

Things That Make No Sense

Marcus and I got to Broadway without saying anything. I was thinking.

"I thought of a question for you," I said finally.

"Okay."

"Let's say I build a time machine." I waited to see if he would laugh at this, but he just nodded and looked thoughtful. "And let's say I decide I want to go back to last Wednesday. Let's say I want to go to the movies while the other me is still in school."

"Okay."

I exhaled a big white cloud. "I won't get to last Wednesday until after I leave, right? I mean, I won't know if I'm really going to get there until I actually get there."

"Right. In your experience, you won't know if you're going to get there until after you leave. I mean, unless you remember seeing yourself, on the street or something. Or we could ask the ticket guy at the theater." He was serious.

"What?"

"At the movie theater. Which one are you planning to go to? Because we could ask the ticket guy if you were there. Then we'll know whether or not you're going to get there."

"But I haven't left yet! I haven't even built the time machine."

"So? It doesn't matter when you *leave*. It's just whether or not you *get there* that matters. Wait, I take that back. It does matter when you leave. Because if you don't leave for fifty years, even if you *were* there, the ticket guy probably won't recognize you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, let's say you finish your time machine in fifty years. You'd be—"

"Sixty-two," I said. We were across the street from school, waiting for the green light. I could see kids coming from every direction, all bundled up in hats and scarves.

"Okay, so let's say you're sixty-two, and you climb into your machine and go back to last Wednesday, December whatever, 1978. You go to the movie theater. The ticket guy would see a sixty-two-year-old woman, right?"

"Right," I said. So far everything made sense.

"So if we went over to the theater today and asked him whether he saw you there last Wednesday, he'd say no. Because his common sense would tell him that you can't be that sixty-two-year-old woman, and she can't be you. Get it?"

I shook my head. "If we asked *today*, he couldn't have seen me anyway. I wouldn't have been there yet. Because I haven't *gone back* yet."

"Duh," said a voice behind us. "It's really not all that complicated."

I whirled around and saw Julia in a long coat. She was standing right behind us waiting for the light.

Marcus ignored her and looked at me. "Are you still worrying about that book? About the kids, and seeing themselves land in the broccoli?"

I said nothing. I wasn't going to have Julia hear any more of this conversation.

"Think of it like this," Marcus said, oblivious to the look she was giving us. "Time isn't a line stretching out in front of us, going in one direction. It's—well, time is just a construct, actually—"

"Look," Julia said, cutting him off. "If you really need to know what he means, I'll explain it to you."

This should be good, I thought. Julia is going to explain the nature of time.

I turned around and looked at her. "Fine. Go ahead."

She pulled off one of her gloves—they were these beautiful, fuzzy, pale yellow gloves—and she yanked a ring from her finger. "I think of it like this," she said, holding up the ring. It was gold, studded all the way around with—

"Are those *diamonds*?" I said.

"Diamond chips." She shrugged. "Look. It's like every moment in time is a diamond sitting on this

ring. Pretend the ring is really big, with diamonds all around, and each diamond is one moment. Got it?"

Marcus was silent, just looking at her.

I laughed. "Time is a diamond ring!" I said. "That explains everything. Thanks."

"Would you shut up and listen? If you figured out a way to bring yourself to another time, probably through some sort of teleportation—you'd be somehow *re-creating* your atoms, really, not physically moving them, I'm guessing; that would be tricky. . . ."

"Can we not worry about that part right now?" I said. "I'm freezing." We were still standing across the street from school, even though the light had changed once already and then gone back to red.

"Okay. Put it this way—we're kind of jumping from diamond to diamond, like in cartoons where someone is running on a barrel, trying to stay on top. We have to keep moving—there's no choice."

"Now we're in a cartoon, on a barrel?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Okay, forget that. Let's stick with the ring." She held it up again. "Let's say we're here." She put her fingernail on one diamond chip. "And we figure out a way to jump all the way back to here." She pointed to another one, a few chips away. "It wouldn't matter where we came from. If we're on that chip, we're at that moment. It doesn't matter whether we came from the chip behind it, or ten chips ahead of it. If we're there, we're there. Get it?"

"No. I don't get it, because what you're saying makes absolutely no—"

"I do," Marcus said quietly. "I get it. I know what she means."

"Thank you!" Julia said. "I'm glad *someone* here has a brain." And she stomped off through the red light while Marcus stared after her.

I turned to him. "So you're saying this diamond chip is just sitting there minding its own business, and then suddenly a bunch of kids land in the diamond chip's *broccoli patch*—"

Marcus's face lit up. "Stop—I see your problem! You're thinking that time exists on the diamonds themselves. It doesn't. Each moment—each diamond—is like a snapshot."

"A snapshot of what?"

"Of everything, everywhere! There's no time in a picture, right? It's the *jumping*, from one diamond to the next, that we call time, but like I said, time doesn't really *exist*. Like that girl just said, a diamond is a moment, and all the diamonds on the ring are happening *at the same time*. It's like having a drawer full of pictures."

"On the ring," I said.

"Yes! All the diamonds exist at once!" He looked triumphant. "So if you jump backward, you are at that moment—you are *in that picture*—and you always *were* there, you always *will be* there, even if you don't know it yet."

I didn't understand a word of it. And I couldn't feel my feet. "Forget it," I said. "The whole thing is making me crazy."

He nodded like he felt sorry for me and my stupid

brain. "I think that's probably because of your common sense. You can't accept the idea of arriving before you leave, the idea that every moment is happening at the same time, that it's us who are moving—"

Enough was enough. I cut him off. "Why did you hit Sal?" I asked.

"Who?" He looked completely mystified, as if I had just changed the subject from something very normal to something completely insane, instead of the other way around.

"My friend Sal. You punched him in the stomach for no reason. In front of the garage. And then you hit him in the face."

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "That's right. But no—there *was* a reason."

"That's bull. I know he never did a thing to you." I'd started to really shiver, even with my hands stuffed in my pockets and Mom's scarf wrapped around my head.

"I *did* hit him for a reason," he said. "What you're talking about is a justification. I'm not saying it was the right thing to do. I'm just saying I did it for a reason. My own stupid reason."

I stared at him. "So what was the reason?"

He looked down and shrugged. "Same reason I do most things. I wanted to see what would happen."

"What do you mean, 'what would happen'? His nose started bleeding, that's what happened! And he almost threw up."

"Besides that, besides the ordinary things." He

tapped the toe of one shoe on the sidewalk. "It was dumb. Really, really dumb."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And *did* anything happen? Besides the ordinary things?"

He shook his head. "No—not that I could tell."

I was going to tell him that he was wrong, that other things *had* happened, like Sal closing the door in my face that afternoon and never opening it again, but at that moment I noticed the laughing man coming down the block behind us. I'd never seen him near school before. He was bent forward, mumbling and watching his feet, with his eyes on the garbage can right next to Marcus.

The laughing man didn't notice us standing there until he was practically on top of Marcus. When he finally looked up, he cursed, twisted away, and took off in the other direction, sprinting like he was running a race.

We watched him rush all the way back to Broadway and disappear around the corner.

"That was weird," I said.

"Yeah," Marcus agreed. "And it's the second time it's happened."

The First Proof

"What did I tell you?" Jimmy said at lunch that same day, happily slapping the counter with both hands. "They never think you'll actually count the bread. Never in a million years would they think you'd count!" The bread order had come up two rolls short. I'd counted it twice to make sure.

Jimmy swaggered over to the phone with a huge smile on his face.

"You just made his day," Colin whispered. "Maybe his whole week." He was folding slices of ham and laying them out neatly on little squares of waxed paper.

I watched Colin's fingers as they picked up each piece of ham—he didn't just smack them in half like I saw Jimmy do. Colin sort of bent each slice into a pretty fan shape. Once I started watching, I couldn't stop. It was hypnotizing, somehow.

"I talked to Annemarie last night," I said. "I think she's coming back to school tomorrow."

Colin nodded. "Good." It was hard to imagine him sneaking around and leaving a rose on anyone's door-mat, but I guess boys will surprise you sometimes.

"Hey," he said suddenly, "you know what? I'm sick of cheese-and-lettuce sandwiches." He glanced guiltily at Jimmy, who was still on the phone talking about his missing rolls. "Want to go get a slice of pizza?"

We acted like everything was normal, making our sandwiches and wrapping them up like we planned to eat them at school. And then we ran to the pizza place down the block. It was crazy, but we felt like we were doing something wrong. We rushed back to school stuffing pizza into our mouths and crouching down low when we passed Jimmy's window so he couldn't see us. Somehow we became so completely hysterical that we were still having what Mom calls fits of helpless laughter when we got to school.

We must have sort of burst into the classroom, because everyone looked up from their silent reading to stare at us. Julia rolled her eyes.

"You're late again," Mr. Tompkin said. And then the whole feeling dissolved and we went to find our books.

I sat with my book open on my desk, thinking about the note in my coat pocket: *3 p.m. today: Colin's knapsack.* Your first "proof." I had to get a look inside Colin's bag, to find whatever would—or wouldn't—be waiting for me.

At three on the dot, I went to the coat closet and grabbed my knapsack to go home. Colin's was just a few hooks away. I could hear him talking to Jay Stringer in the back of the room, near Main Street.

Julia was standing with them, trying again to convince Jay about her stupid tinfoil UFO and how it was going to fly up and down the street on a stupid invisible wire. She still hadn't gotten her project approved.

I reached over and unzipped Colin's bag. There was his denim-covered binder stuffed with falling-out papers, a paperback, and the cheese sandwich he hadn't eaten at lunch, soaking through its paper and smelling like pickles. Nothing unusual.

I felt around the bottom of the bag and touched some keys on a ring, resting in a pile of dirt, or maybe crushed leaves. I tipped the bag toward the light and saw that it wasn't a pile of dirt—it was a pile of crumbs. Bread crumbs.

I patted the back of the bag, felt a lump, reached behind his binder, and pulled out two of Jimmy's rolls. They were flaking all over the place. Colin must have grabbed them straight out of the delivery bag when nobody was looking.

Things You Give Away

I dropped the rolls back into Colin's bag, pulled my coat on, threw my knapsack over one shoulder, and took the stairs two at a time. There was a mob of kids outside like always, pushing and laughing and standing around talking, even though it was still freezing and had started to rain. I took a minute to look for Sal, like I always do. No sign of him. I wound Mom's scarf around my ears, turned north, and started walking up the hill to Annemarie's.

It didn't make sense. Not that Colin had taken the rolls—in fact, that was just the kind of thing I expected from Colin. But my brain was yelling all kinds of other questions at me: How could anyone possibly have *known* that Colin would take the rolls? And when had the note been put in my coat pocket? It didn't occur to me that you could have left it there the same day you put the first note in my library book about the squirrel village. I didn't get that at all, until much later.

And why *me*? I jumped a gutter full of rainwater and took the last steps to Annemarie's building. Why

was I the one getting notes? Why did I have to do something about whatever bad thing was going to happen? I didn't even understand what I was supposed to do! Write a letter about something that hadn't happened yet?

"Miranda," my brain said. "Nothing is going to happen. Someone is playing with you." But what if my brain was wrong? What if someone's life really needed saving? What if it wasn't a game?

Annemarie's doorman waved me in. Upstairs, her father answered the door with an unlit cigar in his mouth and asked me whether I wanted some cold noodles with sesame sauce.

"Uh, no thanks."

"Fizzy lemonade, then?" He helped me tug my wet coat off—the lining was all stuck to my sweater.

So I walked into Annemarie's room balancing my lemonade and an ice water for her, along with a dish of almonds that her father had somehow warmed up. Warm almonds sounds kind of yuck, but in reality they taste pretty good.

Annemarie was still in her nightgown, but she looked normal. "My dad won't stop feeding me," she said, taking a handful of nuts. "And he won't let me get dressed. He says pajamas are good for the soul. Isn't that so dumb?"

I sat on the edge of her bed. "Is that the rose?" It was on her bedside table in a tiny silver vase, just the kind of thing they would have at Annemarie's house.

She nodded and looked at it. The rose was perfect—just opening, like a picture in a magazine.

"I tried to draw it," Annemarie said. She held out a little spiral pad of heavy white paper. She'd sketched the rose in dark pencil, over and over.

"Wow," I said. "I didn't know you could draw like that."

She flipped the pad closed. "My dad shows me tricks sometimes. There are a lot of tricks to drawing. I can show you."

But I knew I could never draw like that, for the same reason I couldn't do Jimmy's V-cut or get my Main Street diagrams to look good.

"Hey," I said, "maybe your *dad* left you the rose."

"Maybe." She frowned, and I felt a little piece of myself light up. "He says he didn't, though."

"But it would explain how the person got upstairs, why the doorman didn't buzz you." I could feel my lips making a smile. "Your dad is so nice. It has to be him."

I was miserable, sitting on the edge of her bed in that puddle of meanness. But I couldn't help it. I didn't want Annemarie's rose to be from Colin. Maybe I couldn't stand for her to have so many people, and to be able to draw and cut bread on top of that. Maybe I wanted Colin for myself.

Annemarie's dad stuck his head through the doorway. "Anybody need a refill?"

"No thanks," I said, even though my glass was empty and my back teeth were packed with chewed nuts. "I have to go."

"Stay for five more minutes," he said. "I put your coat in the dryer."

So I had to sit there, thirsty, and then I had to put on my dry, warm, but still-dirty coat and take the elevator down to Annemarie's lobby, where the lamps glowed yellow and the doorman remembered my name. It had stopped raining.

It was too cold for the boys to hang around in front of the garage. There was hardly anyone out on the street at all.

The light in Belle's window looked friendly in the late-afternoon gloom, and I thought of going in. I had been telling Belle the story of my book, a little bit here and a little bit there. I'd told her how Meg helped her father escape, and I'd described the first battle with IT, which is this giant, evil brain that wants to control everyone. I knew Belle would give me some vitamin Cs and maybe a paper cup of hot chocolate, but it was getting late and I didn't want to have to walk down our block in the complete dark, so I decided to keep going.

At first I thought the laughing man wasn't on the corner, but then I saw him sitting on the wet curb, leaning against the mailbox and just watching me walk toward him. For one second there was something familiar about him, and I noticed for the first time how old he looked. I thought about what Louisa had said, about how old people can't get enough heat. Maybe I felt sorry for him. Maybe he reminded me of Mr.

Nunzi from upstairs. Or maybe I wanted to do something good, to make up for being kind of a jerk to Annemarie, even if she didn't really know it. Anyway, I spoke to him.

"Hey," I said, opening my bag. "You want a sandwich?" I still had the cheese sandwich I hadn't eaten at lunch. I held it out. "It's cheese and tomato."

"Is it on a hard roll?" He sounded tired. "I can't eat hard bread. Bad teeth."

"It isn't hard," I said. It was one of my best V-cuts ever, probably a little soggy now with the juice from the tomato soaking into the bread all afternoon.

He reached up with one hand, and I put the sandwich in it.

"What was the burn scale today?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said, pretending I knew what he was talking about. "I didn't have a chance to, um, check."

"Rain is no protection," he said, looking at the sandwich in his hand. "They should have had the dome up."

"Maybe tomorrow," I said.

He looked up at me, and suddenly he seemed familiar again. It was something about the way his eyes took me in. He said, "I'm an old man, and she's gone now. So don't worry, okay?"

"I won't."

He nodded. "Smart kid."

Things That Get Stuck

"Guess what?" I said to Mom when she got home. "The laughing man isn't completely crazy. He's kind of a CSP."

"CSP?"

"Crazy-shaped person."

"Don't say 'crazy-shaped person.' And what are you talking about?"

"I gave him a sandwich today. He was sort of normal about it. Almost."

"You gave him a sandwich?"

"It was a leftover. From Jimmy's."

"Mira, why in the world would you give the laughing man a sandwich?"

"What's wrong with that? I thought you would like it!"

"You thought I would like the fact that you've struck up a relationship with a mentally ill person?"

"What relationship? I just gave him a sandwich!"

"We've talked about this, Miranda. I thought you knew how to handle yourself. It's the only reason I let you walk around alone!"

"I just gave a sandwich to a homeless guy! You're the one who works for criminals and hangs around with pregnant jailbirds."

"Not everyone accused of a crime is a criminal, you know. And besides, I'm not twelve."

I pointed at her sweatshirt, which had a rainbow on it. "Well, you *dress* like you're twelve!" I could feel the tears starting, so I grabbed two bags of the chips Louisa had brought over, went to my room, and slammed the door.

A few minutes later, she knocked and came in. "I'm sorry. You did a nice thing. I shouldn't have blown up at you like that."

"Why *did* you, then?"

She sat down on the bed next to me. "I don't know. I guess it made me nuts, thinking you were putting yourself in danger. I like to tell myself that you're always safe, but there's no such thing, really, is there? I do trust you, Mira. I want you to know that. I just—I don't want to make any more mistakes. I don't think I can bear to make one more single mistake."

"What are you talking about? What mistakes?"

She laughed. "Are you kidding? Where should I start? I've made about a million mistakes. Luckily, you outweigh almost all of them."

"Almost all of them? Like how many?"

She smiled. "I don't know. Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand?"

"So that just leaves—what? A thousand to go?"

"Richard wants to move in," she said flatly. "He wants us to get married."

And my brain said, "He *does*?" Then I got this feeling of . . . lightness. I was happy. "That's great," I told Mom.

"You think so?" She smiled for a second, and then her mouth dropped. "I don't know. I just can't . . . I can't figure out if it's the right thing."

"Don't you love him?"

"Of course I do! I don't know if it's the right thing for you, I mean."

"Is that why you won't give him a key? Because of me?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I just feel stuck, like I'm afraid to take any steps, in case they're the wrong ones. I need a little more time to think." She stood up. "The water's probably boiling by now. Spaghetti in ten minutes."

Spaghetti again. We were kind of stuck, I realized. In a lot of ways.

Tied-Up Things

"You two have certainly gotten close," Mom said the following weekend while she helped me tug the roll-away cot from the overstuffed hall closet. "That's nice, right?"

Annemarie was sleeping over for the first time.

"Don't you ever vacuum?" I said. "There's dust bunnies behind all the doors."

"Give me a break, Mira," she said sharply.

"I mean it—I saw a roach in the bathroom this morning. This place looks gross."

Mom glared at me. A whole angry conversation seemed to pass over her face. Then she said, "You know what? Do this yourself," and walked away.

I pulled the cot into my room and lined it up next to my bed the way Sal and I always had. Then I wondered whether that was the way other girls did it. Was the cot supposed to be against the far wall? Should I make an L-shape with my bed, so that just our heads were together? I decided on the L-shape, stood back, adjusted the angle, and then went to get the sheets out of the bathroom closet.

Starting when we were really little, Sal and I used to beg to have sleepovers on the weekends, and lots of nights I fell asleep happy with Sal next to me on the roll-away.

But he was never there in the morning. I would wake up and see the empty cot with its tumbled-up striped sheets, and Mom would tell me what had happened—he'd woken up with a stomachache, or a headache, or a bad dream, and wanted to go home.

She'd hand me a tissue and say, "I don't know why we keep doing this. Sal cries in the middle of the night and then you cry in the morning."

A couple of weeks later, we would try again. And I always believed that *this* would be the time Sal would still be there in the morning. Eventually we stopped trying, and then those striped blue sheets made me sad to look at.

But they were the only ones we had that fit the cot. I tucked them in and went to Mom's room to take one of her pillows. She was still being angry in the living room. I fluffed the pillow, placed it carefully on the cot, and stood back. It looked okay.

I was still standing there when the buzzer rang, and I got this clear mental picture of Annemarie and her dad in our lobby with the cigarette smell and the ugly ceiling light full of dead bugs. It was like a vision, almost.

I went to the intercom and pushed the Talk button.
"Who is it?"

Her dad's voice: "It's Annemarie and her unshaven father!"

I buzzed long and hard in a way that was supposed to say "you are extra welcome to be here." Also, the lobby door is so heavy I wanted to give them time to get it open.

Mom came and stood next to me by the front door, saying nothing and running her fingers through her hair. She was wearing jeans and had changed her T-shirt for a black turtleneck sweater.

It was at that moment, standing next to her, that I figured out the truth. The truth was that Mom saw it too: the peeling paint, the cigarette butts on the stairs, everything. It soaked into me like water into sand, fast and heavy-making.

But I still couldn't apologize for what I'd said. I wanted to, but I couldn't. I couldn't even smile at her.

"Welcome!" Mom sang to Annemarie's dad. "I'm so glad Annemarie can spend the night with us."

Annemarie's dad had a cardboard box full of stuff, little containers and plastic bags, which he offered to Mom. "I'm sure Miranda's mentioned that Annemarie eats a special diet," he started.

"Oh!" Mom looked at me. "Actually . . ."

"Never fear!" He pushed the box at her again. "I've brought all sorts of appropriate goodies. Feel free to sample them yourself. They're not bad, if I do say so myself!"

Mom smiled and took the box. "That's wonderful. Thanks. Had I known . . ."

“Never fear!” Annemarie’s dad said again. I saw that the things inside were tied up with purple and green curly ribbon, like Christmas presents.

Annemarie and I played some records in my room, and Mom brought in a special platter with Annemarie’s snacks on it, and a bowl of chips for me, and then we watched TV in the living room for a while before bed. We were watching *Love Boat* when we heard something hit the kitchen floor, followed by a bunch of cursing from Mom.

A minute later she popped her head in and looked at Annemarie. “Sorry. You didn’t hear that, okay? I dropped some frozen grape juice on my foot.”

Annemarie smiled a wide smile. “No problem.”

“Your mom is so cool,” she said later, when we were in our beds and her face was resting on Mom’s pillow. “I like her a lot. She’s like a real person, you know? And she treats you like a real person too. My dad still acts like I’m a baby.”

“I guess.”

But who wants to be treated like a real person? I thought. I wanted to be treated like Annemarie and have all my snacks tied up with ribbon.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, Annemarie was still there. I felt this big rush of relief, like I’d been worrying all night that she would disappear. Maybe I had been, without realizing it.

"Thank God you're awake!" she said, her head propped up on one arm. "I've been poking you for twenty minutes. You sleep like the dead."

"What time is it?" I asked, throwing off my blanket.

"Time to eat," she said. "I'm starved."

"Can you eat cereal?" I asked. "All I know how to make is cereal and toast."

"Nope," she said. "Can't eat either one. Got any eggs?"

We went to the kitchen to check.

"Good morning!" Mom was standing in front of the stove, making bacon. "Annemarie, I called your dad last night, and he told me that you have a thing for bacon omelets."

"Yum!" Annemarie said. "That smells great. No wonder I'm so hungry."

I was staring. Mom had serious bed head and her eyes were puffy with sleep. But she was up at seven-thirty in the morning, making us bacon omelets. I wanted to hug her. But didn't.

Things That Turn Pink

It snowed a little on the second-to-last day before Christmas vacation. Snow always puts me in a good mood. Mr. Tompkin let us skip the math workbooks and spend the whole morning on our Main Street projects. Annemarie helped me start my swings. So far, the perfect day.

By the time we walked to Jimmy's, the snow had stopped and the sidewalk was just slushy enough to make my sneakers uncomfortably wet. Mom had slept through the weather report, so I was the only one without boots.

Colin started to push open Jimmy's door, but Jimmy jumped out from behind the counter and leaned against the door so it slammed in our faces.

"Hey!" Colin smiled, thinking it was a joke, and shoved back. But I could see Jimmy's face better than Colin could. It wasn't a joke.

"Get out!" Jimmy called through the glass. "Don't come back here anymore! You're lucky I don't call the police!"

Annemarie put her hand on Colin's shoulder. "I think he's serious."

"What?" Colin saw our faces and then looked up at Jimmy through the door. "What's going on?" he yelled.

Jimmy had one foot up against the bottom of the door. He glared at us. Some people on the street looked over, but nobody stopped.

"Somebody stole my bank," he said finally, his voice sounding far away. "One of you."

Of course we told him, through the door, that we didn't, that we wouldn't. But there was no way he was letting us in.

We went to the pizza place and talked about who could have taken Jimmy's two-dollar bills. He ran the place alone, aside from the forty minutes a day that we were there. Maybe someone had run in while he was in the bathroom, we thought. He usually put his *Back in Five Minutes* sign in the window and locked the door, but not every time. Sometimes he just ran into the back for a minute and if someone came in, they waited. Someone could have taken the bank then. But who in the world would have known to take it in the first place? It was a faded plastic bank in the shape of a cartoon character. It didn't look remotely valuable.

"Let's write him a letter," Annemarie said. "Or no—we'll get him a card!" She used her spoon to scrape up the last of her lunch, which her dad

packed for her every day in a cleaned-out yogurt container. "Come on," she said, standing up. "It'll be my treat."

So we went into Gold's Stationery and bought Jimmy a greeting card. I wanted to get one that said *With Sympathy*, for Jimmy's lost bank, but Annemarie said we should pick something that was blank inside. She picked a card with roses on it, which I thought was kind of strange, considering it was for Jimmy and roses are supposed to symbolize love. She said the card looked sincere, but I guessed that she liked it because it reminded her of her mystery rose.

"What do you think?" she asked Colin. She held up the card in front of him.

Colin raised his shoulders and dropped them. "I guess."

Annemarie said nothing, but she looked like she'd been hoping for a more revealing answer. "Can you put this on my dad's account?" she asked the cashier.

"Sure thing, Annemarie. Hey, where's your pal Julia? Home sick today?"

Annemarie turned pink. "No, she's around."

The cashier smiled and handed Annemarie a spiral notebook with a beaten-up cover. Annemarie flipped it open and wrote her name and the date.

A charge account at Gold's. I thought of the fat smelly markers that cost two-fifty each, the leather diaries that locked with little keys, the battery-operated fans that you could wear on a string around your neck on hot days.

"Hey, Annemarie," Colin said. "Wanna buy me a pack of baseball cards?"

She turned pink again. "I can't. I mean, I'm not allowed. Sorry."

He shrugged and smiled. "No big deal."

Sometimes I wanted to squeeze Colin's cheeks until his teeth fell out.

After school, Annemarie and I went to her house. Her dad brought us some weird kind of thin ham rolled up so we could eat it with our fingers.

We wrote on Jimmy's card:

Dear Jimmy,

We did not take your Fred Flintstone bank. We don't know who could have taken it (maybe someone came in when you went to the bathroom?).

Can we come back to work?

Signed,

Your employees,

Annemarie, Miranda, and Colin

I put the card in my knapsack so that I could slip it under Jimmy's door the next morning on my way to school. Then we lay on Annemarie's rug and planned all the stuff we were going to do over Christmas vacation: Annemarie wanted to start teaching me how to

draw, even though I told her I was probably hopeless, and we were going to go to the movies, and her dad even said he would take us ice-skating in Central Park.

I tried not to wonder what Sal would be doing. I figured he'd be playing basketball right up until the first big snow.

Things That Fall Apart

The next morning on my way to school, I pushed our card under Jimmy's locked door. At lunchtime, Colin, Annemarie, and I walked up to Broadway together. Jimmy was helping a customer, but he saw us through the glass door, made a face, and shook his head no.

"I guess he means it," Colin said.

We stood there in front of the door for a minute, just in case. When the customer left with his sandwich, Jimmy glanced over at us again. Colin put his hands together under his chin like he was praying and made a puppy-dog face, which was a dumb joke but also pretty cute. Jimmy took a rag and started wiping down the counter, and then he raised one arm and waved us in without looking up.

"So we can come back to work?" Colin asked when we'd all crowded in the door.

Jimmy looked at us. "You're good kids," he said, "but you don't know what you're doing half the time."

"We didn't take the bank!" I started, and he waved at me to be quiet.

"I know. I been thinking about it. You can come back to work."

"Yay!" Annemarie started clapping. Colin ran around slapping everyone five, including Jimmy, who even smiled.

"But here's the thing," Jimmy said after Colin had taken a victory lap behind the counter and through the back room. "Your friend, little Swiss Miss. Don't let me find her in here again. Ever."

"Who?" Annemarie said.

"I think he means Julia," I said.

"You think Julia took the money?" Colin laughed. "Julia needs money like a fish needs a bicycle."

Jimmy shook his head. "Some things are in the blood. All the money in the world can't change a person's blood."

"What do you mean, 'blood'?" Annemarie had her hands on her hips. "What blood?"

Jimmy pointed his big finger right at me. "Like you call her, Swiss Miss: hot chocolate."

"Huh?" Colin looked at me and back to Jimmy. I was just getting it. Annemarie was way ahead of me.

"You . . . you pig," she said. "You racist pig." I had never seen Annemarie angry. She was scary and also obviously about to cry.

Jimmy shrugged. "It's your life. I'm not having that little thief back in here. You don't have to come back either."

"I won't!" Annemarie shouted, and she banged out the door.

"And that's not why I call her Swiss Miss!" I said.

Jimmy shrugged again, and I banged out after Annemarie. Colin followed me. We found her crying halfway down the block, walking fast.

She was spitting words: "That. Big. Fat. Jerk. That. Pig. I. Hate. Him."

Colin looked at me. "I don't even get what just happened!"

Annemarie whirled around to face us. "He thinks Julia did it because she's black."

"No way," Colin said. "He's crazy."

Annemarie turned on me then. "Is that your name for her? Swiss Miss?"

"I—no! I said it one time, but I didn't mean . . . I meant about how she's always talking about Switzerland, her watch and the chocolate, and—"

"She is?" Colin asked. "I never heard her talk about Switzerland."

"If anyone needs the money," Annemarie said to me coldly, "it's you, not Julia."

"Are you serious? I didn't take the stupid money!"

"Forget it," she said. "I want to be alone." And she stomped off toward school.

Colin raised his eyebrows after her and then showed me a rolled-up dollar. "Want to get a slice?"

So we went to the pizza place. But it wasn't fun. And walking back to school, it occurred to me that Colin might not like me at all. He might just like pizza.

"Tell me something," I said just before we got to

our classroom. "That day the bread count was short by two rolls. Did you take them?"

"Yeah," Colin said, starting to smile. "I thought it would be . . . Hey! I didn't steal Jimmy's bank, you know!" He looked at me through his bangs with his injured-puppy face.

"I know," I said quickly. "I know you wouldn't."

"The rolls were just for fun," he said. "But taking the bank would be, you know, *stealing*."

"Yeah."

I didn't get to talk to Annemarie all the rest of that afternoon. After silent reading period, she went to art and music, and I went to gym and science. And then some of the kindergartners came to our classroom to sing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

And then it was Christmas vacation.

Christmas Vacation

For three days in a row, the sky was like a dingy white sheet. I thought about calling Annemarie but didn't. I thought about calling Colin but didn't. I was right about Sal—he was playing basketball every day, and a couple of times there were the voices of other boys, kids from school. On the third day, I opened our living room window very quietly and watched them running up and down the alley in their knit hats with steam blowing out of their mouths.

Then I sat on the couch and closed my eyes. I pictured the world. I pictured the world millions of years ago, with crazy clouds of gas everywhere, and volcanoes, and the continents bumping into each other and then drifting apart. Okay. Now life begins. It starts in the water, with tiny things, microscopic, and then some get bigger. And one day something crawls out of the water onto land. There are animals, then humans, looking almost all alike. There are tiny differences in color, the shape of the face, the tone of the skin. But basically they are the same. They create shelters, grow food, experiment. They talk; they write things down.

Now fast-forward. The earth is still making loops around the sun. There are humans all over the place, driving in cars and flying in airplanes. And then one day one human tells another human that he doesn't want to walk to school with her anymore.

"Does it really matter?" I asked myself.

It did.

I tried again. I pictured the world, all pretty blue-green and floating out in space, creatures and forests and deserts and cities. I brought North America into focus, the United States, the East Coast, New York City. Kids are walking down the street toward school. One kid has green suede boots. One has a charge account at Gold's. One has keys in her pocket.

"Does it really matter?" I asked myself.

It did.

I got up, turned on the television, and tried to think about nothing for a change.

The Second Proof

Mom didn't have to work on Christmas Eve day. We got a tree and strung popcorn for it, and she had some friends from work over. Richard made some eggnog from a German recipe his grandmother gave him, and they all ended up singing a lot while I wrapped presents in my room. I had bought Mom a pair of earrings, a bottle of purple nail polish with glitter in it, and some striped tights, even though I thought, and I still think, that striped tights look dumb. I got Richard an erasable pen from Gold's.

On Christmas morning, we opened presents first thing after Mom made coffee, like always. I got some good stuff: a beaded bracelet, a portable radio, a fancy journal to write in with clouds on the cover, a sweater, and a tin of these really crispy ginger cookies I love from a bakery near Mom and Richard's office.

We were just about to move on to pancakes when Richard handed me a hard, rectangular package that had to be a book.

"Let me guess," I said. "A book?" I wondered if it would be the kind with a spunky girl on the cover.

"Very funny. Open it."

It was a book. Actually, it was *my* book. But this was a hardcover one, with a different picture on the front. I read the title out loud: "*A Wrinkle in Time*." And then I smiled at Richard.

"It's a first edition," Richard said.

"Richard!" Mom burst out. "You shouldn't have." This made me guess that first editions are expensive.

"Read what's inside," he said. "I had the author sign it for you."

I opened the front cover. The writing was big and swoopy, beautiful. Nothing like yours.

Miranda,
Tesser well.
Madeleine L'Engle

Christmas Day: *Tesser well*. Your second proof.

It wasn't a game, I realized. Holding that book in my hands, I finally believed that whoever wrote me those notes actually knew about things before they happened. Somehow.

As soon as Richard and Mom went to make the pancakes, I ran to my room and took all your notes out of the box under my bed.

I am coming to save your friend's life, and my own.

Coming from where? I asked myself. Coming from *when*? I was beginning to believe that someone I cared

about was in real danger, but I still didn't know who it was, and I still didn't know how to help.

I looked at the second note: *I know you have shared my first note. I ask you not to share the others. Please. I do not ask this for myself.*

That was the worst part: I was alone.

Things in an Elevator

New Year's Day was weirdly warm and sunny. Sal's basketball was going strong by about nine in the morning. I sneaked a look down into the alley and saw him running back and forth in just a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. He was wearing the watch Louisa had given him for Christmas. She'd come up to show it to us beforehand. It was kind of old-fashioned, with Roman numerals and a leather band, and I hadn't been sure Sal would like it. But it looked like he did.

Mom was sleeping late. I wrote her a note: *I went out. I'll get you a bagel.*

The laughing man wasn't on the corner—maybe he didn't work holidays. Belle's was closed. Everything felt kind of peaceful and sad and deserted.

My feet carried me to school, which was closed, of course. The yard gate was open, and I went in and sat on the jungle gym for a few minutes, letting myself feel how strange it was to be there alone. I was sort of deliberately trying to weird myself out, I think, to get my energy up. To call Annemarie.

Ten days of silence had grown into a question that my brain shouted inside my head: "Is Annemarie even your friend anymore?" There was a pay phone on the corner. I had a dime in my coat.

As I dialed, I noticed someone leaning over the garbage can across the street. When he pulled himself upright I saw it was the laughing man. He stood there with his hands on his hips looking down at the garbage. I quickly turned my back to him, worried that he might recognize me and come over.

The receiver of the pay phone was cold against my ear. Only after it started ringing did it occur to me that if my mother was sleeping, Annemarie's parents might be sleeping too.

"Yello!" Annemarie's dad answered the phone. He sounded as if he'd been up for hours, just sitting by the phone and hoping, hoping, hoping it would ring.

"Hi . . . it's Miranda—"

"Hi, Miranda! Happy New Year!"

"Hi. I mean, Happy New Year to you too. I was wondering if Annemarie is there."

"She is! But she's in the shower. Are you by any chance outside, Miranda? It sounds like you might be at a pay phone."

"Oh. Yeah, I am, actually."

"In the neighborhood?"

"Um, yeah. I'm right by school."

"Well, come on over. I'm pouring you some orange juice right now!"

"Uh, okay."

"You can surprise Annemarie!"

Would I ever. I walked up the hill, where the sunlight seemed to touch everything like it was a hyper kid running all over a toy store—it bounced off the dirty metal lampposts, the shiny brass awning posts, even the sunglasses of a woman walking her dogs with a cup of coffee in one hand. Everything *shined*.

"Miss Miranda, Happy New Year!" Annemarie's doorman was standing just outside the building's polished doors. He smiled and waved me in.

On the way up, it hit me that it was truly strange to come over here without talking to Annemarie first. But at the exact same time I got nervous about that, I also got this other feeling, which I can only describe as love for Annemarie's elevator. The wood paneling, the cloth-covered stool in one corner, the little bell that went off every time we passed another floor. It was all so nice and cozy that I thought it would be wonderful to stay inside it forever, or at least to sit down on the little stool and close my eyes for a while. The whole thing was beyond weird. And then the elevator stopped on Annemarie's floor, and of course I got out, because that's what people do when the elevator gets to their floor.

Annemarie answered the door in her robe, with wet hair.

"Hi," I started. "I just called to say Happy New Year, and your dad said—"

She smiled. "Come on in."

It was the best morning. Annemarie showed me her Christmas presents. She got all kinds of cool art stuff, and we ended up spreading it all over the dining room table and drawing comic strips on this special comic-strip paper that came with stickers for the talking bubbles and the thinking bubbles. And then her mom showed us how to make origami frogs, and I was actually good at it. Meanwhile, her dad kept bringing in these plates of bacon and, for me, French toast strips I could pick up with my hands.

Then Mom called. I had completely forgotten about her. She was frantic, she was angry, and she was coming to get me. Even Annemarie's dad looked mad.

"Better get your coat on," he said when I hung up the phone, even though my mom couldn't possibly get to Annemarie's apartment that fast. So I waited by the door, overheating in my coat, and Annemarie waited with me.

"So, about what happened at Jimmy's . . .," I said. "You know, I really never meant . . . what he thought I meant. Not for one second."

She looked at the floor. "I totally believe you. And I don't know why I said that thing I said, about . . . money. It was stupid."

"It's okay." I was so grateful that she had something to apologize for that it didn't really occur to me to think about how it had actually made me feel. But I have thought about it since then. It didn't make me feel good.

* * *

We heard the elevator's ding and I opened Annemarie's front door before Mom had a chance to ring the bell. I thought I might be able to escape without Annemarie's parents talking to her.

No such luck. "Jerry?" Mom called out, and Annemarie's dad came rushing over saying, "Oh, you're here. I didn't hear the bell—"

"I'm so sorry about this," Mom said.

"No, I'm sorry. I had no idea—"

"It'll never happen again—"

"—always check with you first."

They cross-talked for a while, then hit one of those natural breaks in the conversation and both turned to look at me.

"Let's go," Mom said coldly, and I said, "Thanks for having me," and Annemarie's dad smiled at me, but only because he's the nicest person on earth.

The elevator opened right away, so there was no awkward waiting. On the way down, I knew I should apologize, but I just waited for Mom to jump all over me. Instead she burst into tears.

Which made me cry. So we both cried through the lobby, past the doorman, and out into the sunlight, where we magically stopped. She took a deep breath and looked at me. "I was scared," she said. "When you didn't come back, I got really scared. Don't ever do that again."

I nodded.

"Okay," she said. "What now?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe a movie?"

So that's what we did. We went to the movies, and ate candy and popcorn, and held hands for a few minutes on the way home.

The laughing man was at his regular post, doing his kicks into the street. When he saw us he yelled, "Smart kid!" But having Mom there made it different, like walking down the street with a blanket wrapped tight around me.

Richard was leaning up against our building, reading a newspaper.

"Hey!" he said. "We had a plan. Did you forget about me?"

He made a sad face, and Mom said, "Oh, no! How late am I?" and then she looked at me and we both started laughing.

Richard said, "Seriously. Would it kill you to give me a key?" And Mom shrugged and said it was only three-thirty and she didn't much feel like going upstairs anyway. So we turned around and went to eat at the diner, which was full of people just waking up and having breakfast.

Things You Realize

It was 1979—a new year, a new decade, almost, but school was still just school. Jay Stringer was still a genius, music assemblies were still boring, and Alice Evans was still too shy to admit when she had to go to the bathroom. The fourth grade's violin performance had only just started, and already Alice was squirming in her seat next to me. Jay was on my other side, somehow reading a book while listening to the world's worst music.

I located Sal's blond head a few rows ahead on my right. I stared at the back of it for a while, trying to see if I could make him turn around with the sheer power of my brain waves, but it was hard to concentrate with Alice doing a Mexican hat dance in her chair. I tried to make a face at Annemarie, who was on the other side of Alice, but Annemarie seemed fully absorbed by the music. She's extremely non-judgmental that way. So I went back to looking at Sal.

Directly in front of me was Julia. She was obviously as bored as I was—her head kept bobbing around. And then she turned and looked at Annemarie. I glanced

over and saw that Annemarie's eyes were still on the stage. Julia watched Annemarie. And I watched Julia watching Annemarie. And what I saw were eyes that were sixty-percent-cacao chocolate, a face that was café au lait, and an expression that was so familiar it made my whole body ring like a bell. Julia's look was my look. My looking at Sal.

And suddenly I knew three things:

First, it was Julia who had left the rose for Annemarie.

Second, Julia cared about Annemarie, but Annemarie didn't see it. Because I was standing in the way.

Third, Alice Evans was about to pee in her pants.

I turned to Alice. "Hey," I said, "I have to go to the bathroom. Be my partner?"

Sometimes you never feel meaner than the moment you stop being mean. It's like how turning on a light makes you realize how dark the room had gotten. And the way you usually act, the things you would have normally done, are like these ghosts that everyone can see but pretends not to. It was like that when I asked Alice Evans to be my bathroom partner. I wasn't one of the girls who tortured her on purpose, but I had never lifted a finger to help her before, or even spent one minute being nice to her.

She stopped squirming and looked at me suspiciously. "You have to go?" she said. "Really?"

"Yeah." And in that moment, I wanted nothing as much as I wanted Alice to feel safe with me. "Really."

I leaned forward in my seat and waved my arm up and down so that Mr. Tompkin turned to look at me from his seat at the end of the row, and I spoke over the laps of Jay Stringer and Colin, who were sitting between us.

"I have to go to the bathroom." These words felt like some kind of sacrifice, a precious offering to the universe. I didn't know why, but Julia's look had given me this total determination to get Alice Evans to the bathroom before she wet herself.

"Now?" Mr. Tompkin whispered.

"Please!"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine."

Mr. Tompkin tilted his knees to one side to let us pass, and Jay Stringer and Colin put their heads together and then Jay laughed. My mind processed that—if Jay was the one who'd laughed, then Colin was the one who'd made the joke. A joke about me, maybe. I grabbed Alice's hand and pulled her after me. And then we were running up the aisle.

Things You Beg For

As soon as Alice went into the bathroom, I ran down the hall toward the office. There were so many things I wanted to do but couldn't, like hug my mom, or be less jealous of Annemarie, and I didn't want this to become one of them. But I had to work fast.

"Miranda?" Wheelie looked up at me doubtfully. "Aren't you supposed to be in assembly?"

"Yes, I am in assembly—I mean, I was, and I'm going right back. Alice is in the bathroom. Can I have a piece of paper?"

"No, ma'am! I don't have paper to be just giving away."

"Please—just a little piece. A corner of a piece!" If I didn't do this now, I never would.

Wheelie sighed. Then, still in her chair, she kicked her way over to the next desk, where there was one of those pink message pads. She ripped off the top sheet, folded it, folded it again, and then carefully ripped the paper along the first fold, and then along the second fold. "Hurry," my brain said. "Hurry."

"Here." She held out a quarter of a pink message slip and looked at me with a face that said "I hope you won't be coming around here looking for another handout anytime soon."

I picked up a pen from the counter and scribbled on the little pink square.

"I thought you left me." Alice was standing in front of the bathroom looking all wounded.

"Me?" I said. "No way."

She smiled. People seemed to like the new me.

We squeezed back into our row past Colin and Jay Stringer, who whispered and laughed again. Annemarie leaned forward and gave me a where-were-you shrug. I mouthed "Bathroom," and she nodded and settled back again.

I folded my pink square a couple of times. Then I leaned forward and dropped the note into Julia's lap. I hadn't had much time—it was just the one word: *TRUCE*.

And underneath I'd written my phone number.

Things That Turn Upside Down

That afternoon, Sal brought Colin home after school. I saw them up ahead of me, taking turns on Colin's skateboard. One would ride, and the other would bounce Sal's basketball—they were circling each other and laughing and racing around and I wanted to be part of it so much that my heart almost broke watching. I decided to stop off at Belle's.

Belle picked up the economy jug of chewable vitamin C she kept behind the register and shook it at me. I nodded, and she tipped four of them into my hand.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Not much."

"Got some time for the story?"

"Sure. Where were we?"

"Aunt Beast."

"Right. Aunt Beast. So Aunt Beast's planet is perfect—it smells great and the food is wonderful and everything is soft and comfortable. But Meg can't stay

there. She has to go back and save her little brother. They left him behind, with IT, remember?"

Belle nodded. "She has to go back by herself?"

"Yes. She's the only one who can do it, because she's closer to her brother than anyone. It has to be her."

Belle nodded.

"So she goes back there, to Camazotz, and her brother is totally under ITs control, and he's saying all these awful things to her. And IT is trying to suck her in too, to take over her brain. She's trying to resist, but it's hard. And then, at the last second, she figures out that there's only one thing that can defeat IT: love. IT doesn't understand love."

"Ooh," Belle said. "That's deep."

"So Meg stands there and thinks about how much she loves her brother—her *real* brother, not the IT-brother who is standing there with his mouth hanging open and his eyes twirling. She starts yelling over and over that she loves him, and poof, he becomes himself again. That's how she saves him. It turns out to be really simple."

Belle surprised me. "Well, it's simple to love someone," she said. "But it's hard to know when you need to say it out loud."

For some reason that made me want to cry. "Anyway," I said. "Then they're suddenly back home. They land in the vegetable garden outside their house, in the broccoli. That's the end."

Of course I couldn't help thinking of what Marcus had said, about how if they'd gotten home five minutes

before they left, they would have seen themselves get back home before they even knew they were going. But it was better not to drag Belle into all that.

"What's the name of this writer again?"

I spelled it out for her.

Belle had to ring up a few kids buying their after-school junk food, so I wandered around the store. I was thinking I would swipe a few grapes, but they looked old and soft. I took a bottle of chocolate milk out of the refrigerator, checked the date on it, and brought it up to the register with a five-dollar bill I had taken from Mom's coat pocket that morning.

"Weirdest thing," Belle said, taking my five. "You see that guy out there?" She pointed through her front window and across the street to where the laughing man was pacing back and forth on my corner, doing his kicks.

"Yeah."

"Well, check this out." She lifted the plastic tray out of the register drawer, and I looked in. It was full of two-dollar bills. Wavy, bent-looking two-dollar bills.

"A couple weeks ago, that guy out there suddenly starts coming in every day to get a butter-on-white and a banana, and he always pays with these two-dollar bills."

I was staring into the drawer.

"You want a couple for your change?" Belle asked.

I nodded, and she handed them to me. "Sorry," she said, smoothing them out, "they're crumpled. He gives

them to me all folded up into triangles, if you can believe it. The first time, I didn't even think it was real money. I started telling the guy to get lost!"

My brain was doing that thing where it yells at me. It was yelling, "The *laughing man* stole Jimmy's Fred Flintstone bank? The *laughing man*?"

"The guy is looney," Belle said thoughtfully, "but also generally polite. Polite is always worth something."

When I walked by him a minute later, the laughing man was shaking his fist at the sky and kicking his legs out into the traffic rushing up Amsterdam Avenue. A few cars honked at him. When he saw me, he pointed and yelled, "Smart kid! Smart kid!"

I popped my last two vitamin Cs and imagined the wrapped-in-a-blanket feeling I'd had when Mom was with me. Then I calmly walked by the laughing man, thinking, Yeah, really polite.

Colin and Sal were in the lobby, making a total racket with the skateboard and the basketball so that any second Mrs. Bindocker would probably come charging out of her apartment, yelling that they were scaring her cat.

"Hey!" Colin said when he saw me. "I *thought* you lived in this building. Want to skate a little?" He picked up his skateboard and held it out to me.

I glanced at Sal, who was concentrating on his basketball like the whole concept of bouncing had just been invented and was really very amazing and

deserving of attention. He had developed a way of waving at me without making eye contact—it was kind of like a no-look pass.

“No thanks,” I said, “I have to go.”

But Colin is Colin. If he can read a vibe, he never lets on. “Can I see your place?” he said. “We’re shooting baskets in the back—have you been back there? It’s cool. Want to come hang out?”

I told Colin that my mother was sick upstairs, and that I was just rushing home from the store.

“You got her chocolate milk?” he asked, pointing at the bottle in my hand.

“Yeah.” I headed for the stairs. “She loves it.” And I sprinted up to the second floor before he could say anything else.

When I unlocked our door, the apartment felt like a warm hug—the refrigerator was humming, the light was streaming through the living room windows, and the voice in my head said “Safe” and then got quiet. I went to the kitchen, opened my chocolate milk, and took the last bag of Lay’s. Those pregnant jailbirds were out of luck.

Then the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Have I reached the Sinclair residence? May I please speak with Miranda?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hi, Julia,” I said. “It’s me.”

That first time, we only talked for five minutes. Julia said her mom had a recipe for a flourless cake we could make for Annemarie’s birthday. Without knowing

whether I really wanted to, I agreed to go over and make a practice cake with her after school the next day.

It was dark outside when there was a tap at the door. I sat up on the couch. A tap on the door was a strange thing. Everyone rings our doorbell, except for Louisa, who always knocks her regular knock. I was afraid—your notes had done that to me.

Another tap.

“Hello?” I called.

Silence. I got up and looked through the peephole.

Colin stood there, holding his skateboard in front of him like a shield, looking not exactly like himself.

I opened the door. “What’s wrong?”

He took two steps forward and kind of hovered right in front of me for a second, and then he kissed me. And then he stopped and waited. And then I kissed him back. He smiled and ran down the stairs.

There are days when everything changes, and this was one of those days.

Things That Are Sweet

Julia's mother had a whole shelf full of books about cooking: *No-Fat Cooking*, *Cooking Extra-Extra-Light*, *Skinny Cooking*.

"My mom is *always* on a diet," Julia said, pulling a book from the shelf. "I think she bought this one by mistake. It actually has the word 'butter' in it." She laughed and held out the giant bag of Fritos she had bought on the way home.

I shook my head. I'd eaten too many already. "Should we start making the cake?"

I had to call Mom at work three times to ask her questions like how many tablespoons are there in a stick of butter, and is it okay to use a potato peeler to skin an apple. The third time I called, she said, "Hold on, Mira. Are you planning to use the oven? Is there an adult in the house?"

When I said I thought Julia's mother was home, though technically I had not actually seen her, Mom said, "But is she watching you? Where is she?"

"Where's your mother?" I whispered to Julia.

"She's meditating," Julia said.

"Here?"

"Yes—in the . . . closet. And she absolutely cannot be disturbed."

"Um—did you just say your mom's in the closet?"

Julia looked down at the French pot holder in her hand. "It's a walk-in closet," she said quietly.

Mom said we couldn't light the oven until Julia's mother came out to supervise us, so we put our clumped-together cake batter in the fridge and went to Julia's room to watch television.

Julia's room was like a ruffled version of Annemarie's—ruffled curtains, ruffled bedspread, lots of ruffled pillows. And books all over the floor, some stacked in piles, some worn-looking, some brand-new, some splayed upside down, some sliding off the pink bedside table next to the lamp with the orange fabric shade.

I tried to think of something to say about all the ruffles. "Nice lamp," I said.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at the lamp. "Really? Because I think it's kind of ugly. My mom picked it." She waved one arm across the room. "She picked out all this stuff. And she won't let me put up my outer-space posters. I had to hang them in my bathroom!" She jerked a thumb toward a door. Her own *bathroom*.

Something very familiar caught my eye. It was on the bedside table, under the ugly lamp. It was my *book*—or maybe it was my book's twin sister, just as old and beat-up-looking as mine, but with different

creases and one corner ripped off the cover. I went over and picked it up.

"Yeah," she said. "I notice you carry yours around. I leave mine at home."

"I got a first edition for Christmas. That means it's one of the original—"

"You *did*? You are so lucky," she said. "All I ever get is clothes. And jewelry."

I stared at her. "I thought you liked all that stuff," I said.

"Yeah, actually, I do." She smiled. "But I like other stuff too." That was when I noticed her *Mysteries of Science* poster leaning up against a wall. Hers was called "Is There Intelligent Life in Outer Space?" Her bubble letters were a lot better than mine.

She flopped down on her shaggy pink wall-to-wall carpeting, glanced at her digital clock, and reached out automatically to turn on the TV. And I realized that we probably spent our afternoons the same exact way. Except I can at least get my mother on the phone. Julia's apartment is a lot nicer than ours, but I'm pretty sure there's no phone in the closet.

I stretched out on the rug and rested my head on my arm. Julia looked me up and down. "Hey, you know what color your hair is?" she asked.

"My hair?" I touched it and made a face. "It's brown."

She looked at it thoughtfully. "No. When you see it in the light, it's really more of a caramel."

Caramel.

The Last Note

I'm up to the part about what happened on the corner. If I ever do write your letter, I'll tell this part very carefully.

1. I was walking home alone after school, thinking about what to get Annemarie for her birthday.
2. It was cold but not too cold—the boys were standing outside the garage making noise, as usual. They were also throwing potato chips at each other.
3. Sal's class must have been dismissed a few minutes before mine—he was walking a little ahead of me. I did not run to catch up.
4. I watched him pass the boys outside the garage; they said some stuff to him like they sometimes do. I saw a couple of potato chips hit him on the back.
5. Sal seemed to lose it. He turned and screamed "Shut up!" He was wearing his dark blue knit cap pulled down over his forehead again.
6. The boys just laughed. My heart started going

- very fast, but I wasn't really worried they would hit Sal because it is officially beneath them to hit smaller kids. Torment, yes. Hit, no.
7. One of them reached out and pushed Sal in the chest—not too hard, but Sal stumbled back a few steps. He yelled, “Jerks!” and the boys all cracked up, but no one else touched him.
 8. Sal pointed himself toward home and started walking again.
 9. Marcus came walking out through the dented metal door next to the garage.
 10. Sal saw Marcus and broke into a run.
 11. Marcus yelled, “Hold up!” and started running after Sal.
 12. I saw the laughing man, across the street on the corner. He was in his nutcracker position, facing us.
 13. Marcus was catching up to Sal, yelling, “Hold up! Wait!”
 14. This is where things got weird: I saw something next to the laughing man, like an old movie that flickered for just a few seconds and then went out. It was between two parked cars, and it looked like a man holding his head in his hands. He was naked. And then he was gone.
 15. Sal kept running. Marcus kept running. I started running.
 16. “Hey! Hey—kid!” Marcus yelled. Naturally he had forgotten Sal's name.

17. Sal took one look over his shoulder and started moving faster. He was almost to the corner. Traffic was flying by on Amsterdam Avenue.
18. "Sal!" I screamed. "Stop!" But he didn't stop.
19. "Wait!" Marcus yelled. "I want to—" Then he finally seemed to figure out that Sal was running away from *him*. He slowed down. "Hey, look out!"
20. Sal was in the street, still running and looking back over his shoulder.
21. I caught up to Marcus. I think we both saw the truck at the same time. It was a big truck, moving fast.
22. "Stop!" Marcus shrieked at Sal. He was pointing at the truck with both hands. "Watch out! Watch out!"
23. I have no idea what the truck driver was doing—checking his delivery list, maybe, or changing the radio station—but he didn't see Sal in the middle of the street, and he didn't slow down.
24. I started screaming and covered my ears. I always cover my ears when I don't want something to happen, like if I drop a glass and don't want it to break. I wonder why I don't cover my eyes or my mouth. Or try to catch the glass.
25. I saw Sal's head start to turn, and I knew the exact moment he registered the truck. It was practically on top of him. Going forward meant getting hit. He was moving too fast to turn

- back. Stopping on a dime might have saved him, but there was no way he could do it.
26. My brain boomed inside my head: "Sal is going to die."
27. "SAL IS GOING TO DIE."
28. SAL
IS
GOING
TO
DIE.
29. Suddenly, the laughing man was in the street, his right leg flying out in a mighty kick.
30. The laughing man's foot hit Sal's body.
31. Sal flew backward and hit the ground, hard.
32. The truck hit the laughing man.
33. Marcus sat down on the ground and started crying like there was no tomorrow. Really sobbing his head off.
34. I ran over to where Sal was lying very still with his arm tucked underneath him in a way that was not right. "Sal!" I screamed. "Sal!" He looked dead.
35. The truck made a long screeching noise, and then the driver came running out and shoved me away from Sal.
36. Someone (I found out later it was Belle) led me past a heap of something awful in the street, saying, "Don't look don't look don't look." She walked me over to the curb and sort of propped me up next to the mailbox on

our corner, and then she ran back to where the truck driver was hunched over Sal, doing something to his body. There was a shoe lying upside down at my feet.

37. I found myself staring and staring at the shoe. It was a black shoe with a two-inch platform nailed to the bottom. It was Richard's shoe.
38. Everything started to spin. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the cold metal of the mailbox. When I opened my eyes, I was staring at four words scratched into the blue mailbox paint. They were stacked one on top of another:

Book

Bag

Pocket

Shoe

39. "Book," "Bag," "Pocket," "Shoe." I read the words over and over. And then my brain showed me some pictures. I saw the school-library book with your first note sticking out of it. I saw the tall paper bag full of bread that hid your second note. I saw your third note, pulled out of my coat pocket with last winter's dirty tissues. And then my brain pointed my eyes at the shoe lying upside down at my feet. The shoe that had been stolen from our apartment.

40. I reached down, picked it up, and slowly turned it over. Inside was a small square of stiff paper just like the first three:

This is the story I need you to tell. This
and everything that has led up to it.

Please deliver your letter by hand. You
know where to find me.

My apologies for the terse instructions.
The trip is a difficult one; I can carry nothing,
and a man can only hold so much paper in
his mouth.

41. I heard Sal cry out, and looked up. The truck driver was on his knees next to Sal, saying, "Thank God, thank God, thank God, it's a miracle."
42. On the other side of the street I saw Marcus, still hunched over on the curb and crying hard. I could see him shaking. Behind him stood the boys from the garage, so still and silent that they looked like a picture of themselves.
43. Sal was not dead. The laughing man saved his life.
44. You saved Sal's life.
45. You were the laughing man.
46. You were the heap of something awful.
47. You are dead.

Difficult Things

That night, Richard stayed with me while Mom kept Louisa company at the hospital. Sal had a broken arm and three broken ribs, and he had to spend the night for observation.

Richard ordered a pizza. "Do you feel like talking?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "Maybe later."

He nodded. "Just let me know."

After dinner, I closed my door and sat on my bed with your notes spread out in front of me. "Think," my brain said. "Think, think, *think*." I got out my ropes, tied some knots, and tried to start at the beginning.

The trip is a difficult one. I will not be myself when I reach you.

The trip is a difficult one, and I must ask my favors while my mind is sound.

And then there was the strangest line of all: *The trip is a difficult one; I can carry nothing, and a man can only hold so much paper in his mouth.*

I fingered the notes, so small and brittle. Had you carried them in your *mouth*?

The trip is a difficult one.

Difficult enough to scramble a person's mind and leave him raving on a street corner? What kind of a trip did that to someone? Who would deliberately *take* a trip like that?

My mind began a little chant: "And why? Why, why, *why*?"

To save Sal. That's why you stood on our corner day after day. That's why you were always doing those kicks into the street—you were *practicing*. It was all to save Sal. Because, somehow, you knew.

Time travel is possible, Marcus said. In theory.

I am coming to save your friend's life, and my own.

"Well," I said out loud to no one, "you saved Sal's life, but you failed miserably with goal number two."

Richard knocked on the door, and I jumped.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to scare you. I thought you might want to come out and have some grapes."

Richard had brought me grapes. We watched some TV and ate a giant bowl of the most perfect tart green grapes in the world. They were definitely not from Belle's.

It was nice, just sitting there watching TV together. My brain stopped asking me questions. I saw Richard glance over at me a couple of times, but he didn't ask me any questions either. And that was nice, too.

When I fell asleep on the couch, Richard turned the TV off and said I should go to bed. But once everything was quiet, I couldn't sleep. Your words were swimming in my head.

Please deliver your letter by hand. You know where to find me.

Louisa had told me that some of her old people died with nothing and no one. She said they were buried on an island somewhere north of Manhattan. I figured that was where you would be soon.

I was still worrying and feeling a little frozen when my bedroom door opened and Mom came over and sat on the edge of my bed.

"Sal is going to be fine," she whispered, putting one arm around me. "The tests are done. He'll probably be home in the morning."

I didn't say anything. I was afraid that if I spoke, I would tell her too much—I would tell her about the notes, Richard's shoes, the two-dollar bills, everything. And I thought that if I did tell her, somehow Sal might not be okay anymore. So instead I just held on to Mom's arm, and she stayed right there until I fell asleep.

Things That Heal

The next night after dinner, Mom and I went to visit Sal and Louisa downstairs. It was strange to be there, in a place I knew so well but hadn't seen in so long—like how it might feel to look at my own face in the mirror for the first time in months.

Sal was sitting up in bed with one arm in a cast. Mom gave him a careful hug, and then she and Louisa went to talk in the kitchen. Louisa had dragged a table over to the left side of Sal's bed so that he could reach it with his good arm, and there was a stack of sports magazines and stuff on it.

"Wow," I said, "are those Tootsie Pops? Your mom went all out."

He smiled, actually looking me in the eyes. "Yesterday at the hospital she brought me McDonald's," he said.

"McDonald's?" Louisa thought that McDonald's was a giant conspiracy against the health of all Americans. "Oh, my God. I mean, why aren't you *dead*?"

But that was a little too close to what had actually happened. He laughed, but I felt myself go red.

With his good hand, Sal shook the bag of Tootsie Pops out onto the table, found a purple one, and held it out to me. "Grape," he said.

"Aw, you remember."

But somehow that was also too close to the truth. I felt my head kind of buzz and was pretty sure I had gone red again.

"I remember everything," he said cheerfully. He seemed to be in a great mood. He also seemed to have forgotten that we weren't really friends anymore.

"You do?" I said, unwrapping my Tootsie Pop. "So do you remember why you don't like me anymore?" I was surprised to hear myself ask, but once I had, I really wanted to know the answer.

"I still like you! Of course I still like you. I just needed to—I don't know, take a break for a while. Ha! *Break.*" He gestured to his sling. "Get it?" He giggled.

"But why? *I* wasn't the one who hit you!"

He shook his head. "Hit me when? What are you talking about?"

"What do you *think* I'm talking about? The day Marcus hit you. The day you bled all over your Yankees jacket—the day you shut me out!"

"Wait—who's Marcus?"

I suddenly got how totally stupid I'd been, never telling Sal that Marcus was an okay kid. I thought of the day I'd seen Sal drop to the ground and pretend to tie his shoe. He probably worried about seeing Marcus on that block every single day. He probably woke up

in the morning thinking about it. And I could have done something to fix it, a long time ago.

"Marcus is the kid who hit you that day on the street. The kid you were running from yester—"

"Oh!" Sal cut me off. He looked at his feet, which were just a bump under the covers. "Yeah, that kid freaks me out. He has it in for me."

"He doesn't have it in for you," I said. "He really doesn't. I think he was trying to apologize yesterday."

He shrugged. "If you say so." He looked at me. "But that has nothing to do with—with you and me. Really."

"But the day Marcus hit you—that was the day that you stopped wanting to do stuff together. You stopped—"

He shook his head. "No. It was before that."

And, very quietly, my brain said, "Remember? Remember the times way back in September, when Sal didn't show up to walk home together after school? Remember how he said he didn't have money to go out to lunch when you knew he did? Remember the morning you waited for him in the lobby until you were absolutely, positively going to be late, and then you rang his doorbell, and it turned out he'd gone to school without you?"

And then I remembered something else. I remembered running across Broadway holding my big *Mysteries of Science* poster, and seeing Sal on the other side, and yelling for him to wait up. And he had. He'd

waited. And when I asked him why he wasn't at our regular spot after school, he'd just mumbled something and looked at his feet, and then we'd walked toward Amsterdam in total silence. Until Marcus hit him.

Sal had started home without me that day. And it wasn't the first time.

But here he was, today, looking right at me. And we still felt like us. "So when can we go back to normal?" I asked.

"That's the thing, Mira. It *wasn't* normal. I didn't have any other friends! Not real friends."

Neither did I! I wanted to say. And then I realized—that was his whole point. We'd only had each other. It had been that way forever.

He was still talking. "I mean, remember the second week of school, when you got sick? I spent that whole week alone. The whole week. Alone at lunch every day, alone after school...and don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes I want to hang out with boys." He yawned. "I'm on these pills," he said. "For my arm. They make me kind of sleepy."

"You could have just *told* me," I said. "You could have said all this stuff before. I thought we talked about everything."

"Not everything." He looked at me in a groggy way. "Anyway, I gave you hints. You never got them."

Mom and Louisa walked in. "I thought you might be getting tired," Louisa told Sal. "These painkillers!"

she said to Mom. "He takes one, talks his heart out for twenty minutes, and then falls asleep, like clock-work."

She gave me a tight hug as we were leaving and said, "I'm glad you two had a chance to talk." And I wondered if she'd saved the twenty minutes for me on purpose.

Things You Protect

Wheelie was running late. "I'm still working on the list," she said, pushing some candy across her desk at me. "Have a seat. I'll be done in two jigs."

That was fine with me. In the two days since the accident, I'd thought about your notes a thousand times and tried at least that many times to push away the memory of your body lying in the street. I wasn't sleeping much, and I was tired.

My first Bit-O-Honey was just softening in my mouth when two police officers walked into the office.

Wheelie looked up from her typewriter. "May I help you?"

"There a Marcus Heilbroner enrolled here?"

Her face stayed blank. "I believe there might be. But the principal isn't in right now, and—"

"That's okay. We just need a word with Marcus Heilbroner. Seems he likes to chase kids into the street, and we need to have a word with him about that. What room?"

She scratched her head. "I'm not—I'm not sure. I'll have to look him up."

That's when I got scared. Wheelie knew every kid in the school, and she knew what classrooms they were in without having to think about it. She was afraid, I realized. For Marcus.

I stared at the backs of the two officers and thought about the things Mom had told me about people who go to jail, about how some of them were never the same afterward. I couldn't let that happen to Marcus. He was barely regular to begin with. I thought of him shaking and crying on the curb after the accident, and how he'd tried to stop Sal from running in front of the truck, and how he'd been too clueless to realize Sal was running away from him in the first place.

"I need to use the phone," I said to Wheelie.

"This phone?" She put one heavy hand down on top of it. "I don't think so."

"Please!" I said.

"No, ma'am!" From behind her desk, she pulled out a plastic tub full of index cards and started to flip through them while the officers watched.

"Let's see," she said. "Hillerman, right? Any idea what grade he's in?"

They looked at each other. "Heilbroner," one of them said. "Don't you have an alphabetical list?"

"Of course!" she said. "But that's down here somewhere. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she started to roll her chair toward the file cabinets that stood along the back wall.

I left the office casually, as if I just had to go to the bathroom, and then I sprinted around the corner and

down the dead-end hallway. In my mind was a picture of the dentist's white wall phone.

The dentist was relaxing in his chair, looking very comfortable with a paper cup of coffee and the newspaper. "Hi, Miranda," he said, sitting up. "You have the patient list?"

"Can I use your phone?" I called to him. "It's an emergency!"

He looked surprised but said, "Sure, go ahead."

I called my mom at work.

"I need help," I said. "The police are at school and I think a kid is going to get arrested. A friend."

"But—all the lawyers are in court," she told me.

I started to cry. "Can you come, Mom? Right now?"

"Me?" she said. And then, "Yes. I'm coming."

By the time I hung up the phone, I had the dentist's full attention. "What's up?" he said.

"Marcus is in trouble," I said. "The police are here and they might arrest him and he didn't even do anything wrong! If my mom can get here I think she can help."

"Marcus is a good kid," he said firmly. "A good kid through and through." He calmly folded his newspaper and took a pen from his pocket. "So, Miranda, are you my runner this morning?"

I raced up the four flights to Marcus's classroom, the dentist's scrawled note in one hand, and burst in, yelling, "I need Marcus!" and waving the piece of paper in Mr. Anderson's face.

"Calm down! What's wrong with you?" Mr. Anderson stared at me, and I tried to stand still. He examined my note. "All right, Marcus, go ahead."

Marcus nodded and started rearranging the pile of books on his desk.

"Leave your books," I called to him. "The dentist says he needs you right *now*."

Out in the hall I said, "You need to hide. The police are here and I think they want to arrest you!" I started running toward the stairs.

Marcus called quietly after me, "It would probably be better if we walked."

He was right. Five seconds later, we strolled right past the police officers on their way up to Mr. Anderson's classroom. They didn't even glance at us.

The dentist locked the door behind us. Then he looked at me. "Your mom is a lawyer?"

"Sort of."

"Okay. We'll just sit tight until she gets here."

The police didn't come to the dentist's office right away—it must have taken them a while to find it. Nobody seemed to be helping them much.

They knocked, and the dentist called out, "Sorry, I have my hands full here. It'll be a minute."

I was wondering what we would do when a minute was up. The dentist just sat there reading his paper. Marcus looked at his palms. "I wish I'd brought my book," he said, turning to me accusingly.

"You're welcome!" I said. "I'm trying to save you, here."

"Does either one of you have a sense of what this is all about?" the dentist asked.

Marcus and I exchanged looks.

"I tried to stop him," Marcus said.

"I know. He was afraid of you."

He pressed his hands to his chest. "Of me?"

"You punched him! Remember?"

"I know!" Marcus put his head down on his two fists. "Oh, God," he mumbled, "and now that man is dead. That old man. He was afraid of me too. Remember how he ran away from me? But I never did anything to him! I swear!" His voice cracked and his shoulders started shaking.

"It wasn't your fault," I said quickly. "He—" But I didn't know what to say. Because it *was* kind of his fault. Marcus didn't mean for any of it to happen, but if he hadn't run after Sal, and Sal hadn't run into the street, wouldn't you still be alive?

The dentist was staring at us. "On second thought, it might be better not to talk," he said, nodding at the door.

Time crawled. The police waited, knocked, waited again, talked into their walkie-talkies, knocked again, disappeared, came back, knocked again, and then started calling out things like: "He better be in there when this door opens, doc."

And the dentist called his own stuff through the door, about anesthesia and paste-drying time, and only having two hands. It didn't make a lot of sense.

Marcus stared at the floor, which I'd just noticed was tiled with tiny white hexagons like the ones in our bathroom at home. My brain sorted the hexagons into the usual shapes and flowers. It was weirdly comforting.

Then, very quietly, Marcus said something. "I have an older brother. Anthony."

I looked over at him.

"I want you to know why I hit your friend that day—"

"Sal! His name is *Sal*. God, why don't you ever remember anyone's *name*?"

The dentist shushed us.

Marcus made his voice even lower. "The day before I hit Sal, my brother Anthony said something about another kid's girl. I think he meant it as a joke. But this guy got Anthony up against this car, and he was hitting him and hitting him. . . ."

I remembered. Sal and I had crossed the street to avoid that fight. Marcus's brother was the kid who had been trying to get off the hood of the car. Who kept getting knocked down. "I think I saw that," I said. "Was your brother wearing a hat?"

Marcus nodded. "Yeah. He always wears that hat."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I was leaning in our doorway, watching. Afterward, Anthony said to me, 'Did you even *think* about standing up? About helping me?' He said I was like no brother at all."

"Those kids are bigger than you," I said.

Marcus shook his head. "It wasn't that. I wasn't afraid. I just didn't see myself as . . . part of what was happening. Sometimes I'm thinking about stuff and I walk right past my own building. Those guys don't see me as one of them. Because I'm not one of them.

"Anthony told me, 'One day, you're gonna have to hit someone. And get hit yourself. Then you'll see. Maybe. Maybe you'll understand life a little better.' And I wanted to understand life better. To understand *people* better. So the next day, I walked over and hit Sal. And then I stood there like an idiot and waited for him to hit me back. But he just bent over and cried, and I didn't know what to do, so I walked away. And Anthony yelled: 'What the hell was that?' And later, at home, he said, 'What are you hitting short kids for? Don't you know nothing?' He said I was hopeless."

I was trying to think of what to say when Marcus suddenly looked at me with his eyes all wide. "Hey! You were the one holding the poster."

My mouth fell open. "You just figured that out?"

He nodded. "Interesting poster," he said. "I've always wondered about yawns. I read an article once—"

Then there was a fast clicking sound that I knew: Mom's heels on a hard floor. I shushed Marcus and pressed my ear to the closed door even though the dentist kept waving me back.

"I'm from the law firm of Able and Stone," I heard her say. "Can I help you gentlemen?"

"Only if you have the key to this door," one of the police officers growled.

She kept going. "I've spoken with the school secretary. I understand you want to talk to a student by the name of Marcus Heilbroner."

"Yeah."

"Mr. Heilbroner, as you certainly know, is a minor. We can use the principal's office for a few minutes so that you can brief me about whatever allegations have been made. But of course you can't speak with Mr. Heilbroner himself until his parents have been notified. Would you follow me, please?"

One of the police officers swore, but the other one said, "Might as well. We aren't getting anything done standing in this hallway." And they all walked away.

"Thank God." The dentist let out a long breath. Marcus stood up, but the dentist said, "Sit down. She hasn't gotten rid of them yet."

Another fifteen minutes went by while Marcus looked at the floor, the dentist paced, and I stared out the window. Finally we heard Mom coming back down the hall.

"They're gone," she called, "open up." I yanked the door open, and there she was with her hair pulled back, wearing a gray wool skirt and a matching blazer.

I flew at her and grabbed her around her tiny middle, almost knocking her down.

I felt her hand on my head. "Let's try to figure this mess out. Who wants to talk first?"

Things You Line Up

It turned out that Belle was the one who had reported Marcus to the police. She'd seen the whole thing from her store window and thought that Marcus had chased Sal into the street on purpose. So Mom was able to get things sorted out. She got a statement from Sal, who had to sign it with his left hand because of his cast, and one from me, and one from Belle, and by the following week, the police had dropped the whole thing and Mom had dressed like a grown-up for three days in a row.

"You know, you look darn good in a suit," Richard told her.

I figured she would give him some kind of lecture, but Mom took his hand and said, "Thanks. That means a lot coming from you, Mr. Perfect." She looked happy, and it seemed so obvious at that moment that they should get married. But she still hadn't even given him a key.

And then Mom hung up her suit, and I put all your notes in the box under my bed and didn't look at them anymore. Annemarie had her birthday party

with two cakes, an awful one that Julia and I made for her and a really good one her dad made.

Time passed. Annemarie and Julia helped me install my playground on Main Street, and Julia's UFO finally got approved by Jay Stringer. I became Alice Evans's regular bathroom partner—we worked out a secret signal so that she wouldn't have to do the Mexican hat dance anymore. Marcus and I waved hello to each other, and we sometimes talked a little, except when he didn't notice I was there, which was about half the time. In early March, we started rehearsing songs for graduation. I kissed Colin a few more times, and I suspected that Jay Stringer was working up the nerve to kiss Annemarie. I don't think anyone dared to kiss Julia.

Sal's cast came off and he started playing basketball in the alley again. A couple of times I waved at him from the window, and once he yelled up to say hi and ask if I wanted to check out his three-point shot, which he lined up for about five minutes and then missed. I clapped anyway, and he took a bow.

I tried to forget about the laughing man. I mean, I tried to forget about you. But it didn't work. There was something left over: the letter I was supposed to write.

This is the story I need you to tell.

Please deliver your letter by hand. You know where to find me.

Trying to forget really doesn't work. In fact, it's pretty much the same as remembering. But I tried to forget anyway, and to ignore the fact that I was remembering you all the time.

And then, three weeks ago, Mom's postcard came from *The \$20,000 Pyramid*.

April 27th: *Studio TV-15*. The last proof.

That's when I officially gave up the forgetting and started doing all this thinking. I have the story laid out in my mind now, as straight as it's ever going to be.

And now I'm wondering if I should just write the letter, even though you're dead and most likely buried on that island. I wonder if I should write it anyway, if maybe then I'll be able to stop thinking about you, once and for all.

The \$20,000 Pyramid

Richard, Louisa, and Sal are coming with us to ABC Studio TV-15 on West Fifty-eighth Street to see Mom try to win twenty thousand dollars.

"Miranda, can you get me my sweater with the little buttons?" Mom asks. She's nervous, and her voice sounds too high. "If it's chilly in there I won't be able to concentrate."

"Mom, it's seventy degrees out," I say.

"Exactly. They might have the air-conditioning on. I'm always too cold in air-conditioning."

I get the sweater and check myself out again in Mom's closet mirror. I have on new jeans and a long-sleeved shirt with flowers embroidered on the sleeves that I borrowed from Julia. Richard has even polished my shoes for me with his special shoe brush. I try to fluff my hair, but my brain says, "What in the world are you fluffing your hair for? You know your hair doesn't fluff!" and I stop.

Richard buzzes from the lobby. Mom rushes to the intercom and yells, "We'll be right down! And happy birthday!" We walk downstairs and stop at Sal and

Louisa's door, which flies open as if they've been standing right inside waiting for us.

"The big day!" Louisa says. "Big day, big day, big day!" She seems even more nervous than Mom.

I look at Sal, and he shrugs and says, "She's been like this all morning."

We are very quiet on the subway.

There are people in red blazers by the studio doors.

"Contestants to the left," one of them says. "Audience to the right." And suddenly I realize it's time to say goodbye to Mom. She's standing there looking terrified and holding on to her bag with her sweater and her extra clothes and her barrettes. I go over and hug her while Richard gives her a kiss and Louisa says "We love you" and Sal looks at the floor and says good luck.

"You're going to win," I say. "I know it."

"Don't get your hopes up," Mom says, and then we watch her disappear behind a door.

We walk into the studio, which is like a theater with all the \$20,000 *Pyramid* stuff up on the stage: Dick Clark's podium is there, and the word screens that swivel back and forth during the speed round, and two empty chairs facing each other in the Winner's Circle. Everything looks artificial and kind of gloomy in the dim light. I'm thinking that one good shove could probably knock the whole thing over.

There are a lot of people in the theater already, and we get seats about halfway back. They are red velvety

seats, the kind you have to fold down before you sit on them.

A guy with headphones comes out and talks to the audience about when to clap and when to be quiet. He points to these metal boxes attached to the ceiling that light up like exit signs, only they say *Applause* instead of *Exit*. He explains that the signs will blink on and off to help us remember when to clap and when to stop. We have to practice with him: Clap, stop. Clap, clap, stop. It's a little silly, but Louisa and Richard are taking it very seriously. Sal and I laugh and dare each other to clap at the wrong time.

The stage lights come on, and suddenly the whole set is glowing like July at the beach. *Much* more cheerful. Richard takes my hand. Dick Clark comes out and says hi to the audience and Louisa starts talking about how she has always liked Dick Clark, how he has always seemed like one of the nicest people on television, and how now that she's seen him, she thinks she likes him even more. Isn't it amazing, she asks, how he never seems to age? He looks just the same today as he did back in 1956. She says she might ask him for some autographs after the show for the old people at her nursing home, because she's sure they would get a big kick out of that. Louisa is talking even faster than Mrs. Bindocker at the monthly tenant meeting. And then suddenly she is quiet. I look at her and see that she's biting her lips.

Everything starts to happen very fast. There is music. Dick Clark makes a funny face like he's afraid he

might be late, and he hops over to his podium. The celebrities take the stage. I've never heard of either one of them. The next thing I know, Mom is coming out with her hair clamped back in barrettes, looking smaller than ever.

But she's wonderful. The speed round is a thing of beauty. Mom gets seven words out of seven every time, and wins the cash bonus. Her celebrity is not as dumb as a bag of hair. In fact, her celebrity is not remotely dumb.

The other contestant is good, but his celebrity speaks too slowly and says the word *bat* while giving clues for the word *batter*, an amateur's mistake. They lose that point and a couple of others. Before I know it, Dick Clark is leading Mom over to the Winner's Circle.

"This is it," I hear Richard whisper to himself. "Ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars," my brain says. "Ten thousand dollars."

Mom's celebrity looks determined. Mom looks scared. Dick Clark is smiling. He's the only one who looks relaxed. He's chatting with Mom for a minute, and I know Mom is trying to focus, to lift a corner of her veil so that she'll be able to see the big things. So she can see the thread.

Dick Clark is still talking, and I realize: we never practiced the chatting. I am suddenly afraid. I am hearing the ocean. How can Mom lift her veil and see

the magic thread with Dick Clark talking to her about her stupid job? I focus on Mom and try to help her concentrate. Louisa is getting nervous again, and she starts whispering about Dick Clark, "He doesn't age, I tell you. Dick Clark simply does not age. It's amazing." I'm chanting to myself, "Magic thread, magic thread," and I'm staring at Mom so hard that my eyes are almost aching.

Finally, Dick Clark is done chatting. "Here is your first subject," he says. "Go."

Then the strangest thing happens.

Magic Thread

Mom is jumping up and down, and I hear the sound of hundreds of people cheering and clapping, lifting me like a wave and carrying me. I am out of my seat, I am floating down the aisle, people are patting me on the back or reaching out to squeeze my arm, and then the stage is in front of me, I am going up some steps, and then light is everywhere, too bright, and it's hot.

Mom is still leaping around. She's hugging her celebrity, she's hugging Dick Clark. One of her barrettes is down by the side of her face, hanging on for dear life and banging against her cheek. She hugs me, and my head is pulled up and down as she jumps, so that I am forced to jump with her.

I feel happy. I smile and grab Mom's hands and jump up and down with her. I let go of her and raise my arms over my head and feel the audience roar louder.

I am not thinking of the wall-to-wall carpet, or the camera, or the trip to China.

I am jumping up and down because at the very moment Dick Clark said the word "Go," it was like an

invisible hand reached out and snatched away my veil. And for almost a minute, I understood everything. When that veil isn't hanging down right in front of a person's face, a minute is long enough to realize a lot of things.

I realized that when you took our key from the fire hose, when you left me the notes, when you stole Richard's shoes and Jimmy's Fred Flintstone bank, you had already read my letter. You had read it many times, even though I have not yet written it.

That's how you knew where the key was, even before you asked. That's how you knew everything. I will tell you, in my letter. The letter you asked me to write.

"But that's impossible!" my brain squawked. "You're saying the laughing man read a letter that you haven't even *written* yet! It makes no sense!"

Common sense is just a name for the way we're used to thinking.

Time travel is possible.

You came to save Sal. And finally—finally!—I understood.

Dick Clark never ages. I thought of what Marcus had said about going to the movies in my time machine, that if I didn't leave until I was sixty-two, the ticket guy wouldn't recognize me.

I might not even recognize myself.

Maybe Dick Clark never ages. But the rest of us will. I will. Sal will, thanks to you. And Marcus will, too.

Please deliver your letter by hand, your note said. You know where to find me.

I thought of the beat-up metal door next to the garage, and I thought, "Yes, I do." Because you are still here after all, to read my letter. Marcus is here. And when he reads the letter, he'll realize that he has seen himself arrive, before he left. That's what my letter is for.

And then, in who-knows-what year—the year of the burn scale, the year of the dome—Marcus will come back. You will come back. You will come back with a mouth full of paper. You won't be yourself when you reach me but you will get the job done. You will save Sal. You already have.

Marcus is the magic thread. You are the laughing man. You are Marcus. Marcus is the laughing man. Or he will be, when he's old.

"None of it makes sense!" my brain yelled.

"But all of it is true," I answered.

Like I said, it lasted just under a minute. It lasted fifty-five seconds, to be precise. Which is how long it took Mom to guess six categories and win ten thousand dollars.

And then Mom and I are on the stage together, jumping up and down until they make us get off.

Things That Open

We take the bus home because we think it'll be so much *fun* to take the bus home, knowing that we are rich now and can take a cab anytime we want. And it is fun. Sal and I don't talk much, but we lean into the turns the way we used to when we were little and actually believed that we could make the bus tip over.

After Mom won her ten thousand dollars, she played another speed round. But this time she had to be partners with the other celebrity.

"He wasn't as dumb as a bag of hair," Mom says on the bus, "but he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer either." They lost. But Mom gets to keep her ten thousand dollars, and her twenty-one-hundred-dollar cash bonus. "Not bad for a day's work," she says, smiling at me. "Not bad at all."

When we get to the lobby, Louisa has to change into her uniform for work.

"Want to watch some TV?" Sal asks me.

I tell him I would love to. Another time.

Upstairs, Mom puts on a record, and she and

Richard dance for a while in the living room while I sit on the couch and grin, just watching them.

Then I go to my room, shut my door, and pull the box out from under my bed. Right on top of everything is a big envelope for Mom—Richard gave it to me a week ago for safekeeping. And underneath it is Richard's birthday present.

Mom is in the kitchen, making birthday tacos and a box cake. Every once in a while she yells, "Whoo-hoo! We're rich!"

I write on Mom's envelope with a marker: *I personally do not care about wall-to-wall carpeting. Louisa says carpets are full of dust mites anyway.*

I make an origami frog for Richard and put it on top of his box.

I make an origami frog for Mom and put it on top of her envelope.

I can't get enough of these origami frogs.

It's time for dinner. We eat the tacos. We sing. We cut the cake.

I give Mom her envelope. "What's this?" she says. "It's not my birthday!"

She admires her frog. She reads my note about the carpeting and the dust mites and gives me a funny look. She opens the envelope, which is full of applications for law school.

She looks at them. "But—I can't . . ." Then she sits back in her chair and says, "Wow."

This was our secret plan all along. Mine and Richard's.

I give Richard his present. He admires his frog and puts it on the table next to Mom's frog so that their little frog feet are touching. He opens the box. Inside are two keys, one for the lobby door and one for the apartment. I made a key ring for them—it's a sailor's knot, two strands, pulled tight. He knows how to untie it, of course, but I don't think he will.

Things That Blow Away

The next morning, I wake up early, cut myself a big piece of Richard's birthday cake for breakfast, and start writing the letter. I'm writing it in the journal with the clouds on the cover that Mom gave me for Christmas. I'm at the top of the second page when it dawns on me that this letter I'm writing is kind of a horrible burden. And I start feeling really sorry for Marcus.

It's not a letter that most people would want to get. I know it will be a big relief to know that he didn't accidentally cause the laughing man's death—your death—after all. That's a good thing. But at the same time, he'll understand that he saw his *own* death, which I have to think is a very hard thing. And he'll also realize that he's going to discover the secret of traveling through time, which is a thing so incredible that most people would consider it a miracle. Of course, he's the total hero of the story. But there isn't a happy ending for him.

I start at the very beginning, when you first showed up in the fall, and I'm thinking about everything you did—the spot on the corner where you stood, your kicking practice, the way you muttered to

yourself. "Book, bag, pocket, shoe." There was a reason for all of it.

Except for one thing. I don't understand why you used to lie on the ground with your head under the mailbox. Why? It must have been annoying the way kids were always banging on it.

I raise my head slowly from the journal. Then I get dressed in a hurry, pulling a sweater on over my pajama top. I leave a note on the kitchen table, grab my keys, and slip out of the apartment before Mom and Richard wake up.

It's an almost-warm morning. No one is on the corner, which is good, because I probably look pretty strange lying faceup on the sidewalk and inching myself under the mailbox. It isn't as easy as I thought it would be.

The underside of a mailbox is really ugly—a bunch of paint-splattered metal joints and bolts. I see the square of paper right away. It's small, about the same size as the notes you left me, and it's wedged under a metal seam so that it stays flat against the bottom of the box. I realize that it's held there with a key—our old key, the one we hid in the fire hose. I adjust my head so that I'm looking straight up at the paper, the way you must have.

A woman's face stares down at me, drawn in pencil. She's old, like you were. Her white hair is pulled back behind her head, her dark eyes are looking to the side a little, and she has this playful smile. It's really kind of a beautiful drawing.

People can get old all different ways, I guess. Some people change a lot, like you. I could have stared at your face for a week and I never would have guessed that you were Marcus. You were so much thinner than he is, and the bones above your eyes stuck out. Maybe that was because of what you put yourself through—all the diamond-jumping. But the old woman's face in the drawing still holds some youth. It's the dark eyes, maybe, or the smile. It's hard to say exactly how we recognize other people. But I know without a shadow of a doubt that this woman is Julia.

Marcus and Julia. I think about how she whipped her diamond ring off and used it to explain the way she sees time, and the way Marcus stared at her afterward. Maybe he was thinking that he wasn't alone in the world after all. I get this rush of happiness, this flood of relief. Marcus won't be alone. He'll have a partner. He'll have Julia.

I'm wiggling out from under the mailbox—some guy with a big black dog is looking at me funny—and I suddenly remember what you said to me, practically on this exact spot, the afternoon I gave you my soggy cheese sandwich: *I'm an old man, and she's gone now. So don't worry, okay?*

I believe that you were ready. But I still think it's sad.

I leave the drawing there, wedged underneath the mailbox with our key. It doesn't seem right to take it. I figure it will be there for a long time, and then, someday, it'll just blow away.

Sal and Miranda,
Miranda and Sal

Sal and I don't wait for each other these days. Not purposely. But if we happen to be leaving school at the same time, if he isn't going to a friend's, or to basketball practice, and I'm not going to Annemarie's or Julia's—or Colin's—then Sal and I walk home together. And we are better this way, together because we want to be. He understood that before I did.

We walk up to Broadway, past Jimmy's. We walk to Amsterdam, past the garage, where the boys still say stuff to us and we ignore them. We walk past Marcus's door.

We pass Belle's. We cross the last street, to your old corner, where the mailbox is still scratched up with your words.

And when we are safely across, Sal always gives a little salute. And sometimes I look up, and shake my fist at the sky.

Parting Gifts

My letter is almost finished now. Very soon, I will bring it to Marcus, just like you asked.

There are things I could tell him, things I think I've figured out, like that those naked guys—the ones running down the street the days we had to eat lunch in the school cafeteria, and the one I saw flickering in and out before the accident—they were all you, learning how to get here. Practicing. You said you couldn't carry anything, and I guess that includes clothes. That's why you carried my notes in your mouth.

Or I could give Marcus some advice, like if he gets hungry while he's visiting, he'll find Annemarie's perfectly good lunch in the garbage can across from the schoolyard, where she threw it away every day for six weeks. But I'm pretty sure you figured that out for yourself.

Or I could tell him about Julia.

But I've decided I won't say much. I'll just hand him my letter and say, "Try not to land in the broccoli." He'll understand. He's a smart kid.