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JERRY SPINELLI



Jerry Spinelli

STARGIRL



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PORCUPINE NECKTIE

When I was little, my uncle Pete had a necktie with a porcupine painted on it. I thought that necktie was just about the neatest thing in the world. Uncle Pete would stand patiently before me while I ran my fingers over the silky surface, half expecting to be stuck by one of the quills. Once, he let me wear it. I kept looking for one of my own, but I could never find one.

I was twelve when we moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona. When Uncle Pete came to say good-bye, he was wearing the tie. I thought he did so to give me one last look at it, and I was grateful. But then, with a dramatic flourish, he whipped off the tie and draped it around my neck. "It's yours," he said. "Going-away present."

I loved that porcupine tie so much that I decided to start a collection. Two years after we settled in Arizona, the number of ties in my collection was still one. Where do you find

a porcupine necktie in Mica, Arizona—or anywhere else, for that matter?

On my fourteenth birthday, I read about myself in the local newspaper. The family section ran a regular feature about kids on their birthdays, and my mother had called in some info. The last sentence read: “As a hobby, Leo Borlock collects porcupine neckties.”

Several days later, coming home from school, I found a plastic bag on our front step. Inside was a gift-wrapped package tied with yellow ribbon. The tag said “Happy Birthday!” I opened the package. It was a porcupine necktie. Two porcupines were tossing darts with their quills, while a third was picking its teeth.

I inspected the box, the tag, the paper. Nowhere could I find the giver’s name. I asked my parents. I asked my friends. I called my uncle Pete. Everyone denied knowing anything about it.

At the time I simply considered the episode a mystery. It did not occur to me that I was being watched. We were all being watched.

"Did you see her?"

That was the first thing Kevin said to me on the first day of school, eleventh grade. We were waiting for the bell to ring.

"See who?" I said.

"Hah!" He craned his neck, scanning the mob. He had witnessed something remarkable; it showed on his face. He grinned, still scanning. "You'll know."

There were hundreds of us, milling about, calling names, pointing to summer-tanned faces we hadn't seen since June. Our interest in each other was never keener than during the fifteen minutes before the first bell of the first day.

I punched his arm. "Who?"

The bell rang. We poured inside.

I heard it again in homeroom, a whispered voice behind me as we said the Pledge of Allegiance:

"You see her?"

I heard it in the hallways. I heard it in English and Geometry:

"Did you see her?"

Who could it be? A new student? A spectacular blonde from California? Or from back East, where many of us came from? Or one of those summer makeovers, someone who leaves in June looking like a little girl and returns in September as a full-bodied woman, a ten-week miracle?

And then in Earth Sciences I heard a name: "Stargirl."

I turned to the senior slouching behind me. "Stargirl?" I said. "What kind of name is that?"

"That's it. Stargirl Caraway. She said it in homeroom."

"Stargirl?"

"Yeah."

And then I saw her. At lunch. She wore an off-white dress so long it covered her shoes. It had ruffles around the neck and cuffs and looked like it could have been her great-grandmother's wedding gown. Her hair was the color of sand. It fell to her shoulders. Something was strapped across her back, but it wasn't a book bag. At first I thought it was a miniature guitar. I found out later it was a ukulele.

She did not carry a lunch tray. She did carry a large canvas bag with a life-size sunflower painted on it. The lunchroom was dead silent as she walked by. She stopped at an empty table, laid down her bag, slung the instrument strap over her chair, and sat down. She pulled a sandwich from the bag and started to eat.

Half the lunchroom kept staring, half started buzzing.

Kevin was grinning. "Wha'd I tell you?"

I nodded.

"She's in tenth grade," he said. "I hear she's been home-schooled till now."

"Maybe that explains it," I said.

Her back was to us, so I couldn't see her face. No one sat with her, but at the tables next to hers kids were cramming two to a seat. She didn't seem to notice. She seemed marooned in a sea of staring, buzzing faces.

Kevin was grinning again. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he said.

I grinned back. I nodded. "*Hot Seat*."

Hot Seat was our in-school TV show. We had started it the year before. I was producer/director, Kevin was on-camera host. Each month he interviewed a student. So far, most of them had been honor student types, athletes, model citizens. Noteworthy in the usual ways, but not especially interesting.

Suddenly Kevin's eyes boggled. The girl was picking up her ukulele. And now she was strumming it. And now she was singing! Strumming away, bobbing her head and shoulders, singing, "I'm looking over a four-leaf clover that I overlooked before." Stone silence all around. Then came the sound of a single person clapping. I looked. It was the lunch-line cashier.

And now the girl was standing, slinging her bag over one shoulder and marching among the tables, strumming and singing and strutting and twirling. Heads swung, eyes followed her, mouths hung open. Disbelief. When she came by our table, I got my first good look at her face. She wasn't gorgeous, wasn't ugly. A sprinkle of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose. Mostly, she looked like a hundred other girls in school, except for two things. She wore no makeup, and her eyes were the biggest I had ever seen, like deer's eyes caught in headlights. She twirled as she went past, her flaring skirt brushing my pant leg, and then she marched out of the lunchroom.

From among the tables came three slow claps. Someone whistled. Someone yelped.

Kevin and I gawked at each other.

Kevin held up his hands and framed a marquee in the air. "*Hot Seat! Coming Attraction—Stargirl!*"

I slapped the table. "Yes!"

We slammed hands.

When we got to school the next day, Hillari Kimble was holding court at the door.

"She's not real," Hillari said. She was sneering. "She's an actress. It's a scam."

Someone called out, "Who's scamming us?"

"The administration. The principal. Who else? Who cares?" Hillari wagged her head at the absurdity of the question.

A hand flashed in the air: "Why?"

"School spirit," she spat back. "They think this place was too dead last year. They think if they plant some nutcase in with the students—"

"Like they plant narcs in schools!" someone else shouted.

Hillari glared at the speaker, then continued,

"—some nutcase who stirs things up, then maybe all the little students will go to a game once in a while or join a club."

"Instead of making out in the library!" chimed another voice. And everybody laughed and the bell rang and we went in.

Hillari Kimble's theory spread throughout the school and was widely accepted.

"You think Hillari's right?" Kevin asked me. "Stargirl's a plant?"

I snickered. "Listen to yourself."

He spread his arms. "What?"

"This is Mica Area High School," I reminded him. "It's not a CIA operation."

"Maybe not," he said, "but I hope Hillari's right."

"Why would you hope that? If she's not a real student, we can't have her on *Hot Seat*."

Kevin wagged his head and grinned. "As usual, Mr. Director, you fail to see the whole picture. We could use the show to expose her. Can't you see it?" He did the marquee thing with his hands: "*Hot Seat Uncovers Faculty Hoax!*"

I stared at him. "You *want* her to be a fake, don't you?"

He grinned ear to ear. "Absolutely. Our ratings will go sky-high!"

I had to admit, the more I saw of her, the easier it was to believe she was a plant, a joke, anything but real. On that second day she wore bright-red baggy shorts with a bib and shoulder straps—overall shorts. Her sandy hair was pulled back into twin plaited pigtails, each tied with a bright-red ribbon. A rouge smudge applied each cheek, and she had even dabbed some oversized freckles on her face. She looked like Heidi. Or Bo Peep.

At lunch she was alone again at her table. As before, when she finished eating, she took up her ukulele. But this time she didn't play. She got up and started walking among the tables. She stared at us. She stared at one face, then another and another. The kind of bold, I'm-looking-at-you

8 stare you almost never get from people, especially strangers.

She appeared to be looking for someone, and the whole lunchroom had become very uncomfortable.

As she approached our table, I thought: *What if she's looking for me?* The thought terrified me. So I turned from her. I looked at Kevin. I watched him grin goofily up at her. He wiggled his fingers at her and whispered, "Hi, Stargirl." I didn't hear an answer. I was intensely aware of her passing behind my chair.

She stopped two tables away. She was smiling at a pud-ding-bodied senior named Alan Ferko. The lunchroom was dead silent. She started strumming the uke. And singing. It was "Happy Birthday." When she came to his name she didn't sing just his first name, but his full name:

"Happy Birthday, dear Alan Fer-kooooh"

Alan Ferko's face turned red as Bo Peep's pigtail ribbons. There was a flurry of whistles and hoots, more for Alan Ferko's sake, I think, than hers. As Stargirl marched out, I could see Hillari Kimble across the lunchroom rising from her seat, pointing, saying something I could not hear.

"I'll tell you one thing," Kevin said as we joined the mob in the hallways, "she better be fake."

I asked him what he meant.

"I mean if she's real, she's in big trouble. How long do you think somebody who's *really* like that is going to last around here?"

Good question.

Mica Area High School—MAHS—was not exactly a hotbed of nonconformity. There were individual variants here and there, of course, but within pretty narrow limits we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music. Even our dorks and nerds had a MAHS stamp on them. If we happened to somehow distinguish ourselves, we quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands.

Kevin was right. It was unthinkable that Stargirl could survive—or at least survive unchanged—among us. But it was also clear that Hillari Kimble was at least half right: this person calling herself Stargirl may or may not have been a faculty plant for school spirit, but whatever she was, she was not real.

She couldn't be.

Several times in those early weeks of September, she showed up in something outrageous. A 1920s flapper dress. An Indian buckskin. A kimono. One day she wore a denim miniskirt with green stockings, and crawling up one leg was a parade of enamel ladybug and butterfly pins. "Normal" for her were long, floor-brushing pioneer dresses and skirts.

Every few days in the lunchroom she serenaded someone new with "Happy Birthday." I was glad my birthday was in the summer.

In the hallways, she said hello to perfect strangers. The seniors couldn't believe it. They had never seen a tenth-grader so bold.

ing questions, though the question often had nothing to do with the subject. One day she asked a question about trolls—in U.S. History class.

She made up a song about isosceles triangles. She sang it to her Plane Geometry class. It was called “Three Sides Have I, But Only Two Are Equal.”

She joined the cross-country team. Our home meets were held on the Mica Country Club golf course. Red flags showed the runners the way to go. In her first meet, out in the middle of the course, she turned left when everyone else turned right. They waited for her at the finish line. She never showed up. She was dismissed from the team.

One day a girl screamed in the hallway. She had seen a tiny brown face pop up from Stargirl’s sunflower canvas bag. It was her pet rat. It rode to school in the bag every day.

One morning we had a rare rainfall. It came during her gym class. The teacher told everyone to come in. On the way to the next class they looked out the windows. Stargirl was still outside. In the rain. Dancing.

We wanted to define her, to wrap her up as we did each other, but we could not seem to get past “weird” and “strange” and “goofy.” Her ways knocked us off balance. A single word seemed to hover in the cloudless sky over the school:

HUH?

Everything she did seemed to echo Hillari Kimble: She’s not real...She’s not real...

And each night in bed I thought of her as the moon came through my window. I could have lowered my shade to make it darker and easier to sleep, but I never did. In that moonlit hour, I acquired a sense of the otherness of things. I liked the feeling the moonlight gave me, as if it wasn't the opposite of day, but its underside, its private side, when the fabulous purred on my snow-white sheet like some dark cat come in from the desert.

It was during one of these nightmoon times that it came to me that Hillari Kimble was wrong. Stargirl *was* real.

We fought daily, Kevin and I.

My main job as producer was to recruit people for the Hot Seat. After I signed someone up, Kevin began researching the person, getting his questions ready.

Every day he asked me, "Did you sign her up?"

Every day I answered no.

He got frustrated.

"What do you mean, no? Don't you *want* to sign her up?"

I told him I wasn't sure.

His eyes bugged out. "Not sure? How can you not be sure? We high-fived in the lunchroom weeks ago. We were thinking Stargirl mini-series, even. This is a *Hot Seat* from heaven."

I shrugged. "That was then. Now I'm not sure."

He looked at me like I had three ears. "What's there to be not sure about?"

I shrugged.

"Well then," he said, "I'll sign her up." He walked away.

"You'll have to find another director, then," I said.

He stopped. I could almost see the steam rising from his shoulders. He turned, pointed. "Leo, you can be a real jerk sometimes." He walked off.

It was uncomfortable. Kevin Quinlan and I usually agreed on everything. We had been best friends since arriving in Arizona the same week four years before. We both thought the prickly pear cactus looked like Ping-Pong

paddles with whiskers, and that saguaros looked like dinosaur mittens. We both loved strawberry-banana smoothies. We both wanted to go into television. Kevin often said he wanted to be a sleazy talk show host, and he wasn't kidding. I wanted to be a sports announcer or news anchor. We conceived *Hot Seat* together and convinced the faculty to let us do it. It was an instant hit. It quickly became the most popular thing in school.

So why was I balking?

I didn't know. I had some vague feelings, but the only one I could identify was a warning: Leave her alone.

In time "Hillari's Hypothesis" (so called by Kevin) about Stargirl's origins gave way to other theories.

She was trying to get herself discovered for the movies.

She was sniffing fumes.

She was homeschooling gone amok.

She was an alien.

The rat she brought to school was only the tip of the iceberg. She had hundreds of them at home, some as big as cats.

She lived in a ghost town in the desert.

She lived in a bus.

Her parents were circus acrobats.

Her parents were witches.

Her parents were brain-dead vegetables in a hospital in Yuma.

14 We watched her sit down in class and pull from her canvas bag a blue and yellow ruffled curtain that she draped

over three sides of her desk. We saw her set out a three-inch clear glass vase and drop into it a white and yellow daisy. She did and undid this in every class she attended, six times a day. Only on Monday mornings was the daisy fresh. By last period the petals were drooping. By Wednesday the petals began to fall, the stem to sag. By Friday the flower hung down over the rim of the waterless vase, its dead stump of a head shedding yellow dust in the pencil groove.

We joined her as she sang "Happy Birthday" to us in the lunchroom. We heard her greet us in the hallways and classrooms, and we wondered how she knew our names and our birthdays.

Her caught-in-headlights eyes gave her a look of perpetual astonishment, so that we found ourselves turning and looking back over our shoulders, wondering what we were missing.

She laughed when there was no joke. She danced when there was no music.

She had no friends, yet she was the friendliest person in school.

In her answers in class, she often spoke of sea horses and stars, but she did not know what a football was.

She said there was no television in her house.

She was elusive. She was today. She was tomorrow. She was the faintest scent of a cactus flower, the flitting shadow of an elf owl. We did not know what to make of her. In our minds we tried to pin her to a corkboard like a butterfly, but the pin merely went through and away she flew.



Kevin wasn't the only one. Other kids pestered me: "Put her on the Hot Seat!"

I lied. I said she was only a tenth-grader and you had to be at least a junior to be on *Hot Seat*.

Meanwhile, I kept my distance. I observed her as if she were a bird in an aviary. One day I turned a corner and there she was, coming right at me, the long skirt softly rustling, looking straight at me, surrounding me with those eyes. I turned and trotted off the other way. Seating myself in my next class, I felt warm, shaken. I wondered if my foolishness showed. Was I myself becoming goofy? The feeling I had had when I saw her around the corner had been something like panic.

Then one day after school I followed her. I kept at a safe distance. Since she was known not to take a bus, I expected the walk to be short. It wasn't. We trekked all over Mica, past hundreds of grassless stone-and-cactus front yards, through the Tudorized shopping center, skirting the electronics business park around which the city had been invented a mere fifteen years before.

At one point she pulled a piece of paper from her bag. She consulted it. She seemed to be reading house numbers as she walked along. Abruptly she turned up a driveway, went to the front door, and left something in the mailbox.

I waited for her to move off. I looked around—no one on
16 the street. I went to the mailbox, pulled out a homemade

card, opened it. Each tall letter was a different painted color. The card said: CONGRATULATIONS! It was unsigned.

I resumed following her. Cars pulled into driveways. It was dinnertime. My parents would be wondering.

She took the rat from the bag and put it on her shoulder. Riding there, the rat faced backward, its tiny triangular face peeping out of her sand-colored hair. I could not see its beady black eyes, but I guessed it was looking at me. I fancied it was telling her what it saw. I fell farther back.

Shadows crossed the streets.

We passed the car wash and the bike shop. We passed the country club golf course, the biggest spread of green grass until the next golf course in the next town. We passed the "Welcome to Mica" sign. We were walking westward. There was us and the highway and the desert and the sun blazing above the Maricopa Mountains. I wished I had my sunglasses.

After a while she veered from the highway. I hesitated, then followed. She was walking directly into the setting sun, now a great orange perched atop the mountain crests. For a minute the mountains were the same dusky lavender as her sand-skimming skirt. With every step the silence grew, as did my sense that she knew—had known all along—that she was being followed. Or more, that she was leading me. She never looked back.

She strummed her ukulele. She sang. I could no longer see the rat. I imagined it was dozing in the curtain of her

hair. I imagined it was singing along. The sun lay down behind the mountains.

Where was she going?

In the gathering dusk, the saguaros flung shadows of giants across the pebbled earth. The air was cool on my face. The desert smelled of apples. I heard something—a coyote? I thought of rattlesnakes and scorpions.

I stopped. I watched her walk on. I stifled an impulse to call after her, to warn her...of what?

I turned and walked, then ran, back to the highway.

At Mica Area High School, Hillari Kimble was famous for three things: her mouth, The Hoax, and Wayne Parr.

Her mouth spoke for itself, most often to complain.

The episode that became known as Hillari's Hoax took place in her sophomore year, when she tried out for cheer-leading. Her face and hair and figure were right enough, and she surely had the mouth—she made the squad easily. And then she stunned everyone by turning it down. She said she just wanted to prove that she could do it. She said she had no intention of yammering and bouncing in front of empty bleachers (which was usually the case). And anyway, she hated sports.

As for Wayne Parr, he was her boyfriend. Mouthwise, he was her opposite: he seldom opened his. He didn't have to. All he had to do was appear. That was his job: appear. By both girls' and boys' standards, Wayne Parr was gorgeous.

But he was more—and less—than that.

In terms of achievement, Wayne Parr seemed to be nobody. He played on no sports team, joined no organization, won no awards, earned no A's. He was elected to nothing, honored for nothing—and yet, though I did not realize this until years later, he was grand marshal of our daily parade.

We did not wake up in the morning and ask ourselves, "What will Wayne Parr wear today?" or "How will Wayne Parr act today?" At least, not consciously. But on some level

below awareness, that is exactly what we did. Wayne Parr did not go to football and basketball games, and by and large, neither did we. Wayne Parr did not ask questions in class or get worked up over teachers or pep rallies, and neither did we. Wayne Parr did not much care. Neither did we.

Did Parr create us, or was he simply a reflection of us? I didn't know. I knew only that if you peeled off one by one all the layers of the student body, you would have found at the core not the spirit of the school, but Wayne Parr. That's why, in our sophomore year, I had recruited Parr for the Hot Seat. Kevin was surprised.

"Why him?" Kevin said. "What's he ever done?"

What could I say? That Parr was a worthy subject precisely *because* he did nothing, *because* he was so monumentally good at doing nothing? I had only a vague insight, not the words. I just shrugged.

The highlight of that *Hot Seat* came when Kevin asked Parr who was his hero, his role model. It was one of Kevin's standard questions.

Parr answered, "GQ."

In the control room, I did a double take. Was the sound working right?

"GQ?" Kevin repeated dumbly. "*Gentleman's Quarterly*? The magazine?"

Parr did not look at Kevin. He looked straight at the camera. He nodded smugly. He went on to say he wanted to become a male model, his ultimate ambition was to be on the cover of GQ. And right there he posed for the camera—

he had that disdainful model look down pat—and suddenly I could see it: the jaw square as the corner of a cover, the chiseled cheeks, the perfect teeth and hair.

That, as I say, took place toward the end of our sophomore year. I thought then that Wayne Parr would always reign as our grand marshal. How could I have known that he would soon be challenged by a freckle-nosed homeschooler?

The call came from Kevin on a Friday night. He was at the football game. "Quick! Hurry! Drop whatever you're doing! Now!"

Kevin was one of the few who went to games. The school kept threatening to drop football because of low attendance. They said ticket receipts were barely enough to pay for electricity to light the field.

But Kevin was screaming on the phone. I jumped in the family pickup and raced to the stadium.

I bolted from the truck. Kevin was at the gate, windmilling his arm: "Hurry!" I threw the two dollar admission at the ticket window and we raced for the field. "See better up here," he said, yanking me into the stands. It was halftime. The band was on the field, all fourteen of them. Among the students it was known as "The World's Smallest Standing Band." There weren't enough of them to form recognizable letters or shapes—except for a capital "I"—so they didn't march much at halftimes of games. They mostly stood. In two rows of seven each, plus the student conductor. No majorettes. No color guard. No flag and rifle girls.

Except this night. This night Stargirl Caraway was on the field with them. As they played, rooted in their places, she pranced around the grass in her bare feet and long lemon-yellow dress. She roamed from goalpost to goalpost. She swirled like a dust devil. She marched stiffly like a wooden soldier. She tootled an imaginary flute. She pogoed into the

air and knocked her bare heels together. The cheerleaders gaped from the sidelines. A few people in the stands whistled. The rest—they barely outnumbered the band—sat there with *What is this?* on their faces.

The band stopped playing and marched off the field. Stargirl stayed. She was twirling down the forty-yard line when the players returned. They did a minute of warm-up exercises. She joined in: jumping jacks, belly whumps. The teams lined up for the second half kickoff. The ball perched on the kicking tee. She was still on the field. The referee blew his whistle, pointed to her. He flapped his hand for her to go away. Instead, she dashed for the ball. She plucked it off the tee and danced with it, spinning and hugging it and hoisting it into the air. The players looked at their coaches. The coaches looked at the officials. The officials blew their whistles and began converging on her. The sole policeman on duty headed for the field. She punted the ball over the visiting team's bench and ran from the field and out of the stadium.

Everyone cheered: the spectators, the cheerleaders, the band, the players, the officials, the parents running the hot dog stand, the policeman, me. We whistled and stomped our feet on the aluminum bleachers. The cheerleaders stared up in delighted surprise. For the first time, they were hearing something come back from the stands. They did cartwheels and backflips and even a three-tier pyramid. Old-timers—or as old as timers got in a city as young as Mica—said they had never heard such a racket.



For the next home game more than a thousand people showed up. Everyone but Wayne Parr and Hillari Kimble. There was a line at the ticket window. The refreshment stand ran out of hot dogs. A second policeman was called in. The cheerleaders were in their glory. They screamed up at the bleachers: "GIMME AN E!" The bleachers screamed back: "EEEE!" (We were the Electrons, in honor of the town's electronics heritage.)

The cheerleaders ran through all their routines before the first quarter was over. The band was loud and peppy. The football team even scored a touchdown. In the stands heads kept swinging to the edges of the field, to the entrance, to the streetlamp-lighted darkness behind the stadium. The sense of expectation grew as the first half came to a close. The band marched smartly onto the field. Even they were looking around.

The musicians did their program. They even formed a small, lopsided circle. They seemed to linger on the field, drawing out their notes, waiting. Finally, reluctantly, they marched to the sideline. The players returned. They kept glancing around as they did their warm-ups. When the referee raised his arm and blew his whistle for the second half to begin, a sense of disappointment fell over the stadium. The cheerleaders' shoulders sagged.



On the following Monday, we got a shock in the lunchroom. Bleached blond and beautiful Mallory Stillwell, captain of the cheerleaders, was sitting with Stargirl. She sat with her, ate with her, talked with her, walked out with her. By sixth period the whole school knew: Stargirl had been invited to become a cheerleader and had said yes.

People in Phoenix must have heard us buzzing. Would she wear the usual skirt and sweater like everyone else? Would she do the usual cheers? Did all the cheerleaders want this, or was it just the captain's idea? Were they jealous?

Cheerleading practice drew a crowd. At least a hundred of us stood by the parking lot that day, watching her learn the cheers, watching her jump around in her long pioneer dress.

She spent two weeks practicing. Halfway through the second week she wore her uniform: green-trimmed white V-neck cotton sweater, short green and white pleated skirt. She looked just like the rest of them.

Still, to us she was not truly a cheerleader, but Stargirl dressed like one. She continued to strum her ukulele and sing "Happy Birthday" to people. She still wore long skirts on non-game days and made a home of her school desks. When Halloween arrived, everyone in her homeroom found a candy pumpkin on his or her desk. No one had to ask who did it. By then most of us had decided that we liked having her around. We found ourselves looking forward to coming

to school, to seeing what bizarre antic she'd be up to. She gave us something to talk about. She was entertaining.

At the same time, we held back. Because she was different. *Different*. We had no one to compare her to, no one to measure her against. She was unknown territory. Unsafe. We were afraid to get too close.

Also, I think we were all waiting to see the outcome of an event that loomed larger and larger with every passing day. The next birthday coming up was Hillari Kimble's.

Hillari herself set the stage the day before. In the middle of lunch, she got up from her table and walked over to Stargirl. For half a minute she just stood behind Stargirl's chair. Silence everywhere except for tinklings in the kitchen. Only Stargirl was still chewing. Hillari moved around to the side.

"I'm Hillari Kimble," she said.

Stargirl looked up. She smiled. She said, "I know."

"My birthday is tomorrow."

"I know."

Hillari paused. Her eyes narrowed. She jabbed her finger in Stargirl's face. "Don't try singing to me, I'm warning you."

Only those at nearby tables heard Stargirl's faint reply: "I won't sing to you."

Hillari gave a satisfied smirk and walked off.

From the moment we arrived at school the next day, the atmosphere bristled like cactus paddles. When the buzzer sounded for first lunch, we leaped for the doors. We swarmed into the food lines. We raced through our choices and hurried to our seats. Never had we moved so fast so quietly. At most, we whispered. We sat, we ate. We were afraid to crunch our potato chips, afraid we might miss something.

Hillari was first to enter. She marched in, leading her girlfriends like an invading general. In the food line, she smacked items onto her tray. She glared at the cashier.

While her friends scanned the crowd for Stargirl, Hillari stared ferociously at her sandwich.

Wayne Parr came in and sat several tables away, as if even he was afraid of her on this day.

Stargirl finally came in. She went straight to the food line, blithely smiling as usual. Both she and Hillari seemed unaware of each other.

Stargirl ate. Hillari ate. We watched. Only the clock moved.

A kitchen staffer stuck her head out over the conveyor belt and called: "Trays!"

A voice barked back: "Shut up!"

Stargirl finished her lunch. As usual, she stuffed her wrappings into her paper bag, carried the bag to the paper-only can by the tray return window, and dropped it in. She returned to her seat. She picked up the ukulele. We stopped breathing. Hillari stared at her sandwich.

Stargirl began strumming and humming. She stood. She strolled between the tables, humming, strumming. Three hundred pairs of eyes followed her. She came to Hillari Kimble's table—and kept on walking, right up to the table where Kevin and I sat with the *Hot Seat* crew. She stopped and she sang "Happy Birthday." It was Hillari's name at the end of the song, but true to her word of the day before, she did not sing it to Hillari—she sang it to me. She stood at my shoulder and looked down at me, smiling and singing, and I didn't know whether to look down at my hands or up at her face, so I did some of each. My face was burning.

When she finished, the students burst from their silence with wild applause. Hillari Kimble stomped from the lunchroom. Kevin looked up at Stargirl and pointed at me and said what everyone must have been thinking: "Why him?"

Stargirl tilted her head, as if studying me. She grinned mischievously. She tugged on my earlobe and said, "He's cute." And walked off.

I was feeling nine ways at once, and they all ended up at the touch of her hand on my ear—until Kevin reached over and yanked the same earlobe. "This keeps getting more interesting," he said. "I think it's time to go see Archie."

A. H. (Archibald Hapwood) Brubaker lived in a house of bones. Jawbones, hipbones, femurs. There were bones in every room, every closet, on the back porch. Some people have stone cats on their roofs; on his roof Archie Brubaker had a skeleton of Monroe, his deceased Siamese. Take a seat in his bathroom and you found yourself facing the faintly smirking skull of Doris, a prehistoric creodont. Open the kitchen cabinet where the peanut butter was kept and you were face to fossil face with an extinct fox.

Archie was not morbid; he was a paleontologist. The bones were from digs he had done throughout the American West. Many were rightly his, found in his spare time. Others he collected for museums but slipped into his own pocket or knapsack instead. "Better to sit in my refrigerator than disappear in a drawer in some museum basement," he would say.

When he wasn't digging up old bones, Archie Brubaker was teaching at universities in the East. He retired at the age of sixty-five. When he was sixty-six, his wife, Ada Mae, died. At sixty-seven he moved himself and his bones west, "to join the other fossils."

He chose his home for two reasons: (1) its proximity to the high school (he wanted to be near kids; he had none of his own) and (2) "Señor Saguaro." Señor Saguaro was a cactus, a thirty-foot-tall giant that towered over the toolshed in the backyard. It had two arms high on the trunk. One

stuck straight out; the other made a right turn upward, as if waving “adiós!” The waving arm was green from the elbow up; all else was brown, dead. Much of the thick, leathery skin along the trunk had come loose and crumpled in a heap about the massive foot: Señor Saguario had lost his pants. Only his ribs, thumb-thick vertical timbers, held him up. Elf owls nested in his chest.

The old professor often talked to Señor Saguario—and to us. He was not certified to teach in Arizona, but that did not stop him. Every Saturday morning his house became a school. Fourth-graders, twelfth-graders—all were welcome. No tests, no grades, no attendance record. Just the best school most of us had ever gone to. He covered everything from toothpaste to tapeworms and somehow made it all fit together. He called us the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone. He gave us homemade necklaces. The pendant was a small fossil bone strung on rawhide. Years before, he had told his first class, “Call me Archie.” He never had to say it again.

After dinner that day, Kevin and I walked over to Archie’s. Though the official class convened on Saturday morning, kids were welcome anytime. “My school,” he said, “is everywhere and always in session.”

We found him, as usual, on the back porch, rocking and reading. The porch, bathed in the red-gold light of sunset, faced the Maricopas. Archie’s white hair seemed to give off a light of its own.

The moment he saw us, he put down his book. “Students! Welcome!”

"Archie," we said, then turned to greet the great cactus, as visitors were expected to do: "Señor Saguaro." We saluted.

We sat on rockers; the porch was full of them. "So, men," he said, "business or pleasure?"

"Bafflement," I said. "There's a new girl in school."

He laughed. "Stargirl."

Kevin's eyes popped. "You know her?"

"Know her?" he said. He picked up his pipe and loaded it with cherrysweet tobacco. He always did this when settling in for a long lecture or conversation. "Good question." He lit the pipe. "Let's say she's been on the porch here quite a few times." White smoke puffed like Apache signals from the corner of his mouth. "I was wondering when you'd start asking questions." He chuckled to himself. "Bafflement... good word. She is different, isn't she?"

Kevin and I burst into laughter and nods. At that moment I realized how much I had been craving Archie's confirmation.

Kevin exclaimed, "Like another species!"

Archie cocked his head, as if he had just caught the sound of a rare bird. The pipe stem anchored a wry grin. A sweet scent filled the air about our rocking chairs. He stared at Kevin. "On the contrary, she is one of us. Most decidedly. She is us more than we are us. She is, I think, who we really are. Or were."

Archie talked that way sometimes, in riddles. We didn't always know what he was saying, but our ears didn't much care. We just wanted to hear more. As the sun dipped

below the mountains, it fired a final dart at Archie's flashing eyebrows.

"She's homeschooled, you know. Her mother brought her to me. I guess she wanted a break from playing teacher. One day a week. Four, five—yes, five years now."

Kevin pointed. "You created her!"

Archie smiled, puffed. "No, that was done long before me."

"Some people are saying she's some kind of alien sent down here from Alpha Centauri or something," said Kevin. He chuckled, but not too convincingly. He half believed it.

Archie's pipe had gone out. He relit it. "She's anything but. She's an earthling if there ever was one."

"So it's not just an act?" said Kevin.

"An act? No. If anybody is acting, it's us. She's as real as"—he looked around; he picked up the tiny, wedgelike skull of Barney, a 60-million-year-old Paleocene rodent, and held it up—"as real as Barney."

I felt a little jolt of pride at having reached this conclusion myself.

"But the name," said Kevin, leaning forward. "Is it real?"

"The name?" Archie shrugged. "Every name is real. That's the nature of names. When she first showed up, she called herself Pocket Mouse. Then Mudpie. Then—what?—Hullygully, I believe. Now..."

"Stargirl." The word came out whispery; my throat was dry.

Archie looked at me. "Whatever strikes her fancy. Maybe

that's how names ought to be, heh? Why be stuck with just one your whole life?"

"What about her parents?" said Kevin.

"What about them?"

"What do they think?"

Archie shrugged. "I guess they agree."

"What do they do?" Kevin said.

"Breathe. Eat. Clip their toenails."

Kevin laughed. "You know what I mean. Where do they work?"

"Mrs. Caraway, until a few months ago, was Stargirl's teacher. I understand she also makes costumes for movies."

Kevin poked me. "The crazy clothes!"

"Her father, Charles, works—" he smiled at us "—where else?"

"MicaTronics," we said in chorus.

I said it with wonder, for I had imagined something more exotic.

Kevin said, "So where is she from?"

A natural question in a city as young as Mica. Nearly everybody had been born somewhere else.

Archie's eyebrows went up. "Good question." He took a long pull on the pipe. "Some would say Minnesota, but in her case..." He let out the smoke, his face disappearing in a gray cloud. A sweet haze veiled the sunset: cherries roasting in the Maricopas. He whispered, "Rara avis."

"Archie," said Kevin, "you're not making a lot of sense."

Archie laughed, "Do I ever?"

Kevin jumped up. "I want to put her on *Hot Seat*. Dorko Borlock here doesn't want to."

Archie studied me through the smoke. I thought I saw approval, but when he spoke, he merely said, "Work it out, men."

We talked until dark. We said "adiós" to Señor Saguaro. On our way out, Archie said, more to me than to Kevin, I thought: "You'll know her more by your questions than by her answers. Keep looking at her long enough. One day you might see someone you know."

The change began around Thanksgiving. By December first, Stargirl Caraway had become the most popular person in school.

How did it happen?

Was it the cheerleading?

The last football game of the season was her first as a cheerleader. The grandstand was packed: students, parents, alumni. Never had so many people come to a football game to see a cheerleader.

She did all the regular cheers and routines. And more. In fact, she never stopped cheering. While the other girls were taking breaks, she went on jumping and yelling. She roamed. Areas that had always been ignored—the far ends of the grandstand, the spectators behind the goalposts, the snack bar parents—found themselves with their own arm-pumping cheerleader.

She ran straight across the fifty-yard line and joined the other team's cheerleaders. We laughed as they stood there with their mouths open. She cheered in front of the players' bench and was shooed away by a coach. At halftime she played her ukulele with the band.

In the second half she got acrobatic. She did cartwheels and backflips. At one point the game was stopped and three zebra-shirted officials ran toward one end zone. She had shinnied up a goalpost, tightrope-walked out to the middle

of the crossbar, and was now standing there with her arms raised in a touchdown sign. She was commanded down, to a standing ovation and flashing cameras.

As we filed out afterward, no one mentioned how boring the game itself had been. No one cared that the Electrons had lost again. In his column next day, the sports editor of the *Mica Times* referred to her as "the best athlete on the field." We couldn't wait for basketball season.

Was it a Hillari Kimble backlash?

Several days after the birthday song, I heard a shout down the hallway: "Don't!" I ran. A crowd was gathered at the top of a stairwell. They were all staring at something. I pushed my way through. Hillari Kimble was standing at the upper landing, grinning. She was holding Cinnamon the rat, dangling by its tail over the railing, nothing but space between it and the first floor. Stargirl was on the steps below, looking up.

The scene froze. The bell for the next class rang. Nobody moved. Stargirl said nothing, merely looked. The eight toes of Cinnamon's front paws splayed apart. Its tiny unblinking eyes were bulging, black as cloves. Again a voice rang out: "Don't, Hillari!" Suddenly Hillari dropped it. Someone screamed, but the rat fell only to the floor at Hillari's feet. She sent Stargirl a final sneer and left.

Was it Dori Dilson?

Dori Dilson was a brown-haired ninth-grader who wrote

poems in a looseleaf notebook half as big as herself and whose name nobody knew until the day she sat down at Stargirl's table for lunch. Next day the table was full. No longer did Stargirl eat lunch—or walk the hallways or do anything else at school—alone.

Was it us?

Did we change? Why didn't Hillari Kimble drop the rat to its death? Did she see something in our eyes?

Whatever the reason, by the time we returned from Thanksgiving break, it was clear that the change had occurred. Suddenly Stargirl was not dangerous, and we rushed to embrace her. Calls of "Stargirl!" flew down the hallways. We couldn't say her name often enough. It tickled us to mention her name to strangers and watch the expressions on their faces.

Girls liked her. Boys liked her. And—most remarkable—the attention came from all kinds of kids: shy mice and princesses, jocks and eggheads.

We honored her by imitation. A chorus of ukuleles strummed in the lunchroom. Flowers appeared on classroom desks. One day it rained and a dozen girls ran outside to dance. The pet shop at the Mica Mall ran out of rats.

The best chance for us to express our admiration came in the first week of December. We were gathered in the auditorium for the annual oratorical contest. Sponsored by the Arizona League of Women Voters, the event was open to any high school student who cared to show his or her stuff as a public speaker. The microphone was yours for seven min-

utes. Talk about anything you like. The winner would move on to the district competition.

Usually only four or five students entered the contest at MAHS. That year there were thirteen, including Stargirl. You didn't have to be a judge to see that she was far and away the best. She gave an animated speech—a performance, really—titled “Elf Owl, Call Me by My First Name.” Her gray-brown homesteader's dress was the color of her subject. I couldn't see her freckles from the audience, but I imagined them dancing on her nose as she flicked her head this way and that. When she finished, we stomped on the floor and whistled and shouted for more.

While the judges went through the charade of conferring, a film was shown. It was a brief documentary about the previous year's state finals. It featured the winner, a boy from Yuma. The most riveting moments of the film came not during the contest, but during its aftermath. When the boy arrived back at Yuma High, the whole school mobbed him in the parking lot: banners, cheerleaders, band music, confetti, streamers. Pumping his arms in the air, the returning hero rode their shoulders into school.

The film ended, the lights went on, and the judges proclaimed Stargirl the winner. She would now go on to the district competition in Red Rock, they said. The state finals would be held in Phoenix in April. Again and again we whooped and whistled.

Such was the acclamation we gave her in those last weeks of the year. But we also gave something to ourselves.

In the Sonoran Desert there are ponds. You could be standing in the middle of one and not know it, because the ponds are usually dry. Nor would you know that inches below your feet, frogs are sleeping, their heartbeats down to once or twice per minute. They lie dormant and waiting, these mud frogs, for without water their lives are incomplete, they are not fully themselves. For many months they sleep like this within the earth. And then the rain comes. And a hundred pairs of eyes pop out of the mud, and at night a hundred voices call across the moonlit water.

It was wonderful to see, wonderful to be in the middle of: we mud frogs awakening all around. We were awash in tiny attentions. Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life. For years the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. If someone got an A, others celebrated, too. If someone sprained an ankle, others felt the pain. We discovered the color of each other's eyes.

It was a rebellion she led, a rebellion *for* rather than against. For ourselves. For the dormant mud frogs we had been for so long.

Kids whose voices had never been heard before spoke up in class. "Letters to the Editor" filled a whole page of the school newspaper's December edition. More than a hundred students tried out for the Spring Revue. One kid started a camera club. Another wore Hush Puppies instead

of sneakers. A plain, timid girl painted her toenails kelly green. A boy showed up with purple hair.

None of this was publicly acknowledged. There were no PA announcements, no TV coverage, no headlines in the *Mica Times*:

MAHS STUDENTS ASTIR INDIVIDUALITY ERUPTS

But it was there; it was happening. I was used to peering through the lens, to framing the picture, and I could see it. I could feel it in myself. I felt lighter, unshackled, as if something I had been carrying had fallen away. But I didn't know what to do about it. There was no direction to my liberation. I had no urge to color my hair or trash my sneakers. So I just enjoyed the feeling and watched the once amorphous student body separate itself into hundreds of individuals. The pronoun "we" itself seemed to crack and drift apart in pieces.

Ironically, as we discovered and distinguished ourselves, a new collective came into being—a vitality, a presence, a spirit that had not been there before. It echoed from the rafters in the gym: "GO, ELECTRONS!" It sparkled in the water fountains. At the holiday assembly, the words of the alma mater had wings.

"It's a miracle!" I gushed to Archie one day.

He stood on the edge of his back porch. He did not turn. He pulled the pipe slowly from between his lips. He spoke as if to Señor Saguario or to the blazing mountains beyond.

“Best hope it’s not,” he said. “The trouble with miracles is, they don’t last long.”

And the trouble with bad times is, you can’t sleep through them.

It was a golden age, those few weeks in December and January. How could I know that when the end came, I would be in the middle of it?

All my resistance to putting Stargirl on *Hot Seat* vanished. "Okay," I said to Kevin, "let's do it. Schedule her." He started off. I grabbed his arm. "Wait—ask her first."

He laughed. "Right. Like she's gonna say no."

No one had ever said no to the Hot Seat. Any reluctance to answering personal or embarrassing questions always yielded to the lure of appearing on TV. If anyone could resist that lure, I figured it would be Stargirl. That day after school, Kevin came at me thumbs-up and grinning: "It's a go! She said yes!"

First I was surprised. This didn't fit my impression of her. I didn't know that this was an early glimpse of something I was soon to see much more of: behind the dazzling talents and differentness, she was far more normal than I had realized.

Then I was elated. We yipped. We high-fived. We saw visions of our most popular show ever.

This was mid-January. We set a date of February thirteenth, the day before Valentine's. We wanted a full month for buildup. With my resistance now gone, I jumped in with both feet. We planned a promo campaign. We got art students to do posters. We jotted down questions for Kevin to ask in case the jury ran out—fat chance of that happening. We didn't have to post the usual jury notice: dozens of kids volunteered.

And then things changed again.



In the courtyard of our school stood a five-foot sheet of plywood in the shape of a roadrunner. It was a bulletin board, strictly for student use, always taped and tacked with messages and announcements. One day we found the following computer printout taped to the plywood roadrunner:

“I pledge allegiance to United Turtles of America and to the fruit bats of Borneo, one planet in the Milky Way, incredible, with justice and black bean burritos for all.”

Handwritten across the bottom were the words: “This is how she says the Pledge of Allegiance.”

No one had to tell us who “she” was. Apparently, she was overheard in homeroom as we said the Pledge each morning.

As far as I knew, we were not a particularly patriotic bunch. I didn’t hear people saying they were offended. Some thought it was funny. Some giggled and nodded knowingly, as if to say, There she goes again. On the following mornings, more than one kid was heard reciting the new “pledge.”

Within days a new story wildfired through the student body. A senior girl, Anna Grisdale, lost her grandfather after a long illness. The funeral took place on a Saturday morning. For a while everything seemed routine: the crowd of people at the church, the line of cars with their headlights on, the smaller group clustered around the grave for

the final farewell. After the brief graveside service, the funeral director handed everyone a long-stemmed flower. Upon leaving, each mourner laid his or her flower over the casket. This was when Anna Grisdale first noticed Stargirl.

Through her own tears Anna could see that Stargirl was crying also. She wondered if Stargirl had been at the church as well. Even more, she wondered why Stargirl was there at all. Could she have been friends with her grandfather without Anna's knowing it? Anna's mother asked her who the unfamiliar girl was.

Afterward, the mourners were invited to Anna's house for lunch. About thirty came. There was a buffet of cold cuts and salads and cookies. Stargirl was there, chatting with members of the family but not eating or drinking anything.

Suddenly Anna heard her mother's voice. It was no louder than the others, but it was different: "What are you doing here?"

Sudden stillness. Everyone staring.

They were in front of the picture window. Anna had never seen her mother so angry. Mrs. Grisdale had been very close to her father. They had built an addition to their house so he could live with them.

She glared down at Stargirl. "Answer me."

Stargirl gave no reply. "You didn't even know him, did you?"

Still Stargirl said nothing.

"Did you?"

And then Anna's mother was flinging open the front door and pointing, as if banishing her to the desert. "Leave my house."

Stargirl left.

Danny Pike was nine years old. He loved to ride the bicycle he had gotten for his birthday. One day after school he lost control and plowed into a mailbox. He broke his leg, but that wasn't the worst of it. A blood clot developed. He was airlifted to Children's Hospital in Phoenix, where he was operated on. For a while it was touch and go, but within a week he was on his way back home.

All this was reported in the *Mica Times*. As was the celebration when Danny arrived at his home on Piñon Lane. The five-column photo in the *Times* showed Danny on his father's shoulders, surrounded by a mob of neighbors. In the foreground was a new bike, and a big sign that read:

WELCOME HOME, DANNY

It wasn't until days later that the front-page photo appeared on the plywood roadrunner. We gathered around to see something we hadn't noticed before. An arrow from a thick red felt-tip marker pointed at one of the tiny faces crowded into the frame. It was the face of a girl, beaming as if Danny Pike were her little brother back from the dead. It was Stargirl.

46 And then there was the bike.

The various members of the Pike family—parents, grandparents, et al.—each thought someone else had bought Danny the new bicycle. Several days went by before they discovered to their great surprise that none of them had.

So where did the bike come from? High-schoolers who heard the story and saw the picture had a pretty good idea. Apparently the Pikes did not. The bike became the focus of a family squabble. Mr. Pike was mad because nobody he asked would admit to buying the bike—and probably because he hadn't done it himself. Mrs. Pike was mad because no way, not for at least one year, would she allow Danny back on wheels.

One night the new, still-unridden bike wound up at the Pikes' front curb with the trash cans. By the time the trash collector came the next day, it was gone. Danny got a BB gun instead.

The Pledge of Allegiance, the Grisdale funeral, the Danny Pike affair—these things were noted, but they had no immediate impact on Stargirl's popularity at school. Not so with cheerleading and the boys' basketball season.

II

During the first quarter of each home game, Stargirl went over to the visitors' section and gave them a cheer. She began with an exaggerated ball-bouncing motion:

Dribble, Dribble!

Sis Boom Bibble!

We don't bite!

We don't nibble!

We just say—

(sweeping wave)

"Howwww-dee, friends!"

(two thumbs pointing to her chest)

"We're the Electrons!"

(points to them)

"Who—are—YYYYYYOU?"

(turns head to side, cups ear)

A couple of visiting cheerleaders, maybe a fan or two would call back: "Wildcats!" or "Cougars!" or whatever, but most of them just gaped at her as if to say, Who is *this*? Some of her fellow cheerleaders were amused, some were mortified.

At that point the only crime Stargirl could have been accused of would be corniness. But she didn't stop there. She cheered whenever the ball went in the basket, regardless of which team shot it. It was the strangest sight: the other

team scores, the MAHS crowd sits glumly on their hands while Stargirl, alone, pops up cheering.

At first the other cheerleaders tried to suppress her; it was like trying to calm down a puppy. When they gave her the pleated skirt, they made a cheerleader they never imagined. She did not limit herself to basketball games. She cheered anyone, anything, anytime. She cheered the big things—honors, election winners—but she gave most of her attention to little things.

You never knew when it would happen. Maybe you were a little ninth-grade nobody named Eddie. As you're walking down the hall you see a candy wrapper on the floor. You pick it up and throw it in the nearest trash can—and suddenly there she is in front of you, pumping her arms, her honey hair and freckles flying, swallowing you whole with those enormous eyes, belting out a cheer she's making up on the spot, something about Eddie, Eddie and the trash can teaming up to wipe out litter. A mob is gathering, clapping hands in rhythm, more eyes on you than all the previous days of your life combined. You feel foolish, exposed, stupid. You want to follow the candy wrapper into the trash can. It's the most painful thing that's ever happened to you. Your brain keeps squirting out a single thought: *I'm going to die . . . I'm going to die . . .*

And so, when she finally finishes and her freckles settle back onto the bridge of her nose, why don't you? Why don't you just die?

Because they're clapping for you, that's why, and whoever

heard of dying while they're clapping for you? And they're smiling at you. People who never even *saw* you before are smiling at you and slapping your back and pumping your hand, and suddenly it seems like the whole world is calling your name, and you're feeling so good you pretty much just float on home from school. And when you go to bed that night, the last thing you see before you zonk out are those eyes, and the last thing on your face is a smile.

Or maybe you showed up at school with really unusual earrings. Or you aced a test. Or broke your arm. Or got your braces off. Or maybe you weren't even a person. Maybe you were a charcoal drawing on the wall done by an art whiz. Or a really neat-looking bug out by the bike rack.

We wagged our heads and agreed what a goofy girl this was, maybe even officially crazy, but we walked away smiling and maybe not saying but all thinking the same thing: it felt good to get credit.

And if this had been any other year, things might have just gone on and on like that. But this was the year something unbelievable was happening on the basketball court. This was the year the team was winning. *Only* winning.

And that changed everything.

Early in the season no one noticed. Except for girls' tennis, we had never had good teams in anything. We expected to lose. We were comfortable with losing. In fact, most of us were oblivious to it, since we didn't even attend the games.

50 The year before, the basketball Electrons had won only

five of twenty-six games. This year, they won their fifth game before Christmas. By early January they had won the tenth, and people began to notice that there was still a zero in the loss column.

"UNDEFEATED!" blared a sign on the plywood road-runner. Some said we were winning by accident. Some said the other teams were simply more rotten than we were. Some thought the sign was a joke. One thing was certain: attendance went up. By the start of February the winning streak had reached sixteen, and there wasn't an empty seat in the gym.

But something even more interesting was happening. Suddenly we were no longer comfortable with losing. In fact, we forgot how to lose. The transformation was stunning in its speed. There was no apprenticeship period, no learning curve. No one had to teach us how to be winners. One day we were bored, indifferent, satisfied losers; the next we were rabid fanatics, stomping in the grandstand, painting our faces green and white, doing the wave as if we had been perfecting it for years.

We fell in love with our team. When we spoke of it, we used the word "we" instead of "they." The leading scorer, Brent Ardsley, seemed to have a golden glow about him as he moved through the school. And the more we loved our team, the more we hated the opposition. We used to envy them. We even applauded them to spite our own hapless teams. Now we detested the opposition and everything about them. We hated their uniforms. We hated their

coaches and their fans. We hated them because they were trying to spoil our perfect season. We resented every point scored against us. And how dare they celebrate!

We began to boo. It was our first experience as booers, but you'd have thought we were veterans. We booed the other team, we booed the other coach, we booed the other fans, the referees—whatever threatened our perfect season, we booed it.

We even booed the scoreboard. We hated games that went down to the wire. We hated suspense. We loved games that were decided in the first five minutes. We wanted more than victories, we wanted massacres. The only score we would have been totally happy with would have been 100 to 0.

And right there in the middle of it all, in the midst of this perfect season mania, was Stargirl, popping up whenever the ball went through the net, no matter which team scored, cheering everything and everybody. It was sometime in January when calls started flying from the stands: "Siddown!" Then came the boos. She didn't seem to notice.

She did not seem to notice.

Of all the unusual features of Stargirl, this struck me as the most remarkable. Bad things did not stick to her. Correction: *her* bad things did not stick to her. *Our* bad things stuck very much to her. If we were hurt, if we were unhappy or otherwise victimized by life, she seemed to know about it, and to care, as soon as we did. But bad things falling on her—unkind words, nasty stares, foot blisters—she seemed

unaware of. I never saw her look in a mirror, never heard her complain. All of her feelings, all of her attentions flowed outward. She had no ego.

The nineteenth game of the basketball season was played at Red Rock. In previous years cheerleaders had outnumbered Mica fans at away games. Not now. The convoy rolling across the desert that evening stretched for a couple of miles. By the time we were seated, there was barely room for the home-team fans.

It was the worst slaughter of the year. Red Rock was helpless. By the start of the fourth quarter we were ahead, 78 to 29. The coach put in the subs. We booed. We smelled a hundred points. We wanted blood. The coach put the starters back in. As we howled and thundered in the stands, Stargirl got up and walked from the gym. Those of us who noticed assumed she was going to the rest room. I kept glancing toward the exit. She never returned. With five seconds left in the game, the Electrons scored the hundredth point. We went nuts.

Stargirl had been outside the whole time, chatting with the bus driver. The other cheerleaders asked her why she left. She said she felt sorry for the Red Rock players. She felt her cheering was only making the massacre worse. Such games were no fun, she said. Your job isn't to have fun, they told her, your job is to cheer for Mica High no matter what. She just stared at them.

The team and the cheerleaders rode the same bus. When

the players came out from the locker room, the cheerleaders told them what had happened. They devised a trick. They told Stargirl that someone had forgotten something in the gym, and would she please go get it. With Stargirl gone, they told the bus driver everyone was aboard, and the bus made the two-hour return trip without her.

A Red Rock custodian drove her home that night. Next day in school, the cheerleaders told her it was all a big misunderstanding and acted as if they were sorry. She believed them.

The next day was February thirteenth. The Hot Seat.

This is how *Hot Seat* went.

It took place in the communications center studio. There were two chairs on stage: the infamous Hot Seat itself—painted red with flames running up the legs—and an ordinary chair for the host, Kevin. Off to the side were two rows of six chairs each, the second row higher than the first. This was where the jury sat.

It was a jury in name only. The twelve members did not vote or render a verdict. Their job was to ask questions, to give the Hot Seat its heat: ticklish questions, embarrassing questions, nosy questions. But not mean or hurtful questions. The idea was to make the subject squirm, not roast.

In the spirit of mock inquisition, we called the subject the “victim.” And why would anyone want to be the victim? The lure of TV. The chance to confess—or lie—before a camera and before peers instead of parents. But I doubted the usual reasons applied to Stargirl.

There were three cameras: one for the stage, one for the jury, and Chico. Chico was the handheld close-up camera. According to Mr. Robineau, our faculty advisor, a student named Chico once begged him to be a close-up camera kid. Mr. Robineau gave him a tryout, but Chico was so skinny he practically collapsed under the camera. The job went to someone else and Chico went to the weight room. By the following year Chico had muscles, and the camera was like nothing on his shoulder. He got the job, and he was brilliant

at it. He gave the camera his own name. "We are one," he said. When he graduated, his name stayed behind, and from then on the close-up camera and its operator were a unit called Chico.

The host and the victim were each fitted with a thimble-size clip-on mike; the jury passed around a hand mike. Opposite the stage was the glassed-in control room, sound-insulated from the rest of the studio. That's where I worked, wearing my headset, watching the monitors, directing the shots. I stood at the shoulder of the technical director, or TD. He sat at a rack of buttons, punching up the shots I ordered. Also in the control room were the graphics and audio people. Mr. Robineau was there as faculty overseer, but basically the students worked everything.

Kevin's job was to get things started: intro the victim, ask a few opening questions, stir things up if the jury was slow. Usually the jury was on the ball. Typical questions: "Does it bother you that you're so short?" "Is it true that you like so-and-so?" "Do you wish you were good-looking?" "How often do you take a shower?"

It almost always added up to entertainment. At the end of the half hour, as we cued credits and music, there was always a good feeling in the air, and everyone—victim, jury members, studio crew—mingled and became students again.

We filmed the shows after school, then broadcast them that night—prime time—on local cable. About ten thousand homes. Our own surveys said at least fifty percent of

56 the student body watched any given show. We outdrew

most of the hot sitcoms. We expected to top ninety percent for the Stargirl show.

But I had a secret: I wished no one would watch.

In the month since we had scheduled the show, Stargirl's popularity had dropped out of sight. Gone were ukuleles from the lunchroom. More and more kids saw her cheer-leading behavior as undermining the basketball team and its perfect record. I was afraid the boos for her might spread from the court to the studio. I was afraid the show might turn ugly.

When Stargirl came in that day after school, Kevin gave her the usual briefing while Mr. Robineau and I checked out the equipment. As the jury members straggled in, they were not clowning around or tap-dancing on the stage as jurors usually did. They went right to their seats. Stargirl was the one tap-dancing. And mugging for the cameras with Cinnamon the rat licking her nose. Kevin was cracking up, but the faces of the jurors were grim. One of them was Hillari Kimble. My bad feeling got worse.

I retreated to the control room and shut the door. I checked communications with the cameras. We were ready. Kevin and Stargirl took their seats. I took one last look through the plate glass that separated the set from the control room. For the next half hour I would see the world through four monitors. "Okay, everybody," I announced, "here we go." I cut the studio mike. I looked over my control-room mates. "We all set?" Everyone nodded.

Just then Stargirl lifted one of Cinnamon's front paws and waved it at the control room and said in a squeaky voice, "Hi, Leo."

I froze. I came unraveled. I didn't know she knew my name. I just stood there like a dummy. Finally I wagged my fingers at the rat and mouthed the words "Hi, Cinnamon," although they couldn't hear me on the other side of the glass.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, ready music, ready intro." I paused. "Music, intro."

This was the moment I lived for, launching the show. I was the director, the maestro, I called the shots. On the monitors before me I watched the program unfold according to my commands. But on this day the thrill was missing. I felt only a dark dread snaking along the cables.

"Greetings...and welcome to *Hot Seat*..."

Kevin went through the opening spiel. Kevin loved to be on camera. He was ideal for a show like this, which made good use of his smirky grin and arching, Did-I-really-hear-you-say-that? eyebrows.

He turned to Stargirl. Then, impromptu, he reached out and stroked the nose of Cinnamon, who was perched on Stargirl's shoulder. "Want to hold him?" she said.

Kevin gave the camera a Should-I look. "Sure," he said.

"Ready, Chico, rat," I said into my headset mike.

"Ready" was always first in the command sequence.

Chico zoomed in.

"Chico."

TD punched up Chico. The camera followed Cinnamon from Stargirl's hands to Kevin's. No sooner was the rat in Kevin's lap than it scampered up his chest and darted between two buttons into his shirt. Kevin yipped and squirmed. "It scratches!"

"He has fingernails," Stargirl said calmly. "He won't hurt you."

Chico nailed Cinnamon poking his head out from between the two buttons. Mr. Robineau stuck a thumbs-up in front of my face.

Kevin gave the camera his Ain't-I-something face. He turned again to Stargirl. "You know, ever since you showed up at school this year, we've been wanting to put you on the Hot Seat."

Stargirl stared at him. She turned to the live camera. Her eyes were growing wider...

Something was happening.

...and wider...

"Chico!" I barked.

Chico moved in, crouching, giving it a little upshot. Terrific. "Closer, closer," I said.

Stargirl's wonderstruck eyes practically filled the screen. I checked the long-shot monitor. She was frozen, rigid, as if electrified to the chair.

Someone smacked my shoulder. I turned. Mr. Robineau was laughing, saying something. I lifted one earphone. "She's *joking*," he repeated. And suddenly I saw. She was taking "Hot Seat" literally. She was milking it for all it

was worth, and judging from the blank stares of Kevin and the jury, Mr. Robineau and I were the only ones who got the joke.

Stargirl's hands were rising now from the arms of the Hot Seat...

"Ready one," I called. "One!"

Camera One, not there at first but getting it now, the long shot, nailing her as her hands came off the chair arms, fingers spread wide, you could almost see her fingertips smoking...

Hold it, I prayed, hold it...

...as her horrified eyes swung down over the side of the chair, the Hot Seat, saw the painted flames...

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEYIKES!"

Her scream bent instrument dials like palms in a hurricane. The rat leaped from Kevin's shirt. The TV image quaked as my Camera One man flinched, but he recovered and caught her standing now on the front edge of the stage, bending over with her rear end in the camera, flapping her hand behind her, fanning her smoking fanny.

Finally Kevin got it. He went nuts.

"One, pull back, get Kevin in it. Ready...One."

Kevin was doubled up, tipping out of his chair, on his knees on the stage. His laughter flooded the control room. The rat ran over his hands and hopped down the single stage step...

"The rat!" I yelled. "Two, get the rat!"

But Two couldn't get the rat because the rat was nosing around Two's feet and Two was bolting from his camera.

“Chico, rat!”

Chico dived. He was flat on the floor, feeding the live screen a brilliant shot of the rat heading over to the jury, the jury members scrambling, taking off, climbing onto their seats.

Forget the “Readys”; things were happening too fast. The cameras were dancing, feeding the monitors. I barked commands. TD was punching his button rack like some hard-rock keyboarder.

Stargirl’s pantomime remains the best I have ever seen. Mr. Robineau kept squeezing my shoulder. As he said later, it was the greatest moment in *Hot Seat* history.

But because of what followed, no audience would ever see it.

In less than a minute, everything returned to normal. Stargirl retrieved Cinnamon and sat back coolly in the Hot Seat as if nothing had happened. Kevin's eyes twinkled. He was squirming. He couldn't wait to dig into the interview. Neither could the jury, but their eyes were not twinkling.

Kevin forced himself to look serious. "So, your name. Stargirl. It's pretty unusual."

Stargirl gave him a blank look.

Kevin was flustered. "Isn't it?" he said.

Stargirl shrugged. "Not to me."

She's putting him on, I thought. "Chico," I said into my mike, "stay tight on her face."

A voice was heard dimly off-camera. Kevin turned. A jury member had spoken. "Jury mike up," I said. "Ready Two." The mike was passed to Jennifer St. John. "Two."

The mike looked like a black ice cream cone before Jennifer's face. Her voice wasn't pleasant. "What was wrong with the name your parents gave you?"

Stargirl turned slowly to Jennifer. She smiled. "Nothing. It was a good name."

"What was it?"

"Susan."

"So why did you drop it?"

"Because I didn't feel like Susan anymore."

"So you just threw out Susan and named yourself Stargirl."

"No." Still smiling.

"No?"

"Pocket Mouse."

Twelve pairs of eyes boggled.

"What?"

"I named myself Pocket Mouse," Stargirl said breezily. "Then Mudpie. Then Hullygully. *Then* Stargirl."

Damon Ricci snatched the mike from Jennifer St. John. "So what's it gonna be next? Dog Turd?"

Uh-oh, I thought, *here we go*.

Kevin jumped in. "So... you change your name whenever you get tired of it?"

"Whenever it doesn't fit anymore. I'm not my name. My name is something I wear, like a shirt. It gets worn, I outgrow it, I change it."

"So why Stargirl?"

"Oh, I don't know." She petted Cinnamon's nose with her fingertip. "I was walking in the desert one night, looking up at the sky—like," she chuckled, "how can you *not* look at the sky!—and it just sort of came to me, fell onto me."

Kevin looked up from his sheet of prepared questions. "So what do your parents think? Are they sad you didn't keep Susan?"

"No. It was almost their idea. When I started calling myself Pocket Mouse when I was little, they called me that, too. And we just never went back."

Another distant voice from the jury.

I tapped the soundman. "Jury mike. And keep all mikes open." I hated to do it.

It was Mike Ebersole. "I said, do you love your country?"

"Yes," she answered briskly. "Do you love yours?"

Ebersole ignored her question. "Why don't you say the Pledge of Allegiance right?"

She smiled. "Sounds right to me."

"Sounds like you're a traitor to me."

Jurors were only supposed to ask questions, not make statements.

A hand reached into the picture and grabbed the mike from Ebersole. Becca Rinaldi's angry face appeared on Camera Two. "Why do you cheer for the other team?"

Stargirl seemed to be thinking it over. "I guess because I'm a cheerleader."

"You're not *just* a cheerleader, you dumb cluck"—Becca Rinaldi was snarling into the mike—"you're supposed to be *our* cheerleader. A *Mica* cheerleader."

I glanced at Mr. Robineau. He was turned away from the monitors. He was staring straight at the set through the control room window.

Stargirl was leaning forward, looking earnestly at Becca Rinaldi, her voice small as a little girl's. "When the other team scores a point and you see how happy it makes all their fans, doesn't it make you happy, too?"

Becca growled, "No."

"Doesn't it make you want to join in?"

"No."

"Don't you ever want the other team to be happy, too?"

"No."

Stargirl seemed genuinely surprised. "You don't always want to be the winner...do you?"

Becca scowled at her, jutted out her jaw. "Yes. Yes, I do. Yes. I *always* want to be the winner. That's what I do. I root for us to win. That's what we all do." She swept her arm around the set. "We root for Mica." She jabbed her finger at the stage. "Who do you root for?"

Stargirl hesitated. She smiled, she threw out her arms. "I root for *everybody*!"

Kevin—to the rescue, thankfully—clapped his hands. "Hey—how about this? Maybe it should be official. Maybe one person in the whole district should be appointed to be on"—he waved his arm—"everybody's side!"

Stargirl reached over and slapped Kevin's knee. "She could wear every school's letter on her sweater!"

Kevin laughed. "She'd have to be big as a house!"

Stargirl slapped her own knee. "Then no letter at all. That's even better." She looked into the camera, she swiped at the space before her. "Out with letters!"

"Cheerleader-at-large!"

"Everybody's cheerleader!"

Kevin sat at attention, placed his hand over his heart. "With liberty and justice...and a cheerleader for all."

Ebersole snarled into the jury mike: "And a nut roll for all."

Kevin wagged his finger. "That's a no-no," he scolded. "No statements from the jury. Questions only."

Renee Bozeman snatched the mike. "Okay, here's a question. Why did you quit homeschooling?"

Stargirl's face became serious. "I wanted to make friends."

"Well, you sure have a funny way of showing it, making the whole school mad at you."

I wished I had never given in to Hot-Seating Stargirl.

Stargirl just stared. Chico filled the screen with her face.

"Gimme—" It was Jennifer St. John, reaching for the mike. "And out of school, too. You meddle into everybody's business. You stick your nose in, whether you're invited or not. Why do you do that?"

Stargirl had no reply. Her usual impish expression was gone. She looked at Jennifer. She looked at the camera, as if trying to find an answer in the lens. Then she was looking away, looking at the control room. I took my eyes from the monitor and for a second I thought they met hers at the control room window.

I had been wondering when Hillari Kimble would speak up. Now she did. "I'm gonna tell you something, girl. You're goofy. You're crazy." Hillari was standing, jabbing her finger at Stargirl, chewing on the mike. "You must've come from Mars or something..." Kevin raised a timid hand. "And don't you tell me 'no statements,' Kevin. Where'd you come from, Mars or something? There, now it's a question. Why don't you go back to where you came from? There's another question."

Stargirl's eyes filled the camera. *Don't cry, I prayed.*

There was no stopping Hillari. "You want to cheer for other schools? Fine! Go there! Don't come to *my* school. Get outta *my* school!"

Other hands were snatching at the mike.

"I know what your problem is. All this weird stuff you do? It's just to get attention."

"It's to get a boyfriend!"

The jurors laughed. They were a mob. Hands grabbed at the mike. Kevin looked anxiously at me. I could do nothing. With all the buttons and switches at my command, I was helpless to change anything on the other side of the glass.

"I got a simple question for you. What's the matter with you? Huh? *Huh?*"

"Why can't you be normal?"

"Why do you wanna be so different?"

"Yeah—is something wrong with us, you gotta be so different?"

"Why don't you wear makeup?"

They were all standing now, jabbing, jutting, shouting, whether they had the mike or not.

"You don't like us, do you? *Do you?*"

Mr. Robineau flipped the master toggle on the console.

"That's it," he said.

I flipped the studio sound switch. "That's it. Show's over."

The jury went on shouting.

This was the start of a period that blurs as I try to recall it. Incidents seem to cascade and merge. Events become feelings, feelings become events. Head and heart are contrary historians.

The *Hot Seat* session was never aired. Mr. Robineau destroyed the tape. Of course, that didn't stop every moment of it from being reported. In fact, most of the students knew about it by the time school opened next day.

What I recall then, when the last detail had been spilled, is a period of whispers and waiting. Tension. What would happen now? Would the jury's open hostility spill over into the classrooms? How would Stargirl react? Answers were expected on the following day, Valentine's Day. On previous holidays—Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Groundhog Day—Stargirl had left a little something on each desk in her homeroom. Would she do likewise this time?

The answer was yes. Each member of Homeroom 17 found a candy heart on his or her desk that morning.

There was a basketball game that night; that I do remember. The biggest game of the year. The Electrons had breezed through the regular season undefeated, but now the second season was about to begin: the play-offs. First the districts, then the regionals, and finally the state tournament. We had never even made it to the districts, but now visions of cham-

pionships danced in our heads. The Electrons—champions of all Arizona! We would settle for nothing less.

First hurdle in our way was Sun Valley, champions of the Pima League. The game was played Valentine's night on a neutral court in Casa Grande. All of Mica, it seemed, emptied out and headed for the game. Kevin and I went in the pickup.

From the moment the Mica mob entered the gym, our cheers rattled the rafters. The big green M on Stargirl's white sweater flounced as she spun and leaped with the other cheerleaders. I spent as much time watching her as I did watching the game. She cheered when we scored. When Sun Valley scored, she did not. Something inside me felt better.

But not for long. We were losing. For the first time all year, we were trailing at the end of the first quarter. In fact, we were getting smoked, 21 to 9. The reason was no mystery. While Sun Valley's team was not as good as ours, they did have one thing we did not: a superstar. A kid named Ron Kovac. He stood six-foot-eight and averaged thirty points per game. Our players looked like five Davids flailing against Goliath.

Sun Valley's lead had increased to nineteen points midway through the second quarter. Our once-raucous fans were stunned into silence, and that's when it happened. The ball was loose in the middle of the floor. Several players from each team dived for it. At that moment Kovac was running past, trying to avoid the divers, and his right foot came down

on a prone player's sneaker—so it was told in the newspapers the next day. At the time, it happened so fast no one saw it, though several people said they heard a sickening crack, like a twig snapping. All we knew was that suddenly Goliath was on the floor writhing and screaming, and his right foot looked all wrong, and the Sun Valley coaches and trainer and players were sprinting across the floor. But they were not the first. Stargirl, somehow, was already there.

While Kovac's own cheerleaders sat gaping and stricken on their bench, Stargirl knelt on the hardwood floor. She held his head in her lap while the others attended his broken leg. Her hands moved over his face and forehead. She seemed to be saying things to him. When they carried him away on a stretcher, she followed. Everyone—both sides—stood and applauded. The Sun Valley cheerleaders leaped as if he had just scored two points. Ambulance lights flashed in the high windows.

I knew why I was applauding, but I wondered about some of the other Mica fans. Were they really standing in tribute, or because they were happy to see him go?

The game resumed. Stargirl returned to the cheerleaders' bench. Without Kovac, Sun Valley was a pushover. By early in the second half we took the lead and went on to win easily.

Two nights later we lost to Glendale. Again we fell farther and farther behind as the first half went on. But this time there was no turnaround in the second half. This time the Electrons faced not one but five players better than

themselves. This time no opponent broke an ankle, though I'm sure in our desperation some of us secretly wished for it.

We were shocked. We couldn't believe it. And then, as the seconds of the fourth quarter ticked by, we did believe. The cheers from across the gym were like volleys of arrows piercing our grand delusion. How could we have been so stupid? Did we really think that little Mica, undefeated in its own third-rate league, could ever stand up to the big-city powerhouses around the state? We had been lured into great, foolish expectations. Suckered. We were devastated. It had been so wonderful to be winners. And so right for us. Winning, we had come to believe, was our destiny.

And now...

As the Glendale coach sent in the scrubs to mop us up, Mica girls wept. Boys cursed and booed. Some blamed the officials. Or the nets. Or the lights. The cheerleaders, to their credit, kept on cheering. They looked up at us with glistening eyes and mascara tracks on their cheeks. They pumped their arms and shouted and did everything that cheerleaders are supposed to do, but their gestures were empty, their hearts not in it.

Except for Stargirl. As I watched her intently, I could see that she was different. Her cheeks were dry. There was no crack in her voice, no sag in her shoulders. From the start of the second half on, she never sat down. And she never again looked at the game. She turned her back on the court. She stood and faced us and gave not an ounce of herself to the jubilation across the gym. We were losing by thirty points

with a minute to go, but she cheered on as if we had a chance. Her eyes blazed with a ferocity I had never seen before. She shook her fists at us. She flung her defiance at our gloom.

And then her face was bloody.

A Glendale player had just dunked the ball and Kevin pounded my knee with his fist and I looked to see Stargirl's face suddenly a bloody mask and I was on my feet screaming, "NOOOOOO!"

But it wasn't blood. It was a tomato. Someone had splattered her face with a perfectly thrown ripe tomato, and as the clock expired and the Glendale fans poured onto the court, Stargirl just stood there, her great eyes staring up at us in utter bewilderment through the pulpy red gore. Spouts of bitter laughter erupted among us, even some applause.

The next morning at home I found the card. It was in a school notebook that apparently I had not opened for several days. It was a valentine, one of those little cut-out third-grade sorts, showing a blushing little boy and a girl with mary jane shoes and a big red heart between them and the words "I LOVE YOU." And as third-graders—and high-schoolers—often do, the sender had signed it in code:



She gave everybody in school a card. That was my first thought.

When I saw Kevin at school, I was about to ask him, but I pulled back. I waited until lunch. I tried to be casual. I slipped it in with the only thing that mattered that day. The school was in mourning. The game. The loss. The tomato. Oh yeah, incidentally, speaking of Stargirl: "Did you happen to get a card?"

He looked at me funny. "She gave them to her homeroom, I heard."

"Yeah," I said, "that's what I heard, too. But was that all? Didn't she give them to everybody else?"

He shrugged. "Not to me. Why? You get one?"

He was looking away across the lunchroom, biting into his sandwich, yet I felt he was grilling me. I shook my head. "Oh, no, just wondering."

Actually, I was sitting on the card. It was in the back pocket of my jeans. Meanwhile, all eyes in the lunchroom were on Stargirl. I think we half expected to see traces of red still clinging to her face. She sat at her usual table with Dori Dilson and several other friends. She seemed subdued. She did not play her ukulele. She did not play with her rat. She just ate and talked with the girls at her table.

As the lunch period was ending, she got up but did not head straight for the exit. Instead she detoured in the direction of my table. I panicked. I jumped up, grabbed my

stuff, blurted "Gotta go," left Kevin with his mouth hanging, and took off. Not fast enough. Halfway to the door I heard her behind me: "Hi, Leo." My face got warm. I was sure every eye was turned to me. I was sure they could all see the card in my pocket. I pretended to look at the clock. I pretended I was late for something. I ran from the lunchroom.

I lurked in the shadows for the rest of the day. I went straight home after school. I stayed in my room. I came out only for dinner. I told my parents I had a project to do. I paced. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I stared out the window. I laid the card on my study desk. I picked it up. I read it. I read it. I read it. I played "Hi, Leo" over and over in my head. I tossed darts at the corkboard on the back of my door. My father called in, "What's your project, darts?" I went out. I drove around in the pickup. I drove down her street. At the last intersection before her house, I turned off.

For hours I lay under my sheet of moonlight. Her voice came through the night, from the light, from the stars.

Hi, Leo.

In the morning—it was a Saturday—Kevin and I went together to Archie's for the weekly meeting of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone. There were about fifteen of us. We wore our fossil necklaces. Archie wanted to discuss the Eocene skull he was holding, but all the others could talk about was the game. When they told Archie about the tomato, his eyebrows went up, but other than that, his face did not change. I thought, *This is not news to him, he already knows.*

Archie spent the whole session that way, nodding and smiling and raising his eyebrows. We dumped our disappointment on him, the devastation of the loss. He said very little. When it was over, he looked down at the skull in his lap and patted it and said, "Well, this fellow here lost his game, too. He was winning for ten million years or so, but then the early grasses started growing up around him, and he found himself in a different league. He hung in there as well as he could. He scored his points, but he kept falling farther and farther behind. The opposition was better, quicker, keener. In the championship game, our boy got annihilated. Not only didn't he show up for class the next day, he never showed up, period. They never saw him again."

Archie lifted the snouted, fox-size skull until it was side by side with his own face. A good minute passed as he said nothing, inviting us into our own thoughts. Faces staring at faces staring at faces. Tens of millions of years of faces in a living room in a place called Arizona.

Monday. Lunch.

This time I stayed put when Stargirl came toward my table on her way out. My back was to her. I could see Kevin's eyes following her, widening as she came closer. And then his eyes stopped, and his mouth was sliding toward a wicked grin, and it seemed like everything stopped but the clink of pans in the kitchen, and the back of my neck was on fire.

"You're welcome," I heard her say, almost sing.

I thought, *What?* but then I knew what. And I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to turn around and speak to her, and I knew she was going to stand there until I did. This was silly, this was childish, this being terrified of her. What was I afraid of, anyway?

I turned. I felt heavy, as if I were moving through water, as if I were confronting much more than a tenth-grade girl with an unusual name. I faced the gaudy sunflower on her canvas bag—it looked hand-painted—and at last my eyes fell into hers. I said, "Thanks for the card."

Her smile put the sunflower to shame. She walked off.

Kevin was grinning, wagging his head. "She's in love."

"Bull," I said.

"She is mucho in love."

"She's goofy, that's all."

The bell rang. We gathered our stuff and left.

76 I wobbled through the rest of the day. A baseball bat

could not have hit me harder than that smile did. I was sixteen years old. In that time, how many thousands of smiles had been aimed at me? So why did this one feel like the first?

After school my feet carried me toward her homeroom. I was trembling. My stomach had flies. I had no idea what I was going to do if I saw her. I only knew I couldn't *not* go.

She wasn't there. I hurried through the hallways. I ran outside. The buses were loading. Cars were revving. Hundreds of kids were scattering. For months she had been everywhere, now she was nowhere.

I heard her name. *Her name*. The same two syllables, the same eight letters that I had been hearing all year, and suddenly the sound struck my ear with a *ping* of pure silver. I drifted sideways to overhear. A group of girls was chattering toward a bus.

"When?"

"Today. After school. Just now!"

"I don't believe it!"

"I don't believe it took so long."

"Kicked off? Are they allowed?"

"Sure. Why not? It's not *her* school."

"I would've kicked her off long ago. It was treason."

"Good riddance."

I knew what they were talking about. It had been rumored for days. Stargirl had been kicked off the cheerleading squad.

"Hi, Leo!"

A chorus of girl voices calling my name. I turned. They

were in front of the sun. I shaded my eyes. They sang in unison: "Starboy!" They laughed. I waved and hurried home. I could never have admitted it, but I was thrilled.

Her house was two miles from mine, behind a little ten-store shopping center. Archie had told me where. I walked. I didn't want to ride. I wanted to be slow about it. I wanted to feel myself getting closer step by step, feel the tension rising like fizz in a soda bottle.

I did not know what I would do if I saw her. I knew only that I was nervous, afraid. I was more comfortable with her as history than as person. Suddenly, intensely, I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to see her baby pictures. I wanted to watch her eating breakfast, wrapping a gift, sleeping. Since September she had been a performer—unique and outrageous—on the high school stage. She was the opposite of cool; she held nothing back. From her decorated desk to her oratorical speech to her performance on the football field, she was there for all to see. And yet now I felt I had not been paying attention. I felt I had missed something, something important.

She lived on Palo Verde. For a person so different, her house was surprisingly ordinary, at least by Arizona standards. Single story. Pale adobe. Clay-red pipetile roof. Not a blade of grass in the small front yard, but rather barrel and prickly pear cacti and clusters of stones.

It was dark, as I had intended, when I got there. I walked up and down the other side of the street. It occurred to me

I might be mistaken for a prowler, so I walked around the block. I stopped into Roma Delite for a slice of pizza. Gulped down only half of it, hurried back out, couldn't relax when her house was not in sight. Couldn't relax when it was.

At first it was enough just to see the house. Then I began to wonder if she was inside. I wondered what she could be doing. Light came from every window I could see. There was a car in the driveway. The longer I hung around, the closer I wanted to be. I crossed the street and practically dashed past the house. As I went by, I scooped up a stone from the yard. I went up the street, turned, and looked at her house in the distance.

I whispered to the salt-sprinkled sky, "That's where Stargirl Caraway lives. She likes me."

I headed back toward the house. The street, the sidewalks were deserted. The stone was warm in my hand. This time I walked slowly as I approached. I felt strange. My eyes fixed on a triangle of light in a curtained window. I saw a shadow on a yellow wall. I seemed to be drifting, footless, into the light.

Suddenly the front door opened. I dived behind the car in the driveway and crouched by the rear fender. I heard the door close. I heard steps. The steps matched the movement of a long shadow cast down the driveway. My breath stopped. The shadow stopped. I felt both ridiculous and weirdly, perfectly placed, as if crouching by that car was precisely what life had in store for me at that moment.

Her voice came from beyond the shadow. "Remember when you followed me into the desert that day after school?"

Absurdly, I debated whether to answer, as if doing so would—what? Give me away? I leaned into the smooth metal of the fender. It never occurred to me to stand, to show myself. Hours seemed to pass before I finally croaked, "Yes."

"Why did you turn around and go back?"

Her tone was casual, as if she held conversations every night with people crouching behind the car in the driveway.

"I don't remember," I said.

"Were you afraid?"

"No," I lied.

"I wouldn't have let you get lost, you know."

"I know."

A little shadow detached itself from the larger one. It came toward me, wavering over the pebbled driveway. It had a tail. It wasn't a shadow. It was the rat, Cinnamon. Cinnamon stopped at the tip of one of my sneakers. He stood, looking up at me. He put his front paws on top of my sneaker and nosed into the laces.

"Are you getting acquainted with Cinnamon?"

"Sort of."

"Are you lying?"

"Sort of."

"Are you afraid of rats?"

"Sort of."

"Do you think I'm cute? If you say sort of, I'll tell Cinnamon to bite you."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I think you're cute." I thought of adding "sort of" just to be funny, but I didn't.

"Do you think Cinnamon is cute?"

The rat had climbed fully onto my sneaker now. I could feel his weight. I wanted to shake him off. His tail spilled onto the driveway. "No comment," I said.

"Oh my, hear that, Cinnamon? No comment. He doesn't want people to know he thinks you're cute."

"I think you're getting a little carried away," I said.

"I certainly hope so," she said. "Nothing's more fun than being carried away. Would you like to carry Cinnamon away for the night? He loves sleep-overs."

"No thank you."

"Oh." Her voice was mock-pouty. "Are you sure? He's no trouble. He hardly takes up any room. All you have to feed him is a Mini Wheat. Or two grapes. And he won't poop on your rug. Will you, Cinnamon? Go ahead, stand up and tell him you won't. Stand up, Cinnamon."

Cinnamon stood on my sneaker. His eyes shone like black pearls.

"Doesn't he have the cutest ears?"

Who notices a rat's ears? I looked. She was right. "Yeah," I said, "I guess he does."

"Tickle him behind his ears. He loves that."

I swallowed hard. I reached down with the tips of my two forefingers and tickled the tiny, furry spaces behind the

rat's ears. I guessed he enjoyed it. He didn't move. And then, surprising myself, I moved one fingertip in front of his nose, and he licked me. It had never occurred to me that rats do that. His tongue was half the size of my little fingernail. I would have guessed it was rough, like a cat's, but it wasn't; it was smooth.

And then he was no longer on my foot—he was on my shoulder. I yelped. I tried to swat him off, but he dug into my shirt with his fingernails. Meanwhile, Stargirl was cracking up. I could see the shadow shaking.

"Let me guess," she said. "Cinnamon jumped onto your shoulder."

"You got it," I said.

"And you're thinking about how rats are supposed to go for people's throats."

"I wasn't," I said, "but now that you mention it..." I clamped my hands around my neck. I felt something in my ear. Whiskery. I yelped again. "He's eating my ear!"

Stargirl laughed some more. "He's nuzzling you. He likes you. Especially your ears. He never meets an ear he doesn't love. By the time he's done, that ear of yours will be clean as a whistle. Especially if there's some leftover peanut butter in it."

I could feel the tiny tongue mopping the crevices of my left ear. "It tickles!" I felt something else. "I feel teeth!"

"He's just scraping something off for you. You must have something crusty in there. Have you washed your ears lately?"

"None of your business."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to get personal."

"I forgive you."

All was quiet for a while, except for the snuffing in my ear. I could hear the rat breathing. His tail drooped into my front shirt pocket.

"Do you want to confess now?"

"Confess what?" I said.

"That you're actually starting to like having a rodent poking around in your ear."

I smiled. I nodded, dislodging the rat's nose for a moment. "I confess."

More silence, tiny breathing in my ear.

"Well," she said at last, "we have to go in now. Say good night, Cinnamon."

No, I thought, *don't go*.

"I still have another ear," I said.

"If he does that one, he'll never want to leave you, and I'll be jealous. Come on, Cinnamon. Time for beddy bye."

Cinnamon went on snuffing.

"He's not coming, is he?"

"Nope."

"Then just take hold of him and put him on the ground."

I did so. As soon as I put the rat down, he scooted under the tailpipe and out of sight on the other side of the car.

The shadow withdrew. I heard the front door open. Light gushed out. "Night, Leo."

"Night," I called.

I didn't want to leave. I wished I could curl up right there on the driveway and go to sleep. I had been crouching for a long time. It was a chore just to stand. I was halfway home before I could walk right.

Just two weeks before, I had found out she knew my name, and now I was loopy with love. I was floating. I floated up the white light that washed my sheets and slept on the moon. In school I was a yellow balloon, smiling and lazy, floating above the classrooms. I felt a faint tug on my string. Far below, Kevin was calling, "You're in love, dude!" I merely smiled and rolled over and drifted dreamily out a window.

This state lasted until lunch, when suddenly I became self-conscious. I was certain that everyone in school knew. They would be waiting for me, turning as I entered the lunchroom, staring. I was uncomfortable in the spotlight, always had been. I was happy to stay behind the camera and let Kevin take the bows out front.

So I hid for those thirty-five minutes in the gym equipment room. I sat atop a rolled-up wrestling mat, kicking a volleyball against the opposite wall. I had nothing to eat—I had intended to buy—but I wasn't hungry.

After school we found each other, not that we had to look.

She took Cinnamon from her bag and put him on her shoulder. "Shake paws with Leo, Cinnamon."

Cinnamon and I shook paws.

"Do you believe in enchanted places?" she said.

"You talking to me or the rat?"

She smiled. She dazzled. "You."

"I don't know," I said. "I never thought about it."

"I'm going to show you one."

"What if I don't want to see it?"

"You think you have a choice?"

She grabbed my hand and almost pulled me off my feet, laughing out loud, and we flew across the school fields, swinging hands for all the world to see.

We walked for miles, out past the business park, Mica-Tronics, the golf course, into the desert. "Look familiar?" she said.

By now, Cinnamon was riding my shoulder. And I was carrying the ukulele, strumming nonsense. "It's where we came that day," I said.

She gave a snort. "*We?* I was coming out here, *you* were half a mile behind." She poked my shoulder. "*Sneaking* after me." She poked me again, hard this time, but her eyes were twinkling. "*Stalking* me."

I acted horrified, hurt. "Stalking? I was not stalking. I was just lagging behind a little, that's all."

"Following me."

I shrugged. "So?"

"Why?"

I could feel a million reasons, but there were no words to express them. "I don't know."

"You liked me."

I smiled.

"You were smitten with me. You were speechless to behold my beauty. You had never met anyone so fascinating. You thought of me every waking minute. You dreamed

about me. You couldn't stand it. You couldn't let such wonderfulness out of your sight. You *had* to follow me."

I turned to Cinnamon. He licked my nose. "Don't give yourself so much credit. It was your rat I was after."

She laughed, and the desert sang.

To the person who expects every desert to be barren sand dunes, the Sonoran must come as a surprise. Not only are there no dunes, there's no sand. At least not the sort of sand you find at the beach. The ground does have a sandy color to it, or gray, but your feet won't sink in. It's hard, as if it's been tamped. And pebbly. And glinting with—what else—mica.

But you don't notice the ground much. What you notice are the saguaros. To the newcomer from the East, it's as simple as that. The desert seems to be a brown wasteland of dry, prickly scrub whose only purpose is to serve as a setting for the majestic saguaros. Then, little by little, the plants of the desert begin to identify themselves: the porcupiny yucca, the beaver tail and prickly pear and barrel cacti, buckhorn and staghorn and devil's fingers, the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo.

We walked a weaving line around the plant life, up and down washes and gullies, the Maricopas looming lavender in the distance.

"When you turned and ran that day," she said, "I called after you."

"You did?"

"I whispered."

"Whispered? How'd you expect me to hear?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just thought you would."

I strummed the uke. I squared my shoulders. Giving a rat a ride improves the posture.

"You're shy, aren't you?" she said.

"What makes you think that?"

She laughed. "Were you embarrassed when I pulled you along after school today? All those kids looking?"

"Nah."

"Are you lying?"

"Yeah."

She laughed. I seemed to be good at making her laugh.

I glanced back. The highway was out of sight. "Do you have the time?" I said.

"Nobody has the time," she said. "The time cannot be owned." She threw out her arms and twirled till her multi-colored skirt looked like a pinwheel taffy. "The time is free to everyone!"

"Sorry I asked," I said.

She hung her sunflower bag on a cactus arm and cart-wheeled toward the Maricopas. Crazily, I felt like joining her. I told myself I couldn't because I was loaded down with a ukulele and a rat. I picked up her bag and followed.

When she decided to walk like a normal human again, I told her she was goofy.

She stopped, turned to me, and bowed grandly. "Thank you, good sir."

Then she took my arm as if we were strolling down a promenade and she said, "Scream, Leo."

"Huh?"

"Just throw your head back and let it all out. Scream your ears off. Nobody will hear you."

"Why would I want to do that?"

She turned her astonished eyes on me. "Why wouldn't you?"

I pointed to Cinnamon. "If he screams first, then I will." And I changed the subject. "Are we ever going to get to this enchanted place?" I felt silly just saying the words.

"Just a little farther," she said.

I humored her. "So how do you know an enchanted place when you come to it?"

"You'll see," she said. She squeezed my hand. "Did you know there's a country with officially designated 'enchanted places'?"

"No," I said. "Where would that be? Oz?"

"Iceland."

"Imagine that."

"I'm ignoring your sarcasm. I think it would be neat if we had that here. You'd be walking or riding along, and there would be this stone marker with a brass plate: 'Enchanted Site. U.S. Department of Interior.'"

"We'd litter it up," I said.

She stared at me, her smile gone. "Would we?"

I felt bad, as if I had ruined something. "Not really," I told her. "Not if there's a Don't Be a Litterbug sign."

A minute later she stopped. "We're here."

I looked around. The place couldn't have been more ordinary. The only notable presence was a tall, dilapidated saguaro, a bundle of sticks, in worse shape than Archie's Señor. The rest was gray scrub and tumbleweed and a few prickly pears. "I thought it might look different," I said.

"Special? Scenic?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"It's a different kind of scenery," she said. "Shoes off."

We pulled off our shoes.

"Sit."

We sat, legs crossed. Cinnamon scampered down my arm and onto the ground.

Stargirl shrieked, "Stop!" She scooped up the rat and put him in her bag. "Owls, hawks, snakes. He'd be a tasty meal."

"So," I said, "when does the enchantment start?"

We were sitting side by side, facing the mountains.

"It started when the earth was born." Her eyes were closed. Her face was golden in the setting sun. "It never stops. It is, always. It's just here."

"So what do we do?"

She smiled. "That's the secret." Her cupped hands rested in her lap. "We do nothing. Or as close to nothing as we can." Her face turned slowly to me, though her eyes remained closed. "Have you ever done nothing?"

I laughed. "My mother thinks I do it all the time."

"Don't tell her I said so, but your mother is wrong." She turned back to the sun. "It's really hard to do nothing totally.

Even just sitting here, like this, our bodies are churning, our minds are chattering. There's a whole commotion going on inside us."

"That's bad?" I said.

"It's bad if we want to know what's going on outside ourselves."

"Don't we have eyes and ears for that?"

She nodded. "They're okay most of the time. But sometimes they just get in the way. The earth is speaking to us, but we can't hear because of all the racket our senses are making. Sometimes we need to erase them, erase our senses. Then—maybe—the earth will touch us. The universe will speak. The stars will whisper."

The sun was glowing orange now, clipping the mountains' purple crests.

"So how do I become this nothing?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "There's no one answer to that. You have to find your own way. Sometimes I try to erase myself. I imagine a big pink soft soap eraser, and it's going back and forth, back and forth, and it starts down at my toes, back and forth, back and forth, and there they go—poof!—my toes are gone. And then my feet. And then my ankles. But that's the easy part. The hard part is erasing my senses—my eyes, my ears, my nose, my tongue. And last to go is my brain. My thoughts, memories, all the voices inside my head. That's the hardest, erasing my thoughts." She chuckled faintly. "My pumpkin. And then, if I've done a good job, I'm erased. I'm gone. I'm nothing. And then

the world is free to flow into me like water into an empty bowl."

"And?" I said.

"And...I see. I hear. But not with eyes and ears. I'm not outside my world anymore, and I'm not really inside it either. The thing is, there's no difference anymore between me and the universe. The boundary is gone. I am it and it is me. I am a stone, a cactus thorn. I am rain." She smiled dreamily. "I like that most of all, being rain."

"Am I the first one you've brought out here?"

She didn't answer. She faced the mountains, bathed in sun syrup, her face as still and peaceful as I've ever seen a face.

"Stargirl—"

"Shhhh."

That was the last sound either of us made for a long time. We sat side by side, lotus style, facing west. I closed my eyes. I tried to be perfectly still—and promptly found out that she was right. I could immobilize my arms and legs, but inside me it was rush hour in downtown Phoenix. I had never been so aware of my breath and my heartbeat, not to mention other assorted grumblings and gurglings. And my head—it just wouldn't close down. Every question, every stray thought from miles around came wandering into my brain, sniffing about, scratching at my attention.

But I tried. I tried the eraser, but it wouldn't even wipe out the first toe. I tried to imagine I was sawdust blowing away with the wind. Swallowed by a whale. Dissolving away like

Alka-Seltzer. Nothing worked. I could not make myself disappear.

I peeked. I knew I wasn't supposed to, but I did. Clearly, she had erased herself. She was gone. She was serenity. Her lips faintly smiling. Her golden skin. The glowing thread-ends of her hair. She seemed to have been dipped in sunlight and set here to dry. I felt a pang of jealousy, that she could be sitting next to me and not know it. That she could be somewhere most wonderful and I could not be there, too.

Then I saw the rat. He had crawled out of the bag. He was sitting on it much as we were, his front paws—I kept thinking of them as tiny hands, they were so human-like—dangling before him. He, too, was not moving. He, too, was facing the sunset, his pelt the color of a new penny. His peppercorn eyes were fully open.

I knew it must have been a trick she had taught him, or imitative rodent behavior. Still, I couldn't help thinking there was more to it, that the whiskered little fellow was having an experience of his own—which might include digestion in a critter's stomach if Stargirl's fears came true. As quietly as possible, I reached over and scooped him up. I held him in both hands. He did not struggle or squirm, but resumed facing the sunset with his tiny chin resting on my forefinger. In my fingertips I could feel his heartbeat. I drew him closer to my chest. I dared any varmint to come near.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for another try at enchantment. I don't think I succeeded. I think Cinnamon was a better eraser than I. I tried. I tried so hard I almost

squeaked, but I could not seem to leave myself, and the cosmos did not visit me. I could not stop wondering what time it was.

But something did happen. A small thing. I was aware of stepping over a line, of taking one step into territory new to me. It was a territory of peace, of silence. I had never experienced such utter silence before, such stillness. The commotion within me went on, but at a lower volume, as if someone had turned down my dial. And an eerie thing happened. While I never did totally lose awareness of myself, I believe I did, so to speak, lose Cinnamon. I no longer felt his pulse, his presence, in my hands. It seemed we were no longer separate, but were one.

When the sun fell behind the mountains, I felt it as a faint coolness on my face.

I don't know how long my eyes were closed. When I opened them, she was gone. Alarmed, I jerked around. She was standing off a ways, smiling. Evening had come. While my eyes were closed, the mountains' dusky lavender had drifted over the desert.

We put on our shoes. We headed for the highway. I expected her to interrogate me, but she did not. One moment the moon was not there, and then it was, then one bright star. We walked across the desert hand in hand, saying nothing.