

CHAPTER 21

On Tuesday evening, I'm sitting at my desk reviewing my toy blocks. I can recognize each now, almost instantly and from many angles. But after naming a shape, I still reach out and touch it to confirm I am correct.

"There's a knock at my door."

"It's Dad. I can tell from the knock."

"Will?"

"Come in."

He does. I turn and watch a formless, shifting array of colors as the door opens and he walks into my room and sits on the bed, the mattress exhaling under his weight.

"Seems like you've pretty much conquered those blocks now," he says.

"I guess so."

"Ready to graduate to real objects?"

I resent his implication that my progress isn't *real* because I'm learning with toys. "These are real shapes."

"Sorry, you're right. You're doing great. But now that

you know basic shapes, maybe it's time to try to identify complex ones?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"I've got a good example downstairs. You might say it's a gift to congratulate you on winning the election yesterday. Want to check it out?"

We go downstairs. I follow the sound of his movements, walking by touch with my eyes shut. But every few steps, I open my eyes for a second, take just a quick, dizzying peek at the moving hallway.

Dad says proudly, "Here it is, Will, your first complex object to identify by sight."

We are in the side hallway, which we've always kept clear of furniture. Only some photo frames hanging about shoulder level. He squares my shoulders so I'm facing the wall.

"You want me to look at the photos?" I ask. I could probably handle that. I mean, at least I now know how to tell the difference between a framed object and the wall it's hanging on.

"No, there's something else here. See if you can figure out what it is."

I wonder why Dad is doing this. Probably because I'm his son and he wants me to successfully adapt. But I can't help wondering if a part of him—maybe a part he's not even aware of—might actually want to push me to failure. He told me not to get the operation. He warned me tasks

like this one would be overwhelmingly difficult. If that's the lesson he's trying to teach here, I want to prove him wrong.

So maybe this is a trick question: I'm supposed to search and search and give up, only to realize there *is* no object.

"Dad, I've walked by this wall and touched it a hundred times. There's nothing else here," I say. In other words, *I see what you're trying to do here, Dad. And I'm not amused.*

"No, I moved the object here from another part of the house."

"This strikes me as suspicious. "Why not just move *me* to that part of the house?"

He chuckles. "Will, obviously if I took you to the place where this object normally is found, you would know what it is based on context. Bringing it here makes it challenging."

There's a smile in his voice. He sounds kind of excited about this "challenge" he's created for me.

But as far as teaching methods go, wouldn't it make more sense to give me some easy ones to start off with? Why not let me build my confidence by, say, going into the kitchen and finding the blender and the coffeemaker? Going into the living room and finding the TV? That kind of thing. Why deliberately make it more difficult by bringing an object out of its native habitat?

"Fine," I say with annoyance. "I'll attempt your 'challenge.'"

Instinctively, my hands draw up from my waist the way people say gunslingers draw from their holsters in Western movies.

"Sorry," I say. "Old habit."

Dad grunts something indecipherable.

I scan the wall with my eyes. It seems to be white. That's something I've learned this week: Most walls are white. I never knew that when I was blind. I guess I always thought most walls were black. Some of the kids at my old school, who weren't totally blind, told me how they'd invert the colors on their computer screens so that the background is blue or black, to make the white text and colored images easier to see. And I know people like to hang colorful decorations on their walls. So I'd always assumed they'd want black walls to make the decorations more visible. Apparently I assumed wrong.

Below the mass of white and the rectangles of the picture frames, I observe a complex, multicolored object. The shapes bounce and swirl as I try to pin them down with my gaze. I feel like I am angling my chin to look at it, which suggests it is below my eye level. So I squat. Sure enough, the object appears to grow in front of me. It's now massive and a little overwhelming. I decide to break it into its component shapes, figure them out one at a time. But whenever I identify a single shape and move on to another, I lose track of the first one and have to start all over again. It feels like when I couldn't count the dots on that die.

The task is even more difficult for me because the shapes overlap one another. Presumably if I had a better understanding of depth, I could differentiate which shape is at which depth, but because the world appears essentially flat to me, all the lines run together, crisscrossing, bending, curling over one another. Is *that* line important? How about this one? Which lines make up the most essential outline of this object?

"Want a clue?" Dad asks.

"No," I snap, sounding angrier than I intend to. I don't want to let on that his little challenge is getting to me.

When I read braille, I move from left to right. So I decide to try that method.

I step back and stare at the left side of the object. After a while, I notice a circle. It is crisscrossed with an incalculable number of lines, but there is definitely a circle around the edges. I move right from the circle to the middle of the object. That section is complete nonsense to me, all the colors and shapes stacked up on each other. I move to the right again. After a while, I notice another circle, similar to the one on the left. Two circles. One on each side.

"I've got it!" I say, jumping up, ready to prove Dad wrong with my realization. "It's a pair of glasses!"

"No, guess again," he says, disappointed.

Two circles. One on each side.

"A dumbbell? From the weight set in the basement?"

"It's much, much larger than glasses or a dumbbell."

Well, if he's trying to demonstrate that I can't judge size, he's right. I can't. Yet.

But then it hits me. Two circles. Two wheels.

"A bike!"

"Yes!" he exclaims, clapping me on the shoulder. "A bike!"

I reach out and touch the circles, and the rubber treads light up for me: *Tires*, say my fingers. I run my hands along the center, and it names itself: *Metal bike frame*.

"You probably thought—" I begin to lash out at him for his attempt to stump me, but he interrupts.

"It's for you!"

"What?"

"A gift! For you!" He's almost giddy now. And let me emphasize this: My father is not an emotional man. I witness him get this excited maybe once a year, like when the Tour de France is on TV or something.

"I can't even walk, Dad. Much less ride a bike," I say, confused.

"That's why I got it for you!"

"I don't get it."

"I know you can't walk by sight yet, but soon you'll be able to. And soon after that, you'll be able to ride a bike. I want you to know that I believe in you. I believe you'll one day be able to ride this thing."

I'm speechless.

"Will, I know I advised you not to get the operation.

And maybe I wasn't as supportive as I should have been. But you are braver than me, son. You are in some ways... in some ways more of a man than I am. And that's why you went through with it anyway. Now you can see. And one day, we'll go on a bike ride together."

"Thanks, Dad." It means a lot. More than I can express, or want to express.

"Think of it as an early Christmas present," he says. "Or, hey, next week is Thanksgiving. It could be a Thanksgiving present."

I add, "Guess we don't need the tandem anymore, huh?"

"Oh, no, we'll save it," he says. "One day I'll be too old to ride, and I'll need you to steer me around on the tandem! HA!" He lets out his dorky one-syllable laugh.

I can't help but laugh, too.

CHAPTER 22

On Wednesday, I ask Cecily to drive us to Mole Hill Park so I can witness my first sunset. She guides me up the million stairs, and we sit down in the grass in the same spot where we sat after the homecoming dance.

Once we are settled, I finally open my eyes and discover the usual visual mayhem—colors smashing into one another, lines colliding in a noisy fight for my attention.

“Is the sun setting yet?” I ask.

“Not yet.”

“So what are we looking at here? The entire city?” I ask, blinking rapidly, as if by fluttering my eyelids I will bring the view into focus.

“Basically,” she says. “It’s a good panorama. I mean, it’s a small city. Someday you should go up in the Hollywood Hills and look at Los Angeles at night. I’ve gone there with my dad before. But anyway, the diminutive skyline of Toano, Kansas, will have to do for now.”

“Can we see my house?”

"No, but we can see mine."

"Really? Where?" I ask.

I've still never been to her house. So this will be my first chance to experience it, and I will have the chance to do so with *eyesight* as we sit here on this hill. I wonder if her blinds are open? I hope so. I want to be able to see in through the windows. I want to look into her room and find out how she's decorated her walls.

"Oh, it's... well, you probably wouldn't be able to see it. Don't worry about it."

"No, I *want* to."

"I know you do. But... I live in a pretty crappy house."

"I don't know what a house is supposed to look like. You could tell me it was a palace, and I wouldn't know the difference by looking at it."

"All right," she agrees. "How do I point it out to you?"

"Just wave your hand in a circle around it," I say.

"My hand? It's way smaller than my hand."

"Your house is smaller than your hand?" I ask, confused.

"Are you joking? Oh, right... perspective. Sorry," she says. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking—"

"It's fine," I say, embarrassed that I still get confused by these things.

"Well, yeah, from this distance, my house is tiny. Like a little speck. All you can see is a black dot, which is the roof."

I'm still a bit curious about whether I would be able to see through her windows, but from what she's saying, I guess the answer is no. And I don't want to ask because, well, it's impossible to make that question *not* creepy.

"No problem," I say, giving up on seeing her house, at least for now. "Besides, there's something I'd much rather look at."

"What?"

"You."

She giggles. Or coughs. Or something.

I turn my head to face her. I am kind of hoping something deep inside, like my heart or whatever, will be able to identify her through pure emotional instinct. Everything else in the world may be blurry and confusing, but her face will jump out in instant high definition, radiant with beautifully articulated and meaningful lines. But this doesn't turn out to be the case. Instead, I see only the normal ocean of shifting colors, currents of hue riding into my brain via my eyes.

"Well?" she asks quietly.

"I do see a lot of green," I say. "I guess that's the grass? Unless you are green?"

"No, I'm...not green," she says, as if it had been a serious question rather than a joke.

"Wiggle your head around so I can see it," I say.

I hear a swoosh of hair, and as I do, a swirl of colors lights up in front of me: Yellow and tan and pink and light brown...

This is Cecily. This is her face.

"Okay, I see you," I say. "Do you mind if I, um, invade your personal space?"

"Yes, you can invade my personal space."

I move toward her so her head fills most of my field of vision. She holds her breath like she's nervous.

A face is a complicated thing. Even before the operation, I appreciated that. It has many parts: rippling contours shaped by the bones underneath the skin, many small spots of hair—eyebrows, eyelashes, sometimes a beard or goatee—and so many different parts—a mouth, a nose, eyes, and ears. Of course, I can't make out any of this on Cecily. I know what each of these things would feel like if I reached out my hands and touched her. But the gaze of my eyes reveals no such detail. Just unrecognizable sensory data, a jumble of shapes and colors.

Even though I don't know how to connect this visual to the physical knowledge I have about faces, I can connect the sight to the knowledge that *this is Cecily's face*.

I reach a hand up, and it lands quietly against her cheek. With the touch of my fingers, the cheek identifies itself to me. I slide my hand over to her nose, and it immediately stands and declares, *I am a nose*. In that moment, my eyes make out a triangle of skin-colored light pink. Her nose.

I bring up my other hand and run my fingertips around her eyes, which she shuts in response to my touch.

But her eyes, those windows into the soul, as they say,

are the territory of her face I am most desperate to explore. Using my hands like two bookmarks to keep from losing my place, I put my pointer fingers on her eyebrows and my thumbs on the top of her cheekbones.

"Open your eyes," I say.

She does, and with the tactile input of my fingers around them, I am able to quickly locate the perfect green circles of her irises surrounding the deep black of her pupils, and to see all this floating in the larger white space of cornea. Around her eyes and above them, on her forehead, her skin fades into a deep purple, darker than the skin on her jaw and cheeks and nose.

The green of her dual irises have tiny flakes of yellow in them, as if sprinkled with gold. I might not be able to see through the windows of Cecily's house today, but I'll happily settle for her soul.

"Green with specks of gold."

"Yes," she says.

I see her previously white corneas turn red and feel warm moisture pool against my thumbs. I swipe my thumbs to wipe the tears, and she pulls me around the neck and buries her face against my shoulder.

CHAPTER 23

When I get home, I am still high on the ecstatic rush of being so close to Cecily's face. It almost felt like... like she wanted to touch my face, too, like maybe with her lips.

I demand that both of my parents stand in front of me for a thorough examination. I connect the field of brown on the bottom half of Dad's head with the prickly bristles of his beard. I associate the thin horizontal lines on Mom's forehead with the neat ridges of her eyebrows, but while doing so, it occurs to me I could go look in a mirror right now and find out what I look like, all of which suddenly makes me relatively uninterested in my mother.

I go to the upstairs bathroom and shut the door. It's my first time seeing a mirror. It looks much like the rest of the world—or, at least, the way I see the world—a swirl of indistinguishable colors and undifferentiated lines. But from what I understand about mirrors, I know at least some of these colors in front of my eyes are my own reflection. A reflection of my face and my body. I am standing right in front of myself.

I bob my head to try to pick out my face in the mirror by its motion, but the movement also has the unwanted side effect of shifting my field of vision. Instinct tells me to instead reach my hand to touch the surface, and I am startled when my fingers collide with the hard glass of the mirror instead of the colors and shapes it's reflecting. This strikes me as the funniest thing ever, and I burst out laughing.

Then an idea hits: perspective. If things get bigger the closer you move to them in real life, wouldn't that be true in the mirror, too? Can I just put my eyes right up to the mirror and then slowly move my head to search it?

I move my face right up to the mirror, and as I do so, I see a yellowish mass explode in the center. I whip around, closing my eyes and reaching out my hands to find what is happening in the bathroom. But there's nothing there. I turn to the mirror again and move in more slowly toward it. When my nose is up against the glass, I put my hand against my cheek, and I see a broad movement. That's when I realize: It's my face. My face is the yellowish mass. My face is what I see moving.

I find my eyes and stare into them. They are brown, as they have apparently been since the surgery. I wonder what they looked like before—"cloudy blue" or "milky blue" is how people always described them. My nose seems to be disproportionately large, which is disappointing. No one wants to discover they have a much larger nose than they

expected. Or maybe that's something that always happens in mirrors, or at least when you are only a couple of inches away from one? My hair is brown and short. My forehead is wide and uniform in color. My lips are a darker shade than the rest of my face, and I remember that this color, the color of my lips, is similar to the one I noticed on the upper half of Cecily's face, around her eyes and forehead. I wonder why her skin changes color around those areas but mine does not.

Later that night, Mom asks, "Did you see Cecily's face tonight?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What did you think?"

Many words comes to mind: Beautiful. Perfect. Radiant. But I don't feel like any of them are Mom's business.

"It was nice," I say flatly.

And it's for this reason—Cecily's face—that I don't wear the eye mask underneath my glasses to school on Thursday. I keep my eyes closed while I'm walking so I don't get dizzy, but I want to be able to open them during journalism class and examine her from afar for all of third period. Which is exactly what I am attempting to do, and I am reasonably certain I've finally located her when Mrs. Everbrook says, "Will?"

"Yes?"

“What do you think?”

“Um...” I consider bluffing with a vaguely generic answer (“I agree with what most people have been saying but disagree with others...”) but figure Mrs. Everbrook will see through it since she was apparently able to tell that I wasn’t paying attention in the first place. “Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.”

“Then consider this your mind’s formal invitation to rejoin the group,” says Mrs. Everbrook.

But I have no interest in class. I just want to be with Cecily, just look at her, head to toe, examine every inch of her appearance. I try to pay attention to Mrs. Everbrook, but can’t help searching the room at the same time with my eyes. I soon figure out how to locate Cecily’s desk. She’s like a magnet, drawing me in. And it’s not just Cecily. How does anyone ever pay attention in school, when there are so many other wonderful and confusing images—hundreds, thousands, millions of pixels—constantly surrounding them?

I almost laugh when I hear the words in my mind: I am still referring to “them,” the *sighted people*, as if they are some other group. As if I am not one of them. But I am now. I am a sighted person. It’s not us versus them anymore. It’s we.

But still, my performance and understanding is severely limited compared to the average person. There remains a gap. Maybe I’m not quite one of them. Not yet. And for

that reason, I'm not able to pick out Cecily among the vibrating contours of the room.

Despite my inability to find her face across the room during class, I manage to catch up with Cecily after the bell rings. She walks me to the cafeteria before her next class, and we make plans to hang out after school.

With one last look at her face until the end of the day, I turn in to meet my friends for lunch. First thing after sitting down, I tell Nick, Ion, and Whitford about my quest to understand faces, and say that if they are all right with it—and I admit this is weird, so if they aren't, it's totally cool—I would like to examine each of their faces up close. But they are all quite eager, as it turns out. Maybe this is why Facebook is so popular: Deep down, everyone wants to put their face on display.

It's not only the first time that I've looked at any of their faces but also the first time I've touched them. Before today, each of them has been just a voice, a personality.

I start with Nick. I already know that the basic physical descriptions of appearance you hear about—eye and hair color—are the same for Nick and me. Brown eyes. Short brown hair. So I'm surprised to find that upon close inspection, we look quite different. Why do people limit their descriptions of a face to these few attributes when there are, seemingly, an infinite number of more interesting, more subtle differences? His nose is smaller, I think. His forehead is different from mine. Maybe its shape? Or

color? I can't quite tell. But one thing I am confident of: This face is quite unlike the one I examined in the mirror last night.

Next is Whitford. From Nick's description, I know he's black. But I've never seen skin of a different color than my own. Bringing his face close to my eyes, I can immediately see the difference in pigmentation between Whitford's face and Nick's. Whitford's is obviously darker. And yet, not "black" as I've learned the color to be.

For all the attention race gets, for all the wars that have been fought over it, all the atrocities committed and hatred based on differences in skin tone over the centuries of human history, I would honestly have expected something . . . *more*. The contrast is obvious, yes, but the difference is marginal. The shape of his face is essentially the same as the others I've seen. Basic features—mouth, eyes, ears, nose. All there. What's the fuss about?

I wonder how this must look to the other kids in the cafeteria, if they are watching. The blind guy pulling his friends' faces right up to his unseeing eyes. Because they don't know I can see. They must think this is super weird. I mean, even *I* think it's kind of weird, and I know what's actually going on here.

Finally we get to Ion.

"I'm not wearing makeup," she warns.

"You never wear makeup," says Nick.

"I just thought he should know," she says defensively.

The main thing I notice about her, both from sight and touch, is her hair. It takes up a lot of space around her head. It is, I think, what people mean when they say "frizzy."

I also note that bringing her face near mine feels different than it did with Whitford and Nick. It feels...less appropriate. But overall, her face is similar to most other faces I've seen. Except for Cecily's.

CHAPTER 24

Thursday afternoon, Cecily and I sit on my bed to work on homework. I use my laptop, while she reads from books and writes in notepads. I scratch a few stickers on the wall and make her guess the flavors with her eyes closed.

At some point, we end up lying side by side, our faces about a hand width apart. I finally understand what it means to look “into” someone’s eyes. You look *at* a face. But eyes? You look *into* them.

I double-check and confirm the existence of that darker-colored skin surrounding her eyes and stretching across her forehead.

“Hey, Ces?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“It seems like your skin is colored differently on the top of your face. Am I seeing that right?”

Her voice shrinks. “You noticed?”

“I guess. I mean, I just don’t understand what I’m looking at. Is it common? That skin color? I don’t

have many faces to compare yours with, so I don't really know."

She's silent for a weirdly long time.

"It's a birthmark," she finally says, in almost a whisper.

"Oh, like the one I have on my hand?" I say. "Mom always tells me about it. I'm not sure which hand it's on," I say, offering my palms.

She pauses, searching. "It's right here," she says, touching a point on my right hand.

"So does this one look like yours?" I ask.

Her voice is tense. "I guess. But mine is much bigger."

I hold my palm in front of my eyes, searching for the darker area.

I move my hand away, returning my gaze to her. Now that I know it's there, the discoloration on her face stands out. The entire top half, everything above her nose, is a dark purple. Based on my new knowledge of Skittle colors, I think the most accurate name for this particular hue would be "grape."

"Well, you're beautiful to me," I say.

I immediately regret using that word, *beautiful*. If she knows how I really feel, how I like her but can't be with her, it could get really awkward between us.

She lets out an unexpected gasp, like she just surfaced after being underwater for several minutes. "Really?"

Even if I've said more than I should have, I can't take it back without wounding her. So I agree.

"Yeah, of course. I mean, why wouldn't you be?"

"It's just...it's such a large..."

"Everyone has birthmarks, right?"

"Yeah, but mine is—"

"No big deal is what it is. A birthmark doesn't affect whether I think you're beautiful."

She's silent. I get the sense this birthmark issue is a big deal for her.

"You were worried about what I'd think when I saw it?"

"Of course."

"Why? Did you think it would change our...friendship?"

"I mean...I didn't know..."

"Jeez, I'm not that shallow. Besides, I can still barely see. I mean, you could be horribly disfigured, and I wouldn't know the difference!"

It's my go-to blindness joke, this bit about *XYZ could be right in front of my eyes, and I wouldn't know it*. But she doesn't laugh. Like she usually would.

"Lighten up, Ces." I poke her. "I mean, it's like—what do they call it?—a beauty mark?"

"I guess," she whispers.

"It's like that. This is just your beauty mark."

She doesn't say anything.

...

Soon after she leaves, Mom calls me downstairs for dinner. Dad, apparently, had to do an emergency surgery, so

it's just the two of us at the table. I still eat by touch and feel, not by sight. No use making a mess.

"Mom," I say, "I have a question."

"What's that, sweetie?"

"Have you ever noticed," I say, gathering my words carefully, "that Cecily has a birthmark on her face?"

She sets down her fork. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, have you?" I press.

Her voice drops. "You saw it, then?"

"So you *have* seen it?" I ask.

"Well, it's—"

"It's what?" I demand.

"It's quite, um, you know..." she stammers.

"Large?" I suggest.

"Yes, that would be one way of putting it."

I think for a moment. "How common is something like that?"

"So it's a birthmark?" she asks.

"I thought you said you had seen it?" I ask.

"I *have* seen it," she says. "I just didn't know it was a birthmark, that's all."

"So how did you know what I was talking about?" I ask.

"Well, like you said, it is a rather large"—she pauses—"um, I guess the word might be disfigurement."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I say, feeling suddenly defensive of Cecily. "Did you seriously just call it a *disfigurement*?"

“Sorry, maybe that was the wrong word,” she says.

“Why do you make it sound so negative?” I ask. “She can’t help it if she was born with it.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Annoyed, I finish my food quickly and excuse myself.

CHAPTER 25

Friday morning in journalism class, I peer out from under my sunglasses and try to look at some of the other kids sitting across the room near Cecily. It seems like the more my vision improves, the worse my eyes feel. It makes sense—it must be the demands I put on them each day as I learn to recognize more stuff. Like how I'm getting better at picking out the oval shape of faces. But again I notice that no one else looks like Cecily, with a face that's two different colors.

My entire life, people have gone out of their way to describe for me what they see. And the more unique-looking the object—be it a person, building, car, weirdly shaped chicken nugget, whatever—the more eager they are to tell me about it. So it's all the more surprising that none of my friends ever mentioned the existence of such a distinctive characteristic of Cecily's face.

Just before the bell rings, Mrs. Everbrook calls us over to her desk.

"Everything all right?" she asks. It's clear from her tone that she can tell it's not.

"Yeah, fine," I lie.

"All right," she says. "Well, since you guys will be taking over for Xander and Victoria, I wanted to remind you of our New Year's tradition. Every January, on the first day of spring semester, the coanchors share a little thought about New Year's resolutions. Nothing long, only about a minute or so. You've got plenty of time, but I thought I'd give you the heads-up so you can be thinking about what you'll say."

As we are walking out of class, Cecily asks me, "What is your resolution going to be?"

"I have no idea," I say.

...

I hurry to lunch so I can ask my friends about Cecily's birthmark. Get some answers.

"You guys remember a couple months ago, when Whitford found a chicken nugget in his lunch that looked like Jesus?" I ask.

"Yeah, that was fantastic!" says Nick, laughing at the memory.

"You all really wanted to describe it to me. How come?"

Whitford says, "You were curious as to how we could

all be in agreement that it looked like Jesus when no record of his appearance actually exists.”

“No, I mean, before I asked about that. When you first found it on your tray, Whitford, you immediately started telling me about it. How come?”

“I guess . . . it was fascinating. And highly improbable. I wanted you to know about it.”

“Right,” I say, having made my point. “So how come you never told me about Cecily’s birthmark?”

The rest of the cafeteria chatters on in the background as my friends go silent. My question hangs there, unanswered.

Finally Nick says, “See, I *told* you he was going to figure it out!”

“Figure what out?” I ask.

“That she’s, you know,” he says, struggling for words.

I can fill in the blank myself.

“Disfigured?” I offer, hoping they will disagree with Mom’s word choice.

“No, no, no,” says Nick. “It’s not like that.”

Okay, not disfigured. That’s good. “What’s it like, then?” I ask.

“She’s just . . . um,” Nick says, “not attractive in the traditional sense.”

“Nick!” snaps Ion.

“What?” Nick says. “That is a polite way of putting it.”

Ion exhales in frustration.

"After I had the surgery, didn't you guys know that I would see it?"

"Sure, but when we first met you, we didn't know you were eventually going to have eyesight," says Ion.

"For the record," says Nick, "I said we should have told you from the very beginning. Back when you first met her, I told Ion and Whitford that we should tell you. Like I've always said, I'm your surrogate eyes, bro."

"We weren't as tight with you back then," offers Whitford. "If it's any consolation, if you met her now, we'd definitely tell you."

"Thanks, that's a huge consolation," I say sarcastically.

"I'm just saying," replies Whitford.

"You guys always said she was really pretty," I say.

Ion says, "Of course she's pretty, Will. She's just different. You might even say, you know, special. Like, in a good way. Besides, you said it didn't matter."

"What didn't matter?" I ask.

"What she looks like. When you asked if she was pretty, I asked you if it mattered. You said no."

"It doesn't matter to what I think about her," I say. "What matters is whether you guys tell me the truth when I ask a question."

"The truth," says Ion, "is that before this year, she didn't even hang out with *us* outside of academic team practice and competitions. She's a totally different person now, and you know what? It's because of you. So why

would we tell you something about her that might mess that up?"

These reasons make sense, I guess, but I am still hurt for some reason. Maybe because it feels like my friends were looking out for themselves more than me in this situation. They actually talked about telling me and then deliberately decided not to. So obviously the birthmark issue was a big deal to them, and they chose to keep it a secret. Which makes me wonder if Cecily made the same decision, and if so, why?

CHAPTER 26

Cecily drove her mom's car to school today and offers to give me a ride home. As we sit in the front seat in the school parking lot, I hear her insert the key. She turns the ignition. The engine revs a few times and sputters out.

"I'm redlining," she says with a sigh of frustration.

"What does that mean?"

"It's, like, when the gas gauge gets really low, the dial goes below this red line. It just means the tank is basically empty. We're running on fumes." She turns the key again with the same result.

"Why didn't you fill it up this morning?" I say irritably.

"Gas is expensive."

"So maybe you should've taken the bus."

She pauses. "Is there something wrong, Will?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"About what?"

"You know what."

"No, I don't."

She turns the key again, and the engine roars to life. I hear her shift the car from park into drive.

I think back to the Candy Land Incident. And to all the times I've ever been lied to, bullied, and tricked for being blind.

"You didn't tell me about your birthmark," I say flatly.

She puts the brakes on and shifts back into park. The engine idles, but she is silent for a moment.

"You never asked."

I say, "You should've told me before, anyway."

"Before what?"

"I don't know. Earlier on."

"Do I have a responsibility to tell you all my flaws?" she snaps. "Should I have also told you that my closet is a mess? That I broke my mom's vase when I was five years old and never told her? If you put all your flaws on display right up front, no one will ever like you."

"That's not true," I say.

"It's absolutely true, and that's why no one has ever liked me before. Because I wear my biggest flaw right on my face. It's not like I set out to trick you, Will."

"Your *biggest flaw*? So you do think it's an important part of who you are?"

"Well, of course—"

But I interrupt. "That's what I don't understand. If it's that big a deal, why wouldn't you tell me about it?"

She doesn't answer.

Eventually I ask, "But what about when I was getting the operation? Didn't you know that I would eventually be able to see you?"

"I *hoped* you would eventually be able to see me, Will."

"Then why didn't you—"

"I hoped you would be able to see me for who I am inside. I believed that you were different from everyone else. You didn't judge me for my appearance."

"So you thought I was that shallow? That just *knowing* about your birthmark would've ruined our friendship?"

"I just...didn't want to risk messing anything up between us."

A piece finally falls into place in my mind. "So the birthmark...that's why you've always been bullied?"

"Yes," she says quietly.

"And that's why you didn't want to try out for the announcements? That's why you didn't think anyone would vote for you?"

"Yes."

"Did it never occur to you that as your close friend, I might *want* to know this key bit of information so I could be there for you?"

She's silent, so I continue, "If you had just told me this one thing, I would've been able to understand. I would've understood why you thought no one liked you. I would've understood why you thought no one would want to date you. I obviously would've tried to convince you otherwise on all

these things, but at least I would've known where you were coming from. These are terrible burdens you've had to carry all by yourself, Cecily. I was trying to be your friend. You know what friendship means? It means sharing the burden. You didn't have to carry it all by yourself."

She still doesn't answer.

"Well?" I say.

Finally she says, "When I first found out you were blind, it was kind of...refreshing to meet someone who didn't look at me and see my birthmark first and foremost. You saw other parts of me instead. And I liked that. I just allowed myself to enjoy it. I couldn't predict we would become this close. But after we kept hanging out, at a certain point, yeah, I felt like it had gone too far, that if I told you then, it would seem like I had taken advantage of your blindness by not telling you earlier."

When she says those words out loud, *taken advantage of your blindness*, I realize that's the other piece of why I'm so offended. It's not just knowing that she might have thought I was so shallow that I couldn't handle it, it's that she took advantage of my blindness because it happened to be more convenient. Why go through the trouble of telling the blind guy your most significant physical characteristic if you can simply allow him to stay ignorant? Why risk filling him in on what everyone else already knows when you can just leave him in the dark?

Cecily says she believed I was different from everyone

else. Well, I believed she was different, too. I believed she was the one person I could really trust. Like she might even be the one sighted person I could trust enough to be in a relationship with. But now she's thrown that all away, crumpled it up, and stomped on it.

I step out of the car and slam the door shut. I navigate back toward the school, hearing my cane *click-click-click* on the pavement as her car's idling engine fades behind me. I blink. I'm not sure if I'm blinking back tears or if I'm just blinking because my eyes feel dry.

As I walk, my mind races with questions. Do people have a duty to disclose what they look like to their blind friends? If you know someone who can't see, is there some moral obligation to tell him about any flaws in your appearance early on? Like, *Hey, I know we just met recently, but in case you ever start feeling attracted to me, you should know that for whatever reason, society wouldn't say I'm beautiful?*

Because that's all it is, right? Society or the media or whoever says people should look a certain way, and the more you deviate from that, the less beautiful you are.

But there's obviously something deeper going on with *attraction*, right? Something beyond just what society says is beautiful or not? Like, I was attracted to Cecily without ever having seen her clearly with my eyes. Because I know her. I know what she's like inside. I know how she expresses herself and the way she loves to take photos and watch sunrises, and that's what I'm attracted to.

Or at least, I thought I knew her.

The fact is, not saying what is true is the same as saying something untrue. It's a lie of omission. Cecily considered telling me the truth about herself and then decided, no, she enjoyed having a friend who didn't know what she looked like. She decided that exploiting my blindness was the best way to make me stick around, the best way to hold on to my companionship. Basically, she used my disability so she could feel better about herself.

But what hurts even more is that she assumed if I knew, I would think less of her because of something she was born with. I mean, seriously? Me, a guy who was born blind? Did she really think I was that shallow?

I liked Cecily. I really did. And if I'm being totally honest with myself, maybe someday I could've even loved her. But I don't think you can have love without trust, and I don't see how I could ever trust her again.

CHAPTER 27

I spend the weekend alone in my room, coming out only to partake in the absolute minimum levels of eating and bathroom use. I pace around, clenching and unclenching my fists, scratching random stickers with noisy aggression. Anger. Scratching. Pacing. Thoughts of Cecily, and how she withheld such a large part of herself from me when I was showing her everything. Indignation. Humiliation. More scratching. More pacing.

On Saturday, I delete all the messages I've ever posted on her wall and defriend her on Facebook. Reaching under my bed, I pull out the box of photos Cecily gave me. I march the box downstairs and dump out its contents unceremoniously on top of the food scraps in the kitchen trash can.

"What are you doing?" asks Mom suspiciously.

"Nothing," I say flatly.

Not including the angry mutterings to myself, it's the first time I've spoken all weekend.

I realize Mom is now likely to examine the contents of the trash can, so I grab a jar of mayonnaise from the fridge and pour it on top of the photos. Mom can't stand the smell of mayonnaise. That will keep her away.

On Sunday afternoon, I flop across my bed listening to music. The melody reminds me of something about Cecily, I'm not even sure what, and all of a sudden, tears roll out of my eyes. Actual tears. Hot, salty beads of confusing emotions.

At the same time I'm fuming at her, I also miss the warmth of her elbow in my hand and the scent of her body nearby as she guides me. I desperately want her in my life. But how can I be around someone who has made me so angry? Why would I *want* to be around someone like that? Does that make me crazy?

The conflict rages on for a while, and eventually my thoughts turn to my semifunctional eyes. I can only hope the tears won't hurt them. Now that I think about it, they have been hurting a little more than before. But I'm pretty sure that's been going on for several days. The physical pain and emotional pain are starting to swirl together. The eye discomfort began well before this crying episode, so I don't think the tears are doing any more damage. Other than the emotional kind. The damaged emotions that are now all that's left of what was once a friendship—and maybe a little more—with Cecily.

But as my tears start to dry up, salty on my face, they

show me something interesting. Before this weekend, I always thought my vision was kind of perpetually blurry. Turns out it was just confusing. Not blurry. The lines were actually crisp and clean; I simply didn't know what they meant. When I cry, the confusing-yet-clear world fogs over into an indecipherable mix of colors. *That's* what blurry looks like.

That's pretty much what the next four weeks feel like: blurry. I float inside a dense cloud of stormy emotions. Sometimes frustration with my limited progress, sometimes joy at how many new things I'm able to see each day. Sometimes anger at Cecily, sometimes regret about losing her. Because yeah, we don't talk anymore. It's awkward for our friends, because they can't hang out with both of us at the same time. An uneasy truce of joint friendship custody forms. She gets the friends Sunday, because I can't really play Settlers anyway. I get them Saturday. And so forth. It's weird. And sad.

...

Just like that, my first semester at a mainstream school is nearly over. There are two days of exams left before school lets out for winter break. After I finish on Monday, I wait for Mom to pick me up for my next therapy session with Dr. Bianchi. I've been going three times a week. Mom picks me up after school to drive me to the PU medical office building.

"How were your exams today?" Mom asks.

"Fine," I say in a tone meant to convey as little emotional revelation as possible.

"Did you see her?" she asks.

"Who?" I respond, playing dumb. This is none of Mom's business. If she really wants to know, she'll have to draw it out of me.

"Did you see *Cecily*?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, maintaining complete flatness in my voice for each one-word sentence.

"And?" she asks.

To this I say nothing, because *and* isn't even a question.

"Well, how did it go?" she prods.

"What?" I reply.

"You and her. Was it, you know, uncomfortable?"

"No," I say. Which isn't entirely true. It was uncomfortable being in class and knowing she was in the room. It was uncomfortable walking the halls without her. But we didn't technically have any interaction, so there's nothing to measure the awkwardness by. Not with Cecily, at least. But with my friends at lunch, yeah, pretty weird. But Mom didn't ask about that, so I don't elaborate.

"Not at all?"

I say nothing, a move meant to strongly suggest this conversation is over.

Inside the medical office building, I make Mom stay in the car while I go in for the appointment. As usual.

It's been about six weeks since the second operation,

so by now I'm pretty familiar with how these sessions go. There's a lot of poking and prodding, a lot of metal gadgets that measure this or that, a lot of pinching my eyelids and lifting them off my eyes and shining a light underneath. It's a dizzying spectacle of blinking lights and spinning colors, like a rave party with an opera soundtrack.

"Any problems this week, Will?" asks Dr. Bianchi as a streak of bright white lab coat walks into the room.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," I say, assuming he is inquiring about my eyesight, not my personal life. "But I'm still having a lot of trouble with depth perception. Does that mean one of my eyes isn't working? Because don't you need both eyes to see depth?"

"Ah, yes, the depth perception. Binocular cues—that's what we call cues from using two eyes—do account for some of depth perception. But most of the cues are monocular, meaning they can be processed by a single eye."

"What are the monocular cues?" I ask.

"When one object blocks the other, it tells us it is in front. When you know the actual size of the two objects, you can compare their distance by judging their relative size and knowing the smaller one is farther away. Also, color and brightness. There are many ways."

"So I just have to keep waiting?" I say, frustrated.

"You must have patience, yes. But you must do more than simply wait. You should explore and see the new objects and places. Force your brain into unknown

situations where it must comprehend the depth perception for you."

I don't know where I could find these unknown situations to put myself in. I mean, I've never even been outside Kansas. I've only left Toano for blind school and camp. My day-to-day life simply doesn't present me with many new stimuli. I mean, sure, technically everything I see is a "new" sight. But I already have route maps of school, my house, and my neighborhood in my head. So when I look at them now, I'm just connecting the objects I see with points along the paths I memorized back when I was blind. It's not actually new or unknown terrain.

"Let us now examine those eyes," he says.

We go through the usual routine. But there's one particular measurement involving a cold metal caliper pushed into the edges of my eyeballs that he performs a few more times than he usually does.

"Will, I am sorry to tell you this—I have some very bad news," he says, stepping back from the examination table where I am sitting. "Have you been experiencing blurriness around the edges of your vision? Or any pain?"

"My eyes have been feeling kind of uncomfortable lately, yes," I offer.

"As I feared."

"But I kind of had, uh, a relationship problem and did a lot of crying."

From his tone, I feel like it's something serious, but I

want to believe whatever problem he's found is merely a side effect of the tears.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But no, crying is not the problem. You have a buildup of fluid in your optical cavity. Very much fluid since I saw you last week," he explains.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Most likely, it means your body is rejecting the donor tissue."

My heart skips a beat.

"That sounds bad."

"Yes, I am afraid it is very bad."

"What will happen?" I ask.

"If it continues, all the progress we made is lost," he says, sympathy creeping into his voice.

It feels like he slapped me in the face.

"You mean I'll go back to being blind?"

He pauses. "Yes, this is what I mean."

I angle my head down toward the floor and run my fingers through my hair.

"When that—I mean, *if* that happens, couldn't you just do another transplant?"

"Unfortunately, no. Such a transplant can be performed only once. The scar tissue from the operation makes further attempts impossible."

"Well, then—I mean, there must be—is there something you can do? To stop the fluid buildup?"

"Yes, we'll of course try our best to save your eyesight.

The problem we have now is that your body identifies the new tissue in your eyes as foreign, so your own immune system tries to destroy it. This is the source of the fluid. I'm going to increase your dose of immunosuppressive drugs. But I must warn you, Will, this also puts you in danger. You must avoid contact with any person of illness, because with a compromised immune system, you are able to contract any contagious disease. You must avoid dirty or contaminated environments.

"You must not fly on airplanes, because the pressure in the airplane cabin could cause an optical rupture. No contact sports, no sudden movements. Your situation is very fragile; you must exercise great caution."

"Got it," I say, trying to sound more confident about my situation than I actually feel.

He sets a hand on my shoulder. "I'm very sorry about all this, Will. I always have the greatest hopes for you."

"What are my chances?"

"Not the best," he says, avoiding a direct answer.

"What would you say, though?" I ask. "Like a percentage?"

"That you retain the eyesight?" he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"From what I have seen today, my guess is fifty percent."

CHAPTER 28

In the car on the way home, Mom can tell there's a problem.

"What's wrong?" she asks as soon as I fasten my seat belt.

"Nothing," I say dryly.

"Honey, did Dr. Bianchi say there was something wrong?" she asks worriedly.

"No," I lie.

"Then why are you upset?"

"I'm not upset," I say, trying not to sound it.

"You're my son, Will," she says a little more gently, like she's trying to soothe me. "I can tell when you are upset."

She sounds like she's talking to a little child, which just makes everything worse. "Fine," I snap. "I'm upset. Can we go now?"

We are still parked, and she doesn't put the car in gear. Instead, she immediately asks, "Is it your eyes?"

I don't want to talk about it. I don't want her to know,

because she'll swoop into Dr. Bianchi's office and ask him a ton of questions and demand he fix me, and it will just be humiliating.

She presses again. "Will, tell me."

I don't answer. Finally I feel the car start to accelerate, and we turn out of the parking lot.

I turn my gaze out the window. I hear the sound of cars passing by, but the speeds are too fast for me to differentiate the shapes of the vehicles from the background of the road and passing buildings. What a joke that is. I want to take in the world, appreciate it all while I still can, but my eyesight just isn't good enough. So instead I get a partial glimpse through a tiny crack in the wall between the blind and the sighted, and soon that crack will seal shut completely.

Now it will be so much worse. Now I have an understanding of how much nuance I've been missing out on. I won't return to blindness with a full appreciation of what it means to see, but I *will* return with a full appreciation of what it means to be blind.

Just a few weeks ago, in fact, it seemed like I held everything that I've ever wanted in the palms of my hands. My life was on track. My plans were coming together. I had fledgling eyesight, even possible romance. But now, just like that, I've lost both. I'm left holding the empty shells of my desires, and I have to tell you, it all really sucks. Where do I go from here?

So I'm going to go back to being blind, but with a greater distrust of sighted people. How can a blind guy function without trusting others? Even with my wits and training, I still have to rely on the canes and GPS gadgets that other people make for me and sell to me, and on the occasional kindness of strangers when these things fail and I get lost.

I think for a second about how I'm supposed to share a New Year's resolution on the first day we're back at school in January. Presumably the resolution is supposed to be something, like, optimistic. But at the moment I'm feeling pretty glass-half-empty.

But hey, I've got a 50 percent chance, right? The flip of a coin. No reason not to at least *try* the meds.

"We need to stop by the pharmacy and get these new prescriptions," I tell Mom as we drive.

I hold out the prescription, and she snatches it immediately, probably taking her eyes off the road to read every bit of information she can extract. I'm sure it's a difficult task—based on what Dad always says about doctors' handwriting, I'd guess Dr. Bianchi's scribbling is about as legible to Mom as it would be to me.

The traffic slows to a stop at an intersection, giving her time to decipher the instructions. She asks, "Why are your meds changing?"

"Standard procedure after the operation," I lie.

"Hmmmmmm," she says as if she's not sure she believes me.

"Can we just go to the pharmacy?" I ask impatiently.

"Of course, Will. It's right up ahead."

...

The next morning, the last day before winter break, it still feels weird being in the same room as Cecily during journalism class. But I'm also starting to wonder if I got angry over nothing in her car the other day. After all, I still think she's beautiful, birthmark or not. It wasn't like she set out to hurt me by deliberately deceiving me. So maybe I acted too hastily. Maybe there's still a chance to salvage this. Maybe we can at least go back to being friends. I mean, this is the last day of the fall semester. After the break, we'll become cohosts of the announcements. So it's probably time to reconcile.

As Mrs. Everbrook explains a new strategy for soliciting ad sales, I take occasional glances across the room at Cecily. I'm curious to see how she looks to me today, with this new perspective bolstering my judgment. When I look more carefully, though, I realize that I'm not looking at Cecily but at an empty desk. She's not here.

Where is she? Is everything okay? I feel a pang of jealousy, thinking about people who can covertly text under their desks.

Instead, I ask Mrs. Everbrook for a hall pass to use the restroom. I lock myself in a stall and send a text.

Ces, are you OK? Where are you?

I wait there for as long as a person could reasonably need to take care of business but get no reply.

It's agonizing waiting until lunch to ask my friends if they know why Cecily is absent.

"None of us have seen her," says Nick. "I don't think she showed up today."

"I've texted her, but she won't reply," I say, wishing for the thousandth time I could take back the words I said in the car. "Can you guys try?"

"I already did," says Ion. "She didn't reply to me, either. Whatever it is, I guess she doesn't want to talk about it."

"Hold on—maybe Mark Sybis knows. He lives next door to her," says Nick. "Yo, Mark!" he shouts, apparently to a nearby table. He speaks loudly to cut through the chatter of the cafeteria. "Have you seen Cecily?"

"Batgirl?" says a voice. "Nah, man, the car wasn't in her driveway this morning, neither."

Wait, Batgirl? Was this the guy who called Cecily Batgirl because she was walking with me in the hallway?

"Did he just call her Batgirl?" I ask, gritting my teeth.

"Yeah, I know, it's mean," says Nick. "But honestly, most of the school does it."

"Most of the school?" I say, horrified. "Just because she was hanging out with me this semester?"

"What? No," says Ion. "She's had that nickname since elementary school. I think Xander gave it to her, actually. It's because her birthmark covers the top half of her face."

Like Batman's mask. It's really mean, so we obviously never use it, but a lot of other kids do."

I swallow and find myself looking down toward the nondescript geometry of the cafeteria floor. They call her Batgirl because of the way she looks? They've been doing it since elementary school? I blink a few times in shock, and then anger. What's wrong with people? Why would anyone treat Cecily that way?

But more important right now, where is she if she's not at school and her car is gone?

"Where do you guys think she is?" I ask the table.

"Maybe she's just sick or something," suggests Whitford.

I think about our argument.

"Maybe it's my fault," I say hesitantly. "We had this big fight a few weeks ago. I said some things. . . . But since then. . ."

"What?" prompts Ion.

"I guess you could say I finally came to my senses," I say. "I really care about her. And I need her to know that."

"About time," says Ion.

"You knew?" I ask.

"About your crush? Duh," she says.

"I didn't realize it was that obvious," I say.

"It was so obvious a blind guy could've seen it," says Nick, adding, "No offense."

"Well, as soon as school's out, I'm going to find her. I've got to make things right."

"I'll drive if you want help finding her, Will."

"I'm in, too," says Ion. "But don't worry, I'm sure everything's fine."

"Like I said, maybe she's just at home sick or something," Whitford says again. "And maybe her mom just needed the car this morning. We can all go visit her after school. Let's meet in the parking lot after last period."

As it happens, I have no exam last period (gym class). Rather than leave early, though, I had planned to go see Mr. Johnston. Since it's the end of the semester, I need to go over the routes for my spring schedule with him. I don't want to ask any of my friends to do it because I feel like they're finally thinking of me as their friend first, and a visually impaired guy second, and I don't want to mess that up. I wouldn't have minded asking Cecily to help, I guess, but now she's gone.

I navigate to Mr. Johnston's office, back to that same room where I began in September. We set off immediately, starting from the main entrance once again.

"Shame about your friend Cecily," says Mr. Johnston as I'm counting out the steps in the science hallway.

I stop abruptly.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"About her father. It seems he had a heart attack. He's home now, and he'll recover, but she went to be with him for a few weeks."

"Her father, like, in California?"

"Yes, I believe that's where he lives."

As we continue to plan out my walking routes, I'm distracted by the sensation that my chest is going to explode. I want so desperately to apologize to Cecily and to tell her I like her. But how can I now? It's impossible. Not only is she ignoring my calls and texts, it turns out she's literally a thousand miles away.

When we meet at Whitford's car after school, I fill everyone in on what I learned.

"So, Los Angeles?" says Nick.

"Yeah."

"You gonna go see her?" asks Ion.

"That would be quite the romantic gesture, but my eyes... It's a thing from the operation. I can't fly anywhere right now." I feel a knot in the back of my throat like I might cry.

"Don't give up so soon. Why don't we *drive* to Los Angeles?" Whitford suggests. "It's only, what? A couple days? And we *are* on break now."

Everyone suddenly starts talking at once, excited about Whitford's road trip. But even if we can sleep in the car, we'll still need gas money. Nick, Ion, Whitford, and I disclose our financial assets, which turn out to be less than one hundred dollars in cash between us all.

"How can *you* not have any money?" Nick asks Whitford.

"When I need money, I ask my parents, and they give it to me. It's not like I have a reason to stash it away or something."

"Well, the road trip was a nice idea," I say. "Thanks for the offer, guys."

...

My friends drop me off at home, and I'm sitting in my room by myself when I hear Mom's footsteps on the stairs.

Then she knocks at the door. "Honey?" she calls.

"Come in."

I hear Mom walk in and feel her sit beside me on the bed.

"How're you doing?" she asks.

"Fine."

"You don't seem fine."

"Where's Dad?"

"Still at work."

She takes a breath and says, "You know, when I was growing up, my mother always told me, 'Don't marry someone you can live with. Marry someone you can't live without.'"

"Uhhh...okay," I say, unsure about the relevance of this advice to my life. "Are you and Dad getting a divorce or something?"

"Oh, no, of course not."

"So is that how you felt about Dad when you met? That you couldn't live without him?"

"Your father was...very eager to get married. We were young. And I thought he'd be able to give me the life I

wanted. This house, my clothes. I didn't have all this when I was your age."

I pause, considering her answer. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Will, honey," she says, putting a hand on my back. It feels unnatural coming from my mom, who's usually so much more, well, annoying. But I don't shrug it off. "It seemed like you were happier when you were with Cecily. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen you so happy, at least not since you were little, before you figured out that you were different from the other kids."

"Well, it's over now," I say bitterly.

"I know it's none of my business, but does it have to be?"

"Yes, actually," I say. "She left. She went to California."

"Why did she leave?"

"Her dad lives there, and he's sick. My friends and I would drive out to see her, but we can't afford it."

I wouldn't normally tell this kind of stuff to my mom, but I feel so defeated that I have no energy to keep my guard up. Plus, I want to express what I'm feeling. At the moment, Mom is the only one near enough to listen.

"I'm sorry," she says.

She really does sound sorry.

We sit in silence for a few moments, and then she leaves and I return to my staring at the ceiling. After a while—a few minutes, a few hours, who knows—I get bored and

scratch a few of the stickers on the wall, noticing for the first time the colors and designs printed on each one. I text Cecily. No reply. I call her. Voice mail. As always.

It's early evening now—I can tell because the light coming through the window is all but gone—when I hear another knock on my door.

“Will?”

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Mind if I come in again?”

“Sure.”

She sits down. “Here.”

I reach out, and she pushes an envelope into my hand.

“Feel inside.”

I open it and flip through. The bills are already stamped with braille.

“Where did you get this?”

“I sold the Tesla.”

“What?” I exclaim.

“I sold it. I couldn't get top dollar on such short notice, but I have a friend from the club who I knew wanted one, and I gave her a good deal for buying it right away.”

“That must be thousands of dollars....I can't take that.”

“Don't worry,” she says. “I'm not giving you *all* of it. Just enough for the four of you to drive to Los Angeles and back.”

“Why didn't you just go to an ATM?”

"I thought about it, but my ATM limit isn't high enough to fund a cross-country road trip. At least, not unless you were going to stay in seedy hotels and live off cheap junk food."

I still can't believe it. The Tesla was, like, her most prized possession.

"Mom, I really can't take this."

"Of course you can."

"No, really. Go get the car back. You got ripped off."

"That's why I know she won't sell it back to me. So you might as well take the money."

"What's Dad going to say?"

"Nothing if you leave before he gets home."

"Like, right now? For LA?"

"Unless you want your father grounding me *and* you."

"Um, wow . . . uhhhh . . . okay. Okay. Yeah. Let me just text my friends."

"The money comes with one stipulation."

"What's that?"

"You have to stop at the Grand Canyon on your way there. It's the most beautiful place in the world, and I want you to have the opportunity to see it."

"Mom, there's something I should tell you about my operation—"

"I already know," she says softly.

"You do?" I ask, surprised.

"There was a problem with an insurance payment, so

I had to call Dr. Bianchi's office. He mentioned the fluid buildup. Asked me how you were doing."

I'm silent for a moment. "Oh."

"That's the other reason I got rid of the Tesla. I know how upset you were about it. I'm sorry I don't always take your feelings into account. So if there's a chance you're going to return to total blindness, I've decided we shouldn't have a silent car around."

"Thanks, Mom."

"And that's also why I want you to see the Grand Canyon before it's too late. I want you to see the whole country. Now, while you still can. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah, I will."

She kisses me on the forehead.

"This is your journey. I can't guide you anymore."

At first I think she's saying this to herself: time to let her son go. Then I realize this is the moment she was training *me* for my whole life. This is why she always insisted on guiding me instead of holding my hand when I was little—so I would be able to let go when I was ready.

"No time to waste," Mom says. "Now, get out of here before your father comes home!"

CHAPTER 29

Being in a car with other people is the opposite visual experience of being in a building with them. In a room or hallways, the background of the walls and floor remain stationary while people walk around in front. In a car, however, the heads and bodies of your fellow passengers stay still against a backdrop of constant motion as the world zooms by out the windows.

I notice this as I sit in the backseat with Nick. Ion is up front while Whitford drives.

The four of us made it out of Toano within two hours of Mom's giving me the money—an impressively quick mobilization.

We were even able to leave before Dad got back from the hospital. Our goal is to put enough distance between our homes and our hotel tonight that by the time the lies and half-truths start cracking under the scrutiny of our respective parental units, we'll be too far into our quest to turn back.

It's nighttime as we head west on Interstate 70. Most of my field of vision is dark or nearly so. I motion with my hand over light sources so Nick can identify them for me. The large but stationary glow is the dashboard. The fast-moving dots are car lights. White are headlights, red are taillights. And the tiny bluish spots overhead are stars.

"We're outside the city now, so you can see them really well here," says Nick.

Stars. Everyone talks about their beauty and ability to inspire the spirit. I roll down my window and stick my head out to gain a better view. I find a tapestry of dark sky with tiny bluish-white specks. And in between the brighter stars are many points so small and faint I can barely see them.

I bring my head back in the car.

"How many are there?" I ask, the pounding wind decreasing in volume as I roll up the window.

"Stars? I don't know," says Nick.

"I know there are like a gazillion stars in the universe."

"Sextillion," corrects Nick. "One with twenty-one zeros after it."

"Okay, but I mean just the visible stars you can see right now without a telescope or anything. Can't you just count them?"

"Uh, not really. You'd need a computer or something. There are way too many. It would be impossible to concentrate that hard."

So even for a person with normal eyesight, there's an upper limit to counting. A problem with concentrating simultaneously on the number of objects and the visual tracking of them. In fact, it's the exact same problem I have with counting, albeit with much smaller quantities.

Nick waves his hand over various constellations, which according to tradition connect together in shapes like Orion's Belt, the Big Dipper, and the Little Dipper. I can't see the images, and it's difficult for me to imagine how anyone could.

Honestly, I find more pleasure in looking at the dashboard than I do the stars. First of all, the dashboard lights are much bigger and easier to see than the stars. Second, they come in a variety of shapes. There are square buttons and several half circles. The stars, on the other hand, are only available in one model: the tiny dot. And third, unlike the monochromatic stars, the dashboard features an array of luminescent hues. Nick tries to tell me one star is actually Mars and it's red, but to me it looks like pretty much the same bluish-white as the other dots in the sky.

I think for a moment that maybe this could be the New Year's resolution I'll share on the announcements, something about appreciating all the lights and colors and sounds, about enjoying the view as we drive through life. But what is there to enjoy right now? I fell for a girl, then pushed her away. And now she's gone from my life, maybe forever. After three hours of driving, we stop in Colby,

Kansas. I shell out some twenties for two rooms at the Holiday Inn Express. There is a discussion as to how to divide sleeping arrangements; surely, we agree, Whitford's and Ion's parents would not allow them to share a room. But Nick points out that their parents aren't here, so they should do what they want. I lie in bed awake for a while thinking about Cecily, wishing there was a way to get to her faster.

The next morning we hit up the free continental breakfast in the lobby and get on the road. I have a number of missed calls on my phone from my dad last night. None, however, from Mom. I assume Dad is upset about the almost-new car being sold for a lot less than they paid for it, and about me being gone, but that Mom hasn't changed her mind about it being a good idea. So I don't call back.

As we get back on the road, I roll down the window again and look at the sky. It's quite different from last night. Where, I wonder, does the blackness go? Where do all the stars go? The galaxies have been replaced by a single star, the sun, and the black sky is now lit up in bright blue. *The color of my eyes before the operation*, I think. *The color of my eyes when I was blind.*

And there are white and blue and gray clouds of all different sizes. Unlike the stars, I find the clouds fascinating. I watch them for a full hour, during which time I see one cloud that looks like the bicycle my dad gave me the other day. Of course I know that there cannot be actual bicycles

floating in the sky, and actually I have a pretty fuzzy memory about what the bike looked like, but my eyes and brain insist that yes, that's what I'm seeing. A sky bike made of clouds. It makes me laugh. My friends ask what I'm laughing about, but when I tell them, they don't find it as funny as I do.

After crossing the state line, we stop at the Colorado welcome center for a bathroom break. Nick, Whitford, and I sit on a bench inside the lobby while Ion calls her parents, who are apparently flipping out.

"Hey, Whitford," says Nick, "see that desk that says TOURIST INFORMATION?"

"Yeah."

"I'll give you a dollar if you walk over to the old lady sitting there and ask, 'Can you tell me about some of the tourists who visited here last year?'"

Whitford cracks up, and so do I.

"All the people visiting here today are, uhhhh..." I struggle to find the most appropriate word.

"Fat?" says Nick.

"Sad?" says Whitford.

"I was going to say white. Like, Caucasian. Am I seeing that correctly? I haven't noticed a single African American here."

"No, you're right," says Nick. "Not many of Whitford's kind in this part of the country."

"Kansas is five percent black," says Whitford. "We

came to Toano because PU was looking for nonwhite professors like my parents to increase its diversity. Otherwise, you can bet we'd get our black asses out of here."

"Technically, we're not in Kansas anymore," says Nick. "But Colorado has similar demographics."

"Interesting," I say.

"But, hey, that's rest stops for you. Some of the only places in America you can see a cross section of society," says Nick.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"All the other places you go—where you live, what stores you shop at and restaurants you eat at, whether you go to public or private school—these decisions are basically determined by your family's income and socioeconomic status. But interstate rest stops are the great equalizer. From time to time we all have to drive places, and, while doing so, from time to time we all have an urgent need to take a dump."

"Going number two: the number one common denominator of America," says Whitford.

"Jeez, I step away for one second," says Ion, walking over to us, "and the conversation has already devolved into pooping?"

"Had you heard the context of our conversation," says Nick, "you would know that we were in fact analyzing important socioeconomic and racial demographic issues."

Ion snorts, unimpressed.

"How'd it go with your parents?" asks Whitford.

"Eh, okay," she says. "I think I held them off for now. They still think I'm at Kelly's house. They'll probably kill me when they find out. But let's cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, we drive!"

"You may take our lives," Nick intones loudly in a Scottish accent, "but you'll never take our freedom!"

We stand from the bench and cheer wildly.

"Is everyone looking at us now?" I ask out of the side of my mouth.

"Yeeeeeeep," whispers Whitford. "Let's get out of here."

We return to I-70. I point out that I can feel us making turns as we drive, something I had not noticed in Kansas.

"Interstates in Kansas are straight and flat as far as the eye can see," says Whitford. "Colorado is more curvy."

"Kind of like your mom! Oooooooh!" says Nick. His gag, however, results in no audible fist pounds or laughs. "Nothing? Jeez. Tough crowd. Anyway, it's true. Driving across the state of Kansas is like running on a giant treadmill for eight hours."

"Can't say I've ever seen what a treadmill looks like," I say.

"Sorry, bad metaphor. The point is it's really monotonous."

I also notice a line at exactly eye level where the green of the ground and the blue of the sky intersect. This, I

assume, is the horizon. But the farther we move into Colorado, the less straight this line of the horizon is.

"What's wrong with the sky?" I ask Nick.

"What do you mean?"

"There," I say, pointing my finger. "That's the horizon, right?"

"Yeah."

"It used to be a straight line. Now the sky is all bumpy."

"Those are mountains. Welcome to the Rockies."

"As in, the Rocky Mountains? But they're tiny! I thought the Rockies were supposed to be, like, huge."

"Don't worry. They'll get bigger."

It reminds me of what Cecily taught me about perspective. I guess the mountains will grow as we get closer.

Eventually I see another interruption to the horizon. But unlike the uneven bumps of the distant mountains, this is a series of parallel lines, long rectangles cut out from the blue sky. Nick tells me it is the skyscrapers of downtown Denver. My first city skyline.

As we get closer to downtown, the road becomes more crowded with cars. Eventually the buildings are so tall I have to roll down my window and stick my head out to be able to see the tops.

"The Rockies are bigger than these buildings?" I ask.
"It sure doesn't look that way right now."

"Just wait. They're crazy big. You'll see," says Nick.

After we pass through Denver, I hear the engine

downshift to a lower gear and feel us angle back in a slight uphill climb. And sure enough, the mountains rise up from the horizon until they loom imposingly above the dashboard. I ask Ion to switch seats with me so I can watch them more carefully. We pull over, and I hop in front. The mountains are still only the size of my hand if I hold it close to my face, but they now take up all the background space visible beyond the front windshield, so I know they are massive. Their color is fascinating. Green along the bottom, then gray, and eventually they all turn white before tapering off into the sky.

Soon the ground around us becomes white, too.

"Is that snow?" I exclaim.

"Yep," says Whitford.

"When will we get to the top?" I ask.

"I'm not sure I-70 goes to the top of anything," says Whitford. "Roads are built on the path of least resistance, which means going in between mountains whenever possible, rather than directly over them."

"I'll look into it," says Nick, pulling out his phone.

A few minutes later, he reports, "We won't reach any summits on I-70. But we go right by Highway 40, which would take us to the top of Berthoud Pass. Elevation: eleven thousand three hundred feet."

"So it would be a detour," says Whitford, more as a statement than a question.

I share his concern. I mean, the faster we go, the sooner we find Cecily.

"How long will it take?"

"Like, an hour, tops," says Nick. "But how often do you get to be on top of the Continental Divide? If you stand there and pee in one direction, it ends up in the Atlantic Ocean, but if you turn around and pee in the other, it goes to the Pacific. How many people can say they've peed into two oceans with a single stream of urine?"

"How many people *want* to?" says Ion, clearly not convinced this would be an accomplishment.

"Will?" asks Whitford.

"Let's do it," I say. It will delay us, but I remember what my mom said about seeing everything while I still can.

"At this rate we're never going to make it to California," laments Whitford.

"Hey, it's only twenty-four hours of total driving time, and we've got two weeks off school. We're fine," says Nick.

I don't say it aloud, but the goal here is not to kill two weeks of vacation time. The goal is to find Cecily.

It's a good thing they don't give driver's licenses to people like me, because I would never be able to make sense of Highway 40. Back in Kansas, the interstate was straight and gradually tapered off into the horizon in a little point, like the street in the van Gogh painting at the museum. But Highway 40 is constantly disappearing and then reappearing after we pivot around a curve. I'm impressed with Whitford's ability to keep track of all these corners despite the many distractions—other cars whizzing by in both

directions, the gigantic mountains out the windows, snow everywhere, and the fascinatingly complex dashboard in front of him.

I feel us slide a few times as we climb the road to Berthoud Pass. Whitford curses, reminding us how dangerous this is, wondering why they don't plow this more often, and suggesting we turn back. Honestly, it *does* seem dangerous. I don't know how Whitford and the other drivers can tell where the road ends and the mountain terrain begins. To me, it all just looks like one continuous plane of snow. But eventually we reach the pass and stop in a snow-covered parking lot.

The effort to step out of the car and shut the doors gets all four of us out of breath.

"The air is so thin here!" says Ion.

Every time I exhale, the mountains go dim and blurry for a second. I breathe in and out, watching the phenomenon. This, I decide, must be what people mean when they say they can "see their breath."

My friends are impressed by the view. I can tell because, well, they all shut up and just stand there for a while in the cold, no sarcastic statements or quips. And I'll admit, it is pretty cool. But to me, all views are pretty cool. To me, seeing mountains in every direction is no more and no less interesting than the circular brown hay bales that dot the endless farmlands of Kansas or the skyscraping glass towers of downtown Denver or the glowing dials of a Volvo's dashboard. But I know Cecily would appreciate

this view. She'd want to see what a sunset looks like at this altitude, with this landscape.

We eventually return to I-70 and continue west. We pass three ski resorts—Copper Mountain, Vail, and Beaver Creek. From the car, the trails look like crisscrossing white lines cutting through the dark green alpine forests.

Night has fallen by the time we stop at a hotel in Grand Junction, Colorado, near the Utah border, and when I wake up in the morning, I look outside to find that I can no longer see the mountains. Have I gone nearsighted? Is this the first sign that I'm reverting to blindness?

"It's a blizzard out there," says Nick, joining me at the window. "A complete whiteout."

I hope he doesn't notice my sigh of relief.

I put on my coat and go out to stand in the thick of it, feeling the snow land on my hair, face, and outstretched hands. I hold a flake up to my eye and watch it turn to an icy-cold drop of water.

One of the main sensory cues I've always relied on is the volume of a sound. Generally speaking, the louder something is, the more significant it is. Snow is counter-intuitive. It's pouring down around me so heavily that I can see no more than a few footsteps away. The snow is presumably piling up on the ground, bringing delight to skiers and despair to motorists. Berthoud Pass is probably closed. But the falling snow emits not a single note. It falls silently, it lands silently, it melts silently on my tongue.

Whitford refuses to drive while it's snowing, and we waste precious hours watching TV in the hotel until noon. Then we cross the border into Utah and head south. The terrain is different here. Gone are the mountains and foothills lined with green pine trees. The horizon is flat again, but with clusters of orange rectangles standing at right angles.

"Are those skyscrapers, too?" I ask, gesturing out the window.

"No," says Nick. "Rock formations. Most of this on our left is part of Arches National Park, actually."

It's dark outside by the time we reach Grand Canyon Village. We get two rooms at Bright Angel Lodge, and in the morning, the four of us set out for the viewing deck at the south rim of the canyon.

I still walk with my cane, but I rely on it less than I used to. I'm now able to see the ground moving beneath my feet and time it with the rhythm of my steps.

"Guys, I have a confession to make," says Nick. "I'm kind of afraid of heights."

"Awwww, poor Nick," teases Ion. "You need me to hold your hand?"

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," says Whitford.

We reach the deck, and we have to drag Nick to the edge to get him to look.

"Will's probably not afraid of heights. Are you, Will?" asks Ion.

"I don't really know. I've never looked over anything tall and steep before."

"Well, you've got a mile drop in front of you right now. Are you afraid?"

I peer over the edge, leaning on the rail.

"Can't say I feel any fear, no," I say. "It looks awesome—and I mean that in the literal sense—but I don't... the depth doesn't really register for me."

I gaze down at the canyon and out across the panorama of reds and browns. It's a feast for the eyes; that much I can understand and appreciate.

The Grand Canyon, I decide, is kind of the opposite of the Colorado Rockies. Whereas the mountains jutted above the horizon, carving triangle-shaped peaks against the blue sky, the horizon here is basically flat, with all the terrain having been chiseled out below it.

Even though she still hasn't answered my texts, I think about how I wish Cecily were with me to see this. I pull out my phone to take photos—it's a feature that I've never actually used before. My hope is that after we find her, I can show her the things we saw.

We return to the road. Our path will take us near Las Vegas, and Nick insists that we get off the interstate so I can see the Vegas strip lit up at night.

"How long will it take?" I ask. We are only hours away from Los Angeles, and the closer we get, the more eager I am to be there already.

"Will, I need you to trust me on this one. You can see

replicas of the greatest wonders of the world in Vegas," says Nick. "Stuff you'd have to travel the entire globe to see otherwise."

I hate to delay us, but it occurs to me that if my eyesight regresses, I'll never get to see *any* wonders of the world. This might be my only chance. Even if they're just replicas. But what difference does it make, if they look just like the real thing?

So I agree, and we make our way to Vegas.

He points out the attractions in front of the casinos as we drive south. First we pass two pirate ships floating in a small harbor.

"How do you know they are pirate ships and not, like, sailboats or navy vessels?" I ask.

"Those all look really different from each other. And basically all old ships look like pirate ships," he says.

At the next block we see a casino surrounded by water, like the Italian city of Venice, I'm told. Next, a casino with stone sculptures and giant pillars modeled after ancient Rome. I find the sculptures kind of creepy. To my untrained eyes, they look too much like real humans. I keep expecting them to hop down from their pedestals and start talking or walking.

One block later we reach a casino with a Paris, France, theme.

"Can you guess what that is?" asks Nick, pointing.

"The Eiffel Tower?" I ask.

"Yep. An exact replica, built at half scale."

"Wow," I say. "Probably the closest I'll ever come to seeing the real thing."

"What do you mean? Maybe you'll go to Paris someday. Who knows?"

I try to stifle a wince.

We keep driving past a casino replica of New York City. Nick points out the towers of the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building. Then we get to a half-sized model of the Statue of Liberty.

"It looks so much like the real thing that a couple years ago the US Postal Service accidentally issued a stamp with a picture of this sculpture instead of the real one in New York," said Nick. "They ended up printing billions of those stamps with the wrong statue."

"*Billions?*" Whitford laughs.

"For real. Look it up," says Nick.

We pass a casino shaped like a castle, and finally reach one named for a city in Egypt.

"It's a triangle," I say, thinking of Cecily.

"A pyramid, actually," says Nick. "Which is like four triangles laid—"

"I know what a pyramid *is*," I interrupt. "I just don't always recognize what I know."

"My bad. Well, here's something you probably won't recognize: In front of the pyramid is a model of the Great Sphinx."

"Half scale?"

"No, actually. This one is double the size of the original."

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"You don't get to be captain of the academic quiz team without an ability to store an endless number of useless facts."

We stay in a cheap hotel in the old downtown that night.

In the car the next morning, Ion asks, "You nervous?"
Today's the day we reach LA.

"About Cecily?"

"Yeah."

"Terrified."

"I don't blame you. It's a big conversation."

"I just hope I say the right thing."

"It's not about what you say, Will."

"What's it about, then?"

"Listening."

I nod. "I guess."

She continues, "And it's a good thing you can see now, because listening is about a lot more than just what you do with your ears."

"Thanks. Just what I need. More stuff to worry about,"
I say.

"You'll be fine," says Ion. "Just remember: Don't talk. Listen. With your ears and your eyes and your heart."

"Don't worry, I'm already soaking up everything I can with my eyes these days."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

I look around the car. "There's something I haven't told you guys."

I close my eyes and run my fingers across my eyelids, wishing there was something I could do to get rid of the swelling behind the corneas. "My body is rejecting the transplant. There's a good chance I will go back to being blind."

"Oh, man," says Whitford.

"Will, I'm so sorry," says Ion. "What are the chances—"

"Fifty percent," I say. "A fifty-fifty chance I go back to the way I was before."

"Doesn't matter to me," says Nick.

I start to protest that it does matter quite a bit whether I can see or not, but he catches his own poor choice of words.

"Sorry, that came out wrong. What I mean is, it doesn't matter to *our friendship* whether or not you can see. We were friends before, we're friends now, we'll be friends whatever happens."

"Thanks, man," I say, reaching for his shoulder. "That means a lot."

"Who knows?" adds Nick. "If you're lucky, maybe we'll even let you join the academic quiz team."

"What? And be stuck at nerd tournaments with you losers?" I say to lighten the mood. Everyone laughs.

CHAPTER 30

We finally arrive in Los Angeles, where traffic slows us to a crawl.

"So, how exactly are we going to find her?" asks Nick.

"Cecily said her dad lived near Venice Beach. Six blocks from the ocean," I say.

"GPS can get us to Venice Beach, but that could be a lot of houses," says Nick.

"Well, I'll need your help for that," I say. "She also said it was a corner lot with a yellow house and a red surfboard on the porch. I don't think I could pick all that out from a moving car."

"No problem, we got you," says Nick.

We weave through the narrow streets of Venice Beach for about three hours. Eventually we find it. The house is such a big bright yellow that even I can see it. And once we are parked out front, I can identify the splotch of red on the porch, too.

"We'll wait out here," says Ion. "But if you need anything, we're here for you."

"I know you are," I say.

I'm able to walk without my cane, albeit slowly, across the sidewalk, through the front gate, and up to the porch. I stand there for a moment. What am I going to say? It all comes down to this. We've driven halfway across the country, and I'm standing here, and this is my one chance to apologize and win her back. I look over at my friends waiting in the car. I can't really see them, but the glance is instinctual, like I know it's what I am supposed to do. It's where I am supposed to look for support.

I knock and wait.

I hear footsteps behind the door.

Then it opens and she's standing there.

I wish I was better at reading facial expressions. Is she happy to see me? Angry? Shocked?

Knowing she's right in front of me makes me feel unsteady. I reach out a hand to grab the porch railing.

"Will?" she says, her voice registering complete confusion.

I'm not sure what I was planning to say, but I blurt out, "Ces, it's so good to see you."

I start to raise my arms to hug her but stop myself as she says, "What are you doing here?"

What am I doing here? Isn't it plainly obvious? I just drove across the country to see you, I think.

"I'm really sorry about your dad," I say.

"Thanks," she says. "It was pretty scary, but he's going

to be all right. He's even promised to start eating better and stuff."

"That's good," I say. "Yeah, really great."

"But you didn't answer my question," she says. "Why are you here? *How* are you here?"

"We drove, actually," I say. "Don't worry, not me personally. Whitford did the driving."

She doesn't laugh.

"So...?" she prompts.

Right. She still wants to know why.

Why, indeed? To answer that question could take hours. To completely explain the reason, to tell her what I've learned. But in simple terms, she *is* the reason. But she's also the one who *taught* me the reason.

See, I had been kidding myself with this idea that I needed to maintain my independence. In truth, my life has been dependent on others, or at least interdependent *with* others, since the day I was born. And my story has been woven together with Cecily's from the moment I transferred to Toano High School. She's the one who got me to try out to be cohost when I didn't think I could, who helped me scroll through the announcement script. She's filled the gaps whenever there were things I couldn't do for myself. She taught me about art, about beauty, and about sunrises. And she's filled the emotional gaps, too. Yeah, independence and self-reliance sound nice in theory, but in reality they are just synonyms for loneliness. And before

I met Cecily, I was so tired, without even realizing it, so tired of being lonely.

I think through all this, and then blurt out, "Because, Cecily, I was wrong. I always thought I could do life by myself, that I wanted to live independently. But you taught me that if there's no one to share your experiences with—if there's no one to look at the painting with, no one to audition with, no one to go to homecoming with—then what's the point?"

She's quiet for a while. "Um," she stammers.

"I love you, Cecily."

The words just come out automatically, from some truthful part of me that is finally ready to say what's inside. I don't think about them; they just happen.

She gasps. "What did you say?"

"I love you," I repeat, faster and more insistently. "I love you, Cecily."

"Will..."

But I don't care whether she loves me back, I just want her to know, right now, for this moment and to remember it always, that this is how I feel about her, and I say, "I've loved you for a long time. I loved you before I could see and after I could see. I loved you when I could only imagine your face and after I could look at your face. I love you completely, all of you."

She's quiet.

I'm breathing quickly, heavily, like I'm about to cry

or start laughing. I feel like something inside my chest—maybe my heart, or my lungs, or something—is expanding and growing, and I need her to speak before it breaks open.

“Well, say something,” I plead.

“You love me?” she asks, pronouncing *love* like it’s a foreign word.

My chest relaxes a little, confident she has at least gotten this message. Even if I never talk to her again after this, she’ll know forever how I felt.

“Yes, I do,” I say.

“Really?” But her voice breaks at the word, and she falls into my arms crying.

“What?” I ask, unsure how she’s feeling.

“My whole life, I never thought—” Her voice falters but then the words spill out. “I never thought anyone would feel that way about me.”

“Oh, Ces.”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her face against my shoulder.

She grabs my hands.

“No cane?” she asks.

“My eyesight has improved a lot,” I say.

“That’s great!” she says. “Oh my God, Will, that’s so great. Can you see me, like, right now?”

“Yes, I can see you quite well. You have a beautiful smile.”

She bites her lip.

"I mean it," I say. "I'm sorry for the things I said in the car that day. You're beautiful. You always have been, and you always will be."

She melts against my shoulder.

"You want to go for a walk?" I ask.

"A walk?" she says, as if waking up from a dream to find us standing on a porch in California.

"I've never seen the ocean, and since we're so close, I thought, you know..."

"Okay," she says.

She takes my hand, and we walk down the stairs and back out to the sidewalk toward the beach. With my free hand, I give a little wave toward the car to let them know everything is fine. Cecily seems so wrapped up in our walk that she doesn't even notice all the thumbs-ups they flash in return.

We take off our shoes, walk out onto the sand, and eventually sit down near the water. We watch the deep green waves rise and then crash into light foam that spreads across the beach. I wonder how much longer I will be able to appreciate sights like this. I pick up a handful of sand and let it stream through my fingers. The grains are far too small to identify individually. Instead, they blend together like a streak of cream-colored paint.

"What?" she asks, grabbing my other hand. "What's wrong?"

She was so happy when the surgery seemed to have

worked, when she could finally show me a sunrise. It hurts to tell her about the swelling, but I do.

"What are the—" she starts to ask.

"Fifty percent." I say the number like I'm referring to the 50 percent chance I'll go blind again, not the 50 percent that I'll retain my eyesight.

"The flip of a coin," she says.

"The flip of a coin," I repeat.

We are quiet for a while, listening to the sound of the waves.

"So," I say, "what do we do now?"

She smiles. It feels like a misplaced expression. I wonder if I'm reading it correctly. What could she be happy about?

"You could start by kissing me," she says.

"What?" I say, caught completely off guard.

"You heard me," she says, rotating to face me.

I stammer, "I didn't realize that you felt, uh, you know, like that about me—"

She puts a finger on my lips, cutting me off. "I think I've loved you from the first time we went to that museum, Will. I just never believed you could love me back. I never believed *anyone* could love me back."

"But now?" I ask softly.

She leans her perfect face in till it's just inches away from mine. "Well, there must be some reason you drove all this way to see me, right?"

"There is," I say. "If I'm going to lose my sight again, I wanted to make sure you were the last thing I ever saw."

I put my hand behind her neck, pulling her the final inches until our lips meet. I close my eyes, and the world goes dark as my lips light up, my whole body tingling. I run my fingers up the back of her head and pull her tight against me, wanting her to know that I don't ever intend to let go. We kiss like that on the white sand beach until the sky lights up in a fiery sunset. We hold hands and watch until the sun dips below the horizon, disappearing to someplace our human eyes cannot see.

MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Spring Semester, Day 1

FINAL SCRIPT

[approved for broadcast by V. Everbrook]

CECILY

Good morning, I'm Cecily Hoder.

WILL

And I'm Will Porter.

CECILY

We're your new announcement coanchors. Traditionally, this show begins each year with each host sharing his or her New Year's resolution. By the flip of a coin, Will has been chosen to go first. Will?

WILL

Thanks, Cecily.

Most of you probably know I was born blind and that I transferred here at the start of last semester. My life has changed in many unexpected ways recently, both as a result of coming to this school and because of an experimental operation I had a few months ago to potentially give me eyesight.

Today I have a wonderful girlfriend who has shown me how to appreciate the burning skies of dawn and dusk, I have parents who have patiently helped me learn shapes and colors, and I have amazing friends who have taught me to recognize everything from mountains to canyons to casinos. And as a bonus, the operation went even better than I could have hoped. My next goal is reading. By the end of the year, I hope to be reading the announcements to you off the teleprompter rather than this braille terminal. Anyway, the point I'm getting at is that my New Year's resolution is to keep my eyes and mind open. Open to beauty in all its forms. And open to all of you—my friends and classmates. Happy New Year.