “This was a hard assignment. I’ve never written anything in three/four

time. I kind of like my tune, but you need to help me think of lyrics." He plays and hums the melody.

"Ooooh, it's actually pretty," she says.

He winces. "I wrote a pretty song."

"You did. You should be proud of that. A great musician can write all kinds of songs."

He keeps playing, and when he comes around to the verse again, she sings, "*I like the sound of a pomegranate. I must be from another planet.*" She laughs.

"My planet is mostly made of granite," he sings, and stops. "See? It's impossible."

"It doesn't have to have the word *pomegranate* in it," Lyla says. "Play it again. I'll sing the first thing that comes to my mind."

He plays.

She sings, "*I like the sound of your name in my ear.*" She stops and blushes. "I didn't mean you you. I mean it doesn't have to be based on anything true, right? We can make up a song, imagining someone is singing it about someone else. Forget it. Let's start over."

"No. It's a good first line. Let's keep going. *I like the sound of your name in my ear. I like to hear . . .*"

"What you have to say?"

"That's good. Then something that rhymes with *say . . .* I want to pay you lots of money . . ." He sings and laughs.

"How about *I'd like to pay attention to you?*"

". . . instead of doing my homework."

"Instead of doing all the things I have to do."

“Good. Good. But let’s make it shorter. *Instead of doing what I have to do.*”

Lyla writes their lyrics in her notebook. “Okay, let’s sing what we have so far.”

I like the sound of your name in my ear.

I like to hear what you have to say.

I’d like to pay attention to you—instead of doing

What I have to do.

“Ooh,” she says. “It sounds good. Sing it again and I’ll try singing harmony.”

“I don’t know if I can sing if you’re doing that.”

“Yeah, you can. Sing your note and hold on to it no matter what I sing. You have to listen to yourself and don’t let yourself be pulled off the note. Imagine you’re on one street and I’m on the other. Parallel. We’re going in the same direction, but you have to stay in your lane.”

“Okay.”

“Sing this note.” She gives him a note. He sings it. “Now stay there.” She adds her note one third above it.

She makes him practice it a few times, and he gets it.

“We’re good,” she says.

“Actually really good!” he admits. “We should play in the Metro.”

“You need a permit,” Lyla says. “I read an article about it once. You have to send in an audition video.”

“Well, we should do it. Or we should do weddings. I

was at this wedding in September and the music was really bad. We could do a lot better.”

“We could!”

Without warning, the door opens and Ms. Kettering and Mr. Jacoby are staring at them.

“Lyla!” Mr. Jacoby says.

Lyla jumps up. “We were just working on some music together.”

“I know I made the rules perfectly clear,” Mr. Jacoby says. “Practice rooms are not for socializing.”

“We’re not socializing,” Tripp says. “We’re—”

“Save your explanation,” Ms. Kettering says. “Come up to the resource room. I’d like to talk with you and Benjamin.”

As Tripp puts away the guitar, Mr. Jacoby explains that he has lost privileges to use the practice room. Period.

Lyla blanches. “But it was my idea. I’m the one who should lose privileges.”

Tripp protests, but Ms. Kettering hustles him out the door.

ROCKLAND HALLWAY; 3:16 P.M.

Lyla has walked through the afternoon in shock, unable to concentrate on anything except the thought of Tripp not being allowed back into the practice room. The effort it has taken to get through each class, to pretend

that nothing is wrong, has made her feel sick to her stomach. As soon as her last class ends, she texts Annie to say that she doesn't need a ride home today. It's another lie, but she needs to find Tripp.

She hurries to her locker, and just as she is about to send him a text, Annie arrives.

"Hey, Lyla, I heard something interesting about Tripp Broody today." Although Annie's voice is light, Lyla can hear a current of hostility running through it.

"Really?" Heat rushes to Lyla's face. She focuses on her backpack, pretending to struggle with the zipper.

Annie goes on. "It was my day to tutor and I was in the resource room, and Ms. Kettering found out that Tripp has been skipping tutoring sessions with Benjamin Fick."

Lyla stuffs a notebook in her backpack and zips it up. "How did she find that out?" She tries to sound casual and starts walking.

Annie follows. "I'm not sure, but anyway, I was talking to Patricia Kent, and she said that Tripp was playing guitar in one of the practice rooms, which doesn't make any sense because you're in there. Did you see him? I mean, you were there today, right?"

Lyla's heart pounds. "I don't know anything about it."

Annie stops and glares. "That was a test, Lyla. And you failed. You've been lying, and I'm so sick of it. You promised that you weren't going to hang out with him, and so what do you do? You go behind my back." She speeds ahead.

"I wasn't trying to deliberately go behind your back, Annie. You don't understand." Lyla catches up.

"I do understand. I talked to Patricia Kent. She said you never even asked her to trade days. She said she heard you in the practice room with him."

"Did you tell on us to Ms. Kettering?"

"I'm sure she figured it out on her own."

"I don't believe you."

Annie stops and shrugs. "Well, that's too bad."

"Look, Annie. I'm sorry I lied. But I . . . I was . . . I've been feeling like . . ."

"Like you want to dump me—"

"Stop it, Annie."

"No, you stop it, Lyla."

"I don't think there's a law that says we have to do everything together all the time."

"That's what friends do, Lyla."

"But you put this pressure on me, like I can't ever disagree."

"Just say it, Lyla. You hate me. You think you're better than me."

"Stop it! I don't think I'm better than you. I don't hate you! You're the one who is always saying 'I hate you' to me. How do you think that makes me feel?"

Annie's face hardens. "So what do you and Tripp do in the practice room?"

"We play the guitar."

An ugly laugh flies out of Annie.

Lyla asks, "Why is that funny?"

"It's so not you." She walks on. "Have a great life, Lyla."

THE BROODYS' CAR; 4:27 P.M.

Tripp says nothing to his mom when she picks him up. Now that he has been kicked out of the practice room, the stakes are higher. He has to get his guitar back. Ms. Kettering said she would contact his mom. Maybe she left a message on the home phone and his mom hasn't had a chance to check the messages. Thankfully, he sees no sign of distress in her face. On the way to Crenshaw, she chatters away, reminding him of all the things he can do to make a good impression: eye contact, firm handshake, no mumbling, and definitely no sarcasm. "Act curious about something they mention," she says, "and nod to show you're interested even if you're not."

"Dishonesty above all," Tripp can't resist saying.

She throws him a look. "You know what I mean."

They drive into the city and turn into a wealthy-looking neighborhood. At the end of the street, the school sits on top of a hill, like an old English mansion, ivy growing up the stone walls, a clock tower in the biggest building. Tripp is led into a room with two round-faced people for a "getting to know you" session while his mom has a conference with the financial aid advisor in another room.

When he comes out, the interviewers are smiling, Tripp is smiling, Tripp's mother is smiling, the secretary who says good-bye to them on the way out is smiling.

"I avoided sarcasm, whipped out some impressive vocab, and managed a straight face even though they looked like Tweedledee and Tweedledum," he says as they walk down the steps toward the parking lot. "So . . . now we get the guitar?"

His mom waits until they pass by two women talking next to a red convertible. Then her smile dissolves and her voice darkens. "I'll tell you when we get in the car."

His stomach drops. She gets in the car and slams the door, and he stands there wondering how long it would take him to walk home. She reaches over and opens the door. As he gets in, she explodes. "I can't believe you've been lying to me." She grips the steering wheel with her left hand, turns on the engine, and yanks the car into gear. When she turns to see if it's safe to back out, her eyes take a swipe at him. "If Crenshaw lets you in, you're going. That's it. If you get good grades there, then you can have your guitar back for the summer."

"What?"

She pulls out of the Crenshaw entrance, passing through the two black doors of the imposing wrought-iron gate. "There will be no discussion."

His fury builds, but he says nothing. They ride in silence. She drops him off at home and tells him flatly that she is going to pick up some groceries.

The minute he is alone in the house, he lets out a primal scream. Shaking, he walks into his own room and calls Lyla. *Please answer.* She does, and her voice is like a lifeline he grabs to keep from drowning. Right away she can tell that something is wrong.

He crawls into bed and tells her what happened.

“Crenshaw!” she exclaims. “You can’t go to Crenshaw.”

“I know.”

“Did she find out about the practice room?”

“Yeah.”

“This is so bad. Annie did, too. We had a huge fight. I really hope—” Her voice changes, and he can tell her father must be there. “It’s page seventy-three. We’re supposed to find solutions to all the odd numbers.”

“I think my solution involves smashing something with a crowbar,” he says.

She laughs. “I don’t think that will work. See you tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, he says good-bye.

TRIPP’S ROOM; 8:26 P.M.

Lyla calls. Her voice is a whisper. “You know what I did to take my mind off everything?”

“Smashed something?”

She laughs. “No. I made us a website and posted our

MP3s on it and said we're available for weddings!" She laughs again. "Check it out. I sent you the URL. And I have a plan. Tomorrow night, meet me at the corner of Sycamore and Twelfth."

"Why?"

"Not telling. Let's make it seven P.M. Don't meander."

"Am I going to like it?"

"Yes. I have to go." She's gone.

He gets his laptop, brings it back to his bed, and fires it up. He finds her e-mail with the URL and clicks on it: www.thrumsociety.com. The website pops up and immediately takes his breath away. Their songs are all there. The Thrum Society. Everything is somehow going to be okay.

LYLA'S ROOM; 9:32 P.M.

Annie/I joined canticle quartet now it's a quintet.
Tomorrow cross our names off audition sheet.

Lyla reads the message and a wave of relief washes over her. She doesn't have to be responsible for Annie. It's better this way.

Lyla/I think that's a great idea. Good luck. I'm sure you'll make it.