

CHAPTER SEVEN

I screamed to wake up my parents, and they burst into the room, but there was nothing they could do to dim the supernovae exploding inside my brain, an endless chain of intracranial firecrackers that made me think that I was once and for all going, and I told myself—as I’ve told myself before—that the body shuts down when the pain gets too bad, that consciousness is temporary, that this will pass. But just like always, I didn’t slip away. I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown.

Dad drove, talking on the phone with the hospital, while I lay in the back with my head in Mom’s lap. There was nothing to do: Screaming made it worse. All stimuli made it worse, actually.

The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black and silent and uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning when there was the Word, and to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word.

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, and I do not deny that courage. I had been poked and stabbed and poisoned for years, and still I trod on. But make no mistake: In that moment, I would have been very, very happy to die.

I woke up in the ICU. I could tell I was in the ICU because I didn't have my own room, and because there was so much beeping, and because I was alone: They don't let your family stay with you 24/7 in the ICU at Children's because it's an infection risk. There was wailing down the hall. Somebody's kid had died. I was alone. I hit the red call button.

A nurse came in seconds later. "Hi," I said.

"Hello, Hazel. I'm Alison, your nurse," she said.

"Hi, Alison My Nurse," I said.

Whereupon I started to feel pretty tired again. But I woke up a bit when my parents came in, crying and kissing my face repeatedly, and I reached up for them and tried to squeeze, but my everything hurt when I squeezed, and Mom and Dad told me that I did not have a brain tumor, but that my headache was caused by poor oxygenation, which was caused by my lungs swimming in fluid, a liter and a half (!!!!)

of which had been successfully drained from my chest, which was why I might feel a slight discomfort in my side, where there was, *hey look at that*, a tube that went from my chest into a plastic bladder half full of liquid that for all the world resembled my dad's favorite amber ale. Mom told me I was going to go home, that I really was, that I would just have to get this drained every now and again and get back on the BiPAP, this nighttime machine that forces air in and out of my crap lungs. But I'd had a total body PET scan on the first night in the hospital, they told me, and the news was good: no tumor growth. No new tumors. My shoulder pain had been lack-of-oxygen pain. Heart-working-too-hard pain.

"Dr. Maria said this morning that she remains optimistic," Dad said. I liked Dr. Maria, and she didn't bullshit you, so that felt good to hear.

"This is just a thing, Hazel," my mom said. "It's a thing we can live with."

I nodded, and then Alison My Nurse kind of politely made them leave. She asked me if I wanted some ice chips, and I nodded, and then she sat at the bed with me and spooned them into my mouth.

"So you've been gone a couple days," Alison said. "Hmm, what'd you miss . . . A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection. A team won a sporting event, but another team lost." I smiled. "You can't go disappearing on

everybody like this, Hazel. You miss too much.”

“More?” I asked, nodding toward the white Styrofoam cup in her hand.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, “but I’m a rebel.” She gave me another plastic spoonful of crushed ice. I mumbled a thank-you. Praise God for good nurses. “Getting tired?” she asked. I nodded. “Sleep for a while,” she said. “I’ll try to run interference and give you a couple hours before somebody comes in to check vitals and the like.” I said Thanks again. You say thanks a lot in a hospital. I tried to settle into the bed. “You’re not gonna ask about your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Don’t have one,” I told her.

“Well, there’s a kid who has hardly left the waiting room since you got here,” she said.

“He hasn’t seen me like this, has he?”

“No. Family only.”

I nodded and sank into an aqueous sleep.

It would take me six days to get home, six undays of staring at acoustic ceiling tile and watching television and sleeping and pain and wishing for time to pass. I did not see Augustus or anyone other than my parents. My hair looked like a bird’s nest; my shuffling gait like a dementia patient’s. I felt a little better each day, though: Each sleep ended to reveal a person who seemed a bit more like me. Sleep fights cancer, Regular Dr. Jim said for the thousandth time as he

hovered over me one morning surrounded by a coterie of medical students.

“Then I am a cancer-fighting machine,” I told him.

“That you are, Hazel. Keep resting, and hopefully we’ll get you home soon.”

On Tuesday, they told me I’d go home on Wednesday. On Wednesday, two minimally supervised medical students removed my chest tube, which felt like getting stabbed in reverse and generally didn’t go very well, so they decided I’d have to stay until Thursday. I was beginning to think that I was the subject of some existentialist experiment in permanently delayed gratification when Dr. Maria showed up on Friday morning, sniffed around me for a minute, and told me I was good to go.

So Mom opened her oversize purse to reveal that she’d had my Go Home Clothes with her all along. A nurse came in and took out my IV. I felt untethered even though I still had the oxygen tank to carry around with me. I went into the bathroom, took my first shower in a week, got dressed, and when I got out, I was so tired I had to lie down and get my breath. Mom asked, “Do you want to see Augustus?”

“I guess,” I said after a minute. I stood up and shuffled over to one of the molded plastic chairs against the wall, tucking my tank beneath the chair. It wore me out.

Dad came back with Augustus a few minutes later. His hair was messy, sweeping down over his forehead. He lit up

with a real Augustus Waters Goofy Smile when he saw me, and I couldn't help but smile back. He sat down in the blue faux-leather recliner next to my chair. He leaned in toward me, seemingly incapable of stifling the smile.

Mom and Dad left us alone, which felt awkward. I worked hard to meet his eyes, even though they were the kind of pretty that's hard to look at. "I missed you," Augustus said.

My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be. "Thanks for not trying to see me when I looked like hell."

"To be fair, you still look pretty bad."

I laughed. "I missed you, too. I just don't want you to see . . . all this. I just want, like . . . It doesn't matter. You don't always get what you want."

"Is that so?" he asked. "I'd always thought the world was a wish-granting factory."

"Turns out that is not the case," I said. He was so beautiful. He reached for my hand but I shook my head. "No," I said quietly. "If we're gonna hang out, it has to be, like, not that."

"Okay," he said. "Well, I have good news and bad news on the wish-granting front."

"Okay?" I said.

"The bad news is that we obviously can't go to Amsterdam until you're better. The Genies will, however, work their famous magic when you're well enough."

“That’s the good news?”

“No, the good news is that while you were sleeping, Peter Van Houten shared a bit more of his brilliant brain with us.”

He reached for my hand again, but this time to slip into it a heavily folded sheet of stationery on the letterhead of *Peter Van Houten, Novelist Emeritus*.

I didn’t read it until I got home, situated in my own huge and empty bed with no chance of medical interruption. It took me forever to decode Van Houten’s sloped, scratchy script.

Dear Mr. Waters,

I am in receipt of your electronic mail dated the 14th of April and duly impressed by the Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy. Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid *hamartia*: hers, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Were she better or you sicker, then the stars would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of stars to cross, and never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves.” Easy enough to say when you’re a Roman nobleman (or Shakespeare!),

John Green

but there is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars.

While we're on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Hazel reminds me of the Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time." (Off topic, but: What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It's a fine poem but a deceitful one: We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates? Nothing. We're pretty sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus. (Witness also that when we talk about literature, we do so in the present tense. When we speak of the dead, we are not so kind.) You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries, but does not resurrect. (Full disclosure: I am not the first to make this observation. cf, the MacLeish poem "Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments," which contains the heroic line "I shall say you will die and none will remember you.")

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

I digress, but here's the rub: The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of memory. The living, thank heaven, retain the ability to surprise and to disappoint. Your Hazel is alive, Waters, and you mustn't impose your will upon another's decision, particularly a decision arrived at thoughtfully. She wishes to spare you pain, and you should let her. You may not find young Hazel's logic persuasive, but I have trod through this vale of tears longer than you, and from where I'm sitting, she's not the lunatic.

Yours truly,
Peter Van Houten

It was really written by him. I licked my finger and dabbed the paper and the ink bled a little, so I knew it was really real.

"Mom," I said. I did not say it loudly, but I didn't have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"Can we call Dr. Maria and ask if international travel would kill me?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

We had a big Cancer Team Meeting a couple days later. Every so often, a bunch of doctors and social workers and physical therapists and whoever else got together around a big table in a conference room and discussed my situation. (Not the Augustus Waters situation or the Amsterdam situation. The cancer situation.)

Dr. Maria led the meeting. She hugged me when I got there. She was a hugger.

I felt a little better, I guess. Sleeping with the BiPAP all night made my lungs feel almost normal, although, then again, I did not really remember lung normality.

Everyone got there and made a big show of turning off

their pagers and everything so it would be *all about me*, and then Dr. Maria said, "So the great news is that Phalanxifor continues to control your tumor growth, but obviously we're still seeing serious problems with fluid accumulation. So the question is, how should we proceed?"

And then she just looked at me, like she was waiting for an answer. "Um," I said, "I feel like I am not the most qualified person in the room to answer that question?"

She smiled. "Right, I was waiting for Dr. Simons. Dr. Simons?" He was another cancer doctor of some kind.

"Well, we know from other patients that most tumors eventually evolve a way to grow in spite of Phalanxifor, but if that were the case, we'd see tumor growth on the scans, which we don't see. So it's not that yet."

Yet, I thought.

Dr. Simons tapped at the table with his forefinger. "The thought around here is that it's possible the Phalanxifor is worsening the edema, but we'd face far more serious problems if we discontinued its use."

Dr. Maria added, "We don't really understand the long-term effects of Phalanxifor. Very few people have been on it as long as you have."

"So we're gonna do nothing?"

"We're going to stay the course," Dr. Maria said, "but we'll need to do more to keep that edema from building up." I felt kind of sick for some reason, like I was going to

throw up. I hated Cancer Team Meetings in general, but I hated this one in particular. “Your cancer is not going away, Hazel. But we’ve seen people live with your level of tumor penetration for a long time.” (I did not ask what constituted a long time. I’d made that mistake before.) “I know that coming out of the ICU, it doesn’t feel this way, but this fluid is, at least for the time being, manageable.”

“Can’t I just get like a lung transplant or something?” I asked.

Dr. Maria’s lips shrank into her mouth. “You would not be considered a strong candidate for a transplant, unfortunately,” she said. I understood: No use wasting good lungs on a hopeless case. I nodded, trying not to look like that comment hurt me. My dad started crying a little. I didn’t look over at him, but no one said anything for a long time, so his hiccuping cry was the only sound in the room.

I hated hurting him. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the inexorable truth is this: They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and the omega of my parents’ suffering.

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU and it looked like I was going to die and Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, and I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad’s chest that I wish I hadn’t heard, and that I hope she never finds

out that I did hear. She said, “I won’t be a mom anymore.” It gutted me pretty badly.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn’t get it out of my head, how she sounded when she said that, like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn’t.

Anyway, eventually we decided to keep things the same only with more frequent fluid drainings. At the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, and Dr. Simons actually and literally laughed, but then Dr. Maria said, “Why not?” And Simons said, dubiously, “Why not?” And Dr. Maria said, “Yeah, I don’t see why not. They’ve got oxygen on the planes, after all.” Dr. Simons said, “Are they just going to gate-check a BiPAP?” And Maria said, “Yeah, or have one waiting for her.”

“Placing a patient—one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less—an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That’s a recipe for disaster.”

Dr. Maria shrugged. “It would increase some risks,” she acknowledged, but then turned to me and said, “But it’s your life.”

Except not really. On the car ride home, my parents agreed: I would not be going to Amsterdam unless and until there was medical agreement that it would be safe.

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Augustus called that night after dinner. I was already in bed—after dinner had become my bedtime for the moment—propped up with a gajillion pillows and also Bluie, with my computer on my lap.

I picked up, saying, “Bad news,” and he said, “Shit, what?”

“I can’t go to Amsterdam. One of my doctors thinks it’s a bad idea.”

He was quiet for a second. “God,” he said. “I should’ve just paid for it myself. Should’ve just taken you straight from the *Funky Bones* to Amsterdam.”

“But then I would’ve had a probably fatal episode of deoxygenation in Amsterdam, and my body would have been shipped home in the cargo hold of an airplane,” I said.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “But before that, my grand romantic gesture would have totally gotten me laid.”

I laughed pretty hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

“You laugh because it’s true,” he said.

I laughed again.

“It’s true, isn’t it!”

“Probably not,” I said, and then after a moment added, “although you never know.”

He moaned in misery. “I’m gonna die a virgin,” he said.

"You're a virgin?" I asked, surprised.

"Hazel Grace," he said, "do you have a pen and a piece of paper?" I said I did. "Okay, please draw a circle." I did. "Now draw a smaller circle within that circle." I did. "The larger circle is virgins. The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg."

I laughed again, and told him that having most of your social engagements occur at a children's hospital also did not encourage promiscuity, and then we talked about Peter Van Houten's amazingly brilliant comment about the sluttiness of time, and even though I was in bed and he was in his basement, it really felt like we were back in that uncreated third space, which was a place I really liked visiting with him.

Then I got off the phone and my mom and dad came into my room, and even though it was really not big enough for all three of us, they lay on either side of the bed with me and we all watched *ANTM* on the little TV in my room. This girl I didn't like, Selena, got kicked off, which made me really happy for some reason. Then Mom hooked me up to the BiPAP and tucked me in, and Dad kissed me on the forehead, the kiss all stubble, and then I closed my eyes.

The BiPAP essentially took control of my breathing away from me, which was intensely annoying, but the great thing about it was that it made all this noise, rumbling with each inhalation and whirring as I exhaled. I kept thinking

that it sounded like a dragon breathing in time with me, like I had this pet dragon who was cuddled up next to me and cared enough about me to time his breaths to mine. I was thinking about that as I sank into sleep.

I got up late the next morning. I watched TV in bed and checked my email and then after a while started crafting an email to Peter Van Houten about how I couldn't come to Amsterdam but I swore upon the life of my mother that I would never share any information about the characters with anyone, that I didn't even *want* to share it, because I was a terribly selfish person, and could he please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real and if Anna's mom marries him and also about Sisyphus the Hamster.

But I didn't send it. It was too pathetic even for me.

Around three, when I figured Augustus would be home from school, I went into the backyard and called him. As the phone rang, I sat down on the grass, which was all overgrown and dandeliony. That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I'd created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys "R" Us and building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He'd insisted on swinging on it first to test it, and the thing damn near broke.

The sky was gray and low and full of rain but not yet raining. I hung up when I got Augustus's voice mail and

then put the phone down in the dirt beside me and kept looking at the swing set, thinking that I would give up all the sick days I had left for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish-granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn't let it kill me before it kills me, and then I just started muttering *stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid* over and over again until the sound unhinged from its meaning. I was still saying it when he called back.

"Hi," I said.

"Hazel Grace," he said.

"Hi," I said again.

"Are you crying, Hazel Grace?"

"Kind of?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Cause I'm just—I want to go to Amsterdam, and I want him to tell me what happens after the book is over, and I just don't want my particular life, and also the sky is depressing me, and there is this old swing set out here that my dad made for me when I was a kid."

"I must see this old swing set of tears immediately," he said. "I'll be over in twenty minutes."

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always really smothery and concerned when I was crying, because I did not cry often, and I knew she'd want to *talk* and discuss

whether I shouldn't consider adjusting my medication, and the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up.

It's not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child and the child saying *higher higher higher* or some other metaphorically resonant moment. The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings hanging still and sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid's drawing of a smile.

Behind me, I heard the sliding-glass door open. I turned around. It was Augustus, wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeve plaid button-down. I wiped my face with my sleeve and smiled. "Hi," I said.

It took him a second to sit down on the ground next to me, and he grimaced as he landed rather ungracefully on his ass. "Hi," he said finally. I looked over at him. He was looking past me, into the backyard. "I see your point," he said as he put an arm around my shoulder. "That is one sad goddamned swing set."

I nudged my head into his shoulder. "Thanks for offering to come over."

"You realize that trying to keep your distance from me will not lessen my affection for you," he said.

"I guess?" I said.

"All efforts to save me from you will fail," he said.

"Why? Why would you even like me? Haven't you put

yourself through enough of this?” I asked, thinking of Caroline Mathers.

Gus didn’t answer. He just held on to me, his fingers strong against my left arm. “We gotta do something about this frigging swing set,” he said. “I’m telling you, it’s ninety percent of the problem.”

Once I’d recovered, we went inside and sat down on the couch right next to each other, the laptop half on his (fake) knee and half on mine. “Hot,” I said of the laptop’s base.

“Is it now?” He smiled. Gus loaded this giveaway site called Free No Catch and together we wrote an ad.

“Headline?” he asked.

“Swing Set Needs Home,” I said.

“Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home,” he said.

“Lonely, Vaguely Pedophilic Swing Set Seeks the Butts of Children,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s why.”

“What?”

“That’s why I like you. Do you realize how rare it is to come across a hot girl who creates an adjectival version of the word *pedophile*? You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are.”

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was never enough air in the world, but the shortage was particularly acute in that moment.

John Green

We wrote the ad together, editing each other as we went. In the end, we settled upon this:

Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home

One swing set, well worn but structurally sound, seeks new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she or they will look into the backyard and feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It's all fragile and fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your child(ren) will be introduced to the ups and downs of human life gently and safely, and may also learn the most important lesson of all: No matter how hard you kick, no matter how high you get, you can't go all the way around.

Swing set currently resides near 83rd and Spring Mill.

After that, we turned on the TV for a little while, but we couldn't find anything to watch, so I grabbed *An Imperial Affliction* off the bedside table and brought it back into the living room and Augustus Waters read to me while Mom, making lunch, listened in.

"*"Mother's glass eye turned inward,"*" Augustus began. As

he read, I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once.

When I checked my email an hour later, I learned that we had plenty of swing-set suitors to choose from. In the end, we picked a guy named Daniel Alvarez who'd included a picture of his three kids playing video games with the subject line *I just want them to go outside*. I emailed him back and told him to pick it up at his leisure.

Augustus asked if I wanted to go with him to Support Group, but I was really tired from my busy day of Having Cancer, so I passed. We were sitting there on the couch together, and he pushed himself up to go but then fell back down onto the couch and sneaked a kiss onto my cheek.

"Augustus!" I said.

"Friendly," he said. He pushed himself up again and really stood this time, then took two steps over to my mom and said, "Always a pleasure to see you," and my mom opened her arms to hug him, whereupon Augustus leaned in and kissed my mom on the cheek. He turned back to me. "See?" he asked.

I went to bed right after dinner, the BiPAP drowning out the world beyond my room.

I never saw the swing set again.

I slept for a long time, ten hours, possibly because of the slow recovery and possibly because sleep fights cancer and

John Green

possibly because I was a teenager with no particular wake-up time. I wasn't strong enough yet to go back to classes at MCC. When I finally felt like getting up, I removed the BiPAP snout from my nose, put my oxygen nubbins in, turned them on, and then grabbed my laptop from beneath my bed, where I'd stashed it the night before.

I had an email from Lidewij Vliegenthart.

Dear Hazel,

I have received word via the Genies that you will be visiting us with Augustus Waters and your mother beginning on 4th of May. Only a week away! Peter and I are delighted and cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Your hotel, the Filosoof, is just one street away from Peter's home. Perhaps we should give you one day for the jet lag, yes? So if convenient, we will meet you at Peter's home on the morning of 5th May at perhaps ten o'clock for a cup of coffee and for him to answer questions you have about his book. And then perhaps afterward we can tour a museum or the Anne Frank House?

With all best wishes,

Lidewij Vliegenthart

Executive Assistant to Mr. Peter Van Houten,
author of *An Imperial Affliction*

...

"Mom," I said. She didn't answer. "MOM!" I shouted. Nothing. Again, louder, "MOM!"

She ran in wearing a threadbare pink towel under her armpits, dripping, vaguely panicked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sorry, I didn't know you were in the shower," I said.

"Bath," she said. "I was just . . ." She closed her eyes. "Just trying to take a bath for five seconds. Sorry. What's going on?"

"Can you call the Genies and tell them the trip is off? I just got an email from Peter Van Houten's assistant. She thinks we're coming."

She pursed her lips and squinted past me.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to tell you until your father gets home."

"*What?*" I asked again.

"Trip's on," she said finally. "Dr. Maria called us last night and made a convincing case that you need to live your—"

"MOM, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!" I shouted, and she came to the bed and let me hug her.

I texted Augustus because I knew he was in school:

Still free May three? :-)

John Green

He texted back immediately.

Everything's coming up Waters.

If I could just stay alive for a week, I'd know the unwritten secrets of Anna's mom and the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest.

"Keep your shit together," I whispered to my lungs.

CHAPTER NINE

The day before we left for Amsterdam, I went back to Support Group for the first time since meeting Augustus. The cast had rotated a bit down there in the Literal Heart of Jesus. I arrived early, enough time for perennially strong appendiceal cancer survivor Lida to bring me up-to-date on everyone as I ate a grocery-store chocolate chip cookie while leaning against the dessert table.

Twelve-year-old leukemic Michael had passed away. He'd fought hard, Lida told me, as if there were another way to fight. Everyone else was still around. Ken was NEC after radiation. Lucas had relapsed, and she said it with a sad smile and a little shrug, the way you might say an alcoholic had relapsed.

A cute, chubby girl walked over to the table and said hi to Lida, then introduced herself to me as Susan. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but she had a scar extending from the side of her nose down her lip and across her cheek. She had put makeup over the scar, which only served to emphasize it. I was feeling a little out of breath from all the standing, so I said, "I'm gonna go sit," and then the elevator opened, revealing Isaac and his mom. He wore sunglasses and clung to his mom's arm with one hand, a cane in the other.

"Support Group Hazel not Monica," I said when he got close enough, and he smiled and said, "Hey, Hazel. How's it going?"

"Good. I've gotten *really hot* since you went blind."

"I bet," he said. His mom led him to a chair, kissed the top of his head, and shuffled back toward the elevator. He felt around beneath him and then sat. I sat down in the chair next to him. "So how's it going?"

"Okay. Glad to be home, I guess. Gus told me you were in the ICU?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Sucks," he said.

"I'm a lot better now," I said. "I'm going to Amsterdam tomorrow with Gus."

"I know. I'm pretty well up-to-date on your life, because Gus never. Talks. About. Anything. Else."

I smiled. Patrick cleared his throat and said, "If we could all take a seat?" He caught my eye. "Hazel!" he said. "I'm so glad to see you!"

Everyone sat and Patrick began his retelling of his ball-lessness, and I fell into the routine of Support Group: communicating through sighs with Isaac, feeling sorry for everyone in the room and also everyone outside of it, zoning out of the conversation to focus on my breathlessness and the aching. The world went on, as it does, without my full participation, and I only woke up from the reverie when someone said my name.

It was Lida the Strong. Lida in remission. Blond, healthy, stout Lida, who swam on her high school swim team. Lida, missing only her appendix, saying my name, saying, "Hazel is such an inspiration to me; she really is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning and going to war without complaint. She's so strong. She's so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength."

"Hazel?" Patrick asked. "How does that make you feel?"

I shrugged and looked over at Lida. "I'll give you my strength if I can have your remission." I felt guilty as soon as I said it.

"I don't think that's what Lida meant," Patrick said. "I think she . . ." But I'd stopped listening.

After the prayers for the living and the endless litany of the dead (with Michael tacked on to the end), we held

hands and said, "Living our best life today!"

Lida immediately rushed up to me full of apology and explanation, and I said, "No, no, it's really fine," waving her off, and I said to Isaac, "Care to accompany me upstairs?"

He took my arm, and I walked with him to the elevator, grateful to have an excuse to avoid the stairs. I'd almost made it all the way to the elevator when I saw his mom standing in a corner of the Literal Heart. "I'm here," she said to Isaac, and he switched from my arm to hers before asking, "You want to come over?"

"Sure," I said. I felt bad for him. Even though I hated the sympathy people felt toward me, I couldn't help but feel it toward him.

Isaac lived in a small ranch house in Meridian Hills next to this fancy private school. We sat down in the living room while his mom went off to the kitchen to make dinner, and then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

"Sure," I said. So he asked for the remote. I gave it to him, and he turned on the TV and then a computer attached to it. The TV screen stayed black, but after a few seconds a deep voice spoke from it.

"Deception," the voice said. "One player or two?"

"Two," Isaac said. "Pause." He turned to me. "I play this game with Gus all the time, but it's infuriating because he is a completely suicidal video-game player. He's, like, way

too aggressive about saving civilians and whatnot.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering the night of the broken trophies.

“Unpause,” Isaac said.

“Player one, identify yourself.”

“This is player one’s sexy sexy voice,” Isaac said.

“Player two, identify yourself.”

“I would be player two, I guess,” I said.

Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem and Private Jasper Jacks awake in a dark, empty room approximately twelve feet square.

Isaac pointed toward the TV, like I should talk to it or something. “Um,” I said. “Is there a light switch?”

No.

“Is there a door?”

Private Jacks locates the door. It is locked.

Isaac jumped in. “There’s a key above the door frame.”

Yes, there is.

“Mayhem opens the door.”

The darkness is still complete.

“Take out knife,” Isaac said.

“Take out knife,” I added.

A kid—Isaac’s brother, I assume—darted out from the kitchen. He was maybe ten, wiry and overenergetic, and he kind of skipped across the living room before shouting in a really good imitation of Isaac’s voice, “KILL MYSELF.”

Sergeant Mayhem places his knife to his neck. Are you sure you—

“No,” Isaac said. “Pause. Graham, don’t make me kick your ass.” Graham laughed giddily and skipped off down a hallway.

As Mayhem and Jacks, Isaac and I felt our way forward in the cavern until we bumped into a guy whom we stabbed after getting him to tell us that we were in a Ukrainian prison cave, more than a mile beneath the ground. As we continued, sound effects—a raging underground river, voices speaking in Ukrainian and accented English—led you through the cave, but there was nothing to see in this game. After playing for an hour, we began to hear the cries of a desperate prisoner, pleading, “God, help me. God, help me.”

“Pause,” Isaac said. “This is when Gus always insists on finding the prisoner, even though that keeps you from winning the game, and the only way to *actually free* the prisoner is to win the game.”

“Yeah, he takes video games too seriously,” I said. “He’s a bit too enamored with metaphor.”

“Do you like him?” Isaac asked.

“Of course I like him. He’s great.”

“But you don’t want to hook up with him?”

I shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You don’t want to give him something he can’t handle. You don’t want him to Monica you,” he said.

"Kinda," I said. But it wasn't that. The truth was, I didn't want to Isaac him. "To be fair to Monica," I said, "what you did to her wasn't very nice either."

"What'd *I* do to her?" he asked, defensive.

"You know, going blind and everything."

"But that's not my fault," Isaac said.

"I'm not saying it was your *fault*. I'm saying it wasn't *nice*."

CHAPTER TEN

We could only take one suitcase. I couldn't carry one, and Mom insisted that she couldn't carry two, so we had to jockey for space in this black suitcase my parents had gotten as a wedding present a million years ago, a suitcase that was supposed to spend its life in exotic locales but ended up mostly going back and forth to Dayton, where Morris Property, Inc., had a satellite office that Dad often visited.

I argued with Mom that I should have slightly more than half of the suitcase, since without me and my cancer, we'd never be going to Amsterdam in the first place. Mom countered that since she was twice as large as me and

therefore required more physical fabric to preserve her modesty, she deserved at least two-thirds of the suitcase.

In the end, we both lost. So it goes.

Our flight didn't leave until noon, but Mom woke me up at five thirty, turning on the light and shouting, "AMSTERDAM!" She ran around all morning making sure we had international plug adapters and quadruple-checking that we had the right number of oxygen tanks to get there and that they were all full, etc., while I just rolled out of bed, put on my Travel to Amsterdam Outfit (jeans, a pink tank top, and a black cardigan in case the plane was cold).

The car was packed by six fifteen, whereupon Mom insisted that we eat breakfast with Dad, although I had a moral opposition to eating before dawn on the grounds that I was not a nineteenth-century Russian peasant fortifying myself for a day in the fields. But anyway, I tried to stomach down some eggs while Mom and Dad enjoyed these homemade versions of Egg McMuffins they liked.

"Why are breakfast foods breakfast foods?" I asked them. "Like, why don't we have curry for breakfast?"

"Hazel, eat."

"But *why*?" I asked. "I mean, seriously: How did scrambled eggs get stuck with breakfast exclusivity? You can put bacon on a sandwich without anyone freaking out. But the moment your sandwich has an egg, boom, it's a *breakfast* sandwich."

Dad answered with his mouth full. "When you come back, we'll have breakfast for dinner. Deal?"

"I don't want to have 'breakfast for dinner,'" I answered, crossing knife and fork over my mostly full plate. "I want to have scrambled eggs for dinner without this ridiculous construction that a scrambled egg-inclusive meal is *breakfast* even when it occurs at dinnertime."

"You've gotta pick your battles in this world, Hazel," my mom said. "But if this is the issue you want to champion, we will stand behind you."

"Quite a bit behind you," my dad added, and Mom laughed.

Anyway, I knew it was stupid, but I felt kind of *bad* for scrambled eggs.

After they finished eating, Dad did the dishes and walked us to the car. Of course, he started crying, and he kissed my cheek with his wet stubbly face. He pressed his nose against my cheekbone and whispered, "I love you. I'm so proud of you." (*For what*, I wondered.)

"Thanks, Dad."

"I'll see you in a few days, okay, sweetie? I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Dad." I smiled. "And it's only three days."

As we backed out of the driveway, I kept waving at him. He was waving back, and crying. It occurred to me that he

was probably thinking he might never see me again, which he probably thought every single morning of his entire weekday life as he left for work, which probably sucked.

Mom and I drove over to Augustus's house, and when we got there, she wanted me to stay in the car to rest, but I went to the door with her anyway. As we approached the house, I could hear someone crying inside. I didn't think it was Gus at first, because it didn't sound anything like the low rumble of his speaking, but then I heard a voice that was definitely a twisted version of his say, "BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE, MOM. IT BELONGS TO ME." And quickly my mom put her arm around my shoulders and spun me back toward the car, walking quickly, and I was like, "Mom, what's wrong?"

And she said, "We can't eavesdrop, Hazel."

We got back into the car and I texted Augustus that we were outside whenever he was ready.

We stared at the house for a while. The weird thing about houses is that they almost always look like nothing is happening inside of them, even though they contain most of our lives. I wondered if that was sort of the point of architecture.

"Well," Mom said after a while, "we are pretty early, I guess."

"Almost as if I didn't have to get up at five thirty," I said. Mom reached down to the console between us, grabbed her

coffee mug, and took a sip. My phone buzzed. A text from Augustus.

Just CAN'T decide what to wear. Do you like me better in a polo or a button-down?

I replied:

Button-down.

Thirty seconds later, the front door opened, and a smiling Augustus appeared, a roller bag behind him. He wore a pressed sky-blue button-down tucked into his jeans. A Camel Light dangled from his lips. My mom got out to say hi to him. He took the cigarette out momentarily and spoke in the confident voice to which I was accustomed. "Always a pleasure to see you, ma'am."

I watched them through the rearview mirror until Mom opened the trunk. Moments later, Augustus opened a door behind me and engaged in the complicated business of entering the backseat of a car with one leg.

"Do you want shotgun?" I asked.

"Absolutely not," he said. "And hello, Hazel Grace."

"Hi," I said. "Okay?" I asked.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay," I said.

My mom got in and closed the car door. "Next stop, Amsterdam," she announced.

Which was not quite true. The next stop was the airport parking lot, and then a bus took us to the terminal, and then an open-air electric car took us to the security line. The TSA guy at the front of the line was shouting about how our bags had better not contain explosives or firearms or anything liquid over three ounces, and I said to Augustus, "Observation: Standing in line is a form of oppression," and he said, "Seriously."

Rather than be searched by hand, I chose to walk through the metal detector without my cart or my tank or even the plastic nubbins in my nose. Walking through the X-ray machine marked the first time I'd taken a step without oxygen in some months, and it felt pretty amazing to walk unencumbered like that, stepping across the Rubicon, the machine's silence acknowledging that I was, however briefly, a nonmetallicized creature.

I felt a bodily sovereignty that I can't really describe except to say that when I was a kid I used to have a really heavy backpack that I carried everywhere with all my books in it, and if I walked around with the backpack for long enough, when I took it off I felt like I was floating.

After about ten seconds, my lungs felt like they were folding in upon themselves like flowers at dusk. I sat down

on a gray bench just past the machine and tried to catch my breath, my cough a rattling drizzle, and I felt pretty miserable until I got the cannula back into place.

Even then, it hurt. The pain was always there, pulling me inside of myself, demanding to be felt. It always felt like I was waking up from the pain when something in the world outside of me suddenly required my comment or attention. Mom was looking at me, concerned. She'd just said something. What had she just said? Then I remembered. She'd asked what was wrong.

"Nothing," I said.

"Amsterdam!" she half shouted.

I smiled. "Amsterdam," I answered. She reached her hand down to me and pulled me up.

We got to the gate an hour before our scheduled boarding time. "Mrs. Lancaster, you are an impressively punctual person," Augustus said as he sat down next to me in the mostly empty gate area.

"Well, it helps that I am not technically very busy," she said.

"You're plenty busy," I told her, although it occurred to me that Mom's business was mostly me. There was also the business of being married to my dad—he was kind of clueless about, like, banking and hiring plumbers and cooking and doing things other than working for Morris

Property, Inc.—but it was mostly me. Her primary reason for living and my primary reason for living were awfully entangled.

As the seats around the gate started to fill, Augustus said, “I’m gonna get a hamburger before we leave. Can I get you anything?”

“No,” I said, “but I really appreciate your refusal to give in to breakfasty social conventions.”

He tilted his head at me, confused. “Hazel has developed an issue with the ghettoization of scrambled eggs,” Mom said.

“It’s embarrassing that we all just walk through life blindly accepting that scrambled eggs are fundamentally associated with mornings.”

“I want to talk about this more,” Augustus said. “But I am starving. I’ll be right back.”

When Augustus hadn’t showed up after twenty minutes, I asked Mom if she thought something was wrong, and she looked up from her awful magazine only long enough to say, “He probably just went to the bathroom or something.”

A gate agent came over and switched my oxygen container out with one provided by the airline. I was embarrassed to have this lady kneeling in front of me while everyone watched, so I texted Augustus while she did it.

He didn’t reply. Mom seemed unconcerned, but I

was imagining all kinds of Amsterdam trip-ruining fates (arrest, injury, mental breakdown) and I felt like there was something noncancerous wrong with my chest as the minutes ticked away.

And just when the lady behind the ticket counter announced they were going to start preboarding people who might need a bit of extra time and every single person in the gate area turned squarely to me, I saw Augustus fast-limping toward us with a McDonald's bag in one hand, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Line got superlong, sorry," he said, offering me a hand up. I took it, and we walked side by side to the gate to preboard.

I could feel everybody watching us, wondering what was wrong with us, and whether it would kill us, and how heroic my mom must be, and everything else. That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes: The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other, and never was it more obvious than when the three of us walked through the empty plane, the stewardess nodding sympathetically and gesturing us toward our row in the distant back. I sat in the middle of our three-person row with Augustus in the window seat and Mom in the aisle. I felt a little hemmed in by Mom, so of course I scooted over toward Augustus. We were

right behind the plane's wing. He opened up his bag and unwrapped his burger.

"The thing about eggs, though," he said, "is that breakfastization gives the scrambled egg a certain *sacrality*, right? You can get yourself some bacon or Cheddar cheese anywhere anytime, from tacos to breakfast sandwiches to grilled cheese, but scrambled eggs—they're *important*."

"Ludicrous," I said. The people were starting to file into the plane now. I didn't want to look at them, so I looked away, and to look away was to look at Augustus.

"I'm just saying: Maybe scrambled eggs are ghettoized, but they're also special. They have a place and a time, like church does."

"You couldn't be more wrong," I said. "You are buying into the cross-stitched sentiments of your parents' throw pillows. You're arguing that the fragile, rare thing is beautiful simply because it is fragile and rare. But that's a lie, and you know it."

"You're a hard person to comfort," Augustus said.

"Easy comfort isn't comforting," I said. "You were a rare and fragile flower once. You remember."

For a moment, he said nothing. "You do know how to shut me up, Hazel Grace."

"It's my privilege and my responsibility," I answered.

Before I broke eye contact with him, he said, "Listen, sorry I avoided the gate area. The McDonald's line wasn't

really that long; I just . . . I just didn't want to sit there with all those people looking at us or whatever."

"At me, mostly," I said. You could glance at Gus and never know he'd been sick, but I carried my disease with me on the outside, which is part of why I'd become a homebody in the first place. "Augustus Waters, noted charmatist, is embarrassed to sit next to a girl with an oxygen tank."

"Not embarrassed," he said. "They just piss me off sometimes. And I don't want to be pissed off today." After a minute, he dug into his pocket and flipped open his pack of smokes.

About nine seconds later, a blond stewardess rushed over to our row and said, "Sir, you can't smoke on this plane. Or any plane."

"I don't smoke," he explained, the cigarette dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

"But—"

"It's a metaphor," I explained. "He puts the killing thing in his mouth but doesn't give it the power to kill him."

The stewardess was flummoxed for only a moment. "Well, that metaphor is prohibited on today's flight," she said. Gus nodded and rejoined the cigarette to its pack.

We finally taxied out to the runway and the pilot said, *Flight attendants, prepare for departure*, and then two tremendous jet engines roared to life and we began to accelerate. "This is

what it feels like to drive in a car with you,” I said, and he smiled, but kept his jaw clenched tight and I said, “Okay?”

We were picking up speed and suddenly Gus’s hand grabbed the armrest, his eyes wide, and I put my hand on top of his and said, “Okay?” He didn’t say anything, just stared at me wide-eyed, and I said, “Are you scared of flying?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” he said. The nose of the plane rose up and we were aloft. Gus stared out the window, watching the planet shrink beneath us, and then I felt his hand relax beneath mine. He glanced at me and then back out the window. “We are *flying*,” he announced.

“You’ve never been on a plane before?”

He shook his head. “LOOK!” he half shouted, pointing at the window.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I see it. It looks like we’re in an airplane.”

“NOTHING HAS EVER LOOKED LIKE THAT EVER IN ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY,” he said. His enthusiasm was adorable. I couldn’t resist leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

“Just so you know, I’m right here,” Mom said. “Sitting next to you. Your mother. Who held your hand as you took your first infantile steps.”

“It’s friendly,” I reminded her, turning to kiss her on the cheek.

“Didn’t feel too friendly,” Gus mumbled just loud

enough for me to hear. When surprised and excited and innocent Gus emerged from Grand Gesture Metaphorically Inclined Augustus, I literally could not resist.

It was a quick flight to Detroit, where the little electric car met us as we disembarked and drove us to the gate for Amsterdam. That plane had TVs in the back of each seat, and once we were above the clouds, Augustus and I timed it so that we started watching the same romantic comedy at the same time on our respective screens. But even though we were perfectly synchronized in our pressing of the play button, his movie started a couple seconds before mine, so at every funny moment, he'd laugh just as I started to hear whatever the joke was.

Mom had this big plan that we would sleep for the last several hours of the flight, so when we landed at eight A.M., we'd hit the city ready to suck the marrow out of life or whatever. So after the movie was over, Mom and Augustus and I all took sleeping pills. Mom conked out within seconds, but Augustus and I stayed up to look out the window for a while. It was a clear day, and although we couldn't see the sun setting, we could see the sky's response.

"God, that is beautiful," I said mostly to myself.

"The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes," he said, a line from *An Imperial Affliction*.

"But it's not rising," I said.

"It's rising somewhere," he answered, and then after a moment said, "Observation: It would be awesome to fly in a superfast airplane that could chase the sunrise around the world for a while."

"Also I'd live longer." He looked at me askew. "You know, because of relativity or whatever." He still looked confused. "We age slower when we move quickly versus standing still. So right now time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground."

"College chicks," he said. "They're so smart."

I rolled my eyes. He hit his (real) knee with my knee and I hit his knee back with mine. "Are you sleepy?" I asked him.

"Not at all," he answered.

"Yeah," I said. "Me neither." Sleeping meds and narcotics didn't do for me what they did for normal people.

"Want to watch another movie?" he asked. "They've got a Portman movie from her Hazel Era."

"I want to watch something you haven't seen."

In the end we watched *300*, a war movie about 300 Spartans who protect Sparta from an invading army of like a billion Persians. Augustus's movie started before mine again, and after a few minutes of hearing him go, "Dang!" or "Fatality!" every time someone was killed in some badass way, I leaned over the armrest and put my head on his

shoulder so I could see his screen and we could actually watch the movie together.

300 featured a sizable collection of shirtless and well-oiled strapping young lads, so it was not particularly difficult on the eyes, but it was mostly a lot of sword wielding to no real effect. The bodies of the Persians and the Spartans piled up, and I couldn't quite figure out why the Persians were so evil or the Spartans so awesome. "Contemporaneity," to quote AIA, "specializes in the kind of battles wherein no one loses anything of any value, except arguably their lives." And so it was with these titans clashing.

Toward the end of the movie, almost everyone is dead, and there is this insane moment when the Spartans start stacking the bodies of the dead up to form a wall of corpses. The dead become this massive roadblock standing between the Persians and the road to Sparta. I found the gore a bit gratuitous, so I looked away for a second, asking Augustus, "How many dead people do you think there are?"

He dismissed me with a wave. "*Shh. Shh.* This is getting awesome."

When the Persians attacked, they had to climb up the wall of death, and the Spartans were able to occupy the high ground atop the corpse mountain, and as the bodies piled up, the wall of martyrs only became higher and therefore harder to climb, and everybody swung swords/shot arrows, and the rivers of blood poured down Mount Death, etc.

I took my head off his shoulder for a moment to get

a break from the gore and watched Augustus watch the movie. He couldn't contain his goofy grin. I watched my own screen through squinted eyes as the mountain grew with the bodies of Persians and Spartans. When the Persians finally overran the Spartans, I looked over at Augustus again. Even though the good guys had just lost, Augustus seemed downright *joyful*. I nuzzled up to him again, but kept my eyes closed until the battle was finished.

As the credits rolled, he took off his headphones and said, "Sorry, I was awash in the nobility of sacrifice. What were you saying?"

"How many dead people do you think there are?"

"Like, how many fictional people died in that fictional movie? Not enough," he joked.

"No, I mean, like, ever. Like, how many people do you think have ever died?"

"I happen to know the answer to that question," he said. "There are seven billion living people, and about ninety-eight billion dead people."

"Oh," I said. I'd thought that maybe since population growth had been so fast, there were more people alive than all the dead combined.

"There are about fourteen dead people for every living person," he said. The credits continued rolling. It took a long time to identify all those corpses, I guess. My head was still on his shoulder. "I did some research on this a couple years ago," Augustus continued. "I was wondering if

everybody could be remembered. Like, if we got organized, and assigned a certain number of corpses to each living person, would there be enough living people to remember all the dead people?”

“And are there?”

“Sure, anyone can name fourteen dead people. But we’re disorganized mourners, so a lot of people end up remembering Shakespeare, and no one ends up remembering the person he wrote Sonnet Fifty-five about.”

“Yeah,” I said.

It was quiet for a minute, and then he asked, “You want to read or something?” I said sure. I was reading this long poem called *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg for my poetry class, and Gus was rereading *An Imperial Affliction*.

After a while he said, “Is it any good?”

“The poem?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, it’s great. The guys in this poem take even more drugs than I do. How’s AIA?”

“Still perfect,” he said. “Read to me.”

“This isn’t really a poem to read aloud when you are sitting next to your sleeping mother. It has, like, sodomy and angel dust in it,” I said.

“You just named two of my favorite pastimes,” he said.

“Okay, read me something else then?”

“Um,” I said. “I don’t *have* anything else?”

"That's too bad. I am so in the mood for poetry. Do you have anything memorized?"

"Let us go then, you and I," I started nervously, "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table."

"Slower," he said.

I felt bashful, like I had when I'd first told him of *An Imperial Affliction*. "Um, okay. Okay. 'Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells: / Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question . . . / Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit.'"

"I'm in love with you," he said quietly.

"Augustus," I said.

"I am," he said. He was staring at me, and I could see the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I'm in love with you, and I'm not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things. I'm in love with you, and I know that love is just a shout into the void, and that oblivion is inevitable, and that we're all doomed and that there will come a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, and I know the sun will swallow the only earth we'll ever have, and I am in love with you."

"Augustus," I said again, not knowing what else to

John Green

say. It felt like everything was rising up in me, like I was drowning in this weirdly painful joy, but I couldn't say it back. I couldn't say anything back. I just looked at him and let him look at me until he nodded, lips pursed, and turned away, placing the side of his head against the window.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I think he must have fallen asleep. I did, eventually, and woke to the landing gear coming down. My mouth tasted horrible, and I tried to keep it shut for fear of poisoning the airplane.

I looked over at Augustus, who was staring out the window, and as we dipped below the low-hung clouds, I straightened my back to see the Netherlands. The land seemed sunk into the ocean, little rectangles of green surrounded on all sides by canals. We landed, in fact, parallel to a canal, like there were two runways: one for us and one for waterfowl.

After getting our bags and clearing customs, we all

piled into a taxi driven by this doughy bald guy who spoke perfect English—like better English than I do. “The Hotel Filosoof?” I said.

And he said, “You are Americans?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “We’re from *Indiana*.”

“Indiana,” he said. “They steal the land from the Indians and leave the name, yes?”

“Something like that,” Mom said. The cabbie pulled out into traffic and we headed toward a highway with lots of blue signs featuring double vowels: Oosthuizen, Haarlem. Beside the highway, flat empty land stretched for miles, interrupted by the occasional huge corporate headquarters. In short, Holland looked like Indianapolis, only with smaller cars. “This is Amsterdam?” I asked the cabdriver.

“Yes and no,” he answered. “Amsterdam is like the rings of a tree: It gets older as you get closer to the center.”

It happened all at once: We exited the highway and there were the row houses of my imagination leaning precariously toward canals, ubiquitous bicycles, and coffeeshops advertising LARGE SMOKING ROOM. We drove over a canal and from atop the bridge I could see dozens of houseboats moored along the water. It looked nothing like America. It looked like an old painting, but real—everything achingly idyllic in the morning light—and I thought about how wonderfully strange it would be to live

in a place where almost everything had been built by the dead.

“Are these houses very old?” asked my mom.

“Many of the canal houses date from the Golden Age, the seventeenth century,” he said. “Our city has a rich history, even though many tourists are only wanting to see the Red Light District.” He paused. “Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth it is a city of freedom. And in freedom, most people find sin.”

All the rooms in the Hotel Filosoof were named after filosoofers: Mom and I were staying on the ground floor in the Kierkegaard; Augustus was on the floor above us, in the Heidegger. Our room was small: a double bed pressed against a wall with my BiPAP machine, an oxygen concentrator, and a dozen refillable oxygen tanks at the foot of the bed. Past the equipment, there was a dusty old paisley chair with a sagging seat, a desk, and a bookshelf above the bed containing the collected works of Søren Kierkegaard. On the desk we found a wicker basket full of presents from the Genies: wooden shoes, an orange Holland T-shirt, chocolates, and various other goodies.

The Filosoof was right next to the Vondelpark, Amsterdam’s most famous park. Mom wanted to go on a walk, but I was supertired, so she got the BiPAP working and placed its snout on me. I hated talking with that thing

on, but I said, “Just go to the park and I’ll call you when I wake up.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sleep tight, honey.”

But when I woke up some hours later, she was sitting in the ancient little chair in the corner, reading a guidebook.

“Morning,” I said.

“Actually late afternoon,” she answered, pushing herself out of the chair with a sigh. She came to the bed, placed a tank in the cart, and connected it to the tube while I took off the BiPAP snout and placed the nubbins into my nose. She set it for 2.5 liters a minute—six hours before I’d need a change—and then I got up. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good,” I said. “Great. How was the Vondelpark?”

“I skipped it,” she said. “Read all about it in the guidebook, though.”

“Mom,” I said, “you didn’t have to stay here.”

She shrugged. “I know. I wanted to. I like watching you sleep.”

“Said the creeper.” She laughed, but I still felt bad. “I just want you to have fun or whatever, you know?”

“Okay. I’ll have fun tonight, okay? I’ll go do crazy mom stuff while you and Augustus go to dinner.”

“Without you?” I asked.

“Yes without me. In fact, you have reservations at a

place called Oranje,” she said. “Mr. Van Houten’s assistant set it up. It’s in this neighborhood called the Jordaan. Very fancy, according to the guidebook. There’s a tram station right around the corner. Augustus has directions. You can eat outside, watch the boats go by. It’ll be lovely. Very romantic.”

“Mom.”

“I’m just saying,” she said. “You should get dressed. The sundress, maybe?”

One might marvel at the insanity of the situation: A mother sends her sixteen-year-old daughter alone with a seventeen-year-old boy out into a foreign city famous for its permissiveness. But this, too, was a side effect of dying: I could not run or dance or eat foods rich in nitrogen, but in the city of freedom, I was among the most liberated of its residents.

I did indeed wear the sundress—this blue print, flowey knee-length Forever 21 thing—with tights and Mary Janes because I liked being quite a lot shorter than him. I went into the hilariously tiny bathroom and battled my bedhead for a while until everything looked suitably mid-2000s Natalie Portman. At six P.M. on the dot (noon back home), there was a knock.

“Hello?” I said through the door. There was no peephole at the Hotel Filosoof.

“Okay,” Augustus answered. I could hear the cigarette

in his mouth. I looked down at myself. The sundress offered the most in the way of my rib cage and collarbone that Augustus had seen. It wasn't obscene or anything, but it was as close as I ever got to showing some skin. (My mother had a motto on this front that I agreed with: "Lancasters don't bare midriffs.")

I pulled the door open. Augustus wore a black suit, narrow lapels, perfectly tailored, over a light blue dress shirt and a thin black tie. A cigarette dangled from the unsmiling corner of his mouth. "Hazel Grace," he said, "you look gorgeous."

"I," I said. I kept thinking the rest of my sentence would emerge from the air passing through my vocal cords, but nothing happened. Then finally, I said, "I feel underdressed."

"Ah, this old thing?" he said, smiling down at me.

"Augustus," my mom said behind me, "you look *extremely* handsome."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. He offered me his arm. I took it, glancing back to Mom.

"See you by eleven," she said.

Waiting for the number one tram on a wide street busy with traffic, I said to Augustus, "The suit you wear to funerals, I assume?"

"Actually, no," he said. "That suit isn't nearly this nice."

The blue-and-white tram arrived, and Augustus handed our cards to the driver, who explained that we needed to wave them at this circular sensor. As we walked through the crowded tram, an old man stood up to give us seats together, and I tried to tell him to sit, but he gestured toward the seat insistently. We rode the tram for three stops, me leaning over Gus so we could look out the window together.

Augustus pointed up at the trees and asked, “Do you see that?”

I did. There were elm trees everywhere along the canals, and these seeds were blowing out of them. But they didn’t look like seeds. They looked for all the world like miniaturized rose petals drained of their color. These pale petals were gathering in the wind like flocking birds—thousands of them, like a spring snowstorm.

The old man who’d given up his seat saw us noticing and said, in English, “Amsterdam’s spring snow. The *iepen* throw confetti to greet the spring.”

We switched trams, and after four more stops we arrived at a street split by a beautiful canal, the reflections of the ancient bridge and picturesque canal houses rippling in water.

Oranje was just steps from the tram. The restaurant was on one side of the street; the outdoor seating on the other, on a concrete outcropping right at the edge of the

canal. The hostess's eyes lit up as Augustus and I walked toward her. "Mr. and Mrs. Waters?"

"I guess?" I said.

"Your table," she said, gesturing across the street to a narrow table inches from the canal. "The champagne is our gift."

Gus and I glanced at each other, smiling. Once we'd crossed the street, he pulled out a seat for me and helped me scoot it back in. There were indeed two flutes of champagne at our white-tableclothed table. The slight chill in the air was balanced magnificently by the sunshine; on one side of us, cyclists pedaled past—well-dressed men and women on their way home from work, improbably attractive blond girls riding sidesaddle on the back of a friend's bike, tiny helmetless kids bouncing around in plastic seats behind their parents. And on our other side, the canal water was choked with millions of the confetti seeds. Little boats were moored at the brick banks, half full of rainwater, some of them near sinking. A bit farther down the canal, I could see houseboats floating on pontoons, and in the middle of the canal, an open-air, flat-bottomed boat decked out with lawn chairs and a portable stereo idled toward us. Augustus took his flute of champagne and raised it. I took mine, even though I'd never had a drink aside from sips of my dad's beer.

"Okay," he said.

“Okay,” I said, and we clinked glasses. I took a sip. The tiny bubbles melted in my mouth and journeyed northward into my brain. Sweet. Crisp. Delicious. “That is really good,” I said. “I’ve never drunk champagne.”

A sturdy young waiter with wavy blond hair appeared. He was maybe even taller than Augustus. “Do you know,” he asked in a delicious accent, “what Dom Pérignon said after inventing champagne?”

“No?” I said.

“He called out to his fellow monks, ‘Come quickly: I am tasting the stars.’ Welcome to Amsterdam. Would you like to see a menu, or will you have the chef’s choice?”

I looked at Augustus and he at me. “The chef’s choice sounds lovely, but Hazel is a vegetarian.” I’d mentioned this to Augustus precisely once, on the first day we met.

“This is not a problem,” the waiter said.

“Awesome. And can we get more of this?” Gus asked, of the champagne.

“Of course,” said our waiter. “We have bottled all the stars this evening, my young friends. Gah, the confetti!” he said, and lightly brushed a seed from my bare shoulder. “It hasn’t been so bad in many years. It’s everywhere. Very annoying.”

The waiter disappeared. We watched the confetti fall from the sky, skip across the ground in the breeze, and tumble into the canal. “Kind of hard to believe anyone

John Green

could ever find that annoying,” Augustus said after a while.

“People always get used to beauty, though.”

“I haven’t gotten used to you just yet,” he answered, smiling. I felt myself blushing. “Thank you for coming to Amsterdam,” he said.

“Thank you for letting me hijack your wish,” I said.

“Thank you for wearing that dress which is like whoa,” he said. I shook my head, trying not to smile at him. I didn’t want to be a grenade. But then again, he knew what he was doing, didn’t he? It was his choice, too. “Hey, how’s that poem end?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“The one you recited to me on the plane.”

“Oh, ‘Prufrock’? It ends, ‘We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.’”

Augustus pulled out a cigarette and tapped the filter against the table. “Stupid human voices always ruining everything.”

The waiter arrived with two more glasses of champagne and what he called “Belgian white asparagus with a lavender infusion.”

“I’ve never had champagne either,” Gus said after he left. “In case you were wondering or whatever. Also, I’ve never had white asparagus.”

I was chewing my first bite. “It’s amazing,” I promised.

He took a bite, swallowed. "God. If asparagus tasted like that all the time, I'd be a vegetarian, too." Some people in a lacquered wooden boat approached us on the canal below. One of them, a woman with curly blond hair, maybe thirty, drank from a beer then raised her glass toward us and shouted something.

"We don't speak Dutch," Gus shouted back.

One of the others shouted a translation: "The beautiful couple is beautiful."

The food was so good that with each passing course, our conversation devolved further into fragmented celebrations of its deliciousness: "I want this dragon carrot risotto to become a person so I can take it to Las Vegas and marry it." "Sweet-pea sorbet, you are so unexpectedly magnificent." I wish I'd been hungrier.

After green garlic gnocchi with red mustard leaves, the waiter said, "Dessert next. More stars first?" I shook my head. Two glasses was enough for me. Champagne was no exception to my high tolerance for depressants and pain relievers; I felt warm but not intoxicated. But I didn't want to get drunk. Nights like this one didn't come along often, and I wanted to remember it.

"Mmmm," I said after the waiter left, and Augustus smiled crookedly as he stared down the canal while I stared up it. We had plenty to look at, so the silence didn't feel

awkward really, but I wanted everything to be perfect. It *was* perfect, I guess, but it felt like someone had tried to stage the Amsterdam of my imagination, which made it hard to forget that this dinner, like the trip itself, was a cancer perk. I just wanted us to be talking and joking comfortably, like we were on the couch together back home, but some tension underlay everything.

“It’s not my funeral suit,” he said after a while. “When I first found out I was sick—I mean, they told me I had like an eighty-five percent chance of cure. I know those are great odds, but I kept thinking it was a game of Russian roulette. I mean, I was going to have to go through hell for six months or a year and lose my leg and then at the end, it *still* might not work, you know?”

“I know,” I said, although I didn’t, not really. I’d never been anything but terminal; all my treatment had been in pursuit of extending my life, not curing my cancer. Phalanxifor had introduced a measure of ambiguity to my cancer story, but I was different from Augustus: My final chapter was written upon diagnosis. Gus, like most cancer survivors, lived with uncertainty.

“Right,” he said. “So I went through this whole thing about wanting to be ready. We bought a plot in Crown Hill, and I walked around with my dad one day and picked out a spot. And I had my whole funeral planned out and everything, and then right before the surgery, I asked my

parents if I could buy a suit, like a really nice suit, just in case I bit it. Anyway, I've never had occasion to wear it. Until tonight."

"So it's your death suit."

"Correct. Don't you have a death outfit?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's a dress I bought for my fifteenth birthday party. But I don't wear it on dates."

His eyes lit up. "We're on a date?" he asked.

I looked down, feeling bashful. "Don't push it."

We were both really full, but dessert—a succulently rich *crèmeux* surrounded by passion fruit—was too good not to at least nibble, so we lingered for a while over dessert, trying to get hungry again. The sun was a toddler insistently refusing to go to bed: It was past eight thirty and still light.

Out of nowhere, Augustus asked, "Do you believe in an afterlife?"

"I think forever is an incorrect concept," I answered.

He smirked. "You're an incorrect concept."

"I know. That's why I'm being taken out of the rotation."

"That's not funny," he said, looking at the street. Two girls passed on a bike, one riding sidesaddle over the back wheel.

"Come on," I said. "That was a joke."

"The thought of you being removed from the rotation

is not funny to me,” he said. “Seriously, though: afterlife?”

“No,” I said, and then revised. “Well, maybe I wouldn’t go so far as no. You?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice full of confidence. “Yes, absolutely. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, and live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes. I believe in Something with a capital S. Always have.”

“Really?” I asked. I was surprised. I’d always associated belief in heaven with, frankly, a kind of intellectual disengagement. But Gus wasn’t dumb.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I believe in that line from *An Imperial Affliction*. ‘The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes.’ That’s God, I think, the rising sun, and the light is too bright and her eyes are losing but they aren’t lost. I don’t believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but I think something becomes of us.”

“But you fear oblivion.”

“Sure, I fear earthly oblivion. But, I mean, not to sound like my parents, but I believe humans have souls, and I believe in the conservation of souls. The oblivion fear is something else, fear that I won’t be able to give anything in exchange for my life. If you don’t live a life in service of a greater good, you’ve gotta at least die a death in service of a greater good, you know? And I fear that I won’t get either a life or a death that means anything.”

I just shook my head.

“What?” he asked.

"Your obsession with, like, dying for something or leaving behind some great sign of your heroism or whatever. It's just weird."

"Everyone wants to lead an extraordinary life."

"Not everyone," I said, unable to disguise my annoyance.

"Are you mad?"

"It's just," I said, and then couldn't finish my sentence. "Just," I said again. Between us flickered the candle. "It's really mean of you to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for something. That's a really mean thing to say to me."

I felt like a little kid for some reason, and I took a bite of dessert to make it appear like it was not that big of a deal to me. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it like that. I was just thinking about myself."

"Yeah, you were," I said. I was too full to finish. I worried I might puke, actually, because I often puked after eating. (Not bulimia, just cancer.) I pushed my dessert plate toward Gus, but he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said again, reaching across the table for my hand. I let him take it. "I could be worse, you know."

"How?" I asked, teasing.

"I mean, I have a work of calligraphy over my toilet that reads, 'Bathe Yourself Daily in the Comfort of God's Words,' Hazel. I could be way worse."

"Sounds unsanitary," I said.

"I could be worse."

"You could be worse." I smiled. He really did like me. Maybe I was a narcissist or something, but when I realized it there in that moment at Oranje, it made me like him even more.

When our waiter appeared to take dessert away, he said, "Your meal has been paid for by Mr. Peter Van Houten."

Augustus smiled. "This Peter Van Houten fellow ain't half bad."

We walked along the canal as it got dark. A block up from Oranje, we stopped at a park bench surrounded by old rusty bicycles locked to bike racks and to each other. We sat down hip to hip facing the canal, and he put his arm around me.

I could see the halo of light coming from the Red Light District. Even though it was the *Red* Light District, the glow coming from up there was an eerie sort of green. I imagined thousands of tourists getting drunk and stoned and pinballing around the narrow streets.

"I can't believe he's going to tell us tomorrow," I said. "Peter Van Houten is going to tell us the famously unwritten end of the best book ever."

"Plus he paid for our dinner," Augustus said.

"I keep imagining that he is going to search us for

recording devices before he tells us. And then he will sit down between us on the couch in his living room and whisper whether Anna's mom married the Dutch Tulip Man."

"Don't forget Sisyphus the Hamster," Augustus added.

"Right, and also of course what fate awaited Sisyphus the Hamster." I leaned forward, to see into the canal. There were so many of those pale elm petals in the canals, it was ridiculous. "A sequel that will exist just for us," I said.

"So what's your guess?" he asked.

"I really don't know. I've gone back and forth like a thousand times about it all. Each time I reread it, I think something different, you know?" He nodded. "You have a theory?"

"Yeah. I don't think the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, but he's also not rich like he leads them to believe. And I think after Anna dies, Anna's mom goes to Holland with him and thinks they will live there forever, but it doesn't work out, because she wants to be near where her daughter was."

I hadn't realized he'd thought about the book so much, that *An Imperial Affliction* mattered to Gus independently of me mattering to him.

The water lapped quietly at the stone canal walls beneath us; a group of friends biked past in a clump, shouting over each other in rapid-fire, guttural Dutch; the

tiny boats, not much longer than me, half drowned in the canal; the smell of water that had stood too still for too long; his arm pulling me in; his real leg against my real leg all the way from hip to foot. I leaned in to his body a little. He winced. "Sorry, you okay?"

He breathed out a *yeah* in obvious pain.

"Sorry," I said. "Bony shoulder."

"It's okay," he said. "Nice, actually."

We sat there for a long time. Eventually his hand abandoned my shoulder and rested against the back of the park bench. Mostly we just stared into the canal. I was thinking a lot about how they'd made this place exist even though it should've been underwater, and how I was for Dr. Maria a kind of Amsterdam, a half-drowned anomaly, and that made me think about dying. "Can I ask you about Caroline Mathers?"

"And you say there's no afterlife," he answered without looking at me. "But yeah, of course. What do you want to know?"

I wanted to know that he would be okay if I died. I wanted to not be a grenade, to not be a malevolent force in the lives of people I loved. "Just, like, what happened."

He sighed, exhaling for so long that to my crap lungs it seemed like he was bragging. He popped a fresh cigarette into his mouth. "You know how there is famously no place less played in than a hospital playground?" I nodded. "Well,

I was at Memorial for a couple weeks when they took off the leg and everything. I was up on the fifth floor and I had a view of the playground, which was always of course utterly desolate. I was all awash in the metaphorical resonance of the empty playground in the hospital courtyard. But then this girl started showing up alone at the playground, every day, swinging on a swing completely alone, like you'd see in a movie or something. So I asked one of my nicer nurses to get the skinny on the girl, and the nurse brought her up to visit, and it was Caroline, and I used my immense charisma to win her over." He paused, so I decided to say something.

"You're not that charismatic," I said. He scoffed, disbelieving. "You're mostly just hot," I explained.

He laughed it off. "The thing about dead people," he said, and then stopped himself. "The thing is you sound like a bastard if you don't romanticize them, but the truth is . . . complicated, I guess. Like, you are familiar with the trope of the stoic and determined cancer victim who heroically fights her cancer with inhuman strength and never complains or stops smiling even at the very end, etcetera?"

"Indeed," I said. "They are kindhearted and generous souls whose every breath is an Inspiration to Us All. They're so strong! We admire them so!"

"Right, but really, I mean aside from us obviously, cancer kids are not statistically more likely to be awesome or compassionate or perseverant or whatever. Caroline was

always moody and miserable, but I liked it. I liked feeling as if she had chosen me as the only person in the world not to hate, and so we spent all this time together just ragging on everyone, you know? Ragging on the nurses and the other kids and our families and whatever else. But I don't know if that was her or the tumor. I mean, one of her nurses told me once that the kind of tumor Caroline had is known among medical types as the Asshole Tumor, because it just turns you into a monster. So here's this girl missing a fifth of her brain who's just had a recurrence of the Asshole Tumor, and so she was not, you know, the paragon of stoic cancer-kid heroism. She was . . . I mean, to be honest, she was a bitch. But you can't say that, because she had this tumor, and also she's, I mean, she's dead. And she had plenty of reason to be unpleasant, you know?"

I knew.

"You know that part in *An Imperial Affliction* when Anna's walking across the football field to go to PE or whatever and she falls and goes face-first into the grass and that's when she knows that the cancer is back and in her nervous system and she can't get up and her face is like an inch from the football-field grass and she's just stuck there looking at this grass up close, noticing the way the light hits it and . . . I don't remember the line but it's something like Anna having the Whitmanesque revelation that the definition of humanness is the opportunity to marvel at

the majesty of creation or whatever. You know that part?”

“I know that part,” I said.

“So afterward, while I was getting eviscerated by chemo, for some reason I decided to feel really hopeful. Not about survival specifically, but I felt like Anna does in the book, that feeling of excitement and gratitude about just being able to marvel at it all.

“But meanwhile Caroline got worse every day. She went home after a while and there were moments where I thought we could have, like, a regular relationship, but we couldn’t, really, because she had no filter between her thoughts and her speech, which was sad and unpleasant and frequently hurtful. But, I mean, you can’t dump a girl with a brain tumor. And her parents liked me, and she has this little brother who is a really cool kid. I mean, how can you dump her? She’s *dying*.

“It took forever. It took almost a year, and it was a year of me hanging out with this girl who would, like, just start laughing out of nowhere and point at my prosthetic and call me Stumpy.”

“No,” I said.

“Yeah. I mean, it was the tumor. It ate her brain, you know? Or it wasn’t the tumor. I have no way of knowing, because they were inseparable, she and the tumor. But as she got sicker, I mean, she’d just repeat the same stories and laugh at her own comments even if she’d already said the

same thing a hundred times that day. Like, she made the same joke over and over again for weeks: ‘Gus has great legs. I mean leg.’ And then she would just laugh like a maniac.”

“Oh, Gus,” I said. “That’s . . .” I didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t looking at me, and it felt invasive of me to look at him. I felt him scoot forward. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and stared at it, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, then put it back.

“Well,” he said, “to be fair, I *do* have great leg.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all good, Hazel Grace. But just to be clear, when I thought I saw Caroline Mathers’s ghost in Support Group, I was not entirely happy. I was staring, but I wasn’t yearning, if you know what I mean.” He pulled the pack out of his pocket and placed the cigarette back in it.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“Me too,” he said.

“I don’t ever want to do that to you,” I told him.

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind, Hazel Grace. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

I woke up at four in the Dutch morning ready for the day. All attempts to go back to sleep failed, so I lay there with the BiPAP pumping the air in and urging it out, enjoying the dragon sounds but wishing I could choose my breaths.

I reread *An Imperial Affliction* until Mom woke up and rolled over toward me around six. She nuzzled her head against my shoulder, which felt uncomfortable and vaguely Augustinian.

The hotel brought a breakfast to our room that, much to my delight, featured *deli meat* among many other denials of American breakfast constructions. The dress I'd planned to wear to meet Peter Van Houten had been moved up in

the rotation for the Oranje dinner, so after I showered and got my hair to lie halfway flat, I spent like thirty minutes debating with Mom the various benefits and drawbacks of the available outfits before deciding to dress as much like Anna in *AIA* as possible: Chuck Taylors and dark jeans like she always wore, and a light blue T-shirt.

The shirt was a screen print of a famous Surrealist artwork by René Magritte in which he drew a pipe and then beneath it wrote in cursive *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. (“This is not a pipe.”)

“I just don’t get that shirt,” Mom said.

“Peter Van Houten will get it, trust me. There are like seven thousand Magritte references in *An Imperial Affliction*.”

“But it *is* a pipe.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “It’s a *drawing* of a pipe. Get it? All representations of a thing are inherently abstract. It’s very clever.”

“How did you get so grown up that you understand things that confuse your ancient mother?” Mom asked. “It seems like just yesterday that I was telling seven-year-old Hazel why the sky was blue. You thought I was a genius back then.”

“Why *is* the sky blue?” I asked.

“Cuz,” she answered. I laughed.

As it got closer to ten, I grew more and more nervous: nervous to see Augustus; nervous to meet Peter Van Houten;

nervous that my outfit was not a good outfit; nervous that we wouldn't find the right house since all the houses in Amsterdam looked pretty similar; nervous that we would get lost and never make it back to the Filosoof; nervous nervous nervous. Mom kept trying to talk to me, but I couldn't really listen. I was about to ask her to go upstairs and make sure Augustus was up when he knocked.

I opened the door. He looked down at the shirt and smiled. "Funny," he said.

"Don't call my boobs funny," I answered.

"Right here," Mom said behind us. But I'd made Augustus blush and put him enough off his game that I could finally bear to look up at him.

"You sure you don't want to come?" I asked Mom.

"I'm going to the Rijksmuseum and the Vondelpark today," she said. "Plus, I just don't get his book. No offense. Thank him and Lidewij for us, okay?"

"Okay," I said. I hugged Mom, and she kissed my head just above my ear.

Peter Van Houten's white row house was just around the corner from the hotel, on the Vondelstraat, facing the park. Number 158. Augustus took me by one arm and grabbed the oxygen cart with the other, and we walked up the three steps to the lacquered blue-black front door. My heart pounded. One closed door away from the answers I'd

dreamed of ever since I first read that last unfinished page.

Inside, I could hear a bass beat thumping loud enough to rattle the windowsills. I wondered whether Peter Van Houten had a kid who liked rap music.

I grabbed the lion's-head door knocker and knocked tentatively. The beat continued. "Maybe he can't hear over the music?" Augustus asked. He grabbed the lion's head and knocked much louder.

The music disappeared, replaced by shuffled footsteps. A dead bolt slid. Another. The door creaked open. A potbellied man with thin hair, sagging jowls, and a week-old beard squinted into the sunlight. He wore baby-blue man pajamas like guys in old movies. His face and belly were so round, and his arms so skinny, that he looked like a dough ball with four sticks stuck into it. "Mr. Van Houten?" Augustus asked, his voice squeaking a bit.

The door slammed shut. Behind it, I heard a stammering, reedy voice shout, "LEEE-DUH-VIGH!" (Until then, I'd pronounced his assistant's name like lid-uh-widge.)

We could hear everything through the door. "Are they here, Peter?" a woman asked.

"There are—Lidewij, there are two adolescent apparitions outside the door."

"Apparitions?" she asked with a pleasant Dutch lilt.

Van Houten answered in a rush. "Phantasms specters

ghouls visitants post-terrestrials *apparitions*, Lidewij. How can someone pursuing a postgraduate degree in American literature display such abominable English-language skills?"

"Peter, those are not post-terrestrials. They are Augustus and Hazel, the young fans with whom you have been corresponding."

"They are—what? They—I thought they were in America!"

"Yes, but you invited them here, you will remember."

"Do you know why I left America, Lidewij? So that I would never again have to encounter Americans."

"But you are an American."

"Incurably so, it seems. But as to *these* Americans, you must tell them to leave at once, that there has been a terrible mistake, that the blessed Van Houten was making a rhetorical offer to meet, not an actual one, that such offers must be read symbolically."

I thought I might throw up. I looked over at Augustus, who was staring intently at the door, and saw his shoulders slacken.

"I will not do this, Peter," answered Lidewij. "You *must* meet them. You must. You need to see them. You need to see how your work matters."

"Lidewij, did you knowingly deceive me to arrange this?"

A long silence ensued, and then finally the door opened again. He turned his head metronomically from Augustus to me, still squinting. "Which of you is Augustus Waters?" he asked. Augustus raised his hand tentatively. Van Houten nodded and said, "Did you close the deal with that chick yet?"

Whereupon I encountered for the first and only time a truly speechless Augustus Waters. "I," he started, "um, I, Hazel, um. Well."

"This boy appears to have some kind of developmental delay," Peter Van Houten said to Lidewij.

"*Peter*," she scolded.

"Well," Peter Van Houten said, extending his hand to me. "It is at any rate a pleasure to meet such ontologically improbable creatures." I shook his swollen hand, and then he shook hands with Augustus. I was wondering what *ontologically* meant. Regardless, I liked it. Augustus and I were together in the Improbable Creatures Club: us and duck-billed platypuses.

Of course, I had hoped that Peter Van Houten would be sane, but the world is not a wish-granting factory. The important thing was that the door was open and I was crossing the threshold to learn what happens after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*. That was enough. We followed him and Lidewij inside, past a huge oak dining room table with only two chairs, into a creepily sterile living room. It looked

like a museum, except there was no art on the empty white walls. Aside from one couch and one lounge chair, both a mix of steel and black leather, the room seemed empty. Then I noticed two large black garbage bags, full and twist-tied, behind the couch.

"Trash?" I mumbled to Augustus soft enough that I thought no one else would hear.

"Fan mail," Van Houten answered as he sat down in the lounge chair. "Eighteen years' worth of it. Can't open it. Terrifying. Yours are the first missives to which I have replied, and look where that got me. I frankly find the reality of readers wholly unappetizing."

That explained why he'd never replied to my letters: He'd never read them. I wondered why he kept them at all, let alone in an otherwise empty formal living room. Van Houten kicked his feet up onto the ottoman and crossed his slippers. He motioned toward the couch. Augustus and I sat down next to each other, but not *too* next.

"Would you care for some breakfast?" asked Lidewij.

I started to say that we'd already eaten when Peter interrupted. "It is far too early for breakfast, Lidewij."

"Well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies."

"Then it's too late for breakfast," he said. "However, it being after noon in the body and whatnot, we should enjoy a cocktail. Do you drink Scotch?" he asked me.

"Do I—um, no, I'm fine," I said.

"Augustus Waters?" Van Houten asked, nodding toward Gus.

"Uh, I'm good."

"Just me, then, Lidewij. Scotch and water, please." Peter turned his attention to Gus, asking, "You know how we make a Scotch and water in this home?"

"No, sir," Gus said.

"We pour Scotch into a glass and then call to mind thoughts of water, and then we mix the actual Scotch with the abstracted idea of water."

Lidewij said, "Perhaps a bit of breakfast first, Peter."

He looked toward us and stage-whispered, "She thinks I have a drinking problem."

"And I think that the sun has risen," Lidewij responded. Nonetheless, she turned to the bar in the living room, reached up for a bottle of Scotch, and poured a glass half full. She carried it to him. Peter Van Houten took a sip, then sat up straight in his chair. "A drink this good deserves one's best posture," he said.

I became conscious of my own posture and sat up a little on the couch. I rearranged my cannula. Dad always told me that you can judge people by the way they treat waiters and assistants. By this measure, Peter Van Houten was possibly the world's douchiest douche. "So you like my book," he said to Augustus after another sip.

“Yeah,” I said, speaking up on Augustus’s behalf. “And yes, we—well, Augustus, he made meeting you his Wish so that we could come here, so that you could tell us what happens after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*.”

Van Houten said nothing, just took a long pull on his drink.

After a minute, Augustus said, “Your book is sort of the thing that brought us together.”

“But you aren’t together,” he observed without looking at me.

“The thing that brought us nearly together,” I said.

Now he turned to me. “Did you dress like her on purpose?”

“Anna?” I asked.

He just kept staring at me.

“Kind of,” I said.

He took a long drink, then grimaced. “I do not have a drinking problem,” he announced, his voice needlessly loud. “I have a Churchillian relationship with alcohol: I can crack jokes and govern England and do anything I want to do. Except not drink.” He glanced over at Lidewij and nodded toward his glass. She took it, then walked back to the bar. “Just the *idea* of water, Lidewij,” he instructed.

“Yah, got it,” she said, the accent almost American.

The second drink arrived. Van Houten’s spine stiffened again out of respect. He kicked off his slippers. He had

really ugly feet. He was rather ruining the whole business of authorial genius for me. But he had the answers.

"Well, um," I said, "first, we do want to say thank you for dinner last night and—"

"We bought them dinner last night?" Van Houten asked Lidewij.

"Yes, at Oranje."

"Ah, yes. Well, believe me when I say that you do not have me to thank but rather Lidewij, who is exceptionally talented in the field of spending my money."

"It was our pleasure," Lidewij said.

"Well, thanks, at any rate," Augustus said. I could hear annoyance in his voice.

"So here I am," Van Houten said after a moment. "What are your questions?"

"Um," Augustus said.

"He seemed so intelligent in print," Van Houten said to Lidewij regarding Augustus. "Perhaps the cancer has established a beachhead in his brain."

"Peter," Lidewij said, duly horrified.

I was horrified, too, but there was something pleasant about a guy so despicable that he wouldn't treat us deferentially. "We do have some questions, actually," I said. "I talked about them in my email. I don't know if you remember."

"I do not."

"His memory is compromised," Lidewij said.

"If only my memory would compromise," Van Houten responded.

"So, our questions," I repeated.

"She uses the royal we," Peter said to no one in particular. Another sip. I didn't know what Scotch tasted like, but if it tasted anything like champagne, I couldn't imagine how he could drink so much, so quickly, so early in the morning. "Are you familiar with Zeno's tortoise paradox?" he asked me.

"We have questions about what happens to the characters after the end of the book, specifically Anna's—"

"You wrongly assume that I need to hear your question in order to answer it. You are familiar with the philosopher Zeno?" I shook my head vaguely. "Alas. Zeno was a pre-Socratic philosopher who is said to have discovered forty paradoxes within the worldview put forth by Parmenides—surely you know Parmenides," he said, and I nodded that I knew Parmenides, although I did not. "Thank God," he said. "Zeno professionally specialized in revealing the inaccuracies and oversimplifications of Parmenides, which wasn't difficult, since Parmenides was spectacularly wrong everywhere and always. Parmenides is valuable in precisely the way that it is valuable to have an acquaintance who reliably picks the wrong horse each and every time you take him to the racetrack. But Zeno's most important—wait, give me a sense of your familiarity with Swedish hip-hop."

I could not tell if Peter Van Houten was kidding. After a moment, Augustus answered for me. "Limited," he said.

"Okay, but presumably you know Afasi och Filthy's seminal album *Fläcken*."

"We do not," I said for the both of us.

"Lidewij, play 'Bomfalleralla' immediately." Lidewij walked over to an MP3 player, spun the wheel a bit, then hit a button. A rap song boomed from every direction. It sounded like a fairly regular rap song, except the words were in Swedish.

After it was over, Peter Van Houten looked at us expectantly, his little eyes as wide as they could get. "Yeah?" he asked. "Yeah?"

I said, "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't speak Swedish."

"Well, of course you don't. Neither do I. Who the hell speaks Swedish? The important thing is not whatever nonsense the voices are *saying*, but what the voices are *feeling*. Surely you know that there are only two emotions, love and fear, and that Afasi och Filthy navigate between them with the kind of facility that one simply does not find in hip-hop music outside of Sweden. Shall I play it for you again?"

"Are you joking?" Gus said.

"Pardon?"

"Is this some kind of performance?" He looked up at Lidewij and asked, "Is it?"

"I'm afraid not," Lidewij answered. "He's not always—this is unusually—"

“Oh, shut up, Lidewij. Rudolf Otto said that if you had not encountered the numinous, if you have not experienced a nonrational encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*, then his work was not for you. And I say to you, young friends, that if you cannot hear Afasi och Filthy’s bravadic response to fear, then my work is not for you.”

I cannot emphasize this enough: It was a completely normal rap song, except in Swedish. “Um,” I said. “So about *An Imperial Affliction*. Anna’s mom, when the book ends, is about to—”

Van Houten interrupted me, tapping his glass as he talked until Lidewij refilled it again. “So Zeno is most famous for his tortoise paradox. Let us imagine that you are in a race with a tortoise. The tortoise has a ten-yard head start. In the time it takes you to run that ten yards, the tortoise has maybe moved one yard. And then in the time it takes you to make up that distance, the tortoise goes a bit farther, and so on forever. You are faster than the tortoise but you can never catch him; you can only decrease his lead.

“Of course, you just run past the tortoise without contemplating the mechanics involved, but the question of how you are able to do this turns out to be incredibly complicated, and no one really solved it until Cantor showed us that some infinities are bigger than other infinities.”

“Um,” I said.

“I assume that answers your question,” he said

confidently, then sipped generously from his glass.

“Not really,” I said. “We were wondering, after the end of *An Imperial Affliction*—”

“I disavow everything in that putrid novel,” Van Houten said, cutting me off.

“No,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“No, that is not acceptable,” I said. “I understand that the story ends midnarrative because Anna dies or becomes too sick to continue, but you said you would tell us what happens to everybody, and that’s why we’re here, and we, *I* need you to tell me.”

Van Houten sighed. After another drink, he said, “Very well. Whose story do you seek?”

“Anna’s mom, the Dutch Tulip Man, Sisyphus the Hamster, I mean, just—what happens to everyone.”

Van Houten closed his eyes and puffed his cheeks as he exhaled, then looked up at the exposed wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling. “The hamster,” he said after a while. “The hamster gets adopted by Christine”—who was one of Anna’s presickness friends. That made sense. Christine and Anna played with Sisyphus in a few scenes. “He is adopted by Christine and lives for a couple years after the end of the novel and dies peacefully in his hamster sleep.”

Now we were getting somewhere. “Great,” I said. “Great. Okay, so the Dutch Tulip Man. Is he a con man? Do he and Anna’s mom get married?”

Van Houten was still staring at the ceiling beams. He took a drink. The glass was almost empty again. "Lidewij, I can't do it. I can't. I *can't*." He leveled his gaze to me. "*Nothing* happens to the Dutch Tulip Man. He isn't a con man or not a con man; he's *God*. He's an obvious and unambiguous metaphorical representation of *God*, and asking what becomes of him is the intellectual equivalent of asking what becomes of the disembodied eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in *Gatsby*. Do he and Anna's mom get married? We are speaking of a novel, dear child, not some historical enterprise."

"Right, but surely you must have thought about what happens to them, I mean as characters, I mean independent of their metaphorical meanings or whatever."

"They're fictions," he said, tapping his glass again. "Nothing happens to them."

"You said you'd tell me," I insisted. I reminded myself to be assertive. I needed to keep his addled attention on my questions.

"Perhaps, but I was under the misguided impression that you were incapable of transatlantic travel. I was trying . . . to provide you some comfort, I suppose, which I should know better than to attempt. But to be perfectly frank, this childish idea that the author of a novel has some special insight into the characters in the novel . . . it's ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life out-

side of those scratches. What *happened* to them? They all ceased to exist the moment the novel ended.”

“No,” I said. I pushed myself up off the couch. “No, I understand that, but it’s impossible not to imagine a future for them. You are the most qualified person to imagine that future. Something happened to Anna’s mother. She either got married or didn’t. She either moved to Holland with the Dutch Tulip Man or didn’t. She either had more kids or didn’t. I need to know what happens to her.”

Van Houten pursed his lips. “I regret that I cannot indulge your childish whims, but I refuse to pity you in the manner to which you are well accustomed.”

“I don’t want your pity,” I said.

“Like all sick children,” he answered dispassionately, “you say you don’t want pity, but your very existence depends upon it.”

“Peter,” Lidewij said, but he continued as he reclined there, his words getting rounder in his drunken mouth. “Sick children inevitably become arrested: You are fated to live out your days as the child you were when diagnosed, the child who believes there is life after a novel ends. And we, as adults, we pity this, so we pay for your treatments, for your oxygen machines. We give you food and water though you are unlikely to live long enough—”

“PETER!” Lidewij shouted.

“You are a side effect,” Van Houten continued, “of an

evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation.”

“I RESIGN!” Lidewij shouted. There were tears in her eyes. But I wasn’t angry. He was looking for the most hurtful way to tell the truth, but of course I already knew the truth. I’d had years of staring at ceilings from my bedroom to the ICU, and so I’d long ago found the most hurtful ways to imagine my own illness. I stepped toward him. “Listen, douchepants,” I said, “you’re not going to tell me anything about disease I don’t already know. I need one and only one thing from you before I walk out of your life forever: WHAT HAPPENS TO ANNA’S MOTHER?”

He raised his flabby chins vaguely toward me and shrugged his shoulders. “I can no more tell you what happens to her than I can tell you what becomes of Proust’s Narrator or Holden Caulfield’s sister or Huckleberry Finn after he lights out for the territories.”

“BULLSHIT! That’s bullshit. Just tell me! Make something up!”

“No, and I’ll thank you not to curse in my house. It isn’t becoming of a lady.”

I still wasn’t angry, exactly, but I was very focused on getting the thing I’d been promised. Something inside me welled up and I reached down and smacked the swollen hand that held the glass of Scotch. What remained of the Scotch splashed across the vast expanse of his face, the

glass bouncing off his nose and then spinning balletically through the air, landing with a shattering crash on the ancient hardwood floors.

"Lidewij," Van Houten said calmly, "I'll have a martini, if you please. Just a whisper of vermouth."

"I have resigned," Lidewij said after a moment.

"Don't be ridiculous."

I didn't know what to do. Being nice hadn't worked. Being mean hadn't worked. I needed an answer. I'd come all this way, hijacked Augustus's Wish. I needed to know.

"Have you ever stopped to wonder," he said, his words slurring now, "why you care so much about your silly questions?"

"YOU PROMISED!" I shouted, hearing Isaac's impotent wailing echoing from the night of the broken trophies. Van Houten didn't reply.

I was still standing over him, waiting for him to say something to me when I felt Augustus's hand on my arm. He pulled me away toward the door, and I followed him while Van Houten ranted to Lidewij about the ingratitude of contemporary teenagers and the death of polite society, and Lidewij, somewhat hysterical, shouted back at him in rapid-fire Dutch.

"You'll have to forgive my former assistant," he said. "Dutch is not so much a language as an ailment of the throat."

Augustus pulled me out of the room and through the

door to the late spring morning and the falling confetti of the elms.

For me there was no such thing as a quick getaway, but we made our way down the stairs, Augustus holding my cart, and then started to walk back toward the Filosoof on a bumpy sidewalk of interwoven rectangular bricks. For the first time since the swing set, I started crying.

“Hey,” he said, touching my waist. “Hey. It’s okay.” I nodded and wiped my face with the back of my hand. “He sucks.” I nodded again. “I’ll write you an epilogue,” Gus said. That made me cry harder. “I will,” he said. “I will. Better than any shit that drunk could write. His brain is Swiss cheese. He doesn’t even remember writing the book. I can write ten times the story that guy can. There will be blood and guts and sacrifice. *An Imperial Affliction* meets *The Price of Dawn*. You’ll love it.” I kept nodding, faking a smile, and then he hugged me, his strong arms pulling me into his muscular chest, and I sogged up his polo shirt a little but then recovered enough to speak.

“I spent your Wish on that doucheface,” I said into his chest.

“Hazel Grace. No. I will grant you that you did spend my one and only Wish, but you did not spend it on him. You spent it on us.”

Behind us, I heard the *plonk plonk* of high heels running.

I turned around. It was Lidewij, her eyeliner running down her cheeks, duly horrified, chasing us up the sidewalk. "Perhaps we should go to the Anne Frank Huis," Lidewij said.

"I'm not going anywhere with that monster," Augustus said.

"He is not invited," Lidewij said.

Augustus kept holding me, protective, his hand on the side of my face. "I don't think—" he started, but I cut him off.

"We should go." I still wanted answers from Van Houten. But it wasn't all I wanted. I only had two days left in Amsterdam with Augustus Waters. I wouldn't let a sad old man ruin them.

Lidewij drove a clunky gray Fiat with an engine that sounded like an excited four-year-old girl. As we drove through the streets of Amsterdam, she repeatedly and profusely apologized. "I am very sorry. There is no excuse. He is very sick," she said. "I thought meeting you would help him, if he would see that his work has shaped real lives, but . . . I'm very sorry. It is very, very embarrassing." Neither Augustus nor I said anything. I was in the backseat behind him. I snuck my hand between the side of the car and his seat, feeling for his hand, but I couldn't find it. Lidewij continued, "I have continued this work because I believe he is a genius and because the pay is very good, but he has become a monster."

"I guess he got pretty rich on that book," I said after a while.

"Oh, no no, he is of the Van Houtens," she said. "In the seventeenth century, his ancestor discovered how to mix cocoa into water. Some Van Houtens moved to the United States long ago, and Peter is of those, but he moved to Holland after his novel. He is an embarrassment to a great family."

The engine screamed. Lidewij shifted and we shot up a canal bridge. "It is circumstance," she said. "Circumstance has made him so cruel. He is not an evil man. But this day, I did not think—when he said these terrible things, I could not believe it. I am very sorry. Very very sorry."

We had to park a block away from the Anne Frank House, and then while Lidewij stood in line to get tickets for us, I sat with my back against a little tree, looking at all the moored houseboats in the Prinsengracht canal. Augustus was standing above me, rolling my oxygen cart in lazy circles, just watching the wheels spin. I wanted him to sit next to me, but I knew it was hard for him to sit, and harder still to stand back up. "Okay?" he asked, looking down at me. I shrugged and reached a hand for his calf. It was his fake calf, but I held on to it. He looked down at me.

"I wanted . . ." I said.

"I know," he said. "I know. Apparently the world is not

a wish-granting factory.” That made me smile a little.

Lidewij returned with tickets, but her thin lips were pursed with worry. “There is no elevator,” she said. “I am very very sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“No, there are many stairs,” she said. “Steep stairs.”

“It’s okay,” I said again. Augustus started to say something, but I interrupted. “It’s okay. I can do it.”

We began in a room with a video about Jews in Holland and the Nazi invasion and the Frank family. Then we walked upstairs into the canal house where Otto Frank’s business had been. The stairs were slow, for me and Augustus both, but I felt strong. Soon I was staring at the famous bookcase that had hid Anne Frank, her family, and four others. The bookcase was half open, and behind it was an even steeper set of stairs, only wide enough for one person. There were fellow visitors all around us, and I didn’t want to hold up the procession, but Lidewij said, “If everyone could be patient, please,” and I began the walk up, Lidewij carrying the cart behind me, Gus behind her.

It was fourteen steps. I kept thinking about the people behind me—they were mostly adults speaking a variety of languages—and feeling embarrassed or whatever, feeling like a ghost that both comforts and haunts, but finally I made it up, and then I was in an eerily empty room, leaning against the wall, my brain telling my lungs *it’s okay it’s okay calm down it’s okay* and my lungs telling my brain *oh, God,*

we're dying here. I didn't even see Augustus come upstairs, but he came over and wiped his brow with the back of his hand like *whew* and said, "You're a champion."

After a few minutes of wall-leaning, I made it to the next room, which Anne had shared with the dentist Fritz Pfeffer. It was tiny, empty of all furniture. You'd never know anyone had ever lived there except that the pictures Anne had pasted onto the wall from magazines and newspapers were still there.

Another staircase led up to the room where the van Pels family had lived, this one steeper than the last and eighteen steps, essentially a glorified ladder. I got to the threshold and looked up and figured I could not do it, but also knew the only way through was up.

"Let's go back," Gus said behind me.

"I'm okay," I answered quietly. It's stupid, but I kept thinking I *owed* it to her—to Anne Frank, I mean—because she was dead and I wasn't, because she had stayed quiet and kept the blinds drawn and done everything right and still died, and so I should go up the steps and see the rest of the world she'd lived in those years before the Gestapo came.

I began to climb the stairs, crawling up them like a little kid would, slow at first so I could breathe, but then faster because I knew I couldn't breathe and wanted to get to the top before everything gave out. The blackness encroached around my field of vision as I pulled myself up, eighteen steps, steep as hell. I finally crested the staircase

mostly blind and nauseated, the muscles in my arms and legs screaming for oxygen. I slumped seated against a wall, heaving watered-down coughs. There was an empty glass case bolted to the wall above me and I stared up through it to the ceiling and tried not to pass out.

Lidewij crouched down next to me, saying, "You are at the top, that is it," and I nodded. I had a vague awareness of the adults all around glancing down at me worriedly; of Lidewij speaking quietly in one language and then another and then another to various visitors; of Augustus standing above me, his hand on the top of my head, stroking my hair along the part.

After a long time, Lidewij and Augustus pulled me to my feet and I saw what was protected by the glass case: pencil marks on the wallpaper measuring the growth of all the children in the annex during the period they lived there, inch after inch until they would grow no more.

From there, we left the Franks' living area, but we were still in the museum: A long narrow hallway showed pictures of each of the annex's eight residents and described how and where and when they died.

"The only member of his whole family who survived the war," Lidewij told us, referring to Anne's father, Otto. Her voice was hushed like we were in church.

"But he didn't survive a war, not really," Augustus said. "He survived a genocide."

"True," Lidewij said. "I do not know how you go on,

without your family. I do not know.” As I read about each of the seven who died, I thought of Otto Frank not being a father anymore, left with a diary instead of a wife and two daughters. At the end of the hallway, a huge book, bigger than a dictionary, contained the names of the 103,000 dead from the Netherlands in the Holocaust. (Only 5,000 of the deported Dutch Jews, a wall label explained, had survived. 5,000 Otto Franks.) The book was turned to the page with Anne Frank’s name, but what got me about it was the fact that right beneath her name there were four Aron Franks. *Four*. Four Aron Franks without museums, without historical markers, without anyone to mourn them. I silently resolved to remember and pray for the four Aron Franks as long as I was around. (Maybe some people need to believe in a proper and omnipotent God to pray, but I don’t.)

As we got to the end of the room, Gus stopped and said, “You okay?” I nodded.

He gestured back toward Anne’s picture. “The worst part is that she almost lived, you know? She died weeks away from liberation.”

Lidewij took a few steps away to watch a video, and I grabbed Augustus’s hand as we walked into the next room. It was an A-frame room with some letters Otto Frank had written to people during his months-long search for his daughters. On the wall in the middle of the room, a video of Otto Frank played. He was speaking in English.

“Are there any Nazis left that I could hunt down and

bring to justice?" Augustus asked while we leaned over the vitrines reading Otto's letters and the gutting replies that no, no one had seen his children after the liberation.

"I think they're all dead. But it's not like the Nazis had a monopoly on evil."

"True," he said. "That's what we should do, Hazel Grace: We should team up and be this disabled vigilante duo roaring through the world, righting wrongs, defending the weak, protecting the endangered."

Although it was his dream and not mine, I indulged it. He'd indulged mine, after all. "Our fearlessness shall be our secret weapon," I said.

"The tales of our exploits will survive as long as the human voice itself," he said.

"And even after that, when the robots recall the human absurdities of sacrifice and compassion, they will remember us."

"They will robot-laugh at our courageous folly," he said. "But something in their iron robot hearts will yearn to have lived and died as we did: on the hero's errand."

"Augustus Waters," I said, looking up at him, thinking that you cannot kiss anyone in the Anne Frank House, and then thinking that Anne Frank, after all, kissed someone in the Anne Frank House, and that she would probably like nothing more than for her home to have become a place where the young and irreparably broken sink into love.

"I must say," Otto Frank said on the video in his

accented English, "I was very much surprised by the deep thoughts Anne had."

And then we were kissing. My hand let go of the oxygen cart and I reached up for his neck, and he pulled me up by my waist onto my tiptoes. As his parted lips met mine, I started to feel breathless in a new and fascinating way. The space around us evaporated, and for a weird moment I really liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I'd spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle, worth the chest tubes and the PICC lines and the ceaseless bodily betrayal of the tumors.

"It was quite a different Anne I had known as my daughter. She never really showed this kind of inner feeling," Otto Frank continued.

The kiss lasted forever as Otto Frank kept talking from behind me. "And my conclusion is," he said, "since I had been in very good terms with Anne, that most parents don't know really their children."

I realized that my eyes were closed and opened them. Augustus was staring at me, his blue eyes closer to me than they'd ever been, and behind him, a crowd of people three deep had sort of circled around us. They were angry, I thought. Horrified. These teenagers, with their hormones, making out beneath a video broadcasting the shattered voice of a former father.

I pulled away from Augustus, and he snuck a peck onto my forehead as I stared down at my Chuck Taylors.

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And then they started clapping. All the people, all these adults, just started clapping, and one shouted “Bravo!” in a European accent. Augustus, smiling, bowed. Laughing, I curtsied ever so slightly, which was met with another round of applause.

We made our way downstairs, letting all the adults go down first, and right before we got to the café (where blessedly an elevator took us back down to ground level and the gift shop) we saw pages of Anne’s diary, and also her unpublished book of quotations. The quote book happened to be turned to a page of Shakespeare quotations. *For who so firm that cannot be seduced?* she’d written.

Lidewij drove us back to the Filosoof. Outside the hotel, it was drizzling and Augustus and I stood on the brick sidewalk slowly getting wet.

Augustus: “You probably need some rest.”

Me: “I’m okay.”

Augustus: “Okay.” (Pause.) “What are you thinking about?”

Me: “You.”

Augustus: “What about me?”

Me: “I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendos, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after.”

Augustus: “God, you are sexy.”

Me: "We could go to your room."

Augustus: "I've heard worse ideas."

We squeezed into the tiny elevator together. Every surface, including the floor, was mirrored. We had to pull the door to shut ourselves in and then the old thing creaked slowly up to the second floor. I was tired and sweaty and worried that I generally looked and smelled gross, but even so I kissed him in that elevator, and then he pulled away and pointed at the mirror and said, "Look, infinite Hazels."

"Some infinities are larger than other infinities," I drawled, mimicking Van Houten.

"What an assclown," Augustus said, and it took all that time and more just to get us to the second floor. Finally the elevator lurched to a halt, and he pushed the mirrored door open. When it was half open, he winced in pain and lost his grip on the door for a second.

"You okay?" I asked.

After a second, he said, "Yeah, yeah, door's just heavy, I guess." He pushed again and got it open. He let me walk out first, of course, but then I didn't know which direction to walk down the hallway, and so I just stood there outside the elevator and he stood there, too, his face still contorted, and I said again, "Okay?"

"Just out of shape, Hazel Grace. All is well."

We were just standing there in the hallway, and he

wasn't leading the way to his room or anything, and I didn't know where his room was, and as the stalemate continued, I became convinced he was trying to figure out a way not to hook up with me, that I never should have suggested the idea in the first place, that it was unladylike and therefore had disgusted Augustus Waters, who was standing there looking at me unblinking, trying to think of a way to extricate himself from the situation politely. And then, after forever, he said, "It's above my knee and it just tapers a little and then it's just skin. There's a nasty scar, but it just looks like—"

"What?" I asked.

"My leg," he said. "Just so you're prepared in case, I mean, in case you see it or what—"

"Oh, get over yourself," I said, and took the two steps I needed to get to him. I kissed him, hard, pressing him against the wall, and I kept kissing him as he fumbled for the room key.

We crawled into the bed, my freedom circumscribed some by the oxygen, but even so I could get on top of him and take his shirt off and taste the sweat on the skin below his collarbone as I whispered into his skin, "I love you, Augustus Waters," his body relaxing beneath mine as he heard me say it. He reached down and tried to pull my shirt off, but it got tangled in the tube. I laughed.

...

“How do you do this every day?” he asked as I disentangled my shirt from the tubes. Idiotically, it occurred to me that my pink underwear didn’t match my purple bra, as if boys even notice such things. I crawled under the covers and kicked out of my jeans and socks and then watched the comforter dance as beneath it, Augustus removed first his jeans and then his leg.

We were lying on our backs next to each other, everything hidden by the covers, and after a second I reached over for his thigh and let my hand trail downward to the stump, the thick scarred skin. I held the stump for a second. He flinched. “It hurts?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

He flipped himself onto his side and kissed me. “You’re so hot,” I said, my hand still on his leg.

“I’m starting to think you have an amputee fetish,” he answered, still kissing me. I laughed.

“I have an Augustus Waters fetish,” I explained.

The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be: slow and patient and quiet and neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. There were a lot of condomy problems that I did not get a particularly

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good look at. No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we'd ever spent together without talking.

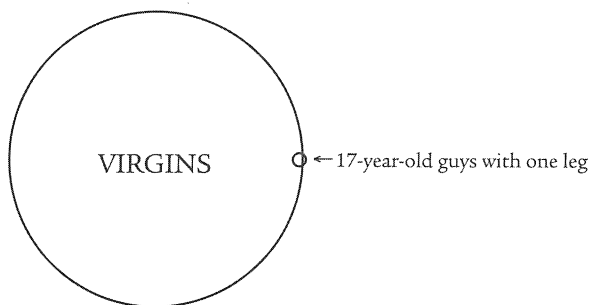
Only one thing followed type: Afterward, when I had my face resting against Augustus's chest, listening to his heart pound, Augustus said, "Hazel Grace, I literally cannot keep my eyes open."

"Misuse of literality," I said.

"No," he said. "So. Tired."

His face turned away from me, my ear pressed to his chest, listening to his lungs settle into the rhythm of sleep. After a while, I got up, dressed, found the Hotel Filosoof stationery, and wrote him a love letter:

Dearest Augustus,



yrs,
Hazel Grace