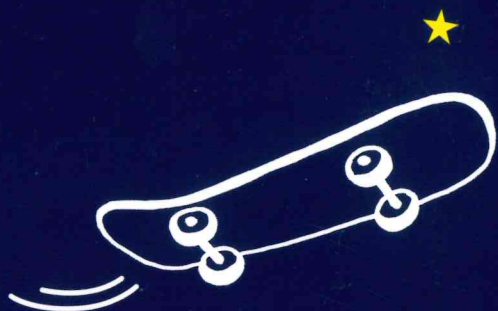


WINNER OF THE NEWBERY MEDAL FOR *MANIAC MAGEE*

JERRY SPINELLI

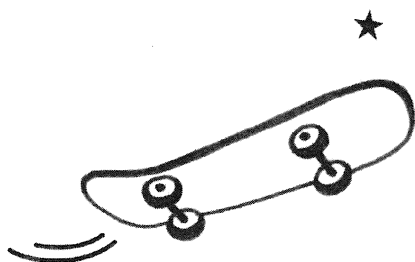


Smiles to Go

LIFE IS THE **ULTIMATE RIDE**
INTO THE UNKNOWN.

EXTRAS
INSIDE

JERRY SPINELLI



Smiles to Go

JOANNA COTLER BOOKS

HARPER

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Smiles to Go

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First paperback edition, 2009

*To my schoolmates
Norristown High School
Class of '59*

UNSMASHABLE

When I was five or six a high-school kid lived next door. His name was Jim. He was a science nut. He won the county science fair two years in a row and went on to MIT. I think he works for NASA now.

Jim was always tinkering in his basement. I was welcome, encouraged even, to join him whenever I liked. I would sit on a high stool for hours and just watch him. I think he enjoyed having a dedicated audience of one.

Jim built his own shortwave radio that we both listened to. He practically swooned when he heard scratchy voices from the South Pacific, but I was too young to be amazed. He always had a jawbreaker in his mouth, and

when he wasn't clacking it against his teeth he kept up a constant mutter about everything he did, as if he were a play-by-play announcer describing a game. "And now Jim is soldering the wire to the whatsits. . . ."

More than anything I looked forward to Jim saying, "Whoa!" That's what he said when something surprised or astounded him. It didn't happen often, maybe only one or two "Whoas!" a week on average. When I heard one I would jump down from my stool and nose right in and say, "What, Jim?" And he would explain it to me, and though I couldn't really understand, still I would feel something, a cool fizzing behind my ears, because I was feeding off his astonishment.

Then one day I had the real thing, an amazement of my own. That day was a little strange to begin with, because when I came down to the basement, Jim wasn't tinkering—he was reading. Watching a person read isn't the most fascinating thing in the world, even if he has a jawbreaker clacking around in his mouth, and after a minute of that I was ready to leave when Jim barked out a "Whoa!" I

jumped down and said my usual, "What, Jim?" but he only warded me off with his hand and kept on reading. Every minute or so another "Whoa!" came out, each one louder than the last. Then came three in a row: "Whoa! Whoa! WWWHOA!"

"Jim! *What!*" I screeched and snatched the book away.

He looked at me as if he didn't know me. Young as I was, I understood that he was still back in the book, immersed in his amazement.

Finally he said it, one word: "Protons." I had heard people say "amen" in that tone of voice.

"What are protons?" I said.

He took the book from my hands. His eyes returned to the present. He began talking, explaining. He talked about atoms first, the tiny building blocks of everything, smaller than molecules, smaller than specks. "So small," he said, "millions can fit in a flea's eye." That got my attention.

One of the most amazing things about atoms, he said, is that, tiny as they are, they are mostly empty space. That made no sense

to me. Empty space was nothing. How could a “something” be nothing? He knocked on his stool seat. “Empty space.” I knocked the stool seat. Empty space? Then why did it stop my hand?

He said atoms are kind of like miniature solar systems. Instead of planets circling the sun, electrons circle a nugget of protons. Then he zeroed in on protons. Atoms may be mostly space, he said, but a proton is nothing but a proton. Small as an atom is, a proton is millions of times smaller. “You could squint till your eyeballs pop out and you’ll never see one,” he said, daring me to try.

“And you know what the coolest thing about protons is?” he said.

“What?” I said.

He clacked his jawbreaker for a while, building the suspense. “You can’t do anything to them,” he said. “You can’t break them. You can’t burn them. You can’t blow them up. Atoms you can smash, but you can’t smash a proton.”

“Not even with a *steamroller*?” I said.

“Not even with a thousand steamrollers.”

And then he hammered home his point. He took out the jawbreaker and put it on the floor. He took a hammer and smashed it to smithereens. He didn't stop there. He kept smashing until there was nothing but white powder. When he stopped, he grinned at me. "Go ahead, stomp on it." I brought the heel of my shoe down on the tiny pile of powder. "Oh, come on, don't be such a wuss," he said. "Stomp good." I did. I jumped up and down until there was nothing on the floor but a pale mist of dust. He got down on his hands and knees and blew it away.

I cheered. "We did it!"

He stood. "What did we do?" he said.

"We smashed the jawbreaker. We made it disappear."

"We sure did," he said. "But what about the protons that made up the jawbreaker? Where are they?"

I looked around. "Gone?"

He shook his head with a sly smile. "Nope," he said. "The jawbreaker is gone, but not its protons. They're still"—he waved his hand about the basement—"here. They'll always be

here. They're unsmashable. Once a proton, always a proton. Protons are forever."

The next words just popped from my mouth, no real thought behind them: "Jawbreakers are lucky."

He poked me. "Hey, so are you. You're made of protons, too."

I stared at him. "I *am*?"

"Sure," he said. "Zillions of them. The protons in you are the same as the protons in that jawbreaker. And in that stool. And in a banana. And a sock monkey. And a glass of water. And a star. Everything"—he threw out his arms—"everything is made of protons!"

I was getting woozy with information overload. Me and sock monkeys made of the same stuff? It was too much to digest. So I retreated to the one conclusion I had managed to extract from all this. "So . . . Jim . . . like, I'm unsmashable?"

He mussed my hair. "Yeah," he said, "I guess you could sort of put it that way." He laughed and waved the hammer in my face. "But don't go trying this on your toe."

Riley picked his nose.

10:15.

Strawberries.

The proton is dead.

These things will go together forever.

My dad remembers exactly what he was doing the moment he heard that Elvis died. For my mother, it was Princess Di. It will be that way with me and the proton.

I was at the kitchen counter this morning cutting strawberries in half, dropping the pieces into my bowl of bite-size Mini-Wheats. My little sister, Tabby, came into the kitchen saying, "Riley picked his nose . . . Riley picked his nose. . . ." She's learning to read, and whenever she sees a few words that strike her fancy she keeps repeating them with a snooty I-can-read smirk.

So Tabby said, "Riley picked his nose," and the knife sliced open the smell of strawberries and the phone on the wall rang. Tabby got to it first. She always does. "Barney's Saloon." That's how she answers the phone

these days. She listened for a moment and said into the mouthpiece: "Phooey!" This is what she says whenever a caller asks for anyone but her. She jabbed the phone in my face. "For yyew."

It was Mi-Su's voice. Excited. "Ninety-eight point five FM! Quick!"

Click.

I ran for the radio, snapped it on . . . FM . . . 98.5. Saturday morning news-of-the-week roundup. Man's voice:

" . . . years of waiting. Finally it happened. The telltale flash that signaled the death of the proton, the moment when it ceased to be. Scientists around the world are speculating on the significance . . ."

I couldn't believe it. A proton was dead! Caught in the act of dying. One moment it was there, then it wasn't.

I looked at the clock. 10:15. Saturday. September 26. And, for me, the start of a new calendar: PD1 (The Day I Heard of the Proton's Death).

Tabby was standing on a chair at the counter. She was slicing a sweet potato.

"Don't," I told her. She stuck out her tongue at me.

The phone rang. This time I got it.

"Hear it?" Mi-Su.

"Yeah."

"So what do you think?" Her voice was bouncy.

Tabby was dropping two slices of sweet potato into the toaster. "Don't!" I said.

"Don't what?" said Mi-Su.

"I'm talking to Tabby. I can't believe it."

"Why not?"

"All those years, nothing happened. Now . . ."

"Proton de-*cay-ay*." She sang it.

"Why are you so happy?"

"I'm excited, that's all. It's news. A discovery. Nothing will ever be the same."

"That's good?" I said.

"Who knows? It just is. Proton decay. It's a fact of life."

The toaster popped. Tabby pulled out the two slices of sweet potato toast and laid them in a cereal bowl. She climbed up onto the counter, both feet, stood there daring me to do

something about it. She got the peanut butter, scooped out a glob with her finger and spread it over the slices. She got the brown sugar. She grabbed a chunk, crumbled it over the peanut butter. She stood on the edge of the counter. She gave me her snooty smirk, spoke.

"Riley—"

"Don't," I said.

"Picked—"

"Don't."

"His—"

"I'm telling you!"

"Nose!"

She jumped from the counter to the floor. Dishes rattled. She grabbed her potato toast and raced upstairs to her Saturday morning cartoons.

"Will? You there?"

"Yeah."

"What was that noise?"

"My sister. Jumping down from the kitchen counter."

"She's too much."

"She just did nineteen things she's not supposed to do."

"To bug you, that's why."

"That's what my mother says."

"You're lucky. I wish I had a little sister."

"Take this one."

She laughed. "We playing tonight?"

"I guess."

"My house, right?"

"Yeah."

"So you bring."

We play Monopoly on Saturday nights. One person hosts the game, the other brings the pizza. Three mediums. BT comes, but he doesn't buy, he just plays. He's always broke.

"The usual?" I said.

"*Extra* pepperoni," she said. "And don't let your stinky pizza get anywhere *near* me. Last time, some of your anchovy fumes crawled over my cheese. I could taste them."

"I can taste the fumes from your pepperoni breath. Excuse me—*extra* pepperoni breath."

She always gets extra pepperoni. I always get anchovies and extra sauce. We always fight about it.

"You're a sicko," she said. "Why can't you just get pepperoni or extra cheese like the rest

of the world? Nobody gets extra *sauce*."

"I do."

"Because you're not normal. Bye."

"Wait!"

"What?"

"I just heard the tail end of it on the radio,"
I said. "Where did it happen?"

"Yellowknife. They charge me for your
extras, you know."

"Sue me. Bye."

"Bye."

As soon as I hung up, the phone rang again.
She was giggling. "Sue me. That's my name
backwards. Bye." *Click*.

I went back to my strawberries. When I
had them all in halves, I started cutting them
into quarters. I looked at my reflection in the
toaster. I looked pinched. Loopy.

A fact of life.

I poured Mini-Wheats into the bowl.
Added the strawberries. Got a spoon. Sat at
the table. Poured milk. Not too much. I don't
like soggy cereal. . . .

The clock said 10:28.

Thirteen minutes and counting.

Nothing will ever be the same.

I stared into the strawberries. Except for the cartoon noise upstairs, the house was silent. Dad was golfing. Mom was at the Arts Center, taking watercolor lessons.

Now pounding from upstairs. Tabby was hammering something. She has her own plastic tools, but she uses most of them to eat with. For serious vandalism she prefers my father's real tools, which she's been forbidden to touch since she nailed his slipper to the floor. She steals them when it's just the two of us in the house. She knows she can hammer away and I won't stop her as long as she's not in my room.

My spoon broke through strawberries, sank into cereal.

The proton was dead.

Riley picked his nose.

— — —

Colossal tanks holding thousands of gallons of water sit at the bottom of salt mines and coal mines around the world. Japan. South Africa. Europe. Canada. Supersensitive

instruments monitor the water. Trillions of molecules of water—every one watched 24/7/365. For years. Decades.

The instruments have been waiting for a flash. The tiniest, most invisible of all flashes. A flash that would mean that a proton—one of the gazillion protons making up the trillions of water molecules—had suddenly winked out of existence. The flash would prove proton decay really happens. The flash would mean that the matter of the proton—the solid stuff—had turned into the energy of the flash ($E=mc^2$). Totally. Nothing left behind. No ash. No smoke. No smell. Nada. One moment it's there, the next moment—pffft—gone.

What would it mean? Only this: Nothing lasts. Nothing. Because everything that exists is made of protons.

Decades went by. No flashes. Untold gazillions of protons under watch, and not a single flash. It looked like the universe would last forever.

And then it happened. It happened in the tank two miles below the earth in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada, Middle of

Nowhere. It happened in the thirty-third year of watching. Eight days ago, says the Centauri Dreams website. Friday night. At precisely 9:47:55 eastern standard time. They saw it. They recorded it. A flash.

— — —

The money was stacked. The cards were stacked. We were both on our second slice. Waiting for BT. Anthony Bontempo.

"Pizza's getting cold," I said. "Let's just start. Teach him a lesson for once." I rolled the dice.

Mi-Su snatched them up. "No! He'll be here."

"He knows we start at seven. Let's show him we can play without him. Then maybe he'll learn to be on time."

She gave me rolling eyes. "Yeah, right. He's BT, remember?"

She was right. BT will be late for his own funeral.

Commotion upstairs. Mi-Su's parents squealing: "BT!" The dog squealing. The dog doesn't squeal like that when I come over.

BT clumped down the stairs. "Gimme four hotels on Park Place!" He rolled his skateboard into the corner. It bumped into mine. BT snatched one of Mi-Su's slices. Mi-Su screamed, threw a pillow at him.

"Clowns," I said. "I'm going first." We sprawled over the floor. I rolled the dice.

BT's first roll was a three. Baltic Avenue. He bought it for \$60. He fished in his pile for the money. Mi-Su and I keep our money in stacks of ones, fives, etc. BT always buys the first thing he lands on. And I always have to say something.

"Dumb."

He said what he always says: "I'm wheelin' and dealin'."

"If I land there," I told him, "all you'll get out of me is four dollars rent. The most you'll ever get with a hotel there is four hundred and fifty."

"Wheelin' and dealin'," he said. He went to the fridge for a soda.

After three times around the board, BT had bought everything he landed on: Baltic, Mediterranean, Vermont, Electric Company,

Tennessee, Kentucky, Water Works, Marvin Gardens, Short Line, Boardwalk. Of course he was broke now, but he didn't care. "Wheelin' and dealin'!" Monopoly money or real money—heck, life itself—it all comes down to one word for BT: spend. I don't think he can even spell the word "save."

BT's strategy (I'm being funny using that word in the same sentence as BT) for Monopoly has two parts:

1. Buy everything you land on until you run out of money.
2. Love the railroads.

He actually believes that if he can ever land on all four railroads and buy them, that's the day he'll win.

Busted, BT was ripe for a buyout. I couldn't stand seeing Boardwalk, the most valuable property of all, in his hands. I offered him what he paid for it—\$400. He took it. Mi-Su shrieked in pain.

Pretty soon I landed on Park Place, too, so I could build on the blue. Mi-Su got the green. As usual, it came down to me and her.

"Hear the news?" I said to BT.

He looked at me, shocked. "I didn't know anybody knew," he said.

I looked at Mi-Su, back at BT. "What are you talking about?"

"I went down Dead Man's Hill."

"Wow!" gushed Mi-Su. "When?"

"Last night."

"Skateboard?"

BT took a swig of soda. "All the way."

"And you're *alive*?"

He pinched himself. "I ain't dead."

"I'm talking about the proton," I said.

BT frowned. "What proton?"

"The one that died. It finally happened. Now there's proof."

"Yeah?" He tried to steal one of Mi-Su's pepperonis. She grabbed his wrist and bit his hand till he let go.

"You want to hear about it?" I said.

"Sure," he said. He snarled at Mi-Su. "Carnivore."

I told him what happened at Yellowknife. As I was talking, he rolled the dice. He landed on Community Chest. He picked up the top card. He looked at it. A huge grin crossed his face.

"Are you listening?" I said.

Now his face was smug. Proud. Superior. He read from the card: "Collect fifty dollars from every player."

Mi-Su tossed him a fifty.

"Do you know what this means?" I said.

"Yeah"—he wagged his fingers in my face—"fifty big ones, chump."

"It means matter is mortal. Everything is going to go. Disappear. Vanish. Rock. Water. The planets. The stars. *Everything*."

He blinked. "Pepperonis, too?"

Mi-Su howled.

"Cretin," I said.

"So, when's all this going to happen?"

"Way in the future," I said. "Billions of years."

He looked at me, the smirk gone. "*Billions* of years?"

"Trillions, actually."

He cocked his head, stared at me, honestly puzzled. He turned to Mi-Su. She nodded. He swung back to me. The smirk returned. The wagging fingers were back in my face. "Fifty."

I crumpled up a fifty and threw it at him.

"He doesn't care about anything," I said to Mi-Su.

Mi-Su grinned. "He's a mess."

We do this, talk about BT as if he's not there.

"That's the word. He's the most messy, disorganized person I know. He has no—"

"—discipline." Mi-Su rolled the dice. She landed on green. Pacific Avenue. "I'm building."

"Right. Discipline. Absolutely none. He just flops and slops through life."

Mi-Su laughed. "A floppy slopper!"

BT laughed. "A sloppy flopper!"

Sometimes he joins in, talking about himself as if he's not there.

Mi-Su built four houses on Pacific Avenue.

"He has no sense of time," I said. "He does everything zippo—like that"—I snapped my fingers—"spur of the moment. No thought. Spends money the instant he gets it."

"He doesn't need pockets."

"He doesn't think. He just does." I rolled the dice.

"A nonthinking doer."

I landed on Park Place. "He spends all his money buying cheap stuff that he can never win with."

"Railroads!"

"Exactly."

"He's disgraceful."

"Perverted," said BT.

"But he thinks he can do it." I built a hotel on Park Place. "And look what he's using. The *thimble*. He's a *boy*."

"Don't be sexist."

Unlike the rest of the world, BT doesn't have a favorite Monopoly token. (I always use the top hat; Mi-Su always uses the dog.) He never chooses his token. He just blindly snatches one up.

"I'm just trying to set him straight," I said. "Be a good role model."

Mi-Su pointed at me. "He skateboarded down Dead Man's Hill."

"So he says."

BT rolled the dice.

Mi-Su looked at me, wide-eyed. "You don't believe him?"

No one has ever skateboarded down Dead

Man's Hill. It comes down off Heather Lane. It's unpaved, stony, rutted, twisting and so steep that when you stand at the top, the faraway bottom almost meets the tip of your board.

BT landed on Park Place.

"He'd be dead," I said. "Rent fifteen hundred."

"I believe him," said Mi-Su.

Deep down, I believed him, too, but I didn't want to. I wagged my fingers in his face. "Fifteen hundred."

It was comical, BT picking through his couple of tens and twenties, as if fifteen hundred dollars was going to appear out of nowhere.

Mi-Su sent a whisper: "Mortgage."

BT threw a finger in the air. "I'll mortgage!" He mortgaged all his properties (except of course Short Line Railroad). "Wheelin' and dealin'."

He dumped all his money in front of me. I counted it. "You're six hundred and eighty short."

"I did something else, too," he said.

Wide-eyed, Mi-Su, who always bites: "What?"

BT shook his head. "Not telling."

I wagged. "Six hundred and eighty, please."

"BT—*what?*" Mi-Su whined. "Tell me."

BT shook his head no.

"Tell me and I'll give you a loan." She counted it out. "Six hundred and eighty."

"Oh, no," I said. I waved the rule book at her. I read: "'Money can be loaned to a player only by the Bank.'"

Mi-Su snooted. "It's my money. I can do whatever I want." She waved the money under BT's nose. "Tell."

BT snatched the money, leaned across the board and whispered in her ear. Her eyes bulged. She squealed, "Really?"

He put on a fake shy face, closed his eyes, nodded. He plunked the money down in front of me. "Rent paid."

Not that it did him much good. Twice more around the board and he landed on Boardwalk, where I also had a hotel. Rent \$2,000. He was dead. "I lose," he said brightly. He tossed his thimble in the box and headed for the dartboard.

There's no satisfaction in beating BT, because he doesn't even care if he loses. He cheats you that way.

As usual, Mi-Su and I went on with the game, but something was different. The squares on the board seemed to float under my little silver top hat. BT had done Dead Man's Hill, and Mi-Su knew something I didn't, and the proton was dead.

PD3

Monday morning.

The principal finished talking over the PA, and the student announcer for the day took over. She talked about how to nominate people for Wildcat and Wildkitten of the Month, then she said, "And on Friday night, Anthony Bontempo, Homeroom two thirteen, became the first person ever to skateboard down Dead Man's Hill!"

Cheers erupted from forty homerooms.

Morning announcements ended with no

mention of the proton.

In the hallways the mobs heading for classes were buzzing:

"BT!"

"He's crazy!"

"Insane!"

"I knew he'd be the one!"

Funny thing, nobody questioned whether it was true or not. Nobody said maybe BT made the whole thing up. Everybody knows BT doesn't lie. If you don't care about consequences, about anything, you don't have to lie. And it's not like he did Dead Man's Hill for the glory. If that were true, he would have had witnesses. He just did it for the same reason he does everything else—he felt like it.



Third period. Physics. Mr. Sigfried.

Finally, somebody to share the proton news with.

The teacher leaned back against the desk, arms folded. "OK, people—there was big news over the weekend. Something happened that will cause textbooks to be rewritten. Who

would like to tell us what I'm referring to?"

My hand was already up when Jamie Westphal blurted, "Anthony Bontempo skate-boarded down Dead Man's Hill!"

Hoots, whistles, cheers, standing ovation—and BT wasn't even in the class. Even Mr. Sigfried gave him a little pitty clap. Then he called on me.

I waited for total silence and said, "Proton decay. It's confirmed."

He snapped a finger at me. "Give that man a prize. And what exactly does that mean, Mr. Tuppence? Proton decay."

"It means nothing in the universe will last."

He went into mock shock. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"How so, Mr. Tuppence?"

"Because everything is made of protons. And now we know that even protons don't last forever. Therefore everything will disappear."

"The planets, too? They're going to disappear?"

"Yep."

"The stars?"

"Yep."

"My aunt Tilly's teapot?"

"Yep." I was enjoying this.

He gazed out the window. "And when is this great disappearing going to happen, Mr. Tuppence?"

"Long time from now."

"Long time? Like a year from now?"

I snickered. "Way longer."

Jamie Westphal piped up, "So, how long?"

Mr. Sigfried gave me a palms-up stop sign. "Let me answer that one, Mr. Tuppence. It's kinda fun." He turned to the blackboard and chalked a 1 in the upper-left corner and began writing zeroes and commas across the whole board. And across the board again. And again. He must have gone on for a full five minutes before he plunked the chalk down, stepped aside and gestured at the board covered with the most colossal number any of us had ever seen. "That"—he grinned—"many years."

"Zowie!" somebody said.

Somebody whistled.

Somebody farted.

The class cracked up. Mr. Sigfried wagged his head and began erasing the board. "OK,

people," he said, "back to earth. Today we consider"—He lettered the rest on the dusty blackboard:

THE WONDERS OF WATER



After school I drubbed Mi-Su in chess club and headed home on Black Viper, my skateboard. Bones Swiss bearings gave the wheels a buttery whir beneath my feet.

I was still a block from my house when I heard Tabby screaming, "Will, look at me!"

BT has been teaching Tabby to skateboard lately. She was wobbling down the driveway. She fell off before she reached the sidewalk. She jumped up, lugged the board back to the garage and wobbled down again. She threw out her arms—"Look!"—and toppled off again.

"No showboating," said BT.

"Will," said Tabby, "can I use Black Viper?"

"No," I told her.

"Pleeeeeze!" She carefully laid a sneaker toe on Black Viper.

I kicked her foot away. I stepped off. I picked up the board. She was looking straight

up at me. Her eyes seemed to take up half her face. I hated BT for getting her started on this. I said, “Don’t ever—*ever*—touch this skateboard. *Ever*. Or you will *die*.”

The eyes blinked. She wanted to cry but she wouldn’t let herself. For once in her life she was going to obey me.

I shot BT a glare and headed for the front door.

Tabby piped behind me: “BT went down Dead Man’s Hill!”

“Big deal,” I said, and went inside.

PD7

There I was but I didn’t know why.

I had told my parents I had to go to school early to help a teacher. Sunrise was the only time of day I could be sure no other kids would be around. They’ve been going up there all week—pilgrims on skateboards—just to be near the place, to stand where he stood, to look over the edge of Dead Man’s Hill, to feel the

tingle on the backs of their necks, to try to picture themselves doing it, to laugh and back off.

So far no one else has done it. Sooner or later somebody will. It won't be me.

The town lay below me. Roofs. Trees. Streets. Sticking up like a periscope: the clock tower on the corner of the Brimley Building. I could see the round face of the clock, but not the time.

The rising sun was straight ahead. I could look directly at it because it was bloody orange and just over the horizon and smoky with clouds. When I looked at the sun, my eyes were crossing 93 million miles of space. But my feet wouldn't cross another inch.

I had one foot on Black Viper, one foot on the earth. There was already too much space under the tip of the board. The angle of the drop was astounding. I felt as if I was looking down over the roof edge of a skyscraper. I didn't see how his wheels could have stayed on the ground all the way down. At some point he must have been flying. And then there were the stones and shin-deep ruts.

I thought: *This is impossible. He lied.*

I knew I was wrong.

Why was I doing this? I knew I wouldn't go down. I was scared stiff just standing there. I already knew I was a coward. Did I need to prove it? Remind myself? Ninety-three million miles of space in front of me, and every inch of it seemed packed with the things I was afraid of: high places, cramped places, dark places, thousand-leggers, speed, flying, death, change, time, pain, failure, criticism, roller coasters, train tracks, being wrong, being smelly, being late, being stupid, being rejected, black mambos, leeches, hantavirus, losing, deep water, uncertainty, being buried alive, being caught being afraid, myself . . .

I could see my epitaph:

HERE LIES WILLIAM JAY TUPPENCE
HE WAS AFRAID

Of course, that wouldn't really happen, because no one knows this about me, not even my parents. What everyone sees is a pretty normal-looking kid, 5 feet 9 1/2 inches, brown hair, brown eyes, ears a little big, a little stuck

out but not enough to mock. Likes science, especially astronomy. Best friends: Anthony Bontempo (aka BT) and Mi-Su Kelly. Runs cross-country. Chess Club. Good at it. Won a trophy. Calls his skateboard Black Viper. Rides it to school. A little shy, on the quiet side, but friendly enough. Not the life of the party, but not a hermit either. Somewhere in the middle. Sensible.

If I'm famous for anything, I guess that's it. I'm sensible. Other kids ask my advice about stuff. To me common sense is just that: common. But some kids seem to think it's this rare gift. They seem to see me as a substitute adult. A homeroom kid wrote in my eighth-grade yearbook: "Thank you for your wisdom & wise ways." Doug Lawson, a cross-country running mate, calls me "Old Man."

That's the macro view. Down here on quantum level, where I live by myself, my fears quiver like leaping electrons. I send my questions up to the surface, but they fizzle long before they reach the top. Why can't I be like other kids? Why can't I believe I'm indestructible? Why can't I believe I'll live forever?

Why do I stare at the sky at night?

Suddenly the sun was blinding. I panicked. Had I gone too far? The clock tower wobbled. I kicked Black Viper back. I stepped away from the terrifying drop. I climbed on my board and pushed off, back to where I belonged, my wheels whirring over the asphalt.

PD8

Saturday morning. Downtown. Hicks' Sporting Goods.

Mr. Hicks handed me the trophy. This was my father's idea. When I won the chess tournament last spring, my father looked at the inscription—

HOPE COUNTY
CHESS CHAMPION
AGES 13–15

—and said, “They should have put your name on it.”

"How could they?" I said. "They didn't know I was going to win."

"I knew," he said.

So typical. My father has so much confidence in me, it's scary. They say that when I was a baby, one year old, he tossed me into the deep end of the Crescent Club pool (my mother screaming), and I swam.

It's been kind of like that ever since. He knows what I can do before I know. In fifth grade he told me I would be the school spelling champion, and I was. He said I would learn to ride a bicycle in one hour. I did. I wish I could be as fearless for myself as he is for me.

"Here ya go," said Mr. Hicks.

I looked at the inscription, added at the bottom of the black mirror plate:

WILL TUPPENCE

"Congratulations," he said. "I never got the hang of chess myself." He chuckled. "Checkers for me." He was still holding it.

The trophy was beautiful. It was topped by a pewter King Arthur-looking figure standing

on a board of little black-and-white squares. The five-inch base was blue marbled stone and held the inscription plate. I already had a space for it on the bookcase in my room.

Finally he let go. "It's figuring out all those moves ahead of time," he said. "I don't know how you do it. I hear the real experts—"

"Grand masters."

"Yeah, the grand masters, they know what they're gonna do—what, three moves ahead?"

"Try ten," I said.

His eyes boggled. He whistled.

"Well, thanks again," I said.

I headed home on foot. I wasn't taking a chance on crashing Black Viper with priceless freight on board. I walked past the old Brimley Building clock tower. It said 11:45. My watch said 11:55. The clock tower is famous for being right. I reset my watch. Hopefully, in a couple of months, I won't have this problem. I've told my parents I want a radio-controlled Exacta watch for Christmas. I showed them the ad in *Discover*. Every night it receives a signal from the National Institute of Standards and Technology Atomic Clock in

Fort Collins, Colorado. The Atomic Clock is accurate to within ten billionths of a second (0.000000001 sec).

For some reason I looked back at the clock tower. It's one of those old-fashioned clocks, with Roman numerals instead of Arabic numbers. Suddenly on the right shoulder of the ten (X), I saw a tiny flash, like a glint from the sun. But when I looked up at the sky, it was gray, nothing but clouds.

— — —

Tonight Monopoly will be at my house. Mi-Su will bring the pizza, anchovies and extra sauce for me, extra pepperoni for her. And a small regular for Tabby. I'll tell her not to do that, that Tabby is just a little kid, that she already thinks she's a grown-up and treating her like one of us will just make her worse. She'll ignore me and give my sister the pizza. BT will be late. Tabby will race upstairs, go crazy over him. He'll breeze down to the basement den and call ahead: "Gimme four hotels on Park Place!" He'll buy everything he lands on. He'll chuckle when he gets a railroad.

Tabby will cheer him on. Within an hour he'll be wiped out. Tabby will attack him. They'll wrestle. She'll bring him a book, probably an adult murder mystery. He'll spend the rest of the night reading it to her. He'll leave out the bad words.

PD16

Sunday morning. Church. Boring, as usual. But as my father says, it's money in the bank. It's the ticket. The bridge. It's how to get from Here to There. From Here to Forever.

There's always a pencil in the pew. Stubby, yellow, like the ones they give you at miniature golf to keep score with. As the service dragged on, I checked off the items in the program: Call to Worship, Hymn of Praise, Prayer of Adoration, Prayer of Confession, Assurance of Pardon, etc., etc. Then came the dreaded sermon—talk about Forever! This was the third Sunday since the proton died in Yellowknife, and Rev. Mauger hadn't said a word about it.

The reverend's lullaby droned on. I decided to amuse myself by writing down Mr. Sigfried's number. Across the top of the church program, down the right-hand side, across the bottom and halfway up the left side:

[illegible]

I stared at the number. It made no sense. It's beyond gazillions. There's not even a name for it. It's the number of years from now when everything will be gone. If I could live that long, I would see Rev. Mauger's pulpit evaporate, proton by proton.

The number was making me woozy. So I did what I sometimes do when I feel lost in

time and space—I began writing down my famous (to me) twelve-step plan:

1. born
2. grow up
3. school
4. college (Naval Academy)
5. career (astronomer)
6. wife (blonde, named Emily, Jennifer or Ann)
7. kids (2)
8. house (four bathrooms)
9. car (mint condition, black 1985 Jaguar XJS/12)
10. retire (win senior chess tournaments)
11. death
12. Heaven (angel) (Forever)

Except now, considering the news from Yellowknife, there's a parade of question marks after number 12. Like, are angels made of protons? Is Heaven? If so, does this mean they won't last forever?

And what exactly is Heaven anyway? A thing? A place? I don't think so. I mean, if I could look at a map of creation, there wouldn't

be a sign saying, "Heaven—This Way." My opinion? Heaven is a dimension, like time. Like up and down.

I think.

As for angels, what are they made of? Smoke? Vapor? Holograms? No. Angels are spirits, and a spirit—by definition—is non-stuff.

I think.

I hope.

I turned the church program over and stared again at the unbelievable number. And risked the biggest question of all: When all this time, all these numbers go by, when the last iota of stuff in the universe—the last proton—finally winks out, will Forever still be? Does Forever continue on beyond the last zero? My answer (my prayer?): of course it does, because Forever means endless.

So . . .

If Heaven and angels are non-stuff . . .

If the stuff-me becomes after death a non-stuff angel-me . . .

If Heaven and angels exist in a timeless medium we call Forever ("Hey, nobody here but us angels!") . . .

Then . . . guess what? . . .

There will be no end of me!

Will Tuppence Forever!

If.

Suddenly we were on our feet singing the last hymn. On the drive home I discovered the little yellow pencil was still in my hand.

PD19

English. The only class I share with BT. Mrs. Hartenstine, the teacher, is old-fashioned. She believes in memorizing. She says, "Memorized passages should be a part of every person's wardrobe, like shirts and shoes."

Today we recited the poems she assigned us to learn. My poem was "The End of the World" by Archibald MacLeish. Mi-Su did "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" by Emily Dickinson.

When Mrs. Hartenstine said, "Mr. Bontempo," BT didn't move. He had his nose in a paperback. His long sandy hair fell like a curtain over his face. Mi-Su, sitting next to him, poked him with her fingertip. He toppled

over and onto the floor. Everyone howled, but that wasn't the funniest thing. Once he was on the floor he kept reading for another ten seconds until he closed the book, looked up half-bewildered and said, "Huh?" More howls.

"Mr. Bontempo, front and center, please," said Mrs. Hartenstine.

So up he goes—the slowest walker you've ever seen—and you could tell he wasn't prepared. Not that that was a surprise; it would have been a shock if he *were* prepared. So he stood there, his paperback in his hand, cheap sneakers, hair flopping, giving us a loopy grin, like, OK, here I am, now what?

"We're waiting, Mr. Bontempo."

BT turned to the teacher. "Me, too." Not belligerent, just . . . BT.

More howls. It's not always easy to tell if BT is trying to be funny or not. Strangely, Mrs. Hartenstine has always cut him a lot of slack.

"Your poem," she said. "Time to recite."

BT pointed a finger in the air. "Ah!" He looked around the room, out the windows, back to the teacher. "And, uh, which poem was that again?"

Mrs. Hartenstine smiled. "'Stopping by

Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ Does the name Robert Frost ring a bell?”

She smiled. Kids laughed. I think they were not just laughing at the scene in front of us. They were also laughing at the craziness of the situation, that the teacher actually expected Anthony Bontempo to be prepared.

BT looked out at us, like a character in a movie sometimes looks right at the camera and into the audience. It was comical. Obviously he hadn’t given it a moment’s thought. *You poor slob, I was thinking, when are you going to get it? How long do you think you’ll survive in the real world?*

“You mean the one that starts, ‘Whose woods are these I think I know . . . ’?”

Stone silence.

Mrs. Hartenstine almost sang, “That’s the one.”

He folded his arms over his chest, holding the paperback with the cover facing out. It was *Crime and Punishment*. It was thick. Obese. I’ve never known a kid so totally unafraid of thick books. He closed his eyes and he recited Frost’s poem. He said it in a monotone. He didn’t try to make it interesting. He droned it out fast in

half a minute and headed back to his seat, eyes and open mouths following him.

Something was wrong. I'm no poetry expert, but I knew something was wrong.

I think the teacher knew it, too. She called to him. "Mr. Bontempo?"

He looked up. He was already back into the paperback. "Yeah?" he said.

Mrs. Hartenstine blinked a few times. She seemed about to speak but she didn't. She merely smiled. "Never mind." She made a mark in her black book. "Next—Miss Bayshore."

I grabbed my textbook, flipped to Frost, found "Stopping by Woods." I read it through. The last line comes twice:

*And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

But that's not what BT had said. As Rachel Bayshore went on reciting her poem, it was BT's words I heard:

*"And smiles to go before I weep,
And smiles to go before I weep."*

I saw it as soon as I entered my room after school. My chess trophy stands on top of my bookcase by the door. And it was backward. The pewter king piece was facing the wall. Somebody had turned it around. Hilarious. I turned it back.

I didn't yell and scream and run after her. I used to, but it didn't do any good. I calmly walked down the hall to her room. Ozzie, her stuffed octopus, was on the bed. She was under the bed. The bottoms of her socks were showing. I just walked away, ignoring her. She hates to be ignored.

But during dinner I couldn't help myself. I glared across the table. "Don't do it again," I said. Calm. Cool. Not the least bit nasty.

She was building a snowman with her mashed potatoes. She was shaping it with a screwdriver. (Explanation: When Tabby first tried eating with one of my father's screwdrivers, my mother put a quick stop to it. But then my father got her her own set of plastic tools, and here's the deal: she's allowed to eat

with them as long as she never uses them for anything else. So if you open our utensil drawer in the kitchen, you'll see a yellow plastic screwdriver, a pair of red pliers and a little blue saw along with the forks and spoons. And she's not allowed to eat with tools if we're having company. This excludes BT and Aunt Nancy, who are not considered outsiders.) So . . . she was working her mashed potatoes and pretending she didn't hear me.

"What did she do now?" said my mother.

"She messed with my trophy."

"Tabby? Did you?"

She looked up, like she didn't know what was going on. She's the world's worst actress. "Huh?" she said.

"Did you—" My mother looked at me. "What exactly did she do?"

"Turned it around."

Tabby quick clamped her lips shut, but not before she giggle-snorted into her potato snowman.

"See?" I said.

"Did you turn his trophy around?"

"No," she said. She would say no if I had

her on film. Unlike her hero, BT, she lies.

"Confess, pest," I said.

"Don't call her that," said my mother.

Tabby snarled, stabbing her screwdriver at me. "Yeah. Don't call me that."

There was a faint noise at the front door. We all turned to see a scrap of paper slipping onto the threshold. It was Korbet Finn, our next-door neighbor. Korbet is five. He's in love with Tabby. About once a week he delivers a love note to her this way.

Tabby ran for the note. She always hopes it will be from somebody else, anybody else, but it never is. She glanced at it, crumpled it, threw it to the floor, yanked open the door and yelled toward next door: "In yer dreams, lugnut!"

My father laughed. My mother looked at him. "Where does she get these words?"

"BT reads to her," I said. "Adult books."

Tabby slammed the door shut, kicked the note-ball into the dining room and stomped back to the table.

We needed to get back to the subject. "Just don't go near my trophy," I said.

Now Tabby was eating string beans with

her red pliers. Humming. Tuning me out.

I looked at my father for support.

He took a sip of coffee. "Leave Will's trophy alone, Tabby," he said. Reasonable. Gentle. Nonthreatening.

Tabby crushed a string bean with her pliers, then smashed the snowman. "I didn't do it!"

"Fine," said my father, calm, soft-spoken, forking into his meat loaf. "Just don't not-do it again."

Tabby exploded. "I didn't do it! I'm innocent!"

I snickered. "Yeah, right."

Tabby picked up a string bean and flung it in my face. "I hate you!" she screamed, and ran from the table, my mother snapping, "Tabby!" me hooting.

"Enough," said my mother.

My father said, "She's in rare form tonight."

After a while my mother said, "Here's my question. How could two such different children have come from the same parents?"

Sometimes I wonder that myself. I wonder why they had us so far apart. When I first heard that I was going to have a little brother or sister,

I wished for a brother. When they told me it would be a sister, I thought, OK, I can deal with that. I pictured myself giving her rides on my shoulders, teaching her to ride a bike.

Never happened.

Aunt Nancy says Tabby is just doing her job. That's what little sisters do: they pester. She says someday Tabby and I will be best friends. I say don't hold your breath.

I'm not saying I hate her. I don't. (Even though I do *feel* that way sometimes.) It's just that all we have are differences (age, gender, personality, etc.), nothing in common. Maybe when we're both adults we will get along. But for now, we lead mostly separate lives. If she didn't go out of her way to bug me, I'd hardly know she was around.

No one answered my mother's question. We ate in silence. Somehow the room seemed to be slowly revolving around the crumpled note-ball on the floor. In a dark crevice of a crumple I thought I saw a tiny sparkle.

Tabby made her daily phone call to Aunt Nancy. "I'm going to a star party!"

I still couldn't believe it. My parents were going to a play at Hedgerow. They had assumed I'd be playing Monopoly tonight. They assumed whether we played at Mi-Su's house or mine, I would babysit my sister. "No way," I said. "We're going to a star party at French Creek. Mi-Su's mother's driving us."

"Fine," she said, "Tabby goes with you."

"No way," I said.

"Tabby goes with you," she said.

Tabby gushed to Aunt Nancy, "I'm making a star shirt!"

She did. She got glitter and stars and pasted them all over a T-shirt. She thought it was a *party party*.

She called Aunt Nancy again. "It's for big people! There's gonna be appetizers! And kissing games! I'm gonna have coffee!"



The tires crunched on the gravelly road.

"How do I know where it is?" said Mrs.

Kelly. "It's so dark."

"Look for the red lights," said Mi-Su.

"Where's BT?" said Mrs. Kelly.

"He doesn't care about stars," I said.

Up ahead—spots of red.

"Lights out," said Mi-Su.

The headlights went out.

Only the red spots were visible now. Some moving, some still.

The car pulled onto the grass, stopped. Three of us got out.

"Back at eleven," said Mrs. Kelly. "Watch Tabby." The car pulled away.

Tabby blurted, "Where's the party?"

I pointed to the sky. "Up there."

Tabby looked. "I don't see nothin'."

On the way Mi-Su tried to tell her that a star party is where people bring their telescopes to look at the night sky, but Tabby wasn't buying it. "Where's the pizza?" she whined.

"It's up there," I said. "Next to the Big Dipper. The constellation Pepperoni Pizza. The Greeks named it."

Mi-Su smacked my arm. "Stop it." She lifted Tabby to her shoulders and we headed for the party.

We could now make out shadowy figures behind the red spots, which were actually flashlights capped with red plastic. The Delaware Valley Astronomical Society has its star parties at French Creek because the light pollution is low there. This would be the last one until spring.

We wandered into the dark forest of telescopes. I'm always amazed at the size of the scopes.

Mi-Su and I split up. I told Tabby to go with Mi-Su, but she refused. She followed me. Not because she would rather be with me, but because she knew I didn't want her to.

Shadows drifted. Dull red circles bobbed and hovered. Whispers, but mostly silence, as if we were afraid to disturb the night. This was a place for stars, not people. A show. No button to click, no ticket to buy. Lean in to an eyepiece. Or just look up. The sky! It's been there all along! Someone pointed the light at himself: red floating face. Soft skitter of footsteps, excited whispers:

"What? *What?*"

"Saturn! *Rings!*"

"Where?"

"Over here! Come on!"

I was pumped. Mi-Su and I both want to be astronomers someday. I went from scope to scope, sampling, asking them what they've got.

"Moon. Great view of Sea of Tranquility."

"Mars."

"Jupiter. Four moons."

Reminded me of a summer fair: "Hey, right here, get yer moon! Yer stars! Three planets fer a dollah!"

Tabby tagging along, her finger hooked in my back belt loop, pestering every time I bent to an eyepiece: "Let me see!" If I didn't let her, she'd get loud. Sometimes I had to lift her, hold her while she squinted and whined, "I don't see nothin'!"

I'm not much interested in moons—ours, Jupiter's, whoever's. Going to Mars doesn't excite me. In fact, I'm pretty lukewarm about the whole solar system. For me, the farther away, the better. Stars. Galaxies. Quasars. That's what makes me tingle.

One monster scope had a line. I asked the

man-shadow at the end, "What?"

"Mars," he said. "You can see the polar cap."

I moved on.

Tabby yanked my belt loop. "I want to see Mars!"

I swung around, whipping her off her feet with her finger caught in the loop. She wailed, "Owww!"

"Don't be an infant," I snapped.

She roared: "I'm *not* an infant!"

The stars flinched. Shadows stopped. Gasps. Shushes.

I shook her. Her knobby shoulders were like golf balls. "Keep your voice *down*! Whisper!"

She whispered, "Ow. You hurt my finger."

To look at me, she had to tilt her head back as if she were looking at the sky. Sometimes I forget how tall I am to her. I saw moon gleam in both eyes. "You screamed like a baby. You want to be with grown-ups, act like one."

I continued my telescope hopping. I viewed a couple of nice star clusters. Most of all I wanted to see a galaxy, and finally it happened. There was a line of five people at a

large scope. The lady at the end didn't even wait for me to ask. "Spiral galaxy!" she gushed.

The line went slowly. Tabby paraded up and down. "Want to see my star shirt?" She held back her arms and puffed out her chest. The paste-on paper stars glimmered in the moonlight. The gazers cooed and patted her on the head and asked dumb questions.

At last I reached the eyepiece. I couldn't see the target at first. Bright images swam by like fish. Then things steadied, and there it was. I could see the oval shape, the spiraling arms. It was the thrill of seeing it for real, the difference between seeing a fox in a zoo or a fox walking across a snow-covered field. But it was even more than that. It was the distance. The galaxy I was looking at, if it was anything like the Milky Way, contained at least a hundred billion (100,000,000,000) stars. "How far?" I said to the scope owner. "About two thousand." He meant two thousand light-years. Light travels 186,000 miles *per second*. In the time it takes me to say "per second," light zips around the world more than seven times.

So figure out how far light travels in a year (which has almost six *trillion* seconds), then multiply that by 2,000 for the distance to this spiral galaxy. How can something that big be so far away that it looks smaller than my little fingernail?

Pretty soon I knew all the scopes that were viewing galaxies, and so I just galaxy hopped. I was in heaven. I bumped into Mi-Su. "Ships passing in the night," she said. I said to Tabby, "Why don't you go with Mi-Su now?" "No," she said, only to bug me. I knew what I was going to say next time: "Stay with me. Don't go with Mi-Su." And she would go.

But we never got to next time. Somewhere along the line I realized I was no longer feeling the finger tug in my belt loop. I turned. She was gone. *She's off with Mi-Su*, I told myself and went on scoping.

But I couldn't concentrate, couldn't enjoy myself. What if she *wasn't* with Mi-Su? What if she was doing something stupid and getting herself hurt or whatever? I was the one who would get blamed. I was staring through an eyepiece at the Beehive Cluster, but all I could

see was my sister wandering off among the dark shadows of strangers just to tick me off. I snapped back from the scope and stomped off. I stopped. I looked over the dark field, the starry horizon, the silent, moving shadows, the jutting shapes of the scopes, the dull red floating spots. I didn't know where to begin. I looked at my backlit watch: 10:30. Mrs. Kelly would be there soon, and I was missing wonders because I had to round up a stupid sister. I knew that one good call would do it. Just stand right there and rear back and bellow her name. But I couldn't. It would be like screaming in church.

I wandered, looking, listening. She's a chatterbox. Chances were I'd hear her before I saw her. But it was something else I heard. Two shadows and a bobbing red spot brushing past me, man and woman voices whispering excitedly. One word separated itself from the others: "Horsehead." I stopped in my tracks. I went after them. I'm not usually bold with people, but I just barged in: "Did you say Horsehead?"

"Yes," said the man. "It's unbelievable. I can't believe we saw it."

"Incredible," said the woman. "And I don't

know a star from a moon." She giggled. "He can die happy now."

I was breathing fast. "Where?"

The man pointed the flashlight, but of course the beam just puddled behind the red cap. "That way. Straight ahead. On the right. You'll see it. Big as a bathtub. On a trailer. Meade LX200." He wagged his head. They walked on.

I turned, walked. The Horsehead Nebula. It's, like, the Holy Grail. Mi-Su and I have been wanting to see it for years. I have a poster of it on my bedroom wall. We'd never seen it for real. It's a huge cloud of cold hydrogen gas and dust, way bigger than the solar system. It's visible because of starlit gases behind it, and it has the shape of a horse's head.

I didn't know what to do. Sister? Horsehead? Sister? Horsehead? My stomach felt like it was coming loose. And suddenly there it was, the monster scope, big as a bathtub, on a trailer behind an SUV—and the longest line I'd seen all night. Everybody wanted to see the Horsehead. It would take a half hour just to get to the head of the line, a half hour I'd gladly have spent, except for a missing sister. . . .

I wanted to cry, scream. I stomped off, spit hissing into the night: "Tabby! *Tabby!*"

At last I heard her voice, chattering away. I found her. She was with someone wearing an Indiana Jones hat. An old lady. "Well, hello there," she said. "You must be the big brother Tabby's been talking about." She held something out to me. "Like a snort of hot chocolate from my thermos here? We have an extra cup."

"No, thank you," I said. I was so mad I could hardly speak.

The old lady chuckled. "Your little sister had been hoping for coffee."

"She thinks she's twenty-one," I said.

Tabby piped: "Will, she has seven cats!"

"That's nice," I said. "Thanks for looking after her." I took the cup from Tabby's hand and gave it to the old lady. "We have to go now. Somebody's picking us up." I grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

She had to run to keep up. She squealed, "Where are we going?"

"To find Mi-Su."

She yanked on my arm. "I know where Mi-Su is!"

She wasn't lying. "Where?"

She wrapped her hand around my finger and pulled. "Follow me."

She wound among the dark shapes as if it were our own neighborhood. She led me out of the thicket of scopes and on toward a moonlit crest—and there she was.

No.

There *they* were.

It seemed to be one shape, one silhouette on the hill, but I knew it was two, and I knew who they were. Mi-Su and BT.

Tabby tugged. "Will, are they *kissing*?"

I turned away. Tabby yammered beside me, but I wasn't hearing, wasn't thinking, wasn't feeling. I don't remember the next few minutes. I only know that I was back among the dark shapes and glowing red spots. I checked my watch. It was time. We walked out to the gravel road. Mrs. Kelly's car was purring, parking lights on.

Mi-Su and BT were already in the car, Mi-Su in front, BT in the backseat. Tabby jumped in, climbed onto BT's lap, put his baseball cap on her head. I got in.

Mi-Su said from the front seat. "BT is crazy. He skateboarded all the way out here."

"I thought you didn't like star parties," I said.

"I was bored," he said. "It was a good night for a ride."

I waited a few seconds, then said it: "Somebody was showing the Horsehead."

Mi-Su screeched. "The Horsehead Nebula?" She whipped around to look at me. "You *saw* it?"

"No. There was a long line."

"Why didn't you come find me?"

"We did!" piped Tabby. "But you were busy kissing BT!"

The purr of the engine poured into the silence. Mi-Su shot a glance at her mother. "I was *not*."

"Yes, you were! You were! Wasn't she, Will? We saw you, on the hill!" Tabby was bouncing up and down on BT's lap.

More awkward silence.

Mrs. Kelly said, "Sounds like I better cover my ears."

More awkward silence.

We were leaving French Creek State Park, passing dark fields on the way to town. I saw tiny flashes beyond the fences, tiny sparks in the dark. It was late October. Wasn't it too late for fireflies?

PD30

I was in my room when my cell phone rang. She was calling about algebra homework. We talked about that and then she said, "You're acting funny."

"I am?"

"Yeah."

"So, why aren't you laughing?"

"You know what I mean. Strange. Different."

"I seem the same to me."

Silence. And from downstairs, the smell of my mother's famous Granny Smith apple pie.

Finally she said, "Is last night bothering you?"

"Why should it bother me?" I said.

"You tell me."

"Yeah, I guess it bothers me."

"I knew it."

"It bothers me that because of my sister I missed seeing the Horsehead. Who knows when I'll ever get another chance."

She laughed. "I knew it! I *knew* it! You're freaked out."

"Did I say that?"

"It's not about your sister or the Horsehead. It's about me and BT, that's what. We freaked you out."

The word "we" hit me like a dart. Tabby strolled by, stopped at my doorway, put on her snooty face, said, "Bob, you smell bad," moved on.

"What was there to get freaked out about?"

Wait—don't answer that.

Too late.

"Oh, just him and me kissing, that's all."

"Wow, that's what you were doing? And here I thought you were watching the stars."

She laughed. "Good one, Will. No, as a matter of fact, we were kissing under the stars. As you well know."

"Actually, I was busy watching the stars. That's what they're for, I thought."

She paused. "Yeah. Sometimes. But sometimes they're for kissing under, too."

"Really? So that's what all those people were doing to their telescopes. Kissing them."

Tabby stopped in the doorway again, the faintest grin on her face. She stepped into my room, turned to the bookcase—the chess trophy—reached out with one pointed finger and tippy-touched the head of the king piece, grinning at me. I leaped from the bed. "Get out!" She screamed, ran.

"Good grief," said Mi-Su. "What's going on over there? Let me guess. Your adorable little sister."

"Bingo."

"So . . . as I was saying, stars are for kissing under."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. And here's where you're all wrong—it wasn't about me and BT."

"Did I say it was?"

She ignored me. "It was about me and BT and all the rest of it. The place. The night. The

stars. Good grief, how could you *not* kiss somebody on a night like that?"

"If you're with Tabitha Tuppence."

She howled. "Touché. But really, it was the time and place more than the person. It just happened. He was there, I was there, that's all. I don't even remember . . . who . . ."

"—made the move?"

"Yeah. Who knows? Who cares? It was just, like, it's a crime to waste this moment. This moon. I would have kissed *anybody*."

"Glad I wasn't there."

Shouldn't have said that. I knew what was coming . . .

"Are you, Will?"

Saved by a *clack!* in the basement . . .

"Gotta go." I hung up. I raced down two flights of stairs, through the kitchen cloud of Granny Smith apple pie. Black Viper was in the middle of the basement floor, not where it was supposed to be.

The phone rang. It was still in my hand.

"What happened?"

"My sister was on my skateboard in the basement. She ran when she heard me coming."

The basement door was open.

"Crisis over now?"

I picked up Black Viper. "I guess."

She didn't speak again until I was back in my room. "Will?"

"Yeah?"

"I never told you—that was sweet of you to come looking for me to see the Horsehead."

"No big deal. I just thought you wanted to see it."

"I did. I do. When's the next star party?"

"Spring."

"Spring. Long time to wait."

"The sky's not going anywhere."

I got the feeling she wanted to say something, but there was only silence. Then: "Well, see ya."

"See ya."

I hung up.

Like a song on replay, the conversation kept running over and over in my head. It occurred to me that it's not true that the Horsehead isn't going anywhere. Actually, it's flying away at thousands of miles a second. Everything is. The Brimley clock. Mi-Su's

smile. My mother's Granny Smith apple pie. We live in a silent explosion. Everything is flying away from everything else . . . flying away . . . flying away . . .

PD32

It's been over a month since BT became the first human to skateboard down Dead Man's Hill. No one else has tried it.

It's been three days since the star party. Since the silhouette on the hill. Was that a first for him also? Or has it been happening all along right under my nose? Exactly how much don't I know? Are others kissing her, too?

PD35

I ride Black Viper but I go nowhere. No matter what day it is, no matter what time, no matter where I am—I'm always at the star party,

staring at the silhouette on the crest of the hill, wishing that one dark shape would split in two. But it never does.

PD44

Two Saturday nights have passed since the star party. We still play Monopoly as if two of the three of us have never kissed and a proton never died. BT comes late and buys everything he lands on and runs out of money. Mi-Su gives him loans and still he loses. We eat pizza and roll the dice and move the tokens around the board.

I keep looking for clues of something between them but I don't see any. Do they secretly meet? Since that one phone call, Mi-Su has clammed up. Is she afraid of hurting my feelings? Does she think I like her *that way*?

Do I?

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

PD49

The wheels of Black Viper crinkle over the autumn leaves.

PD55

I'm regressing. On Saturday mornings I go to the basement and do what I did when I was little: I watch Yosemite Sam and Daffy Duck cartoons. Tabby has discovered this, and so she joins me every Saturday morning. Here's how it goes. As I watch the cartoons I hear a sound behind me: *plink . . . plink . . . plink*. I know what it is. Jelly beans. Tabby is dropping them into the wastebasket, slowly, deliberately, so I'll hear. And not just any jelly beans. Black ones. Why? Because the only jelly beans I eat are the black ones, which I love. And so whenever she comes into some jelly beans, she heads for the wastebasket nearest to me and begins dropping the black ones: *plink . . . plink . . . plink*. Of course she's hoping that I'll

turn and scream at her or something, but I don't. I just sit there and boil to myself, and when the last cartoon ends she runs up the stairs. The fact that she gives up her own Saturday morning cartoon-watching tells you all you need to know about how much she loves to torment me.

PD71

Top-floor dormer. Looking out the window. It was snowing. Well, just flurries actually. Thin dry flakes that weren't really falling but just sort of drifting by mistake into this Saturday in early December.

Our house has four floors, five if you count the basement. It looks pretty modern inside, but outside it's a big brick boxy thing with a porch that starts in front and goes around the side. It was built in 1913. The fourth floor is this one big dormer. It's cold in winter, hot in summer. It's my favorite part of the house. I come up here to be alone, to look

out the window, to think. I call it dormer-dreaming.

We use the dormer as an attic. Out-of-season clothes. Junk. Christmas gifts are already piling up in the corner. I wonder if one of them is my atomic watch. I don't feel any temptation to sneak a peek. My parents love that about me. They know they could put a Christmas present on my pillow in July and I wouldn't open it until December 25. They could put that on my tombstone too:

HE COULD WAIT

My sister is another story. She has no more discipline than a shark smelling blood. That's why everybody's gifts are kept up here except hers. Nobody but my mother knows where they are. Tabby has already started pestering about them. She still believes in Santa Claus, of course, but she thinks, because she's so special, he dumps her stuff off at the house a month early.

There are other gifts up here, too, and that's a whole other story. They're mostly in

silvery wrapping with silver ribbons. They're in a neat stack on a card table against the far wall, fifteen of them by actual count. They've been up here for eighteen years, since before I was born. Before that they were at Aunt Nancy's house. In the family, they're known as the wedding gifts.

My great-grandparents—Andrew and Margaret Tuppence—were missionaries. As the story goes, they met at seminary and fell in love. They got ordained and married on the same day. The next day they had to catch a boat to Africa, so there wasn't even time for a reception. But that didn't stop people from bringing gifts to the wedding. According to family legend, Margaret looked at the pile of gifts and laughed and said, "If I get any happier, I'll burst. We'll open them when we get back." She told her mother to take the gifts home with her, and off they went to Tanganyika, now known as Tanzania. Margaret and Andrew. This was in 1930.

Everyone expected them back in five years, ten at the most, but it just never worked out that way. Margaret and Andrew had two children

over there, both boys, and they set up churches and medical clinics (Margaret was a medical doctor, too) and the years went by.

In 1943 Andrew died of black fever. Margaret stayed on with the boys. They finally came home in 1951. Margaret's mother, who was an old lady by then, still had the wedding gifts, but Margaret said she didn't want to open them without Andrew. "We'll open them together in Heaven someday," she said.

Well, Margaret's mother died, and then Margaret, and one of the boys became my grandfather and so forth, and the wedding gifts wound up at Aunt Nancy's and finally at our big old house, there on the card table against the wall in the dormer. For eighteen years they've been sitting there. They always look new because my mother keeps dusting them. She says they're history. They've become a sort of shrine, I guess. Some days in late afternoon the sun slants through the dormer window and nips a ribbon and it glitters like a tiny star.

Below the dormer window my sister was holding out her tongue and dripping Hershey's

chocolate syrup onto it from a squeeze bottle. She turned her face to the sky. With the snowflakes falling on her chocolate-coated, stuck-out tongue, she figured she was getting an ice cream sundae.

And I wondered, as I often do when I'm in the dormer: *Why hasn't my out-of-control sister ever torn open the wedding gifts?*

I can see a lot from up there. I have my own telescope on a tripod. I slid it over to zero in on the clock on the tower of the Brimley Building. It was now an hour slow. I've noticed it seems slower every time I look. I'm surprised they're not doing something about it. I was about to focus in on Mi-Su's roof when I realized the snow was no longer thin flurries but fat, falling flakes. Beautiful.

All of a sudden I felt like I wanted to cry, which was really strange because I'm not the crying kind. Why did I feel so sad? The flakes were landing on the dry brown grass and Tabby now had a maraschino cherry on her tongue and her eyes were squeezed shut with her tongue out to the sky and she didn't know that Korbett Finn was sneaking up behind her.

I felt bad for Korbet because he loves her and he didn't know he was about to make a colossal mistake and he didn't know that all the way from the maraschino cherry to the farthest quasar protons were dying, the snow was falling and protons were dying across the universe and tears were streaming down my face and Korbet Finn was scooping snow from the dry grass and sneaking up on Tabby and I had to turn away and go downstairs because I didn't want to see.

PD77

We went to BT's house after school. It's a two-story dark green clapboard. The trim is supposed to be white, but the paint is mostly peeled off. The chimney is tilted as if it lost a battle with the wind.

But it's the inside that really gets your attention. When you open his front door you don't see a living room—you see a dump. Magazines stacked to the ceiling. Books, cereal

boxes, cans, jars, soda bottles, bottle caps, clothes hangers, rubber bands, string, paper clips, candy wrappers, toothpaste tubes, spent balloons, old telephones, toasters, electrical cords and plugs, catalogs, movie tickets, telephone pole political posters, tin cans, sneakers, combs, jelly jars. Everywhere. Dining room table. Stairway. Bedrooms. Bathroom. It's like the whole house is an attic.

It's all Mr. Bontempo's idea. He's going to have a museum, he says. About twenty years from now, he figures, all this common stuff will start looking old and interesting. He says people will flock to his Museum of Yesterday, happy to pay admission so they can see what toilet paper wrappers used to look like! This is why there's a sign over the front door:

WHATEVER COMES HERE, STAYS HERE

As BT and I walked through pillars of stacked magazines, I heard snoring. A man was lying on the sofa. It wasn't BT's father.

"Who's that?" I whispered as we went up the stairs.

"Tom."

"Tom who?"

"I don't know."

"What's he doing here?"

"Sleeping."

I knew better than to ask more. Jelly jars, homeless people—Mr. Bontempo welcomes them all equally. Tom will probably hang around for a couple of days and next time I show up, he'll be gone. I've seen it happen before.

There are piles in BT's room, too, but of only one thing: books. They're crammed into a bookcase and stacked in piles alongside it, in front of it, in the corners of the room, on the windowsills. All paperbacks. He gets them for quarters and dimes at thrift shops and yard sales, for nothing on trash pickup days at curbsides. They're ratty, stained, many with no covers. He's a pack rat in training.

The rest of the room is pretty boring. No posters on the walls. No TV. No CD player. No computer. No dartboard. No trophies.

No pictures.

I thought I might see a picture of Mi-Su. I tried not to look obvious as I scanned the

room for any sign of her.

Nothing.

Screams in the hallway. A flash of jeans and sneakers past the doorway. BT's little twin sisters. They're like chipmunks—darting, flitting. I never see anything but scraps of them. I don't think I'd recognize them by face in a police lineup.

BT went off to take a pee. I sneaked peeks under the bed, in the closet, in his dresser drawers. No sign of Mi-Su.

We talked for a while in his room. Tossed a tennis ball back and forth. I wanted to ask him questions, about the star party night, but he never gave me an opening, he never mentioned the night. Or her.

And then his father arrived. We could hear him pull up outside in a noiseball of squeals and chugs and a long, fading death rattle. He drives a truck. A big one, with slatted sides, like they haul mulch with. Somebody just gave it to him because it was junk and everybody knows Mr. B is The Human Dump. And a "piston magician," as he calls himself. So he fixed it up and now the truck is his ride.

He came up the stairs calling, "I smell

kids!" I thought of my father. Silent car. Silent entrance. I usually don't know he's home from work until I hear Tabby running and shrieking.

First through the doorway was a long-handled contraption that reminded me of a floor polisher, then came the brim of his cowboy hat, then his beaming smile. "My new toy," he said.

It was a metal detector. He's had them before. "New model?" I said.

"The newest. Pro Series VLF Discriminator. Eight-inch coil. We're hitting the beach this summer. Hundred dollars a day. Minimum."

He took a nickel from his pocket and tossed it under the bed. He put on earphones. He flipped a switch, the meter on the handle lit up. He swept the platterlike head of the detector under the bed. After a few seconds the needle on the meter leaped to the other side. I could hear a faint hum. He yipped: "Gotcha!"

So we went out to hunt treasure (Tom still snoring on the sofa). We piled into the truck and went bouncing through town on the way to Smedley Park. Mr. B kept up a constant

chatter. I often wonder what it would be like to grow up as Mr. B's kid. (Amazingly, Mrs. B seems pretty regular. She runs the cafeteria at the hospital.) Mr. B doesn't work—I mean, regular nine-to-five work. His one steady job is—tah-dah!—newspaper boy. Every morning at five o'clock he zips around in his truck flipping papers onto driveways. After that, he could be doing anything: hauling furniture, painting houses, handymaning, fixing cars, planning his museum. It's not like he's never busy. It's just that from day to day—or, really, minute to minute—you never know what he's going to be busy *at*. Because even when he's working—fixing a car, painting a house—all he has to hear is “Daddy, come play!” and he's gone. He always has time.

HERE LIES
MARIO BONTEMPO
... FOR THE MOMENT

It's easy to see why BT blows through life like a candy wrapper in a hurricane. That's why, as much as I love Mr. B, I'm afraid that

when I look at him I'm seeing a preview of who BT will become.

When we got to Smedley Park, Mr. B said, "Okay, Anthony, you want first crack at the Discriminator?"

"Sure," said BT.

Mr. B handed him the detector. "Go for it. Try the monkey bars. Upside-down kids. Falling money. Me and Will are gonna scout around a little."

BT nodded and put on the earphones and headed off, natural as you please. He never seems to be embarrassed about his father or his dumpy house or his ratty, off-the-junkpile skateboard.

We rode off. I figured by "scout around" Mr. B meant we would check out some curbside trash, looking for things for his museum. But we didn't. He pulled into a 7-Eleven parking lot and cut the motor. He took off his cowboy hat and laid it carefully on the dash. He turned to me and said, "So. Will. What's bothering you?"

I just sat there, stunned. All I could say was "Huh?"

He grinned. "Don't huh me. You've been the *Very Big Think* lately. It shows."

That's what he calls me sometimes: the Big Think. Because I always have this serious look on my face. It's not true, but that's what he says.

Maybe it was the way he leaned back against the cab door. Maybe it was the way he smiled and held out his hand, inviting, and said, "So . . . ?" Maybe it was knowing how safe Mr. B is to talk to. Maybe it was knowing that of the two things on my mind lately, the one I couldn't possibly talk to him about was Mi-Su.

Whatever, suddenly the words were tumbling out of my mouth: "I see tiny flashes." I knew how crazy it sounded, but he looked as if he heard people say it every day. I told him about Yellowknife and the proton that died. "It was seventy-seven days ago. I can't help keeping track."

I blathered on and on. I said things to him that I hadn't even said to myself. I asked him if he realized what it meant, the proton vanishing. Did he realize nothing would last, that sooner or later every last speck and smidgeon of matter would disappear?

He steepled his fingers under his chin. He nodded. "Interesting."

"See, here it is," I said. "I know I'm not going to live forever. I know that. I'm not stupid."

He nodded. "So?"

I chuckled. "So, I'm in the grave. Here lies Will Tuppencc." "

"And a fine lad he was."

"Yeah." Chuckle. "But here's the thing. Even though I'm dead, it's still me in there, in the coffin. It's still my stuff, Will Tuppencc stuff. Will Tuppencc's bones and calcium and molecules and atoms and protons."

He blinked, grinned, gave me a pistol finger-point. "For a while."

Sometimes I think he's read every book stacked in his house. "Yeah! Right! Okay! You're ahead of me." I was talking about the grimmest thing imaginable. Why was I excited? "You're thinking after eons of time even my coffin and bones will disintegrate and scatter and the sun will gobble up the earth and my protons will wind up in a star somewhere or just drifting through empty space."

He gave me wide-eyed wonder. "Did I say all that?"

I smacked his knee. "Absolutely. But see, even then, those particles were still me once. Somewhere in the universe, forever and ever, my protons—*my* protons—will be out there. My stuff."

"Will Tuppencc was here."

"Exactly!" I loved him.

"But—"

"Yeah. *But*. But now we find out that stuff doesn't last. Not even protons. It *won't* be forever and ever after all. It'll be like I was never here. Never even here."

"Will Tuppencc *wasn't* here."

"*But*."

"Ah. The old double-but."

"If Heaven is a dimension, and angels are non-stuff, and Forever is . . . like, forever . . ."

He waited. "So? Then?"

"I'm afraid to say it. It sounds so goofy."

He tapped my knee. "No problem. I'll say it for you. If the second *but* is true, then maybe, somehow, in some form, you'll go on forever. Never-ending Will."

I winced. "It sounds even more crazy when somebody else says it. Why should I care what happens to my protons a gazillion years from now?" I turned to him. "Mr. B, what's wrong with me?"

He smiled. He squeezed my hand. "Nothing. You're smart enough to know you don't have all the answers, that's all."

"I'm god-awful at not being sure."

"You'll get better."

"But the tiny flashes—what about them?"

He gave a little chuckle. Wasn't he taking me seriously? "Are they like those little Fourth of July sparklers? Or those sparkling birthday candles?"

I nodded. "Both. And sometimes fireflies." I sighed. "I'm a nutcase!"

The neon lights of the 7-Eleven came on, giving his ears a green glow. He reached for his cowboy hat. "You're a kid trying to figure out the world you were born into, that's all. And I got news for you—you're no nuttier than me." He put the hat on. "Better get back to Anthony. He's probably rich by now." He turned the key. The truck rumbled to life.

Eureka!

I know BT's secret!

It came to me early this Saturday morning. I ran up to the dormer. I trained my telescope on the clock tower of the Brimley Building. It was now an hour and fifteen minutes slow.

I was right!

I called him up.

"You buffoon! You *total* buffoon!"

"Huh?" he said. Sounded like I woke him up.

"I know what you're doing. You're setting the Brimley clock back. You're doing it a little bit at a time."

Silence.

"Right?"

"Bingo. Good night."

"Don't ever try to keep a secret from me again," I said, but he had already hung up.

I try to imagine how he does it. I can't.

PD80

Mail was waiting for me when I got home from school. From Mr. B. Postal mail. He doesn't have a computer. I opened it. There were just three words:

Beware of solipsism

Funny word. Sounds like it means "love of melons" or something. I looked it up. It means believing that "the self is the only reality."

Am I a solipsist?

PD84

I'm going to kiss her.

It came to me during biology lab today. She was at another table, leaning over her fetal pig, and I couldn't stop staring at her. And somehow it was all the better because she didn't know I was staring. I don't know why, but I zeroed in on the back of her neck. Her black hair is short, so her neck shows, and it has this thin gold chain around it that holds her little

amber sea horse, which at the moment was dangling over the fetal pig, and after years and years of knowing her, suddenly I couldn't take my eyes off the back of her neck.

I thought about her through the next class and I haven't stopped since. I think it will be OK. I mean, if she kissed BT, why not me? And I'm pretty sure (sometimes) there's nothing going on between them. No new jewelry has suddenly appeared on her. No sign of her in BT's room. No sneaky glances between them at Saturday-night Monopoly.

I keep thinking of what she said on the phone that day. I wrote things down:

" . . . wasn't about me and BT . . . "

" . . . the place . . . the night. . . the stars . . . "

" . . . I would have kissed *anybody* . . . "

I try not to think too deep into that one.

What I need to do now is come up with the time, the place. The moment. Too bad there are no star parties till spring. But there are still the stars. And light pollution. And clouds. Can't do anything about light pollution. Clouds, I can pray against. At least I can count on night to show up.

I'm thinking . . .

PD88

Thinking . . .

PD89

Letter from Mr. B:

Why does a back scratch feel better coming from somebody else than if you do it yourself?

PD90

Thinking . . .

PD91

Bingo! Christmas vacation. It's almost here. That's when I'll do it. I'm working on the details.

My mother is on the warpath.

Tabby found her Christmas presents, three days before Christmas. She tore the wrapping off every one. She knows everything she's getting.

They were hidden on the top shelf of the winter/summer clothes closet that my father had built in the basement. They were completely covered with summer shirts, bathing suits, etc. She had first tried standing on a chair, but she still couldn't reach. So she dragged the half stepladder down from the garage. Still not high enough. So she dragged down the full stepladder. Nobody knows how she did this without being seen or heard. (Or, I'm thinking, without help. I wonder if she lured Korbet. Or BT.)

My mother made the discovery around noon. It's like a crime scene. You can feel the frenzy. The chair and small stepladder flung across the basement. Summer shirts and bathing suits everywhere. The floor covered with ripped paper, bows, ribbons. Gift boxes

ripped open, covers gone. One lid is twenty feet away, under the dartboard. So far there's no evidence that she actually took anything. It seems like she looked, then left everything there, in their boxes, on the floor, for all the world to see.

And my mother is calling: "TABBY! TABBEEEEEE!"

PD96

I got it! The Exacta. My very own atomic watch. It doesn't look special. Just a gray plain-looking face with digital numbers, stainless-steel band. But its coolness lies beneath its looks. Its tiny receiver picks up the radio signal from the Atomic Clock, keeping me accurate to one second every million years. I wore it to bed Christmas night.

My parents punished Tabby by not rewrapping her presents. Her stuff sat under the tree yesterday in their boxes and plastic, looking naked next to everyone else's gussied-up gifts.

The idea was to teach her a lesson, teach her some self-control. Show her how she ruined the whole surprise factor of Christmas morning. So she won't do it again.

Memo: It didn't work. She tore into her stuff, paid no attention to the rest of us, shrieked and squealed and wallowed in her pile of no-bow presents like a hog in slop.

Actually, Tabby did get one wrapped present. From Korbet. He did his knock-and-run thing. Tabby didn't bother to answer the door, but my mother did. When she returned she said to Tabby, "There's a gift on the front step. I think it's for you." At that moment I could see Tabby's gears starting to work: How much do I hate Korbet? Enough to not even take his present?

By lunchtime she couldn't stand it any longer. She stomped out to the front step and snatched the gift. She flung it to the sofa. The wrap job was sloppy, scotch tape, no bows, no ribbons. It was the size of a deck of cards. In fact, I was sure that's what it was. Korbet is always asking her to play Old Maid.

Tabby pretended to ignore it, but you could

hear her brain grinding. About midafternoon she raced to the sofa, tore off the paper, saw it was a deck of Old Maid cards, snarled, "Lugnut!" and threw the cards into the wastebasket.

She did get cash from relatives. Forty-five dollars. She thinks she's rich.

PD97

Mi-Su is in Florida. She went down to visit her aunt and uncle in Tampa. This messes up my kiss plan. Got to retool.

PD100

One hundred days ago the proton died.

Tabby's Christmas money is gone.

In my sleep last night I heard the *plink . . . plink . . . plink* of Tabby dropping black jelly beans into a wastebasket.

I snapped.

I can't believe it. It's not me.

HERE LIES WILL TUPPENCE
HE NEVER SNAPPED
(WELL, MAYBE ONCE)

It happened tonight in my basement. Monopoly night. All the usual stuff: BT bought everything he landed on, BT ran out of money, BT mortgaged his properties, BT chirped, "Wheelin' and dealin'," BT went flat broke—nothing that hasn't happened a hundred times before. And then Mi-Su says to him, "How much do you need? I'll give you a loan"—like a hundred times before, only this time—*snap!*—I went bonkers.

It's like Will Tuppence II showed up. I heard myself yelling at Mi-Su: "No!"

Mi-Su winced as if my voice was a gust of wind. Her eyes went wide. "No what?"

"No more loans."

She laughed. "It's *my* money. I can do what I want with it."

"No, you can't." I groped for the rule book, riffled the pages. "Here! Quote, 'No player may borrow or lend money to another player.'" I smacked the page. "There it is."

She stared at me with those wide eyes, her mouth frozen in wonderment, as if she was seeing ten falling stars at once. "You're serious," she said. "Look at you. You're red."

Tabby clapped. "He's red! He's red!"

"Yeah, I'm serious," I tell her. "It's right here. In the rules."

"We break the rules all the time." She spoke softly, as if a loud voice would shatter me.

"It's not fair," I said. "It's not fair to the other players."

"You're the other player."

"We should play right or not play at all."

Mi-Su blinked. "Will, it doesn't make any difference. I just lend money to BT to keep him in the game for a little longer." Do you? I thought. Or is there some connection between this and the star-party kiss? "You *know* what's going to happen. Sooner or later he's going to lose. He *always* loses." She leaned forward, enunciated: "*And. He. Doesn't. Care.*"

All this time BT was lounging on the floor,

his chin propped up on his hand, grinning. Tabby jumped on his back. "Yeah! You always lose! Loozer! Loozer!"

"Well," I said, "maybe *I* care."

Mi-Su frowned. "What's that mean?"

I didn't know what it meant. The storm inside me had passed. Just dry husks of thought left on the ground.

"Maybe I'm thinking of him. Maybe I want him to win. Maybe I want him to win fair and square, that's all."

Mi-Su just stared. She knew it was all bullcrap.

BT finally spoke: "All I know is, you meatballs wouldn't stand a chance if this game had more railroads."

Tabby was perched on BT's shoulders. She pointed down at me, sneered, "Meatball!"

When I went to bed all I could think was: *You jerk. What makes you think she'll want to kiss you back now?*

Strange territory for me: the after-snap. I still feel myself vibrating. Humming. When I think about it, one minute I'm embarrassed, the next minute I'm—what? Excited? Thrilled? I mean, feeling myself lose it like that—I wonder if it was anything like BT's plunge down Dead Man's Hill: off the edge of self-control and down the slippery slope of my own words. Scary. Wouldn't do it again. But kind of OK with having done it that once.

And surprised that the whole world seems to be OK with it, too. No announcement over the PA this morning: "Calling all classes! Please note that on Saturday night at around nine o'clock Will Tuppence snapped. . . ."

BT was perfectly normal in school today, like it never happened. He came at me before home-room: "Yo, Will! Check this out." And showed me a handful of change he found with his father's new detector. I had been toying with the idea of saying "Sorry about the other night," but I could see there was no point. He would have said, "What are you talking about?"

So he's letting me off the hook. Fine. But here's the twisted part: now I'm a little mad at *that*. Why? Because by ignoring my bad behavior he throws it back in my face. Because he refuses to care about *anything*. How do you deal with somebody who can't be insulted?

So what the heck do I want? I think I want him to forgive me. But that will never happen, because you can't forgive unless you first give a crap.



I finally got to Mi-Su at lunch. I steered her to an empty table in the corner. (BT usually sits with us, but he left school before lunch. Took a half-day. He does that sometimes.) Somebody called: "Check it out—Tuppence and Kelly." Mi-Su smiled (dazzling), laughed (smile on wheels), stuck out her tongue at the caller.

We sat down. I jumped in: "I was a jerk the other night."

She pried the plastic lid off her salad. "Just the other night?"

"Funny girl."

She went straight for the radish. She crunched it. "Did you tell him?"

I picked at the clear wrap on my egg salad sandwich. "Well, actually, I was sort of going to, and then when I saw him this morning he was so, like, Who cares? Like, it's *today* now. It's like he never even noticed."

I caught a whiff of radish breath. "He didn't."

I unwrapped my sandwich. "I feel like the villain."

"Hissss."

"I was thinking about this—"

"You're *always* thinking."

"The thing is, that's not why I get mad at him."

She crunched the second radish. "If you say so."

"Hey"—I jabbed half a sandwich at her—"maybe I care more about him than he cares about himself. Ever think of that? Ever think that when I bust his chops it's—"

She finished the sentence: "—for his own good. I know."

"So?" I said. "Is that so bad? Is it so bad to want him to amount to something? Look at

him. He goes down hills and messes up clocks. What kind of life is that?"

She sipped her orange juice. Orange juice and radish. Sicko. "What I think is, we have this conversation about once a month."

"Sorry," I said. "So, shoot me for caring."

Now she was looking at me funny.

"What?" I said.

"It just occurred to me. Out of the blue."

"What?"

"You never laugh out loud."

"You're off the subject," I told her. "And you're crazy, too. I do so laugh out loud."

She studied me. "I don't think so. I've known you most of my life. If you did, I'd know it."

"Well, you're wrong."

She shaded her eyes with her hand and squinted, as if I was standing in sunlight far away. "No, I don't think so." She brought back her normal face, smiled. "Anyway, I think you should just stop caring. So much."

"Huh?"

"He's got parents for that. Just be his friend."

"I am. He's my *best* friend. That's what this is all about."

"You have a funny way of showing it. And anyway, you're not caring. You're meddling."

Am I? Is she right?

"Don't *you* care about him?" I said. And instantly wished I could take the words back. They covered more territory than I meant. Would she think I was thinking of the star-party kiss?

But she was cool. Impy. Mi-Su. She plastic-forked salad into her mouth, chewed, stared at me, fingered the amber sea horse at her throat, grinned. "Of course."

What did she mean by that?

"So?" I said. Whatever that meant.

"So," she said, munching, "I'm along for the ride." The bell rang. She laughed, pointed at my sandwich. "You never took a bite, you moron."

— — —

The Big Snap has knocked me off my planning for the kiss. I need to refocus.

PD109

Along for the ride . . . along for the ride . . .

PD110

Looking in the mirror. Smiling. Laughing out loud.

PD111

plink . . . plink . . . plink . . .

PD113

I'm at the top of a hill. Dead Man's Hill. Black Viper wobbles beneath me. Wind whistles. I'm scared. Nothing but air beneath me. I want to go back but I can't. Something pushes me. I

spill off the edge, I'm heading down. I can't stop. There's nothing to hang on to. My body drags back while my toes point straight down like a ballet dancer. Black Viper's wheels are stuttering, skipping. The wind is screaming. I can't stop. The wheels lose contact. I'm surfing space. Black Viper goes drifting off, like a jettisoned fuel tank. I'm falling . . . falling . . . the wind is screaming . . . *Wally ate a potato every day . . . Wally ate a potato every day . . .*

I opened my eyes.

Tabby was straddling my chest, wearing her snooty I-can-read face, saying over and over, "Wally ate a potato every day."

I bucked, I swatted, but she was faster. She flitted from the bed like a grasshopper. On the way out the door she bumped the bookcase. My chess trophy tottered, toppled, crashed to the floor.

The pewter King Arthur lay by himself, broken off at the ankles. I cradled it in my hand. The only trophy I'd ever won.

PD118

The trophy is fixed. I got it back from Hicks' today. It's not on the bookcase by the door anymore. It's high. On top of my dresser.

I put a hook-and-eye lock on my door. I use it at night.

PD119

Valentine's Day! Perfecto! That's when I'll do it. I'm drawing up a plan.

PD120

Saturday. The dormer. BT and me.

He had to take his little twin chipmunks to the dentist. Then they came here. They were all playing in Tabby's room, the three of them shrieking beneath us.

We sat on the floor, eating hoagies from

the deli. BT pointed to the wedding gifts.
“When are you gonna open them?”

I shrugged. “Me? Never. Maybe nobody ever will. Or maybe some archaeologist someday.”

He wagged his head. “Crazy.”

“Why?”

“They’re both dead, right? The newly-weds?”

“Yeah. Andrew and Margaret. Long dead.”

“So open them.”

“They’re not mine. They’re like a memorial. It’s a family tradition to *not* open them.”

“Open them.”

“No.”

He reached. “*I’ll* open them.”

I slapped his hand away.

“If they were in my house—”

“Yeah,” I said, “I know.”

“I’m surprised Tabby hasn’t ripped into them.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I am, too. It’s a mystery.”

It seemed impossible that the shrieking below could get any louder, but suddenly it did, followed by stampeding footsteps. Three

miniature girls burst into the dormer. The first, one of the twins, raced bawling into BT's arms.

"Tabby tripped me!"

"She stold Ozzie," gushed Tabby. "I had to stop her." She was hugging her octopus.

"Where's it hurt?" said BT.

"I don't *know*!" wailed the twin. Her arms collared BT's neck, her face was buried under his chin. I'd never heard such screaming. I kept looking for blood. Tabby and the other twin were gaping.

BT cradled her like a baby, rocked her. He was perfectly calm. "I think I know," he said. He pulled up her pant leg. "I think it's right here." He kissed her knee. "That better?"

She nodded. She stopped bawling. He tickled her. She laughed. A minute later the three of them were shrieking again in Tabby's room.

PD127

Eighteen days till Valentine's! I work on The Plan every day. It's almost ready.

PD128

Planning . . .

PD129

Planning . . .

PD130

THE PLAN

Inspired by the words of Mi-Su Kelly:

“The stars. The place. The night.”

I. The Place

A. Smedley Park

1. Picnic grove

II. The Night

A. Speaks for itself

III. The Stars

A. First Option (Clear Sky)

1. Real (Polaris, Sirius, etc.)

B. Second Option (Cloudy Sky)

1. Not real (See V-B)

IV. Extra Credit

A. The Moon

V. Equipment/Materials

A. Thermos

1. Hot chocolate

B. Paper Stars

1. Possible supply sources

a. Lily Pad Art Supplies

b. Staples

c. Rite-Aid

VI. The Bait (at school, February 14)

A. "I'm taking my telescope to Smedley Park tonight. Try to see the Horsehead Nebula. Want to come?"

VII. Procedure

A. Walk with her to Smedley Park after dinner

B. Set up scope

1. Fail to find Horsehead Nebula

a. On purpose

C. Drink hot chocolate

1. Share cup

2. Romantic

D. Words

1. "Hey, I guess we're having our own little star party here, huh?"
2. "Know what we need? More stars!"

E. Dump paper stars over our heads

F. Words

1. "Happy Valentine's Day!"

G. Kiss

PD132

I bought stars today at Lily Pad. Little gold ones, like I used to get on my spelling quizzes in first grade. I also bought hot chocolate. Microwavable. With little marshmallows.

PD133

This is the month! Thirteen days and a wake-up.

PD136

The more I look at The Plan, the more I see what it doesn't cover: What happens after the kiss? How will she react? What will she say? I keep coming up with new possibilities. All day long I hear her voice in my head:

"Oh, Will!"

"Will . . . I didn't know you felt that way about me."

"Those stars did the trick!"

"I wish you hadn't done that, Will."

PD137

"**Y**ou Romeo, you."

"Mmm . . . yummy."

"I've had better kisses from a puppy."

PD139

One week!

PD140

“Will . . . wow! Who have you been practicing on?”

“Kiss me again, you fool.”

“Not bad—but you’re no BT.”

PD141

I was tense at Monopoly tonight. All the usual little things—Mi-Su calling me “sicko” because of my anchovies and extra sauce, BT yapping he’s “wheelin’ and dealin’”—seemed a little different, dipped in glitter, like this is our last Saturday-night Monopoly game before the world changes—again. I remembered Mi-Su’s words when the proton died: “Nothing will ever be the same.”

I watched BT move the tiny iron around the board, and suddenly the question occurred to me: *Am I cheating on him? How much do I really know about him and Mi-Su? Mi-Su says it was the night, not BT. Is she telling the truth? Even if she*

is, what about BT? Was it just the night and the stars for him, too? Or was it Mi-Su? Has he been thinking about Mi-Su just like I have? Has he discovered the back of her neck, too?

PD142

Something could have happened.

But didn't.

Around seven o'clock tonight the doorbell rang. It was Mi-Su. I don't know why, but I was shocked. She just stood there smiling: black coat, bright red knitted hat with bunny-tail tassel, matching red mittens, matching red nose from the cold, just standing there smiling at me, breaking the world record for adorableness. I didn't think—I just did. I reached out and grabbed her and kissed her right there on the front step. . . .

Hah! I wish.

Mi-Su really did come to the door, but it was only a kind of second me—Shadow Me—that reacted that way. Real Me just stood

there, because making a move now wasn't in The Plan and there were still three days to go. Real Me smiled back at her and said, "Hi. What's up?" and she made a face and said, "Geometry. I hate it. Can you help me?" and Real Me said, "Sure, come on in."

She stayed for a couple of hours and we did her geometry, and most of the time we were alone in the basement and sometimes her face was only inches from mine, and Shadow Me kept kicking Real Me in the shins and hissing, "Kiss her . . . kiss her *now!* . . ." but I stayed with The Plan, and when I went to bed the pillow whispered in my ear, "You blew it."

PD143

"Nice try, for an amateur. Come back and see me in a couple of years."

Along the flagstone walkway that goes from our driveway to the front door, there are bushes. I was coasting down the sidewalk after school, about a block from home. Tabby's school bus stopped and out she popped. She trudged up the driveway, her backpack hugging her like a baby monkey. She was almost to the front step when suddenly the bushes moved and out popped Korbet Finn. "Happy Valentine's Day!" he shouted and planted a nose-deep kiss in her cheek.

Tabby recoiled, snarled, "That's tomorrow, lugnut!" and shoved him back into the bushes.

Uh-oh. Was this an omen for tomorrow—The Big Day?

I'm going to chicken out. I know it. I'm terrified. My atomic watch is ticking off the seconds. I can't do it. I don't like not knowing what comes after Plan Part VII-G. In chess, you don't make a move until you know how your opponent will counter. I'm going to chicken out!

The night was clear. No clouds. The stars as good as they get around here. Even the moon showed up, but just a thin toenail clipping, not bright enough to drown out the stars.

I set up my scope. Couldn't find the Horsehead. (Aw shucks.) Let her try. No dice. Her disappointment was no act. "Poopy!" she said. I don't know why, that just tickled me. We drank hot chocolate from the same thermos cup. The red plastic cup matched her mittens and hat. I had been afraid she would say, "Didn't you bring a cup for me?" but she didn't.

When we finished the hot chocolate, I screwed the cup back on and walked a couple of steps away from her and pretended to gaze up at the sky and said, "Hey, guess what?"

"What?" she said.

"I think we're having our own little star party here."

After I said it I didn't breathe, because I was sure she was going to say, "Are you *kid-ding*? This isn't even *close* to a *real* star party at French Creek. So don't get any *ideas*, pal."

But she didn't.

She looked at me. She looked at the sky. She held out her arms as if welcoming the stars to come down. She said, "Well . . . yeah . . . you're right."

I reached into my pocket (where I had dumped the paper stars before I left the house). I walked over to her. Even with the real stars up there, I was going to use all my ammo. I swallowed hard. "Know what we need?" I said—croaked, actually.

"What?" she said dreamily, looking up.

I froze. My hand was in my pocket and the stars were in my hand, but I couldn't move, I couldn't speak.

And then she seemed to come out of her trance and her face was turning toward me and her mouth was opening to say something and suddenly I was doing it—holding my fistful of stars over her head and letting them fall and blurting way too loud, "More stars!"

And "Happy Valentine's Day!"

And kissing her.

So hard that my teeth clacked into hers. I

backed off and it was soft and OK and her shoulders were in my hands and I only knew what I could feel because my eyes were clamped down shut. When I finally pulled away and opened my eyes, I was surprised to see that hers were closed, too.

I braced myself for her words—*Please don't wisecrack*, I prayed—but she said nothing. She just smiled. And kissed me again.

We were halfway home when I realized I had left my telescope behind and we had to go back for it.

PD147

On Fridays the first time I see Mi-Su is in second-period Spanish. I'm always there first. I take a seat toward the back. She's always one of the last to come in. She looks for me, smiles, waggles her fingertips and takes a seat in the first row, even though there's usually an empty seat beside me.

I thought today might be different. I

thought she might come back to the seat beside me. She didn't. Everything was the same: look for me, smile, waggle, first row. Well, what did I expect? Did I expect her to rush back and flop into my lap? Did I think she'd be hauling around a big sign saying WILL KISSED ME LAST NIGHT?

Stupid me, maybe I did, because I kept turning corners all day, half expecting to bump into her, smiling, maybe winking, shyly/slyly saying something. Instead of thinking about Spanish and physics and English, my head ran imaginary conversations:

Her: Hi.

Me: Hi.

Her: Nice time last night.

Me: Yeah.

Her: I didn't sleep much.

Me: Me neither.

Her: I kept thinking about . . .

Me: What?

Her (sly grin): You know.

Me: Yeah.

Her: Know what I wish?

Me: What?

Her: I wish a whole year passed already and this is Valentine's Day again.

Me: Yeah.

Her: So when are you going to kiss me again?

— — —

Lunchtime—not the one in my head but the real one—was a dud. She talked to me. She talked to BT. She talked to the other kids at the table. She didn't send me any special, secret smiles. No winks. No mention of Valentine's Day. No leading questions to the others, like, "So, what did *you* guys do last night?"

Nothing.

So after lunch I started asking myself leading questions. Like, *Did Mi-Su say anything to BT about last night?* Like, *What?*

Suddenly I wanted to check out BT for clues. I tried to remember. Was he looking at me funny today? Did he seem a little frosty? I couldn't check him out now because he took another half-day. When lunch was over, instead of going to his next class, he just kept

walking right on out of school.

I started running a new conversation in my head:

Her: So, what did you do last night?

Him: Nothing. Hung at home. Read. You?

Her: Went to Smedley.

Him: At night?

Her: Yeah. With Will.

Him (taken aback): Our Will? Will Tuppence?

Her: No, Will Shakespeare.

Him: Wha'd you do?

Her: Drank hot chocolate. Looked at the stars. He brought his telescope.

Him: What else?

Her: He kissed me.

Him: Did you kiss him back?

Her: I guess you could say that.

Him: Did you like it?

Her: I guess you could say that.

Him: Do you love him? Is that what it is now, Will and Mi-Su forever?

Her (laughs): Hey—the place. The night. The stars. How could you *not* kiss somebody?

Him: What about us? You, me, the star

party? Was it as good as that?

Her (sly grin): Wouldn't *you* like to know?

— — —

By last class I was a mess. Did she? Didn't she? And then school was over and I was heading for the exit when I felt someone squeeze my hand. She was rushing past me, saying, "Gotta run!" I knew she was heading for the auditorium and tryouts for *The Music Man*. I felt that squeeze all the way home. I feel it now. It says everything. *Yes!*

PD148

I was right: the world *has* changed. I'm just not sure exactly how.

We were at Mi-Su's for Monopoly. I went over early. I figured we could fit in a little alone-time together. And so who answers the door? BT! He was already there. He's never early. Late is the only thing he ever is. That's his middle name: Late. BLT, I call him sometimes.

Words jammed in my head: *Why are you early? Do you know about me and Mi-Su the other night? What did she say to you? What's going on here?* The words that came out were: "You're early."

"So are you," he said. He reached for the pizza boxes I carried. "Gimme. I'm hungry."

An hour later BT went up to the bathroom and Mi-Su and I found ourselves alone. At first neither of us said a word. I snuck a glance at her. She was counting her money. Finally I reached out and touched her hand with the tip of my finger and said, "Hi." Her head came up with that dazzling smile. She did the same fingertip thing to my hand. "Hi." And suddenly everything was okay. Perfect.

"How did the tryouts go?" I said.

"Good."

"Did you make it?"

"Everybody makes it. It's just a question of what role you get."

"What role do you want?"

"Well, every girl wants to be Marian."

"Who's that?"

"The female lead. The librarian. She gets to sing all the great songs."

"That'll be you."

She laughed. "No, it won't be me. It'll be some senior. Probably Jen Willard. I'll be in the chorus. I'll be happy."

And then BT came back and resumed buying up railroads and "wheelin' and dealin'," mortgaging to the hilt, went broke and on his next move landed on Chance. Picked a card. Advance to Illinois Avenue. He slid his thimble down to Illinois, which I owned. At this point I only had two houses on it, so all he owed me was \$300, but it might as well have been three million. I said, "Three hundred," and Mi-Su burst out laughing.

"What?" I said.

"You," she said. "The way you said it."

Already I didn't like how this was going.

"How many ways are there to say three hundred?"

She laughed again. "I don't know. You say it so . . . casual. So businessy. Like you expect him to pay it. Like you don't know he's totally broke."

I turned to BT. I tried to sound as mournful as possible. "I regret to inform you, sir, that a rental fee in the amount of three hundred dollars is now due."

BT held out his hands, wrists together to be cuffed. "Take me to the poorhouse."

"Not yet," said Mi-Su. There was a new firmness in her voice. I expected her usual Operation Rescue BT, but this time it was different. She didn't give him the \$300; she handed it directly to me. She looked me in the eye, smiled, daring me to say something. And she wasn't finished. She picked up her yellow title deed cards—Atlantic Avenue, Ventnor Avenue, Marvin Gardens—and plopped all three down in front of BT. Plus the houses she had built on them.

I was practically biting my tongue in half.

She arched an eyebrow. "You say something?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

"You're not going to reach for the rule book, are you?" She was grinning.

I pled ignorance. "Rule book? Me?"

"Because this isn't money, you know. It's property. And it's not a loan. It's a gift. It's"—she beamed her smile on BT—"charity."

"*Hot dog!*" piped BT. He put the green houses on the yellow properties. "Wheelin' and dealin'."

Mi-Su was now wearing her I'm-so-sincere face. "We're not breaking any rule book rules here, are we, Willy?"

She knows I hate that name. "Not that I can see."

"Because we sure don't want to break any rules, do we, Willy?"

"Can't have that," I said.

There was more than Monopoly going on here, but I didn't know what it was. I had a feeling that if I said the wrong word, she would leap across the board into his arms and shout out: "He's the one I want!"

The game, if you can call it that, played out. BT, even with his windfall "gift," still managed to blow it all and wound up broke as always. After that, Mi-Su made a string of stupid moves and declared bankruptcy. "You win, Will," she said cheerily.

Walking home, I wondered who the real winner was.