18

We were alone. We were the only ones in school.

At least that's how it seemed in the following days.

As I went about my day, I felt her going about hers. I sensed her movement, her presence in distant parts of the building. Walking the halls between classes, I didn't have to see her, I knew she was there: unseen in the mob heading my way, about to turn a corner five classroom doors down. I homed in on the beacon of her smile. As we approached each other, the noise and the students around us melted away and we were utterly alone, passing, smiling, holding each other's eyes, floors and walls gone, two people in a universe of space and stars.

And then one day I began to discover that we were more alone than I had dreamed.

It was a Thursday. Normally on that day, after third period, Stargirl and I would pass each other on the second floor around the teachers' lounge. We would smile and say hi and continue on our way to our separate classes. On this day, impulsively, I fell in alongside her.

"How about an escort?" I said.

She grinned slyly. "Anybody in mind?"

We touched little fingers and walked on. Her next class was on the first floor, so we went down the nearest stairway. We were walking side by side. That's when I noticed.

No one spoke to us.

No one nodded to us.

No one smiled at us.

No one looked at us.

A crowded stairway, and no shoulder, no sleeve brushed us.

Students climbing the steps veered to the railing or wall. Except for Stargirl jabbering in my ear, the usual raucous chatter was absent.

Mostly what I noticed were the eyes. Faces turned up from the steps below, but the eyes never connected with us. They went right on through us as if they were gamma rays. Or they nipped our ears and rattled off among the walls and other eyes. I had an urge to look down at myself, to make sure I was there.

At lunch I said to Kevin, "Nobody looks at me."

He was staring at his sandwich.

"Kevin!" I snapped. "Now *you're* doing it."

He came up laughing. He looked me square in the eyes. "Sorry."

Usually there were others at the table. Today there was only us. I leaned across my lunch. "Kevin, what's going on?"

He looked off, then back to me. "I was wondering when you'd notice. Kinda hoping you wouldn't."

"Notice *what?*"

He stalled by taking a bite of tuna salad sandwich. He took his time chewing. He drank orangeade from a straw. "First of all, it's not you."

I pulled back. I held out my hands. "It's not me. What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's who you're with."

I sat there, blinking, staring at him. "Stargirl?"

He nodded.

"Okay," I said. "So?"

He stared at me some more, chewed, swallowed, sipped, looked away, looked back. "They're not talking to her."

The words didn't stick. "What do you mean? Who's 'they'?"

He cocked his head at the sea of tables and eaters. "Them."

"Who them?" I said, too unhinged to laugh at my grammar.

He wet his lips. "All of them." He shrugged. "Well, almost." His eyes drifted over my shoulder. "There're still two girls sitting with her."

I glanced back. At the height of Stargirl's popularity, kids had been pulling chairs from other tables to squeeze around hers. Now it was just Stargirl, Dori Dilson, and a ninth-grader.

"So," I said, "exactly what is going on?"

He sipped from his straw. "The silent treatment is going on. Nobody's talking to her."

It still wasn't sticking. "What do you mean, 'nobody's talking to her'? What, did everybody have a meeting in the gym and vote on it?"

"It wasn't that official. It just happened. Got up steam."

I gaped at him. "When? When did it start? How? Why?" I was beginning to screech.

"I don't know exactly. After the basketball stuff, I guess. That really ticked off a lot of people."

"The basketball stuff."

He nodded.

"The basketball stuff," I repeated dumbly.

He put down his sandwich. "Leo, don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. Cheering for the other team? What did you think, people thought that was *cute?*"

"It was her, Kevin. It was harmless. Weird maybe, but harmless. It was *her.*"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, well, I guess that's what I'm saying. It's not just one thing she did. It's everything. Don't tell me you never noticed. Remember a certain tomato?"

"Kevin, a couple of months ago everybody stood and cheered in the auditorium when she won the oratorical contest."

"Hey"—he gestured defensively—"tell *them.*"

"One person threw the tomato. One."

Kevin snickered. "Yeah, and a thousand wanted to. Did you notice the cheers when it happened? People blame her. For the team losing. For our undefeated season going down the toilet."

I wasn't sure Kevin was still talking about "them."

"Kevin—" I felt myself pleading. "She was only a *cheerleader.*"

"Leo"—he was pointing—"you asked me what was going on, I told you." He stood up and took his tray to the belt.

I stared at his empty chair until he returned.

"Kevin... the Happy Birthday songs, the Valentine cards, all the nice things she does for people... doesn't that count for something?"

The bell rang.

He got up. He gathered his books. He shrugged. "I guess not."

For the rest of the day, and the next and the next, I grew increasingly paranoid. Walking with her in and around the school, I was intensely aware that the nature of our aloneness had changed. It was no longer a cozy, tunnel-of-love sweetness, but a chilling isolation. We never had to veer, never had to make way for someone else; everyone made way for us. Hallway crowds fell away from us. Except for Hillari Kimble. Whenever we passed her, she tilted toward us with a gloating smirk on her face.

As for Stargirl, she didn't seem to notice. She jabbered constantly in my ear. While I smiled and nodded to her, frost formed on the back of my neck.

19

"The Amish in Pennsylvania have a word for it."

"What's that?" I said.

"Shunning."

I was at Archie's. I had to talk to someone.

"Well, that's what's happening."

"The shunnee, so to speak, has gotten himself in dutch with the church, so he's excommunicated. The whole community is in on it. Unless he repents, nobody speaks to him for the rest of his life. Not even his family."

"What?!"

"That's right. Not even his family."

"What about his wife?"

"Wife. Kids. Everybody." His pipe had gone out. He relit it with a stick match. "I believe the idea is to drive him away. But some stay, continue working the farm, having dinner. If he passes the salt to his wife, she ignores it. If the bishop had his way, the pigs and chickens would ignore him. It's as if he doesn't exist."

I nodded. "I know the feeling."

We were on the back porch. I stared out at Señor Saguaro.

He said, "Does it happen to you when you're not with her?"

"No," I said. "At least I don't think so. But when I'm with her, I feel like it's aimed at me, too."

A small pipe cloud left the corner of his mouth. He smiled sadly. "Poor dolphin. Caught in a tuna net."

I picked up Barney, the Paleocene rodent skull. I wondered if someone would be holding Cinnamon's head 60 million years from now. "So, what should I do?"

Archie waved his hand. "Oh, well, that's the easy part. Stay away from her: your problem's *kaput*."

I sneered. "Great advice. You know it's not that easy."

He did know, of course, but he wanted me to say it. I told him about the valentine, the night in her driveway, the walk in the desert. The question that came to mind then sounded silly, but it persisted: "Do you believe in enchanted places?"

He took the pipe from his mouth and looked straight at me. "Absolutely."

I was confused. "But you're a scientist. A man of science."

"A man of bones. You can't be up to your eyeballs in bones and not believe in enchanted places."

I looked at Barney. I ran my fingertip along the hard line of his two-inch jaw, rough like a cat's tongue. Sixty million years in my hands. I looked at Archie. "Why can't she be..."

He finished for me: "...like everybody else?"

He stood up and stepped down from the porch onto the desert—for his back yard, except for the shed where he kept his digging tools, *was* the desert. Nature did the landscaping. I put down Barney and joined him. We ambled toward Señor Saguaro.

"Not like everybody else," I said. "Not exactly. Not totally. But...Archie..." I stopped. He stopped. I turned full-face to him. My thoughts and feelings were a wild, conflicting

jumble. After staring stupidly at him for a long time, I blurted, "She cheers for the other team!"

Archie pulled the pipe from his mouth, as if to better digest my words. He raised one finger in the air. He nodded solemnly. "Ahh, yes."

We resumed walking.

We walked on past the toolshed, past Señor Saguaro. Occasionally I picked up a stone and flung it toward the purple Maricopas.

Archie said, almost in a whisper, "She's not easy to put into words, is she?"

I shook my head.

"An unusual girl," he said. "Could see that from the first. And her parents, as ordinary, in a nice way, as could be. How did this girl come to be? I used to ask myself. Sometimes I thought she should be teaching me. She seems to be in touch with something that the rest of us are missing." He looked at me. "Hm?"

I nodded.

He turned the mahogany bowl of his pipe upside down and rapped it with his knuckle. A small stream of ash spilled onto a thicket of dead mesquite.

He pointed the pipe stem at me. "You know, there's a place we all inhabit, but we don't much think about it, we're scarcely conscious of it, and it lasts for less than a minute a day."

"What's that?" I said.

"It's in the morning, for most of us. It's that time, those

few seconds when we're coming out of sleep but we're not really awake yet. For those few seconds we're something more primitive than what we are about to become. We have just slept the sleep of our most distant ancestors, and something of them and their world still clings to us. For those few moments we are unformed, uncivilized. We are not the people we know as ourselves, but creatures more in tune with a tree than a keyboard. We are untitled, unnamed, natural, suspended between was and will be, the tadpole before the frog, the worm before the butterfly. We are, for a few brief moments, anything and everything we could be. And then..."

He pulled out his pouch and repacked his pipe. Cherryscent flew. He struck a match. The pipe bowl, like some predator, or seducer, drew down the flame. "...and then—ah—we open our eyes and the day is before us, and"—he snapped his fingers—"we become ourselves."

Like so many of Archie's words, they seemed not to enter through my ears but to settle on my skin, there to burrow like tiny eggs awaiting the rain of my maturity, when they would hatch and I at last would understand.

We walked in silence. Yellow blooms had appeared on a cactus, and for some reason that made me incredibly sad. The purple of the mountains flowed like watercolor.

"They *hate* her," I said.

He stopped. He looked intently at me. He turned me around and we headed back. He put his arm around my shoulder. "Let's consult Señor Saguaro."

Shortly we were standing before the derelict giant. I never understood how the Señor managed to convey a sense of dignity, majesty even, considering his stick-rickety, see-through skeleton and the ridiculous, leathery crumple of hide about his foot, his fallen britches. Archie always spoke to him with respectful formality, as to a judge or visiting dignitary.

"Good day, Señor Saguaro," he began. "I believe you know my friend and charter member of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone, Mr. Borlock." He whispered an aside to me: "I'm a little rusty, but I think I'll use Spanish now. He prefers it on delicate matters." He turned back to the cactus. *"Parece, Señor Borlock aquí es la víctima de un 'shunning' de sus compañeros estudiantes en el liceo. El objeto principal del 'shunning' es la enamorada del Señor Borlock, nuestra propia Señorita Niña Estrella. El está en búsqueda de preguntas."*

As Archie spoke, he looked up toward the elf owl hole. Now he turned back to me and whispered, "I asked for questions."

"Questions?" I whispered. "What about answers?"

But he was turning from me, tilting his head toward the great cactus, his finger on his lips—"Shh"—his eyes closed.

I waited.

At last he nodded and turned back to me. "The esteemed Señor says there is only one question."

"What's that?" I said.

"He says it all boils down to this—if I'm translating correctly: Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'? The Señor says everything will follow from that."

I wasn't sure I understood the Señor any more than I understood Archie half the time, but I said nothing, and I went home. In bed that night, as the moonlight reached high tide under my chin, I realized that in fact I understood the question perfectly. I just didn't want to answer it.

20

Twice a week the results of the state basketball tournament were posted on the plywood roadrunner in the courtyard. The surviving teams were into the sectionals now; then would come the regionals; then, with only two teams left, the big show, the Arizona state championship. Glendale, the team we had lost to, got bitter, masochistic attention on the roadrunner with scores in foot-high numerals, as they continued to win and move through the tournament.

Meanwhile, Stargirl was involved in a tournament of her own, the oratorical contest. As Mica High's winner, she qualified for the district "talk-off," as the *Times* called it. It took place in the auditorium of Red Rock High School, and lo and behold, Stargirl won that, too. Next stop was the state finals in Phoenix on the third Friday in April.

In my homeroom, when the announcement came over the PA about Stargirl winning the district title, I was about to let out a cheer, but I caught myself. Several people booed.

Getting ready for the finals, Stargirl practiced on me. Most often we went into the desert. She did not use notes, nor did her words seem memorized. Each time she gave the speech, it was different. She seemed to insert new material as it popped into her head. She matched her words so perfectly that the speech was not a speech at all, but one creature's voice in the wild, as natural as a raven's caw or a coyote's howl at midnight.

I sat cross-legged on the ground, Cinnamon sat on me.

We listened in rapture, and so, I half believed, did the tumbleweed and cacti, the desert, the mountains, all listening to the girl in the longfalling skirt. What a shame, I thought, to pack her performance into a schedule and present it to rows of plush-back seats in an auditorium. Once, incredibly, an elf owl landed atop a saguaro not ten feet from where she was speaking. It paused for a full minute before ducking into its hole.

Of course, we did other things, too. We walked. We talked. We rode bikes. Though I had my driver's license, I bought a cheap secondhand bicycle so I could ride with her. Sometimes she led the way, sometimes I did. Whenever we could, we rode side by side.

She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day.

She taught me to revel. She taught me to wonder. She taught me to laugh. My sense of humor had always measured up to everyone else's; but timid, introverted me, I showed it sparingly: I was a smiler. In her presence I threw back my head and laughed out loud for the first time in my life.

She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see.

She was forever tugging my arm and saying, "Look!"

I would look around, seeing nothing. "Where?"

She would point. "There."

In the beginning I still could not see. She might be pointing to a doorway, or a person, or the sky. But such things

were so common to my eyes, so undistinguished, that they would register as "nothing." I walked in a gray world of nothings.

So she would stop and point out that the front door of the house we were passing was blue. And that the last time we had passed it, it had been green. And that as near as she could tell, someone who lived in that house painted the front door a different color several times a year.

Or she would whisper to me that the old man sitting alone on the bench at the Tudor Village shopping center was holding his hearing aid in his hand, and he was smiling, and he wore a coat and tie as if he were going somewhere special, and pinned onto his lapel was a tiny American flag.

Or she would kneel down and pull me down with her and show me the ants, two of them, lugging the lopped leg of a beetle twenty times their size across the sidewalk, as might two men, were they strong as ants, carry a full-grown tree from one end of town to the other.

After a while I began to see better. When she said "Look!" and I followed her pointing finger, I saw. Eventually it became a contest: who would see first? When I finally did it—said "Look!" and pointed and tugged *her* sleeve—I was as proud as a first-grader with a star on his paper.

And there was more to her seeing than that. What she saw, she felt. Her eyes went straight to her heart. The old man on the bench, for example, made her cry. The lumberjack ants made her laugh. The door of many colors put her in such a snit of curiosity that I had to drag her away; she felt

she could not proceed with her life until she knocked on such a door.

She told me how she would run the *Mica Times* if she were the editor. Crime would be on page 10, ants and old men and painted doors on page 1. She made up headlines:

ANTS HAUL MONSTER LOAD ACROSS VAST, BARREN WALK

MYSTERY SMILE: OLD MAN NODS OFF AT TUDOR VILLAGE

DOOR BEGS: KNOCK ME!

I told her I wanted to be a TV director. She said she wanted to be a silver-lunch-truck driver.

"Huh?" I said.

"You know," she said, "people work all morning and then it's twelve o'clock. The secretaries in the offices walk out the door, the construction workers put down their hard hats and hammers, and everybody's hungry, and they look up and there I am! No matter where they are, no matter where they work, I'm there. I have a whole fleet of silver lunch trucks. They go everywhere. 'Let Lunch Come to You!' That's my slogan. Just seeing my silver lunch truck makes them happy." She described how she would roll up the side panels and everyone would practically faint at the cloud of wonderful smells. Hot food, cold food, Chinese, Italian, you

name it. Even a salad bar. "They can't believe how much food I fit into my truck. No matter where you are—out in the desert, the mountains, even down in the mines—if you want my silver lunch service, I get it to you. I find a way."

I tagged along on missions. One day she bought a small plant, an African violet in a plastic pot on sale for ninety-nine cents at a drugstore.

"Who's it for?" I asked her.

"I'm not exactly sure," she said. "I just know that someone at an address on Marion Drive is in the hospital for surgery, so I thought whoever's back home could use a little cheering up."

"How do you know this stuff?" I said.

She gave me a mischievous grin. "I have my ways."

We went to the house on Marion Drive. She reached into the saddle pack behind her bicycle seat. She pulled out a handful of ribbons. She chose a pale violet one that matched the color of the tiny blossoms and stuffed the remaining ribbons back into the seat pack. She tied the violet ribbon around the pot. I held her bike while she set the plant by the front door.

Riding away, I said, "Why don't you leave a card or something with your name on it?"

The question surprised her. "Why should I?"

Her question surprised me. "Well, I don't know, it's just the way people do things. They expect it. They get a gift, they expect to know where it came from."

"Is that important?"

"Yeah, I guess—"

I never finished that thought. My tires shuddered as I slammed my bike to a halt. She stopped ahead of me. She backed up. She stared.

"Leo, what is it?"

I wagged my head. I grinned. I pointed to her. "It was *you*."

"Me what?"

"Two years ago. My birthday. I found a package on my front step. A porcupine necktie. I never found out who gave it to me."

She walked her bike alongside mine. She grinned. "A mystery."

"Where did you find it?" I said.

"I didn't. I had my mother make it."

She didn't seem to want to dwell on the subject. She started pedaling and we continued on our way.

"Where were we?" she said.

"Getting credit," I said.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's nice to get credit."

The spokes of her rear wheel spun behind the curtain of her long skirt. She looked like a photograph from a hundred years ago. She turned her wide eyes on me. "Is it?" she said.

21

On weekends and after dinner, we delivered many potted violets. And CONGRATULATIONS! balloons. And cards of many sentiments. She made her own cards. She wasn't a great artist. Her people were stick figures. The girls all had triangle skirts and pigtails. You would never mistake one of her cards for a Hallmark, but I have never seen cards more heartfelt. They were meaningful in the way that a schoolchild's homemade Christmas card is meaningful. She never left her name.

But finally, after much pestering from me, she did tell me how she knew what was going on in people's lives. It was simple, she said. She read the daily paper. Not the headlines or the front page or the sports page or the comics or the TV listings or the Hollywood gossip. What she read were the parts that most people ignored, the parts without headlines and pictures, the boondocks of the paper: the hospital admissions, the death notices, the birthday and wedding announcements, the police blotter, the coming events calendar.

Most of all, she read the fillers.

"I *love* fillers!" she exclaimed.

"What are fillers?" I said.

She explained that fillers are little items that are not considered important enough to be a story or to have a headline. They're never more than one column wide, never more than an inch or two deep. They are most commonly

found at the bottoms of inside pages, where the eye seldom travels. If the editors had their way, they would never use fillers. But sometimes a reporter doesn't write quite enough words, and the story doesn't reach all the way to the bottom of the page. The paper can't have a blank space there, so the editor dumps in a filler. A filler doesn't need to be "news." It doesn't need to be important. It doesn't even need to be read. All it's asked to do is take up space.

A filler might come from anywhere and be about anything. It might tell how many pounds of rice a typical Chinese person eats in a lifetime. Or say something about beetles in Sumatra. Or the filler might come from down the street. It might mention that so-and-so's cat is missing. Or that so-and-so has a collection of antique marbles.

"I search through fillers like a prospector digging for gold," she said.

"So that's it?" I said. "You read the papers?"

"No," she said, "that's not all. There's also the place where I get my hair cut. I always overhear good stuff there. And of course there're bulletin boards. Do you know how many bulletin boards there are in town?"

"Sure," I said facetiously, "I count them every day."

"So do I," she said, not kidding. "So far, I'm up to forty-one."

Offhand, I couldn't think of one, except the plywood roadrunner. "What do you learn from bulletin boards?"

"Oh... somebody just opened a business. Somebody lost a dog. Somebody needs a companion."

"Who advertises for a companion?" I said. "Who needs one that bad?"

"Lonely people," she said. "Old people. Just somebody to sit with them for a while."

I pictured Stargirl sitting in a dark room with an old woman. I couldn't picture myself doing the same thing. Sometimes she seemed so far from me.

We were passing Pisa Pizza. "There's a bulletin board in there," she said.

It was just inside the door. It was smothered with business cards and notices. I pointed to one that said "Odd Jobs—Ask for Mike," call this number. "So what's that tell you?" I said, with more challenge in my voice than I intended.

She read it. "Well, it could be that Mike lost his regular job and can't find another, so he's hiring himself out. Or even if he has a regular job, it's not enough to make ends meet. He's either not very neat, or he can't afford a whole piece of paper. This is just a scrap."

"So what would you do for him?" I said.

"Oh, I don't know. My parents might have an odd job they need done. Or maybe I do. Or maybe I could just send him a card."

"What kind of card would he get?"

"A Keep-your-chin-up card." She poked me. "Hey, want to play a card game?"

I had a feeling she wasn't talking about poker. "Sure," I said.

She said she invented it. "All you need is your eyes and one other person. I pick somebody on the street, the mall, a store, wherever, and I follow them. Say it's a her. I follow her for fifteen minutes, not a minute more. I time myself. The game is, after fifteen minutes of watching her, I have to guess what kind of card she needs."

"But how can you get it to her?" I said. "You don't know where she lives."

"True. That's as far as it goes. That's why it's just a game. It's just for fun." She snuggled into me. She whispered in my ear, "Let's play."

I said sure.

She said we needed a mall. I usually steered us away from the Mica Mall—too many silent-treatment MAHS kids hanging around there. We drove ten miles to the Redstone Mall. It was a Saturday afternoon.

We picked out a woman. Lime-green skort. White sandals. We guessed her age was early forties. She was buying a soft pretzel—regular, salted—at Auntie Anne's. She carried the pretzel in a little white paper bag. We followed her into Suncoast Video. We overheard her ask for *When Harry Met Sally*. They didn't have it. She passed Sonoma, then came back and went in. She wandered about, touching pottery with one fingertip, feeling surfaces. She stopped before the dinner plates. She lifted one with a French café painted on it. "Van Gogh," Stargirl whispered. The lady seemed to think about the plate, even closed her eyes, holding it to her chest with both hands, as if feeling vibrations. But then she

put it back and walked out. On to Sears. Lingerie. Bedclothes. I was uneasy, spying from behind a rack of frilly somethings. She was flipping through nightshirts when time ran out.

Stargirl and I conferred in the corridor.

"Okay," she said, "what do you think?"

"I think I feel like a stalker," I said.

"A good stalker," she said.

"You first," I said.

"Well, she's divorced and lonely. No wedding ring. Wants somebody in her life. A home life. She wishes she were Sally and her Harry would come along. She would make him dinner and snuggle with him at night. She tries to eat low-fat foods. She works for a travel agency. She took a free cruise last year, but all she met on the boat were creeps. Her name is Clarissa, she played the clarinet in high school, and her favorite soap is Irish Spring."

I boggled. "How do you know all that?"

She laughed. "I don't. I'm guessing. That's what makes it fun."

"So what card would you send her?"

She put her finger to her lips. "Hmm... to Clarissa I would send a While-you're-waiting-for-Harry-be-good-to-yourself card. How about you?"

"I would send a"—I mulled over the phrasing—"a Don't-let-Harry-catch-you-flicking card."

Now it was her turn to boggle. "Huh?"

"Didn't you see her pick her nose?" I said. "In Suncoast?"

"Not really. I saw her hand go to her nose, like she was scratching it or something."

"Yeah, or something. She was picking, that's what. She was quick and sneaky. A real pro."

She gave me a playful shove. "You're kidding."

I held up my hands. "I'm serious. She was standing in front of the comedies. Her finger went in and when it came out there was something on it. She carried it around for about a minute. And then, just as she was leaving Suncoast, when she thought nobody was looking, she flicked. I didn't see where it landed." She stared at me. I raised my right hand and put my left over my heart. "No lie."

She broke out laughing, so loudly I was embarrassed. She grabbed my arm with both hands to keep from collapsing. Mallwalkers stared.

We carded two others that day: a woman who spent her whole fifteen minutes feeling leather jackets—we called her Betty—and a man we called Adam because of his huge Adam's apple, which we renamed Adam's pumpkin. No more pick-'n'-flickers.

And I did have fun. Whether it came from the game or simply from being with her, I don't know. I do know I was surprised at how close I felt to Clarissa and Betty and Adam after watching them for only fifteen minutes.

Throughout the day, Stargirl had been dropping money. She was the Johnny Appleseed of loose change: a penny here, a nickel there. Tossed to the sidewalk, laid on a shelf or bench. Even quarters.

"I hate change," she said. "It's so... jangly."

"Do you realize how much you must throw away in a year?" I said.

"Did you ever see a little kid's face when he spots a penny on a sidewalk?" she said.

When her change purse was empty, we drove back to Mica. Along the way she invited me to dinner at her house.

22

Archie had claimed the Caraways were normal folks, but I still couldn't imagine Stargirl coming from an ordinary home. I think I expected a leftover hippie scene from the 1960s. Make love, not war. Her mother in a long skirt with a flower in her hair. Her father's face framed in muttonchop sideburns, saying "Groovy!" and "Right on!" a lot. Grateful Dead posters. Psychedelic lampshades.

So I was surprised. Her mother wore shorts and a tank top as she worked the pedal of a sewing machine with her bare foot. She was making a Russian peasant costume for a play to be presented in Denver. Mr. Caraway was on a stepladder outside, painting windowsills. No muttonchops; in fact, not much hair at all. The house itself could have been anyone's. Glossy bentwood furniture, throw rugs over hardwood floors, Southwest accents: an Anasazi-style wedding vase here, a Georgia O'Keeffe print there. Nothing to proclaim, "You see? She came from *here*."

Same with her room. Except for Cinnamon's blue and yellow plywood apartment in one corner, it might have belonged to any high school girl. I stood in the doorway.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm surprised," I said.

"At what?"

"I thought your room would be different."

"How so?"

"I don't know. More... you."

She grinned. "Stacks of fillers? A card-making operation?"

"Something like that."

"That's my office," she said. She let Cinnamon out. He scurried under her bed. "This is my room."

"You have an office?"

"Yep." She stuck her foot under the bed. When it came out, Cinnamon was aboard. "I wanted to have a place all my own where I could go to work. So I got one."

Cinnamon scampered out of the room.

"Where is it?" I said.

She put her finger to her lips. "Secret."

"Bet I know one person who knows," I said.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Archie."

She smiled.

"He was talking about you," I said. "He likes you."

"He means the world to me," she said. "I think of him as my grandfather."

My inspection yielded two curious items. One was a wooden bowl half filled with sand-colored hair.

"Yours?" I said.

She nodded. "For birds looking for nest materials. I put it out in the spring. Been doing it since I was a little girl. I got more business up north than here."

The other item was on a bookshelf. It was a tiny wagon about the size of my fist. It was made of wood and looked like it might have been an antique toy. It was piled high with pebbles. Several other pebbles lay about the wagon wheels.

I pointed to it. "You collecting stones, or what?"

"It's my happy wagon," she said. "Actually, it could just as well be called an unhappy wagon, but I prefer happy."

"So what's it all about?"

"It's about how I feel. When something makes me happy, I put a pebble in the wagon. If I'm unhappy, I take a pebble out. There are twenty pebbles in all."

I counted three on the shelf. "So there're seventeen in the wagon now, right?"

"Right."

"So that means, what, you're pretty happy?"

"Right again."

"What's the biggest number of pebbles ever in the wagon?"

She gave me a sly smile. "You're looking at it."

It didn't seem like just a pile of pebbles anymore.

"Usually," she said, "it's more balanced. It hangs around ten, a couple to one side or the other. Back and forth, back and forth. Like life."

"How close to empty did the wagon ever get?" I said.

"Oh..." She turned her face to the ceiling, closed her eyes. "Once, down to three."

I was shocked. "Really? You?"

She stared. "Why *not* me?"

"You don't seem the type."

"What type is that?"

"I don't know..." I groped for the right words.

"The three-pebble type?" she offered.

I shrugged.

She picked up a pebble from the shelf and, with a grin, dropped it into the wagon. "Well, call me Miss Unpredictable."

I joined the family for dinner. Three of us had meatloaf. The fourth—guess who—was a strict vegetarian. She had tofu loaf.

Her parents called her "Stargirl" and "Star" as casually as if she were a Jennifer.

After dinner we sat on her front step. She had brought her camera out. Three little kids, two girls and a boy, were playing in a driveway across the street. She took several pictures of them.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked her.

"See the little boy in the red cap?" she said. "His name is Peter Sinkowitz. He's five years old. I'm doing his biography, sort of."

For the tenth time that day she had caught me off guard. "Biography?" Peter Sinkowitz was coasting down his driveway in a four-wheeled plastic banana; the two little girls were running, screaming after him. "Why would you want to do that?"

She snapped a picture. "Don't you wish somebody came up to you today and gave you a scrapbook called 'The Life of Leo Borlock'? And it's a record, like a journal, of what you did on such-and-such a date when you were little. From the days you can't remember anymore. And there's pictures,

and even stuff that you dropped or threw away, like a candy wrapper. And it was all done by some neighbor across the street, and you didn't even know she was doing it. Don't you think when you're fifty or sixty you'd give a fortune to have such a thing?"

I thought about it. It was ten years since I had been six. It seemed like a century. She was right about one thing: I didn't remember much about those days. But I didn't really care either.

"No," I said, "I don't think so. And anyway, don't you think his parents are doing that? Family albums and all?"

One of the little girls managed to wrest the banana roadster away from Peter Sinkowitz. Peter started howling.

"I'm sure they are," she said, snapping another picture. "But those pictures and those moments are posed and smiling. They're not as real as this. Someday he's going to love this picture of himself bawling while a little girl rides off on his toy. I don't follow him around like we did Clarissa. I just keep an eye out for him, and a couple of times a week I jot down what I saw him doing that day. I'll do it for a few more years, then I'll give it to his parents to give to him when he's older and ready to appreciate it." A puzzled look came over her face. She poked me with her elbow. "What?"

"Huh?" I said.

"You're staring at me really funny. What is it?"

I blurted, "Are you running for saint?"

I regretted the words as soon as they left my lips. She just looked at me, hurt in her eyes.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to sound nasty."

"How did you mean to sound?"

"Amazed, I guess."

"At what?"

I laughed. "What do you think? *You.*" I laughed again. I stood before the steps, facing her. "Look at you. It's Saturday. I've been with you all day, and you've spent the whole day doing stuff for other people. Or paying attention to other people. Or following other people. Or taking pictures of other people."

She looked up at me. The hurt was gone from her eyes, but not the puzzlement. She blinked. "So?"

"So...I don't know what I'm saying."

"Sounds like you're saying I'm obsessed with other people. Is that it?"

Maybe it was the angle, but her fawn's eyes, looking up at me, seemed larger than ever. I had to make an effort to keep my balance lest I fall into them. "You're different," I said, "that's for sure."

She batted her eyelids and gave me a flirty grin. "Don't you like different?"

"Sure I do," I said, maybe a little too quickly.

A look of sudden discovery brightened her face. She reached out with her foot and tapped my sneaker. "I know what your problem is."

"Really?" I said. "What?"

"You're jealous. You're upset because I'm paying all this attention to other people and not enough to you."

"Right," I sniffed. "I'm jealous of Peter Sinkowitz."

She stood. "You just want me all to yourself, don't you?" She stepped into my space. The tips of our noses were touching. "Don't you, Mr. Leo?" Her arms were around my neck.

We were on the sidewalk in front of her house, in full view. "What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm giving you some attention," she cooed. "Don't you want some attention?"

I was losing my battle for balance.

"I don't know," I heard myself say.

"You're really dumb," she whispered in my ear.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Why do you think there're eighteen pebbles in my wagon?" And then the last remaining space between our lips was gone and I was falling headlong into her eyes, right there on Palo Verde after dinner. And I can tell you, that was no saint kissing me.

23

Those were the best times, when we were alone, together, out of school. We took long walks around town and into the desert, to her enchanted place. We sat on park benches and people-watched. I introduced her to strawberry-banana smoothies. I borrowed the pickup and drove us to Red Rock and Glendale. On weekends we went to Archie's. On his back porch, we talked of a thousand things and laughed and swooned in pipesmoke and ate pizza. She presented her oratorical contest speech to Señor Saguaro. We never spoke of the shunning. I loved weekends.

But Mondays always followed Sundays.

And the shunning—it was clear now—had come to me. It was less absolute for me than for her, but it was there. I saw it in the eyes that shifted away from mine, the shoulders that turned, the chatter that seemed less loud around me now than before. I fought it. I tested its limits. In the courtyard, between classes, in the lunchroom, I called out to others just to see if they would respond. When someone turned and nodded, I felt grateful. If someone spoke to me, especially if I had not spoken first, I wanted to cry. I had never realized how much I needed the attention of others to confirm my own presence.

I told myself that the shunning was more painful for me than for Stargirl. I told myself that she was too busy being herself to notice that she was being ignored—and in fact, she continued to give birthday people a ukulele serenade and to

decorate her desk and to distribute assorted kindnesses. I told myself that even if she did notice, she wouldn't care.

I understood why this was happening to me. In the eyes of the student body, she was part of my identity. I was "her boyfriend." I was Mr. Stargirl.

Students said things. Not to me, not directly, but tuned for me to overhear even as they pretended I was nowhere near. They said she was a self-centered spotlight hogger. They said she thought she was some kind of saint—I cringed at that—and that she was better than the rest of us. They said she wanted everyone else to feel guilty for not being as nice and wonderful as she was. They said she was a phony.

Most of all, they said she was the reason why the Mica Electrons were not soon to become Arizona state basketball champions. Kevin had been right: when she started cheering for other teams, she did something bad to her own team. To see one of their own priming the opposition did something to the team's morale that hours of practice could not overcome. And the last straw—everyone seemed to agree—was the Sun Valley game, when Stargirl rushed across the court to aid Kovac, the Sun Valley star. All of this was affirmed by our own star, Ardsley himself, who said that when he saw a Mica cheerleader giving comfort to the enemy, the heart went out of him. She was why they lost the next game so miserably to Red Rock. They hated her for it, and they would never forgive.

Unlike Stargirl, I was aware of the constant anger of our

schoolmates, seething like snakes under a porch. In fact, I was not only aware of it, but at times I also understood their point of view. There were even moments when something small and huddled within me agreed with it. But then I would see her smile and take a swan dive into her eyes, and the bad moment would be gone.

I saw. I heard. I understood. I suffered. But whose sake was I suffering for? I kept thinking of Señor Saguaro's question: *Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'?*

I became angry. I resented having to choose. I refused to choose. I imagined my life without her and without them, and I didn't like it either way. I pretended it would not always be like this. In the magical moonlight of my bed at night, I pretended she would become more like them and they would become more like her, and in the end I would have it all.

Then she did something that made pretending impossible.

24

"Roadrunner."

No one said the word to me directly, but I kept hearing it since I arrived at school one day, several days after the kiss on the sidewalk. It seemed more dropped behind than spoken, so that I kept walking into it:

"Roadrunner."

Was there something on the plywood roadrunner that I should read?

I had study hall coming up third period; I'd look into it then. In the meantime, I had second-period Spanish. As I headed for my seat, I looked out the window, which faced the courtyard. There was something written on the roadrunner, all right, but I wouldn't have to go outside to read it. I could read it from here. I could have read it from a low-flying airplane. White paper—no, it was a bedsheet—covered the whole bird. Painted on the sheet in broad red brush strokes was a Valentine heart enclosing the words:

STARGIRL
LOVES
LEO

My first impulse was to drag the Spanish teacher to the window and say, "Look! She loves me!" My second impulse was to run outside and rip the sign away.

Until now, I had never been the target of her public

extravagance. I felt a sudden, strange kinship with Hillari Kimble: I understood why she had commanded Stargirl not to sing to her. I felt spotlighted on a bare stage.

I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork or anything else. I was a mess.

At lunch that day, I was afraid to look at her. I counted one blessing: I had not yet worked up the nerve to sit with her each day. I kept stoking my conversation with Kevin. I felt her presence, her eyes, three tables to my left. I knew she was sitting there with Dori Dilson, the only friend who had not deserted her. I felt the faint tug of her gaze on the back of my neck. Ignoring my wishes, my head turned on its own and there she was: smiling to beat the band, waving grandly, and—horrors!—blowing me a kiss. I snapped my head back and dragged Kevin out of the lunchroom.

When I finally dared to look again at the courtyard, I found that someone had torn the sign away. Thumbtacks at the corners pinned four white scraps of bedsheet to the plywood.

I managed to avoid her by taking different routes between classes, but she found me after school, came shouting after me as I tried to slink away: "Leo! Leo!"

She ran up to me, breathless, bursting, her eyes sparkling in the sun. "Did you see it?"

I nodded. I kept walking.

"Well?" She was hopping beside me, punching my shoulder. "Wha'd you think?"

What could I say? I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I just shrugged.

"Wow. That impressed, huh?" She was mocking me. She reached into her bag and pulled out her rat. "Maybe he's shy, Cinnamon. Maybe he'll tell you how thrilled he was to see the sign." She set him on my shoulder.

I yelped. I swept the rat off and sent him flying to the ground.

She scooped him up and stroked him, all the while staring at me dumbstruck. I could not face her. I turned and walked on alone.

She called, "I guess you don't want to hear me practice my speech, huh?"

I did not answer. I did not look back.

The next day I faced the full impact of the sign. I thought I had truly suffered from the spillover of Stargirl's shunning, but that was nothing now that the full torrent was turned on me.

Of course Kevin—thankfully—talked to me; so did a few other friends. But the rest was silence, a second desert imposed upon the one I already lived in, where "Hi" was as rare as rain. I came to the courtyard in the morning before opening bell, and all I saw were backs of heads. People shouldered past me, calling others. Doors closed in my face. There was laughter, there was fun, but it skipped over me like a flat stone on water.

One morning as I was running a teacher's errand, I saw someone named Renshaw walking across the courtyard. I barely knew the kid, but we were the only two in the court-

yard at that moment, and I had to, so to speak, touch the stove that I knew was hot. "Renshaw!" I called. There was no other voice but mine. "*Renshaw!*" He never turned, never wavered, never slowed down. He kept walking away from me, opened a door, and was gone.

So what? I kept telling myself. What do you care? You never speak to each other. What's Renshaw to you?

But I did care. I couldn't help myself from caring. At that moment, there was nothing more I wanted in the world than a nod from Renshaw. I prayed that the door would burst open and he would be there saying, "Sorry, Borlock, I wasn't listening. What did you want?" But the door stayed closed, and I knew what it felt like to be invisible.

"I'm invisible," I said to Kevin at lunch. "Nobody hears me. Nobody sees me. I'm the friggin' invisible man."

Kevin just looked at his lunch and wagged his head.

"How long's it going to go on?" I demanded.

He shrugged.

"What did I *do?*" My voice was louder than I intended.

He chewed. He stared. At last he said, "You know what you did."

I stared at him like he was crazy. I badgered him some more. But of course he was perfectly right. I knew exactly what I had done. I had linked myself to an unpopular person. That was my crime.

25

Days passed. I continued to avoid Stargirl. I wanted her. I wanted them. It seemed I could not have both, so I did nothing. I ran and hid.

But she did not give up on me. She hunted me down. She found me in the TV studio after school one day. I felt fingers slipping down the back of my neck, grabbing my collar, pulling me backward. The crew was staring. "Mr. Borlock," I heard her say, "we need to talk." Her voice told me she was not smiling. She released my collar. I followed her out of the room.

In the courtyard a couple cooing on the bench beneath the palmetto saw us coming and bolted, so that's where we sat.

"So," she said, "are we breaking up already?"

"I don't want to," I said.

"So why are you hiding from me?"

Forced to face her, forced to talk, I felt my gumption rising. "Something's gotta change," I said. "That's all I know."

"You mean like change clothes? Or change a tire? Should I change a tire on my bike? Would that do it?"

"You're not funny. You know what I mean."

She saw I was upset. Her face got serious.

"People aren't talking to me," I said. I stared at her. I wanted it to sink in. "People I've known ever since we moved here. They don't talk to me. They don't *see* me."

She reached out and lightly rubbed the back of my hand

with her fingertip. Her eyes were sad. "I'm sorry people don't see you. It's no fun not being seen, is it?"

I pulled my hand away. "Well, you tell me what it's like. Doesn't it bother you that nobody talks to you?" It was the first time I had openly mentioned the shunning to her.

She smiled. "Dori talks to me. You talk to me. Archie talks to me. My family talks to me. Cinnamon talks to me. Señor Saguaro talks to me. *I* talk to me." She cocked her head and stared at me, waiting for a responding smile. I didn't give it. "Are *you* going to stop talking to me?"

"That's not the question," I said.

"What *is* the question?"

"The question is"—I tried to read her face but I could not—"what makes you tick?"

"Now I'm a *clock!*"

I turned away. "See, I can't talk to you. It's all just a big joke."

She put my face between her hands and turned me to her. I hoped people were not watching from the windows. "Okay, serious now. Go ahead, ask me the tick question again. Or any other, any question at all."

I shook my head. "You just don't care, do you?"

That stumped her. "Care? Leo, how can you say I don't care? You've gone with me to places. We've delivered cards and flowers. How can you say—"

"That's not what I mean. I mean you don't care what people think."

"I care what *you* think. I care—"

"I know—you care what Cinnamon and Señor Saguaro think. I'm talking about the school, the town. I'm talking about everybody."

She sniffed around the word. "Everybody?"

"Right. You don't seem to care what everybody thinks. You don't seem to *know* what everybody thinks. You—"

She broke in: "Do you?"

I thought for a moment. I nodded sharply. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do know. I'm in touch with everybody. I'm one of them. How could I not know?"

"And it matters?"

"Sure, it matters. Look"—I waved my arm at the school around us—"look what's happening. Nobody talks to us. You can't just not give a crap what anybody thinks. You can't just cheer for the other team and expect your own school to love you for it." Words that I had been thinking for weeks rolled off my tongue now. "Kovac—Kovac, for God's sake. What was *that* all about?"

She was baffled. "Who's Kovac?"

"Kovac. The guy from Sun Valley. The basketball star. The guy who broke his ankle."

She was still baffled. "What about him?"

"What about him? What about *you?* What were you doing out there on the floor with him with his head in your lap?"

"He was in pain."

"He was the *enemy*, Stargirl! Susan. Whatever. The *enemy!*" She stared dumbly back at me. She had blinked at

"Susan." "There were a thousand Sun Valley people there. He had his *own* people to take care of him, his *own* coaches, his *own* teammates, his *own* cheerleaders' laps. And you had *your* own team to worry about." I was screeching. I got up and walked away. I came back, leaned into her. "Why?" I said. "Why didn't you just let him be taken care of by his own people?"

She looked at me for a long time, as if in my face she could find herself explained. "I don't know," she said dimly at last. "I didn't think. I just did."

I pulled back. I was tempted to say, *Well, I hope you're satisfied, because they hate you for what you did,* but I didn't have the heart.

Now I was feeling sorry for her. I sat back down beside her. I took her hand. I smiled. I spoke as gently as I could. "Stargirl, you just can't do things the way you do. If you weren't stuck in a homeschool all your life, you'd understand. You can't just wake up in the morning and say you don't care what the rest of the world thinks."

Her eyes were wide, her voice peepy like a little girl's. "You can't?"

"Not unless you want to be a hermit."

She flicked the hem of her skirt at my sneaker, dusting it. "But how do you keep track of the rest of the world? Sometimes I can hardly keep track of myself."

"It's not something you even have to think about," I said. "You just know. Because you're connected."

On the ground her bag shifted slightly: Cinnamon was

stirring. Stargirl's face went through a series of expressions, ending with a pout and a sudden sobby outburst: "I'm not connected!" She reached out to me and we hugged on the bench in the courtyard and walked home together.

We continued this conversation for the next couple of days. I explained the ways of people to her. I said you can't cheer for everybody. She said why not? I said a person belongs to a group, you can't belong to everyone. She said why not? I said you can't just barge into the funeral of a perfect stranger. She said why not? I said you just can't. She said why? I said because. I said you have to respect other people's privacy, there's such a thing as not being welcome. I said not everybody likes having somebody with a ukulele sing "Happy Birthday" to them. They don't? she said.

This group thing, I said, it's very strong. It's probably an instinct. You find it everywhere, from little groups like families to big ones like a town or school, to really big ones like a whole country. How about really, *really* big ones, she said, like a planet? Whatever, I said. The point is, in a group everybody acts pretty much the same, that's kind of how the group holds itself together. Everybody? she said. Well, mostly, I said. That's what jails and mental hospitals are for, to keep it that way. You think I should be in jail? she said. I think you should try to be more like the rest of us, I said.

Why? she said.

Because, I said.

Tell me, she said.

It's hard, I said.

Say it, she said.

Because nobody likes you, I said. That's why. Nobody likes you.

Nobody? she said. Her eyes covered me like the sky. *Nobody?*

I tried to play dumb, but that wasn't working. Hey, I said, don't look at me. We're talking about them. *Them.* If it was up to me, I wouldn't change a thing. You're fine with me the way you are. But we're not alone, are we? We live in a world of them, like it or not.

That's where I tried to keep it, on them. I didn't mention myself. I didn't say do it for me. I didn't say if you don't change you can forget about me. I never said that.

Two days later Stargirl vanished.

26

Usually I saw her in the courtyard before school, but that day I didn't. Usually I passed her between classes at least once or twice before lunch. Not that day. In fact, when I looked over to her table at lunch, there was Dori Dilson, as usual, but someone else was sitting with her. No Stargirl in sight.

Coming out of the lunchroom, I heard laughter behind me. And then a voice, Stargirl's: "What do you have to do to get somebody's attention around here?"

I turned, but it wasn't her. The girl standing, grinning in front of me wore jeans and sandals, had burnt-red nails and lipstick, painted eyes, finger rings, toe rings, hoop earrings I could put my hand through, hair...

I gawked as students swarmed past. She made a clownish grin. She was beginning to look vaguely familiar. Tentatively I whispered, "Stargirl?"

She batted her chocolaty eyelashes. "Stargirl? What kind of name is that? My name is Susan."

And just like that, Stargirl was gone, replaced by Susan. Susan Julia Caraway. The girl she might have been all along.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. She cradled her books in her arms. The sunflower canvas bag was gone. The rat was gone. The ukulele was gone. She turned around slowly for my open-mouthed, dumbstruck inspection. Nothing goofy, nothing different could I see. She looked magnificently,

wonderfully, gloriously ordinary. She looked just like a hundred other girls at Mica High. Stargirl had vanished into a sea of *them*, and I was thrilled. She slid a stick of chewing gum into her mouth and chewed away noisily. She winked at me. She reached out and tweaked my cheek the way my grandmother would and said, "What's up, cutie?" I grabbed her, right there outside the lunchroom in the swarming mob. I didn't care if others were watching. In fact, I hoped they were. I grabbed her and squeezed her. I had never been so happy and so proud in my life.

We sailed through time. We held hands in the hallways, on the stairs, in the courtyard. In the lunchroom I grabbed her and pulled her over to our table. I looked to invite Dori Dilson, too, but she was gone. I sat there grinning while Kevin and Susan gabbed and gossiped over their sandwiches. They joked about her disastrous appearance on *Hot Seat*. Susan suggested that I should go on *Hot Seat* one of these days, and Kevin said no, he's too shy, and I said not anymore, and we all laughed.

And it was true. I didn't walk, I strutted. I was Susan Caraway's boyfriend. I. Me. Really? *That* Susan Caraway? The one with the tiny barrettes and toe rings? Yep, that's the one, my girlfriend. Call me Mr. Susan.

I started saying "we" instead of "I," as in "We'll meet you there" or "We like fajitas."

Whenever I could, I said her name out loud, like blowing bubbles. The rest of the time I said it to myself.

Susan . . . Susan . . .

We did our homework together. We hung out with Kevin. Instead of following strangers around, we went to the movies and plunged our hands together into the six-dollar Super Tub of popcorn. Instead of shopping for African violets, we shopped for Cinnabons and licked icing from each other's fingers.

We went into Pisa Pizza. We walked past the bulletin board inside the door. We shared a pizza: half pepperoni, half anchovies.

"Anchovies, ugh," I said.

"What's wrong with anchovies?" she said.

"How can you eat them? Nobody eats anchovies."

I was sort of kidding, but her face was serious. "Nobody?"

"Nobody I know."

She picked the anchovies from her slices and dumped them into her water glass.

I tried to stop her. "Hey—"

She pushed my hand away. She dropped the last anchovy into the glass. "I don't want to be like nobody."

On the way out, we ignored the bulletin board.

She was mad for shopping. It was as if she had just discovered clothes. She bought shirts and pants and shorts and costume jewelry and makeup. I began to notice that the items of clothing had one thing in common: they all had the designer's name plastered prominently on them. She seemed to buy not for color or style but for designer label size.

She constantly quizzed me about what other kids would do, would buy, would say, would think. She invented a fictitious person whom she called Evelyn Everybody. "Would Evelyn like this?" "Would Evelyn do that?"

Sometimes she misfired, as with laughing. For several days she was on a laughing jag. She didn't just laugh, she boomed. Heads turned in the lunchroom. I was trying to work up the nerve to say something when she looked at Kevin and me and said, "Would Evelyn laugh this much?" Kevin stared at his sandwich. I sheepishly shook my head. The laughing stopped, and from that moment on she did a perfect imitation of a sullen, pout-lipped teenager.

In every way she seemed to be a typical, ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill teenager.

And it wasn't working.

At first I neither noticed nor much cared that the shunning continued. I was too busy being happy that she was, as I saw it, now one of us. My only regret was that we could not play the basketball season over again. In my mind's eye, I pictured her aiming her incredible zeal and energy exclusively at the Electrons. We could have won games on her cheering alone.

It was she who said it first: "They still don't like me." We were standing outside the TV studio after school. As usual, people were passing by as if we weren't there. Her lip quivered. "What am I doing wrong?" Tears made her eyes even larger.

I squeezed her hand. I told her to give it some time. I pointed out that the state basketball finals would take place in Phoenix that Saturday, and that would end the season and clear the way for her cheerleading crimes to be forgotten.

Her mascara was muddy. I had seen her sad many times before, but always for someone else. This was different. This was for herself, and I was powerless to help. I could not find it in me to cheer up the cheerleader.

That night we did homework together at her house. I ducked into her room to check out her happy wagon. There were only two stones in it.

When I came to school next day, there was something different about the buzz in the courtyard. The arriving students were milling about, some roaming at random, some in clusters, but as I approached, there seemed to be a distinct clearing around the palmetto. I wandered in that direction, and through the crowd I could see that someone—Susan—was seated on the bench. She sat upright and smiling. She was holding a foot-long stick shaped like a claw on one end. Around her neck, dangling on a string, was a sign that read: TALK TO ME AND I'LL SCRATCH YOUR BACK. She was getting no takers. No one was within twenty feet of her.

Quickly I turned away. I walked back through the crowd. I pretended I was looking for someone. I pretended I hadn't seen. And prayed for the bell to ring.

When I saw her later that morning, the sign was gone. She said nothing about it. Neither did I.

Next morning she came running at me in the courtyard. Her eyes were bright for the first time in days. She grabbed me with both hands and shook me. "It's going to be okay! It's going to end! I had a vision!"

She told me about it. She had gone to her enchanted place after dinner the day before, and that's where the vision had come to her. She had seen herself returning in triumph from the Arizona state oratorical contest. She had won first prize. Best in the state. When she returned, she got a hero's welcome. The whole school greeted her in the parking lot, just like in the assembly film. There were streamers and confetti and tooting kazoos and horns blaring, and the mayor and city council were on hand, and they had a parade right then and there, and she rode high on the back seat of a convertible and held her winner's silver plate up for all to see, and the happy faces of her classmates flashed in the sparkling trophy. She told me this, and she threw up her arms and shouted, "I'm going to be popular!"

The state contest was a week away. Every day she practiced her speech. One day she called over little Peter Sinkowitz and his playmates and presented the speech to us from her front steps. We applauded and whistled. She bowed grandly, and I, too, began to see her vision. I saw the streamers flying and I heard the crowd cheering, and I believed.

27

"...and our best wishes go with you, Susan Caraway."

The PA announcement echoed through the school lobby, and we were off to Phoenix. The driver was Mr. McShane, Mica High's faculty representative to the state contest. Susan and I sat in the back. Susan's parents were driving their own car and would meet us in Phoenix.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, she wagged a finger in my face. "Don't get a big head, mister. I was allowed to invite two friends along. You weren't the only one I asked."

"So who was the other?" I said.

"Dori."

"Well, then," I said, "I think I'll go for the big head. Dori isn't another guy."

She grinned. "No, she's not one of those." Suddenly she unbuckled her seat belt—we each had a back window. "Mr. McShane," she announced, "I'm moving over so I can sit close to Leo. He's so cute, I can't help myself."

In the rearview mirror, the teacher's eyes crinkled. "Whatever you like, Susan. It's your day."

She slid over and fastened herself into the middle belt. She jabbed me. "Hear that? It's my day. I get whatever I want."

"So," I said, "what happened when you asked Dori Dilson?"

"She said no. She's mad at me."

"I could tell."

"Ever since I became Susan. She thinks I betrayed my-

self. She just doesn't understand how important it is to be popular."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I was feeling a little uneasy. Fortunately, wondering what to say wasn't much of a problem for me during that two-hour ride, because Susan chattered away like the old Stargirl the whole time.

"But I know Dori," she said, "and I'll tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"She'll be in the front of the mob cheering for me when we get back tomorrow."

I later found out that after we left the school, the principal had spoken again on the PA. He announced our expected time of return on Saturday and suggested that everyone be on hand to meet us, win or lose.

Losing, as it turned out, never occurred to the contestant herself.

"Would you do a favor for me?" she said.

I told her sure.

"That big silver plate that goes to the winner? I'm such a klutz with dishes at home. Would you hold it for me when the crowd rushes us? I'm afraid I'll drop it."

I stared at her. "What crowd? What rush?"

"In the school parking lot. When we get back tomorrow. There's always a crowd waiting for the returning hero. Remember the film at school? My vision?" She cocked her head and peered into my eyes. She rapped my forehead with her knuckle. "Hello in there. Anybody home?"

"Oh," I said. "*That* crowd."

She nodded. "Exactly. Of course, we'll be safe as long as we're in the car. But once we get out, who knows what will happen. Crowds can get pretty wild. Right, Mr. McShane?"

The teacher nodded. "So I hear."

She spoke to me as if instructing a first-grader. "Leo, this has never happened in Mica before, having a winner of the Arizona state oratorical contest. One of their very own. When they hear about it, they're going to go bananas. And when they get a gander at me and that trophy—" She rolled her eyes and whistled. "I just hope they don't get out of hand."

"The police will keep them in line," I said. "Maybe they'll call out the National Guard."

She stared wide-eyed. "You think?" She didn't realize I was kidding. "Well," she said, "I'm really not afraid for myself. I won't mind a little jostling. Do you think they'll jostle, Mr. McShane?"

In the mirror his eyes shifted to us. "Never can tell."

"And if they want to carry me around on their shoulders, that's okay, too. But they better not"—she poked me with her finger—"better *not* mess with my trophy. That's why *you*"—another poke—"are going to hold it. Tight."

I wished Mr. McShane would say something. "Susan," I said, "did you ever hear of counting your chickens?"

"Before they hatch, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"I hear you're not supposed to."

"Exactly."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Never made much sense to

me. I mean, if you *know* they're going to hatch, why not count them?"

"Because you can't know," I said. "There're no guarantees. I hate to break this to you, but you're not the only person in the contest. Somebody else *could* win. You *could* lose. It's possible."

She thought about that for a moment, then shook her head. "Nope. Not possible. So..." She threw up her arms and smiled hugely. "Why wait to feel great? Celebrate now, that's my motto." She nuzzled into me. "What's yours, big boy?"

"Don't count your chickens," I said.

She shuddered mockingly. "Ouuu. You're such a poop, Leo. What's your motto, Mr. McShane?"

"Drive carefully," he said, "you may have a winner in the car."

That set her off howling.

"Mr. McShane," I said, "you're not helping."

"Sorry," he lied.

I just looked at her. "You're going to be in a state contest," I said. "Aren't you just a little bit nervous?"

The smile vanished. "Yes, I am. I'm a lot nervous. I just hope things don't get out of hand when we get back to the school. I've never been adored by mobs of people before. I'm not sure how I'm going to react. I hope I don't get a big head. Do you think I'm the big-head type, Mr. McShane?"

I raised my hand. "Can I answer that?"

"I think your head is just fine," said the teacher.

She jabbed me with her elbow. "Hear that, Mr. Know-it-

all?" She gave me her smug face, which promptly disappeared as she thrust up her arms and yelped, "They're going to love me!"

Mr. McShane wagged his head and chuckled. Silently I gave up.

She pointed out the window. "Look, even the desert is celebrating."

It seemed to be true. The normally dull cacti and scrub were splashed with April colors, as if a great painter had passed over the landscape with a brush, dabbing yellow here, red there.

Susan strained against her seat belt. "Mr. McShane, can we stop here, just for a minute? Please?" When the teacher hesitated, she added, "You said it's my day. I get whatever I want."

The car coasted to a stop along the gravelly roadside. In a moment, she was out the door and bounding across the desert. She skipped and whirled and cartwheeled among the prickly natives. She bowed to a yucca, waltzed with a saguaro. She plucked a red blossom from a barrel cactus and fixed it in her hair. She practiced her smile and her nod and her wave—one-hand, two-hand—to the adoring mob at her hero's welcome. She snapped a needle from a cactus and with the slapstick pantomime of a circus clown pretended to pick her teeth with it.

Mr. McShane and I were leaning on the car, laughing, when suddenly she stopped, cocked her head, and stared off in another direction. She stayed like that, stone still, for a

good two minutes, then abruptly turned and came back to the car.

Her face was thoughtful. "Mr. McShane," she said as the teacher drove off, "do you know any extinct birds?"

"Passenger pigeon," he said. "That's probably the best known. They say there used to be so many of them they would darken the sky when they flew over. And the moa."

"Moa?"

"Huge bird."

"Like a condor?" I said.

He chuckled. "A condor wouldn't come up to its knee. Make an ostrich look small. Twelve, thirteen feet tall. Maybe the biggest bird ever. Couldn't fly. Lived in New Zealand. Died out hundreds of years ago. Killed off by people."

"Half their size," said Susan.

Mr. McShane nodded. "Mm. I wrote a report about moas in grade school. I thought they were the neatest thing."

Susan's eyes were glistening. "Did moas have a voice?"

The teacher thought about it. "I don't know. I don't know if anybody knows."

Susan looked out the window at the passing desert. "I heard a mockingbird back there. And it made me think of something Archie said."

"Mr. Brubaker?" said Mr. McShane.

"Yes. He said he believes mockingbirds may do more than imitate other birds. I mean, other *living* birds. He thinks they may also imitate the sounds of birds that are no longer around. He thinks the sounds of extinct birds are passed

down the years from mockingbird to mockingbird."

"Interesting thought," said Mr. McShane.

"He says when a mockingbird sings, for all we know it's pitching fossils into the air. He says who knows what songs of ancient creatures we may be hearing out there."

The words of Archie Brubaker settled over the silence in the car. As if reading my thoughts, Mr. McShane turned off the air conditioner and powered down the windows. Hair blew in a faint, smoky scent of mesquite.

After a while I felt the touch of Susan's hand. Her fingers wove through mine.

"Mr. McShane," she cooed, "we're holding hands in the back seat."

"Uh-oh," he said, "hormonal teenagers."

"Don't you think he's cute, Mr. McShane?"

"I never really thought about it," said the teacher.

"Well, look," she said. She grabbed my face in her hand and pulled it forward. The teacher's eyes considered me briefly in the rearview mirror.

"You're right. He's adorable."

Susan released my blushing face. "Told you. Don't you just love him?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

A minute later: "Mr. McSha-ane..." Now I felt something in my ear. "I'm putting my finger in his ear..."

This sort of silliness went on until we rounded a mesa and saw the brown mist on the horizon that announced our approach to the city of Phoenix.

28

Her parents met us in the lobby of the hotel where Susan, Mr. McShane, and I each had a room for the night. After we checked in, the five of us ate a buffet lunch in the hotel restaurant. Then we watched Susan board a bus that would take her and eighteen other contestants to Phoenix West High School. There were thirty-eight contestants; nineteen had already given their speeches that morning.

By the end of the afternoon, ten finalists would be chosen. The finals would take place that evening.

To be honest, none of us was surprised that Susan made the cut. She was incredibly good. The surprise was this: her speech was new. It was not the one she had given at Mica High. It was not the one she had been practicing for weeks in front of me and Peter Sinkowitz and assorted saguaros. It was not the one I had heard just the day before.

But it was wonderful.

There were some elements of the old speech in it, and much that was as new as that morning. Like a butterfly, her words fluttered from image to image. She swung from the distant past (Barney, Archie's Paleocene rodent skull) to the present (Cinnamon) to the distant future (the death of the sun). From the most ordinary here (the old man nodding off on the bench at Tudor Village) to the most extraordinary there (a newly discovered galaxy ninety percent to the end of the universe). She touched on silver lunch trucks and designer labels and enchanted places, and when she said her

best friend gave her pet rat a ride on his shoulder, tears came to my eyes. It was a jumble, it was a mishmash, and somehow she pulled it all together, somehow she threaded every different thing through the voice of a solitary mockingbird singing in the desert. She called her speech "I Might Have Heard a Moa."

The auditorium was half full, mostly with small groups of students and parents from the competing schools. After a contestant finished, his or her supporters whistled and whooped, as if doing so would influence the judges. The rest was polite applause.

When Susan finished, the four of us managed a modest cheer, but that was about it. No whistles, no whoops. I think we were made of more timid stuff than the speechmaker herself.

Back at the hotel Mr. McShane and I mobbed her, if two can be a mob. Her parents were more reserved. They were full of smiles and "well dones," but they seemed no more surprised at her success than Susan did.

When the adults went off to the gift shop, I had her to myself. I said, "Where did *that* come from?"

She grinned. "Did you like it?"

"Sure, but it's not what I've been hearing for the last month. What were you doing, practicing a secret speech on the side?"

The grin got wider. "Nope. That was the first time I heard it, too."

I stared at her. Slowly her words sank in. "Let me get this

straight. You're saying you just made it up this morning?"

"I'm saying I didn't even make it up. It was just there. All I did was open my mouth and let it out." She held both hands out to me and snapped her fingers. "Presto!"

I gaped at her. "What are you going to say tonight?"

She threw out her arms: "Who knows?"

The five of us ate an early dinner in the hotel restaurant. Afterward, we waited in the lobby while Susan changed clothes. She stepped off the elevator wearing a peach-colored pantsuit. She slinked across the lobby, modeling for us. She sat on her mother's lap and said, "My personal seamstress made it for me." We applauded lightly and sent her off on the bus.

The general public was invited to the evening show, and the auditorium was packed. People stood in back. Down front, a high school orchestra played rousing music by John Philip Sousa. The ten contestants sat onstage. Seven were boys. All of the contestants appeared to be grim and nervous, stiff as manikins, except for Susan, who was bending the ear of the boy sitting next to her. He nodded occasionally but kept his eyes and spine at attention and obviously wished that she would shut up. Susan's parents chuckled knowingly at her behavior, while I tried to disguise a stab of jealousy.

One by one the contestants took the long walk to center stage to give their speeches. The applause was equally hearty for all. A grade school girl in a frilly white dress handed each

contestant a bouquet of roses, yellow for the girls, red for the boys. While the girls cradled their roses, the boys looked at them as if they were hand grenades.

Susan was next to last to speak. When her name was called, she bounced up from her chair and practically ran to the microphone. She did a sprightly pirouette, a curtsy, waved her hand in a window-washer motion, and said, "Hi." Accustomed to seeing stiff, mortified contestants, the audience responded with uncertain titters. They didn't know what to make of this unconventional teenager any more than we had on the first day of school. Several bold souls said "Hi" and waved back.

She did not begin, at least not in the usual sense. There was no ringing preamble. She merely stood there comfortably chatting away as if we were all on rocking chairs on her front porch. Murmur drifted toward the ceiling; people were waiting for her to get started. The murmur subsided as it occurred to them that this was it and they were missing it. The quiet that then fell over the auditorium was absolute. I was more tuned in to the audience than to the speaker, and if for the last five minutes of her talk anyone was breathing, I could not detect it. When she finished with barely a whisper—"Can you hear it?"—and leaned with her cupped hand to her ear, fifteen hundred people seemed to inch forward, straining to hear. There were ten seconds of purest stillness. Then she turned abruptly and went back to her chair. Still there was no reaction. What's going on? I wondered. She sat forward in her chair, her hands folded primly

in her lap. And then it came, suddenly, explosively, as if everyone had awakened at once. We were all on our feet, clapping and shouting and whistling. I found myself sobbing. The cheering was as wild as that of the crowd at a championship basketball game.

29

She won. As she had said she would.

The silver plate they gave her twinkled like a starburst in a galaxy of flashing cameras. Two TV crews washed her in lights and interviewed her backstage. Strangers mobbed her, citizens of Phoenix gushing, telling her they had been coming to the contest for years and had never heard anything like it. Schoolchildren thrust programs in her face for autographs. Every parent wanted her for a daughter, every teacher for a student.

She was so happy, she was so proud. She yelped and cried when she saw us. She hugged each of us in turn, and I thought she would squeeze the breath out of me.

Back at the hotel everyone already seemed to know: the doorman, the desk manager, the people in the lobby and elevator. Suddenly she had this magical, wonderful power; whoever laid eyes on her smiled. And the English language dwindled to a single word, repeated over and over: "Congratulations!"

We walked—we floated—around the block to burn off our excess energy. Back at the hotel we were invited into the nightclub, even though Susan and I were underage. We drank ginger ales and ordered jalapeño poppers and we all danced to a country and western band while Susan's face beamed on the late news from the TV above the bar. The dance floor was the only place where she did not carry her silver plate.

First thing next morning there she was, sliding under the door of my hotel room: her picture on the front page of the *Arizona Republic*. I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at it, pride welling in me. I read the story. It called her speech "mesmerizing, hypnotic, mysteriously touching." I pictured folded morning papers tossed from cars, landing in driveways all over Mica.

We all met for the breakfast buffet. People stared and nodded and smiled and silently lip-said "Congratulations" across the restaurant. We headed for home in a two-car caravan.

For a while, Susan was her usual chatty self. She put the silver plate on the front seat beside Mr. McShane. She told him it would ride next to him for ten whole minutes, and he could touch it all he wanted. This was his reward, she said, for telling her about moas. As soon as the ten minutes was up, she took back the plate.

As we drew nearer to town, the chatter subsided and finally stopped. We rode the last miles in silence. She took my hand. The nearer we came the harder she squeezed. When we hit the outskirts of town, she turned to me and said, "Do I look okay?"

I told her she looked great.

She didn't seem to believe me. She held up the silver plate and studied her reflection.

She turned to me again and looked at me for some time before she spoke. "I've been thinking. This is how I'm going to do it. I'm going to hold on to the plate myself—okay?"

I nodded.

"...until...until they lift me onto their shoulders. Then I give it to you. Understand?"

I nodded.

"So stay next to me. Every second. Crowds can separate you, you know. They do that. Okay?"

I nodded. "Okay."

Her hand was hot and sweating.

We drove past a man in his driveway. He was dipping a large, broomlike brush into a pail and painting the asphalt with black sealer. He was bent intently to his work in the noonday sun, and somehow I knew at that moment what would happen, I could see it. I wanted to shout to Mr. McShane, "No, don't turn! Don't go there!"

But he did turn. He turned, and there was the school in front of us, and never in my life have I seen a place so empty. No banners, no people, no cars.

"Probably around back," Mr. McShane said. His voice was hoarse. "Parking lot."

We swung around back to the parking lot and—yes—there was a car, and another car. And people, three of them, shading their eyes in the sun, watching us. Two of them were teachers. The other was a student, Dori Dilson. She stood apart from the teachers, alone in the black shimmering sea of asphalt. As we approached, she held up a sign, a huge cardboard sign bigger than a basketball backboard. She set the sign on edge and propped it up, erasing herself. The red painted letters said:

WAY TO GO,
SUSAN
WE'RE PROUD OF
YOU

The car stopped in front of it. All that was left to see of Dori Dilson were two sets of fingers holding the sides of the sign. We were close enough now to see that the sign was trembling, and I knew that behind it Dori was crying. There was no confetti, no kazoos. Nothing cheered, not even a mockingbird.

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As we idled, stunned and silent in front of Dori Dilson's sign, Susan's parents came and retrieved her from Mr. McShane's car. As in all things, they did not appear especially surprised or emotional over what was happening. Susan seemed in a trance. She sat beside me, staring vacantly at the sign through the windshield. Her hand was no longer holding mine. I groped for words but could not find them. When her parents came, she allowed herself to be led away. As she got out of the car, the silver plate slid from her lap and rang like a dying bell against the asphalt. Her father picked it up. I thought he would take it, but instead he leaned into the back seat where I sat and with a strange smile gave it to me.

I did not see her for the rest of the weekend. By Monday she was Stargirl again. Floor-length skirt. Ribbons in her hair. Just like that.

She went from table to table at lunchtime, passing out happy-face cookies. She even gave one to Hillari Kimble. Hillari took off her shoe and used it like a hammer to smash the cookie on her table. Stargirl strolled among us strumming her ukulele, asking for requests. Cinnamon perched on her shoulder. He was strapped onto a tiny toy ukulele. She made her voice squeaky and kept her lips from moving and it was as if Cinnamon were serenading with her. Dori Dilson, bless her, stood and applauded. She was the only one. I was too stunned to join her. And too cowardly. And angry. And

not wanting to show approval for her return to Stargirl. Most of the students did not even look, did not even seem to listen. At the bell, as we left the lunchroom, I looked back. The tables were littered with cookies.

Walking with her after school that day, I said, "I guess you're giving up, huh?"

She looked at me. "Giving up? On what?"

"On being popular. On being..." How could I say it?

She smiled. "Normal?"

I shrugged.

"Yes," she said firmly.

"Yes?"

"I'm answering your question. The answer is yes. I'm giving up on trying to be popular and normal." Her face and body language did not seem to match her words. She looked cheery, perky. So did Cinnamon, perched on her shoulder.

"Don't you think maybe you should back off a little?" I said. "Don't come on so strong?"

She smiled at me. She reached out and brushed the tip of my nose with her fingertip. "Because we live in a world of *them*, right? You told me that once."

We stared at each other. She kissed me on the cheek and walked away. She turned and said, "I know you're not going to ask me to the Ocotillo Ball. It's okay." She gave me her smile of infinite kindness and understanding, the smile I had seen her aim at so many other needy souls, and in that moment I hated her.

That very night, as if he were playing a scripted role,

Kevin called me and said, "So, who are you taking to the Ocotillo Ball?"

I dodged. "Who are *you* taking?"

"Don't know," he said.

"I don't either."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Not Stargirl?"

"Not necessarily," I said.

"You trying to tell me something?"

"What would I want to tell you?"

"I thought you were a two. I thought there was no question."

"So why are you asking?" I said, and hung up.

In bed that night, I became more and more uncomfortable as the moonlight crept up my sheet. I did something I had never done before. I pulled down the shade. In my dreams the old man on the mall bench raised a wobbling head and croaked, "How dare you forgive me."

Next morning there was a new item on the plywood roadrunner, a sheet of white paper. At the top it said:

Sign Up Here to Join
New Musical Group,
THE UKEE DOOKS
No Experience Necessary

There were two numbered columns for names, forty in all.

By the end of the day all forty were filled in, with names such as Minnie Mouse and Darth Vader and The Swamp Thing. The principal's name was there, too. And Wayne Parr. And Dori Dilson.

"Did you see?" said Kevin. "Somebody wrote in Parr's name."

We were in the studio control room. It was May and our *Hot Seats* were over for the year, but on some days we still gravitated to the studio after school.

"I saw," I said.

He stepped up to a blank monitor, studied his reflection. "So, I didn't see your name on the list."

"Nope."

"You don't want to be a Ukee Dook?"

"Guess not."

We fiddled with the equipment for a while. Kevin walked out onto the stage. He flipped a switch. His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear. I held the soft pad of a headphone against my ear. His voice seemed to come from another world. "She's turning goofy again, isn't she? Worse than ever."

I stared at him through the glass. I put down the headphone and walked out.

I understood what he was doing. He had decided that it was now okay to say bad things about Stargirl. Permission to do so must have come from my behavior. Apparently the first to read me was Stargirl herself. I still felt the sting from her remark about the Ocotillo Ball.

Was I that obvious?

★ ★ ★

Classrooms, hallways, courtyard, lunchroom—everywhere I went I heard her disparaged, mocked, slurred. Her attempt to become popular, to be more like them, had been a total failure. If anything, they detested her more now. And they were more vocal about it around me. Or was I just listening better?

She and Dori Dilson, the only Ukee Dooks, did a duet in the courtyard one day after school. Stargirl strummed the ukulele and they both sang "Blue Hawaii." Clearly, they had been practicing. They were very good. They were also very ignored. By the end of the song, they were the only two left in the courtyard.

Next day they were there again. This time they wore sombreros. They sang Mexican songs. "Cielito Lindo." "Vaya Con Dios, My Darling." I stayed inside the school. I was afraid to walk on past them, as if they weren't there. I was equally afraid to stand and listen. I peeked from a window. Stargirl was doing her best imitation of a flamenco; the click of castanets came through the windowpane.

Students walked past, most of them not even glancing her way. I saw Wayne Parr and Hillari Kimble go past, Hillari laughing out loud. And Kevin. And the basketball guys. I realized now that the shunning would never end. And I knew what I should do. I should go out there and stand in front of them and applaud. I should show Stargirl and the world that I wasn't like the rest of them, that I appreciated her, that I

celebrated her and her insistence on being herself. But I stayed inside. I waited until the last of the students had left the courtyard, and Stargirl and Dori were performing for no one. To my surprise they went on and on. It was too painful to watch. I left school by another door.

31

As she had predicted, I did not ask her to the Ocotillo Ball. I did not ask anyone. I did not go.

She did.

The ball took place on a Saturday night in late May on the tennis courts of the Mica Country Club. When sunset was down to a faintly glowing ember in the west and the moon rose in the east, I went forth on my bicycle. I coasted by the club. Festooned with Cantonese lanterns, the ball in the distance looked like a cruise ship at sea.

I could not identify individuals, only stirrings of color. Much of it was powder blue. The day after Wayne Parr said he had chosen powder blue for his dinner jacket, three-quarters of the boys ordered the same from Tuxedo Junction.

Back and forth I cruised in the night beyond the lights. Music reached my ears as random peeps. The desert flowers, so abundant in April, were dying now. I had the notion that they were calling to each other.

I cruised for hours. The moon rose into the sky like a lost balloon. Somewhere in the dark shapes of the Maricopas, a coyote howled.

In the days and weeks and years that followed, everyone agreed: they had never seen anything like it.

She arrived in a bicycle sidecar. Just big enough for her to sit in, the sidecar had a single outboard wheel. The inboard side was braced to the bike. Everything but the seat of the

bike and the sidecar bench was covered in flowers. A ten-foot blanket of flowers trailed the rear fender like a bridal train. Palm fronds flared from the handlebars. It looked like a float in the Rose Parade. Dori Dilson pedaled the bicycle.

Eyewitnesses later filled in what I could not see: parents' cameras flashing, floodlights making a second day as the gorgeous couples disembark from limos and borrowed convertibles and promenade to the festive courts. Showers of applause. Suddenly the flashing stops, the floodlights dim, a hush falls over the crowd. As a particularly long white limo rolls away from the entrance, here comes this three-wheeled bouquet.

The driver Dori Dilson wears a tailed white tuxedo and tall silk hat, but it is her passenger who rivets the crowd. Her strapless gown is a bright, rich yellow, as if pressed from buttercups. There must be one of those hooped contraptions underneath, for the skirt billows outward from her waist like an upside-down teacup. Her hair is incredible. Descriptions clash. Some say it is the color of honey, some say strawberries. It fluffs like a meringue high upon her head. It's a wig. No, it's all hers. Both sides are certain.

Earrings dangle. They are little silver somethings. But what? They are partly obscured by falling ringlets. Many answers are offered. The most popular is Monopoly pieces, but this will prove to be wrong.

From a rawhide string around her neck dangles a white inch-long banana-shaped fossil identifying her as a member in good standing of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone.

While others wear orchids, the corsage on her wrist is a small sunflower. Or a huge black-eyed Susan. Or some sort of daisy. No one is sure, except that the colors are yellow and black.

Before proceeding, she turns back to the bicycle and bends over a small basket hanging from the handlebars. The basket, too, is covered with flowers. She appears to kiss something in it. She then waves to Dori Dilson, Dori salutes, and the bicycle pulls away. People nearby catch a glimpse of tiny cinnamon-colored ears and two peppercorn eyes peering out of the basket.

"Beautiful."

"Unusual."

"Interesting."

"Different."

"Regal."

These words will come later from the parents lining the walk. For now, there are only stares as she makes her way from the entrance to the ball. Someone recalls a single camera flashing, but that is all. She is no one's child. She is the girl they have heard about. As she passes by she makes no attempt to avoid their eyes. On the contrary, she looks directly at them, turning to one side, then the other, looking into their eyes and smiling as if she knows them, as if they have shared grand and special things. Some turn aside, uneasy in a way they cannot account for; others feel suddenly empty when her eyes leave theirs. So distracting, so

complete is she that she is gone before many realize that she had no escort, she was alone, a parade of one.

Perched on my bike in the distance, I remember looking up and seeing the torrent of stars we call the Milky Way. I remember wondering if she could see them, too, or were they lost in the light of the lanterns?

The dancing took place on the center tennis court, which had been covered with a portable parquet floor. She did what everyone else did at the ball: she danced. To the music of Guy Greco and the Serenaders she danced the slow dances and the fast ones. She spread her arms wide and threw back her head and closed her eyes and gave every impression of thoroughly enjoying herself. They did not speak to her, of course, but they could not help looking over the shoulders of their dates. She clapped at the end of each number.

She's alone, they kept telling themselves, and surely she danced in no one's arms, yet somehow that seemed to matter less and less. As the night went on, and clarinet and coyote call mingled beyond the lantern light, the magic of their own powder-blue jackets and orchids seemed to fade, and it came to them in small sensations that they were more alone than she was.

Who was the first to crack? No one knows. Did someone brush against her at the punch table? Pluck a petal from her flower? (One was missing.) Whisper "Hi"? This much is certain: a boy named Raymond Studemacher danced with her.

To the student body at large, Raymond Studemacher did not have enough substance to trigger the opening of a supermarket door. He belonged to no team or organization. He took part in no school activities. His grades were ordinary. His clothing was ordinary. His face was ordinary. He had no detectable personality. Thin as a minute, he appeared to lack the heft to carry his own name. And in fact, when all eyes turned to him on the dance floor, those few who came up with a name for him frowned at his white jacket and whispered, "Raymond Something."

And yet there he was, Raymond Something, walking right up to her—it came out later that his date had suggested it—and speaking to her, and then they were dancing. Couples steered themselves to get a better look. At the end of the number, he joined her in clapping and returned to his date. He told her the silver earrings looked like little trucks.

Tension rose. Boys got antsy. Girls picked at their corsages. The ice shattered. Several boys broke from their dates. They were heading her way when she walked up to Guy Greco and said something to him. Guy Greco turned to the Serenaders, the baton flashed, and out came the sounds of that old teen dance standard: the bunny hop. Within seconds a long line was snaking across the dance floor. Stargirl led the way. And suddenly it was December again, and she had the school in her spell.

Almost every couple joined in. Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr did not.

The line curled back and forth across the netless tennis courts. Stargirl began to improvise. She flung her arms to a make-believe crowd like a celebrity on parade. She waggled her fingers at the stars. She churned her fists like an egg-beater. Every action echoed down the line behind her. The three hops of the bunny became three struts of a vaudeville vamp. Then a penguin waddle. Then a tippy-toed priss. Every new move brought new laughter from the line.

When Guy Greco ended the music, howls of protest greeted him. He restruck the downbeat.

To delighted squeals, Stargirl led them off the parquet dance floor onto the other courts—and then through the chain-link fence and off the tennis courts altogether. Red carnations and wrist corsages flashed as the line headed onto the practice putting green of the golf course. The line doodled around the holes, in and out of sidepools of lantern light. From the dance floor it seemed to be more than it was: one hundred couples, two hundred people, four hundred dancing legs seemed to be a single festive flowery creature, a fabulous millipede. And then there was less and less to see as the head vanished and the rest curled through the fringe of the light and followed, like the tail of a powder-blue dragon, into the darkness.

One girl in chiffon had a tiff with her date and ran off toward the first tee, calling, "Wait for me!" She looked like a huge mint-green moth.

Their voices came in clearly from the golf course. The laughing and yelping made a raucous counterpoint to the

metronomic *tock-tock-tock* of the bunny's never-ending hop. Once, in the light of the quarter moon, they appeared in silhouette on a domed, distant green, like figures dancing in someone's dream.

And then quite suddenly they were gone, as if the dreamer had awakened. Nothing to see, nothing to hear. Someone called "Hey!" after them, but that was all.

It was, according to those left behind, like waiting for a diver in water to return to the surface. Hillari Kimble, for one, did not share that feeling. "I came here to dance," she declared. She pulled Wayne Parr along to the bandstand and demanded "regular music."

Guy Greco tilted his head to listen, but the baton did not stop and neither did the band.

In fact, as the minutes went by, the music seemed to become louder. Maybe it was an illusion. Maybe the band felt a connection to the dancers. Maybe the farther the line spun into the night, the louder the band had to play. Maybe the music was a tether. Or a kite string.

Hillari Kimble dragged Wayne Parr out to the middle of the parquet floor. They slowdanced. They fastdanced. They even tried an old-fashioned jitterbug. Nothing worked. Nothing went with the triple-thumping drumbeat but the bunny hop itself. Hillari's orchid shed petals as she beat her fist on Wayne Parr's chest. "Do something!" she yelled. She ripped sticks of chewing gum from his pocket. She chewed them furiously. She split the wad and pressed the gum into her ears.

The band played on.

Afterward, there were many different guesses as to how long the bunny-hoppers were actually gone. Everyone agreed it seemed to be hours. Students stood under the last line of lanterns, their fingers curling through the plastic-coated wire of the fence, peering into the vast blackness, straining for a glimpse, a scrap of sound. All they heard was the call of a coyote. A boy dashed wildly into the darkness; he sauntered back, his blue jacket over his shoulder, laughing. A girl with glitter in her hair shivered. Her bare shoulders shook as if she were cold. She began to cry.

Hillari Kimble stalked along the fence, clenching and unclenching her fists. She could not seem to stand still.

When the call finally came—"They're back!"—it was from a lone watcher at the far end. A hundred kids—only Hillari Kimble stayed behind—turned and raced down eight tennis courts, pastel skirts flapping like stampeding flamingos. The fence buckled outward as they slammed into it. They strained to see. Light barely trickled over crusted earth beyond the fence. This was the desert side.

"Where?... Where?"

And then you could hear: whoops and yahoos out there, somewhere, clashing with the music. And then—*there!*—a flash of yellow, Stargirl leaping from the shadows. The rest followed out of the darkness, a long, powder-blue, many-headed birthing. *Hop-hop-hop.* They were still smack on the beat. If anything, they seemed more energized than before. They were fresh. Their eyes sparkled in the lantern

light. Many of the girls wore browning, half-dead flowers in their hair.

Stargirl led them along the outside of the fence. Those inside got up a line of their own and hopped along. Guy Greco struck the downbeat three final times—*hop-hop-hop*—and the two lines collided at the gate in a frenzy of hugs and shrieks and kisses.

Shortly after, as the Serenaders gratefully played "Stardust," Hillari Kimble walked up to Stargirl and said, "You ruin everything." And she slapped her.

The crowd grew instantly still. The two girls stood facing each other for a long minute. Those nearby saw in Hillari's shoulders and eyes a flinching: she was waiting to be struck in reply. And in fact, when Stargirl finally moved, Hillari winced and shut her eyes. But it was lips that touched her, not the palm of a hand. Stargirl kissed her gently on the cheek. She was gone by the time Hillari opened her eyes.

Dori Dilson was waiting. Stargirl seemed to float down the promenade in her buttercup gown. She climbed into the sidecar, the flowered bicycle rolled off into the night, and that was the last any of us ever saw of her.

32

That was fifteen years ago. Fifteen Valentine's Days.

I remember that sad summer after the Ocotillo Ball just as clearly as everything else. One day, feeling needy, empty, I walked over to her house. A For Sale sign pierced the ground out front. I peered through a window. Nothing but bare walls and floors.

I went to see Archie. Something in his smile said he had been expecting me. We sat on the back porch. Everything seemed as usual. Archie lighting his pipe. The desert golden in the evening sun. Señor Saguaro losing his pants.

Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

"Where?" I said.

A corner of his mouth winked open and a silky rumple of smoke emerged, paused as if to be admired, then drifted off past his ear. "Midwest. Minnesota."

"Will I ever see her again?"

He shrugged. "Big country. Small world. Who knows?"

"She didn't even finish out the school year."

"No."

"Just... vamoosed."

"Mm-hm."

"It's only been weeks, but it seems like a dream. Was she really here? Who was she? Was she real?"

He looked at me for a long time, his smile wry, his eyes

twinkling. Then he shook his head as if coming out of a trance. He deadpanned, "Oh, you're waiting for an answer. What were the questions again?"

"Stop being nutty, Archie."

He looked off to the west. The sun was melting butter over the Maricopas. "Real? Oh, yes. As real as we get. Don't ever doubt that. That's the good news." He pointed the pipe stem at me. "And well named. Stargirl. Though I think she had simpler things in mind. Star people are rare. You'll be lucky to meet another."

"Star people?" I said. "You're losing me here."

He chuckled. "That's okay. I lose myself. It's just my oddball way of accounting for someone I don't really understand any more than you do."

"So where do stars come in?"

He pointed the pipe stem. "The perfect question. In the beginning, that's where they come in. They supplied the ingredients that became us, the primordial elements. We are star stuff, yes?" He held up the skull of Barney, the Paleocene rodent. "Barney too, hm?"

I nodded, along for the ride.

"And I think every once in a while someone comes along who is a little more primitive than the rest of us, a little closer to our beginnings, a little more in touch with the stuff we're made of."

The words seemed to fit her, though I could not grasp their meaning.

He saw the vacant look on my face and laughed. He

tossed Barney to me. He stared at me. "She liked you, boy."

The intensity of his voice and eyes made me blink.

"Yes," I said.

"She did it for you, you know."

"What?"

"Gave up her self, for a while there. She loved you that much. What an incredibly lucky kid you were."

I could not look at him. "I know."

He shook his head with a wistful sadness. "No, you don't. You can't know yet. Maybe someday..."

I knew he was tempted to say more. Probably to tell me how stupid I was, how cowardly, that I blew the best chance I would ever have. But his smile returned, and his eyes were tender again, and nothing harsher than cherry smoke came out of his mouth.

I continued to attend Saturday meetings of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone. We did not speak of her again until the following summer, several days before I was to leave for college. Archie had asked me to come over.

He took me out back, but this time not to the porch. Instead he led me to the toolshed. He slid back the bolt and opened the door and—it was not a toolshed after all. "This was her office," he said and gestured for me to enter.

Here it was: all the stuff of her activity that I had expected to see in her room at home, the "office" whose location she would not reveal. I saw wheels of ribbon and wrapping

paper, stacks of colored construction paper, cardboard boxes of newspaper clippings, watercolors and cans of paint, a yellow stack of phone books.

Tacked to one wall was a municipal map of Mica. Hundreds of pins of a dozen different colors pierced the map. There was no indication what they stood for. A huge homemade calendar covered the opposite wall. It had a square for every date in the year. Penciled into the squares were names. Across the top of the calendar was one word: BIRTHDAYS. There was one dot of color on the whole thing, a little red heart. It was next to my name.

Archie handed me a fat family album sort of book. The homemade title said "The Early Life of Peter Sinkowitz." I flipped through it. I saw the pictures she had taken that day: Peter squabbling with the little girls over his beloved banana roadster.

"I'm to wait five years, then give it to his parents," said Archie.

He pointed to a filing cabinet in the corner.

It had three drawers. I opened one. There were dozens of red hanging folders, each with a name tag sticking up. I saw "Borlock." Me. I pulled it out, opened it. There was the birthday notice that appeared in the *Mica Times* three years before. And a profile of me from the school paper. And pictures: candid snapshots of me in a parking lot, me leaving my house, me at the mall. Apparently, Peter Sinkowitz wasn't the only target for her camera. And a sheet of paper with two columns: "Likes" and "Doesn't Like." Heading

the list of "Likes" was "porcupine neckties." Under that was "strawberry-banana smoothies."

I replaced my folder. I saw other names. Kevin. Dori Dilson. Mr. McShane. Danny Pike. Anna Grisdale. Even Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr.

I stepped back. I was stunned.

"This is...unbelievable. Files. On people. Like she was a spy."

Archie nodded, smiling. "A lovely treason, hm?"

I could not speak. He led me out into the dazzling light.

33

Throughout my college years I visited Archie whenever I came home. And then I got a job back East, and my visits were less frequent. As Archie grew older, the difference between himself and Señor Saguaro seemed to become less and less. We sat on the back porch. He seemed fascinated by my work. I had become a set designer. Only recently has it occurred to me that I became one on the day Stargirl took me to her enchanted place.

On my last visit with him, he met me at the front door. He dangled keys in front of my eyes. "You drive."

An old tar pail rattled in the bed of his ancient pickup as he pointed me west to the Maricopas. In his lap he carried a brown paper bag.

Along the way I said, as I always did, "So, have you figured her out yet?"

It was years since she had gone, yet still we needed no name for her. We knew who we were talking about.

"I'm working on it," he said.

"What's the latest?"

We were following a familiar script.

On this day he stated: "She's better than bones." On my previous visit, he had said, "When a Stargirl cries, she does not shed tears, but light." On other days in other years, he had called her "the rabbit in the hat" and "the universal solvent" and "the recycler of our garbage."

He said these things with a sly grin, knowing they would

confound me as I mulled them until our next meeting.

We were in the foothills by early afternoon. He directed me to stop on a stony shoulder of the road. We got out and walked. He brought the paper bag with him. I brought the pail. He pulled from it a floppy blue hat, which he mashed onto his head. The sun that had looked warm and buttery at a distance was blazing hot here.

We didn't go far, as walking was a chore for him. We stopped at an outcropping of smooth, pale-gray rock. He pulled a small pick from the pail and tapped the rock. "This'll do," he said.

I held the paper bag while he put pick to rock. The skin on his arms had become dry and flaky, as if his body were preparing itself to rejoin the earth. It took him ten minutes to gouge out a hole that he judged to be right.

He asked for the bag. I was shocked at what he took from it.

"Barney!"

The skull of the Paleocene rodent.

"This is home," he said. He said he was sorry he did not have the energy to return Barney to his original stratum in South Dakota. He laid Barney in the hole, then took from his pocket a scrap of paper. He crumpled the scrap and stuffed it into the hole with the skull. Then he pulled a jug of water, a small bag of patching cement, a trowel, and a plastic tray from the tar pail. He mixed the cement and troweled over the hole. From a distance you wouldn't know the rock had been altered.

Heading back to the pickup, I asked him what was written on the paper.

"A word," he said. The way he said it told me I'd get no answer to the next question.

We rode east down out of the mountains and were home before sundown.

When I returned next time, someone else was living in Archie's house. The shed out back was gone. So was Señor Saguaro.

And a new elementary school now occupies Stargirl's enchanted place.

MORE THAN STARS

Since graduating, our class has had a reunion every five years, but I haven't yet gone. I stay in touch with Kevin. He never left Mica, has a family there now. Like me, he did not wind up in television, but he does make good use of his gift of gab: he's an insurance salesman.

Kevin says when the class gathers for reunions at the Mica Country Club, there is much talk of Stargirl and curiosity as to her whereabouts. He says the most common question these days is "Were you on the bunny hop?" At the last reunion several classmates, for a lark, lined up, hands to waists, and hopped around the putting green for a few minutes, but it wasn't the same.

No one is quite sure what happened to Wayne Parr, except that he and Hillari broke up shortly after graduation. The last anyone heard, he spoke of joining the Coast Guard.

The high school has a new club called the Sunflowers. To join, you have to sign an agreement promising to do "one nice thing per day for someone other than myself."

Today's Electron marching band is probably the only one in Arizona with a ukulele.

On the basketball court, the Electrons have never come close to the success they enjoyed when I was a junior. But something from that season has resurfaced in recent years that baffles fans from other schools. At every game, when the opposing team scores its first basket, a small group of Electrons fans jumps to its feet and cheers.

Each time I visit Mica, I drive past her old house on Palo Verde. On the most recent visit, I saw a red-haired young man across the street, fixing water skis to the roof of a yellow Volkswagen Beetle. It must have been Peter Sinkowitz. I wondered if he was as possessive of his Beetle as he had been of the banana roadster. I wondered if he was old enough to love his scrapbook.

As for me, I throw myself into my work and keep an eye peeled for silver lunch trucks, and I remember. I sometimes walk in the rain without an umbrella. When I see change on the sidewalk, I leave it there. If no one's looking, I drop a quarter. I feel guilty when I buy a card from Hallmark. I listen for mockingbirds.

I read the newspapers. I read them from all over. I skip the front pages and headlines and go to the pages in back. I read the community sections and the fillers. I see little acts of kindness happening from Maine to California. I read of a

man in Kansas City who stands at a busy intersection every morning and waves at the people driving to work. I read of a little girl in Oregon who sells lemonade in front of her house for five cents a cup—and offers a free back scratch to every customer.

When I read about things like these I wonder, *Is she there?* I wonder what she calls herself now. I wonder if she's lost her freckles. I wonder if I'll ever get another chance. I wonder, but I don't despair. Though I have no family of my own, I do not feel alone. I know that I am being watched. The echo of her laughter is the second sunrise I awaken to each day, and at night I feel it is more than stars looking down on me. Last month, one day before my birthday, I received a gift-wrapped package in the mail. It was a porcupine necktie.