



tommy wallach
we all looked up

a NEW YORK TIMES bestseller



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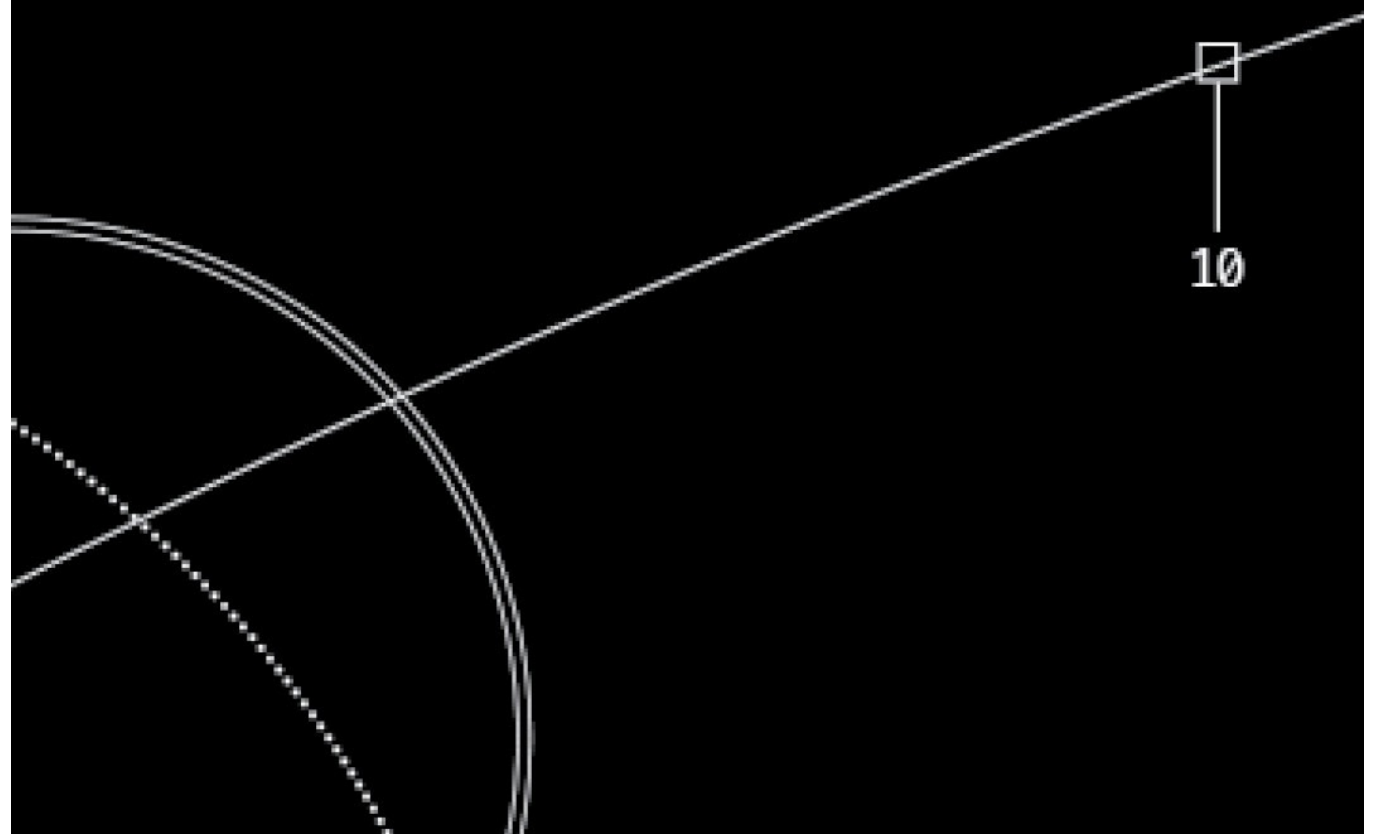
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To my mom,
for a lifetime of encouragement,
counsel, and inspiration

And the meteorite's just what causes the light
And the meteor's how it's perceived
And the meteoroid's a bone thrown from the void
That lies quiet in offering to thee

You came and lay a cold compress upon the mess I'm in
Threw the window wide and cried, Amen! Amen! Amen!

—Joanna Newsom, “Emily”



"IT'S NOT THE END OF the world," Stacy said.

Peter looked down. He'd been staring vacantly at the sky, replaying his brief conversation with Mr. McArthur in his head. He still wasn't sure what to make of it.

"What?"

"I said it's not the end of the world. So one person doesn't like you. Who cares?"

"You really think he doesn't like me?"

Stacy groaned. They'd already been talking about this for fifteen minutes, which, in Peter's experience, was about fourteen minutes longer than his girlfriend liked to talk about any serious subject.

"I don't know. Maybe he's jealous of you or something."

"Why would he be jealous of me?"

"Because, like . . ." She flipped her hair to one side of her head, then back again. Peter had never understood why she did that; maybe she'd seen it in a shampoo commercial or something. She did have great hair, though—a shoo-in for best in school, when yearbook time came around—long and latte brown, the same smooth, glossy texture as a basketball jersey. "You have all this potential, you know? Like your whole life in front of you. And he's stuck in this shit school teaching the same shit history over and over again. If I had to do what he does every year, I'd probably end up hanging myself in a supply closet or something."

"I guess."

The thought had never crossed his mind, that a teacher might be jealous of a student. As a little kid, Peter had figured that once you reached a certain age, somebody just handed you all the knowledge you'd need in order to be an adult. But it turned out that wasn't how it worked at all. Peter's dad had recently admitted that even at the age of fifty-two, he sometimes woke up with the absolute certainty that he was only twenty-four, with his whole life still spread out before him like an untouched Thanksgiving dinner. It was just one of the many mysteries of getting older, along with male pattern baldness, midlife crises, and erectile dysfunction. Of course the only alternative to going through all that stuff, to slowly losing your looks and your teeth and your hair and finally your mind, was to bite the big one early, which *nobody* wanted to do.

Mr. McArthur was bald. Maybe he had erectile dysfunction, too. And really, what right did Peter

have to be pissed at some aging high school history teacher, when his own life was so freakishly criminally good? In his three and a half years at Hamilton, he'd started on the basketball team four times. He'd been to state twice and nationals once. He'd lost his virginity to Stacy, been given a sweet Jeep for his sixteenth birthday, and ended up good and wasted at about a hundred crazy-fun parties. And now he was eighteen. In the fall, he'd be off to sunny California (technically, acceptance letters wouldn't come until March, but the Stanford athletic department said he was as good as in). And seriously, how sick was college going to be? Pledging some frat and playing ball all over the country and partying with his teammates and frat brothers every weekend. Stacy would be sure to get into Stanford State, so they'd see each other all the time. Then he'd go pro if he were lucky, or else get into coaching or something, and he and Stacy would get married and raise some kids and hit up Baja or Tijuana over Christmas breaks and buy a kick-ass summer place on Lake Chelan with a Jacuzzi. That was what life was supposed to do, right? Just keep getting better and better?

But Peter knew it wasn't like that for everyone; he watched the news (or at least saw it out of the corner of his eye when his parents turned it on). People starved. People lost their jobs and then their homes. People came down with messed-up diseases and they had ugly divorces and their kids got into motorcycle accidents and ended up in wheelchairs. Maybe Mr. McArthur's life had just been getting worse and worse since he left high school. Maybe he really was jealous.

And if not, then what the hell point had he been trying to make in class?

"Baby, stop worrying about it." Stacy gave him a dry kiss on the cheek. "If I got all bent out of shape whenever someone didn't like me, I'd be, like . . ." She thought for a few seconds, then shrugged. "I don't know. Seriously bent out of shape."

"Yeah. You're right."

"Of course I am. And I'm also *starving*. Come on."

It was chicken fingers day in the lunchroom, traditionally a day of joy (because the Hamilton chicken fingers were mad good). Peter loaded up his tray with two paper boats full of them, a lemon-lime Gatorade, a chocolate pudding, an apple, a granola bar, and a fingerbowl's worth of wilted green lettuce and shredded carrot. He crossed the lunchroom, catching sight of his little sister's newly dyed hair (the sink in their shared bathroom still looked like a leprechaun had thrown up and then died in it). She was eating lunch with her freak boyfriend over at the freak table. In his mind's eye, Peter could still see a younger version of her sitting next to him on the living room couch, playing with her Legos, back before she transformed into something feminine and unfathomable.

"Dude, you okay?" Peter looked up into the waving hand of his best friend, Cartier Stoffler. "I've already eaten, like, three of your chicken fingers."

"Yeah, sorry. I'm having a weird day. Something a teacher said."

"You in trouble?"

"Not like that. It's hard to explain."

"Here's my trick with teachers, right? Don't ever listen to them in the first place."

“Brilliant.”

“It’s got me this far,” he said, then popped a whole chicken finger into his mouth.

Peter laughed as convincingly as he could. Cartier was generally pretty good at cheering him up but it was no use today. Mr. McArthur’s question had created a black hole that sucked in everything good around it. Or more like it made everything around it suck. Like, it sucked that high school was almost over. And it really sucked that Cartier had applied to WSU to study beer brewing instead of trying to go to college somewhere in California. They’d been friends since the first day of high school, so inseparable that Coach Duggie named them Cookies and Cream (Cartier, though black, insisted that he had to be the cream, on account of his smoothness). They’d shared their first bottle of beer, their first blunt, their answers to homework questions, and even, for a few weeks in tenth grade, Amy Preston, who managed to convince them it was perfectly normal for a girl to have two boyfriends at the same time. And sure, there’d still be the holidays—Thanksgiving and Christmas and the long, long weekend of summer—but it wouldn’t be the same. Already, they’d stopped hanging out as much as they used to. The most painful part of it wasn’t that they wouldn’t be friends, but that they wouldn’t even care that they weren’t friends.

And if he and Cartier couldn’t manage to stay tight, then who was to say that he and Stacy wouldn’t break up too? Peter would be off playing away games every weekend, and she’d be left on her own. Would she really stay faithful to him? Would he stay faithful to her? Would any part of the past four years matter at all four years from now?

These black-hole thoughts wouldn’t leave him alone for the rest of lunch period, but then there was chemistry and precalc to get through, followed by two exhausting hours in the gym, mindless running lines and doing passing drills on instinct. So it wasn’t until he found himself under the steaming beam of the locker-room shower that he really had time to think again. And there was Mr. McArthur’s question—“Would that be a Pyrrhic victory?”—stuck in his head like one of those crappy pop songs that you only knew the chorus to.

He’d stop by the history department in Bliss Hall. If Mr. McArthur had already left for the day, then that would be the end of it. And if he hadn’t, well then at least Peter could get this dumb song to stop playing in his head.



It was the last week of January, and in Seattle, that meant traitorously short days. You’d step into the gymnasium in full daylight, and by the time you got out, the sun would be slipping behind the horizon so fast you’d think it was getting away with something. Peter left the locker room just after six, and all that was left of the day was that fugitive red glow on the horizon. He zipped up his North Face jacket and put his hands in the fleecy pockets. His mom had bought him leather gloves for Christmas, but he’d stopped wearing them after Stacy said that they made him look like the kind of guy who offered to show children the lollipops he kept in his van. The only students left on campus were those who

inhabited the extremes of the work-play spectrum: overachievers laboring late at the library and the skater/slackers who didn't have anywhere better to go. You could hear the faraway *click-snap-skitt* of their skateboards even from inside Bliss Hall.

Peter knocked on Mr. McArthur's door, half hoping no one would answer.

"Come in."

The office was so cramped that the door stuck on a footstool in the corner, and Peter had to squeeze through the gap. Mr. McArthur was on his own—his two office mates must have already gone home for the day—sitting in a brown plastic chair in front of a narrow desk piled high with ungraded essays. Peter had never felt confident in his ability to guess the age of anyone between twenty-five and sixty, but he figured Mr. McArthur was somewhere in his late forties; his forehead had a few permanent creases in it, but they didn't make him look old so much as perpetually concerned. He was popular with the students, engaging but not pushy. Peter had always liked him well enough—until today anyway.

"Hello, Mr. Roeslin. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks."

Peter sat down on a small sofa. A ragged stuffed bunny lay upside down on one of the cushions. Its once pink places had gone gray with age. Mr. McArthur wrote *B+* on the essay he was grading, circling it twice. His pen wasn't the typical felt-tip marker, but something slimmer and more elegant with a diamond-shaped metal nib. He capped it and set it aside.

"So how can I help you?"

Peter hadn't really thought through what he was going to say, and now the possibilities backed up in his head, tripped over themselves like a defense falling apart in the face of a solid drive. "I just thought, well, we were talking today, right? And you asked me this question about a sports star or something, and you were talking about stuff I do, you know? Or might do. I mean, I think you were. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"I might," Mr. McArthur said, with a patient smile.

Peter idly patted the stuffed bunny, trying to remember exactly what had happened. They'd been learning about the phrase "Pyrrhic victory," which came from Roman times and meant that you'd won something, like a battle, but in order to win, you had to lose so much that you really hadn't won at all. Mr. McArthur asked the class if anyone could come up with some examples from real life. Nobody else was going for it, so Peter raised his hand and said that if you won a basketball game or a football game or something, but your best player got injured, that would be an example. Mr. McArthur nodded, but then he stared hard at Peter with the combined intensity of his earnest eyes and that inquisitorial forehead and said, "What about if you were a big sports star, and you made loads of money, and you bought big houses and you drove fast cars, but when your time in the limelight was over, you ended up unhappy because you didn't know what the point of your life had been? Would that be a Pyrrhic victory?"

He'd let the question hang out there, like some big old rainbow of a three-pointer. And then Andie Rowen said, "I'd take it anyway," and the whole class laughed and they moved on to Caesar.

But Peter couldn't help thinking that Mr. McArthur was probably right: It *would* be a Pyrrhic victory. Because when the golden days were over, and you were lying on your deathbed, watching the instant replay of your life, wouldn't it be pretty depressing to think you'd wasted your best years playing a *game*?

That was the thought that had plagued Peter for the last six hours, though he didn't quite know how to put it into words. Thankfully, Mr. McArthur finally came to his rescue.

"Peter, I'm sorry if it seemed like I was criticizing you today. I like you. And I've seen a lot of popular kids go through this school. The ones at the top of the pile, I mean. Most of them let it go over their heads, but I don't think you do."

Flattery embarrassed Peter; he looked over toward the wall, where an empty Advent calendar still hung, open windows counting down the days until Christmas. He'd expected a lecture from Mr. McArthur, not a recitation of his good qualities. "I guess."

"Most kids wouldn't have given a second thought to what I said. So why do you think it's made such an impression on you?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. Then let me ask you this—what is it that makes a book really good?"

"I don't really read that much. Outside of homework, I mean."

"Then I'll tell you. The best books, they don't talk about things you never thought about before. They talk about things you'd *always* thought about, but that you didn't think anyone else had thought about. You read them, and suddenly you're a little bit less alone in the world. You're part of this cosmic community of people who've thought about this *thing*, whatever it happens to be. I think that's what happened to you today. This fear, of squandering your future, was already on your mind. I just underlined it for you."

Something inside Peter thrummed along with this explanation. "Maybe."

"It's a good thing, Peter, to worry about having a meaningful life. Are you at all religious?"

"I guess so. I mean, I believe in God and stuff."

"That's some of it, then. Religion is all about making meaning for yourself. And you'll have to excuse me if this is too personal, but have you ever lost someone? Someone close to you, I mean."

"Yeah," Peter said, a little awed by Mr. McArthur's intuition. "My older brother, a couple years ago. Why?"

"My father died when I was very young. It forced me to confront things that many of my peers had the luxury of ignoring. The big questions. Does that sound familiar?"

"I'm not sure."

Mr. McArthur left some space in the conversation, waiting to see if Peter would say more, then shrugged his caterpillar eyebrows. "My point, Peter, is that you're one of those people who've been

blessed not only with talent, but with self-awareness. And that means you get to choose what you want to do with your life, instead of life choosing for you. But having that power, the power to choose, can be a double-edged sword. Because you can choose wrong.”

“How do you know if you’re choosing wrong?”

“You tell me. Do you think it’s better to fail at something worthwhile, or to succeed at something meaningless?”

Peter answered before he realized what he was saying. “To fail at something worthwhile.” The implications of his answer hit him like an elbow to the sternum.

Mr. McArthur laughed. “You look positively tragic!”

“Well, you’re saying I should stop doing the only thing I’ve ever been great at.”

“No. I’m not saying stop. I’m saying *evaluate*. I’m saying *choose*. You can ignore everything I said today if you want.”

“Can I?”

“I suppose that depends on what kind of man you want to be.” Mr. McArthur stood up and put out his hand. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. Come talk to me anytime.”

Peter stood up too. He was a few inches taller than Mr. McArthur, but he felt smaller than he had in years. They shook hands. As Peter was leaving, the teacher called out after him.

“Hey, Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“The bunny.”

Peter looked down. Sure enough, he was clutching the old stuffed animal in his left hand, so tight that its face had been squashed down to a nub.

“Sorry,” Peter said, and tossed it back onto the couch.



Back outside, darkness had set in. Peter felt like a different person; his certainties had all disappeared with the daylight. Almost too perfect then, that the sky was suddenly unfamiliar: Against an eggplant-purple backdrop shone a single bright star, blue as a sapphire, like a fleck of afternoon someone had forgotten to wipe away.

Peter heard the click of a door opening nearby. Someone was coming out of the arts building, a swirl of multicolor scarf that he knew for a fact she’d knitted herself—Eliza Olivi. It was the first time they’d been alone together in almost a year. And it was happening today, of all days? What did they call that? Serendipity?

“Eliza,” he called out. “Do you see that star? Isn’t that crazy?”

But even though she must have heard him, she just kept on walking.

IT HAD ALL STARTED A year ago.

Eliza was working late in the photo lab, as usual. She spent most of her free time there, alone with her thoughts, her favorite music, and her vintage Exakta VX (a kind of reverse going-away present from her mother, who moved to Hawaii with her new boyfriend just a few weeks after Eliza turned fourteen). It was the same camera that Jimmy Stewart used in *Rear Window*, with a black leather grip and a polished silver band running down the center. The dials on top were thick with machine-tooled hatchings and spun with heavy, satisfying clicks. Eliza kept the camera in a side compartment of her bag at all times, so she could get at it easily in an aesthetic emergency. Quick draw, like a cowboy with a six-shooter, always ready to capture that fleeting frame.

She believed photography to be the greatest of all art forms because it was simultaneously just like food and gourmet cuisine, because you could snap dozens of pictures in a couple of hours, then spend dozens of hours perfecting just a couple of them. She loved how what began as an act of the imagination turned into a systematic series of operations, organized and ordered and clear: mixing up the processing bath, developing the negatives, choosing the best shots and expanding them, watching as the images appeared on the blank white paper as if in some kind of backward laundromat—billowing line of clean sheets slowly developing stains, then hung up until those stains were fixed forever. And then there was the setting, crepuscular and shadowy, everything about it perfectly calibrated for creativity, from the sultry red glow of the darkroom lights to the still and shallow pond in which her prints rested like dead leaves on the surface of a pond. If no one else was around, she could put her phone in the dock and blast Radiohead or Mazzy Star loud enough to make the room tremble with each downbeat, to erase the world outside. Immersed in that cocoon of sound and crimson light, Eliza could imagine she was the last person on Earth. Which was what made it so startling to be touched gently on the shoulder as she was examining a developing print for the faintest hint of beauty.

She whipped around with a hand out, as if slapping at a mosquito. A boy, bent over, holding his palm to his face.

“Ow! Shit!” he said.

She ran to the dock and turned down the music. The boy shook off the slap, unrolling his hair from an impossible height. Eliza felt annoyed that she recognized him, in the same way that you can’t help but

recognize Hollywood actors on the covers of magazines, even if you despise everything they stand for.

He was Peter Roeslin, of the Hamilton basketball team.

“You surprised me,” she said, angry with him for having been hurt by her.

“Sorry.”

He stood there in the semidarkness, tall and slim as the silhouette of a dead tree.

“Hey, what are those?” he asked, noticing the prints drying on the line.

“Pictures. Can I help you with something?”

He took her curtness in stride. “Oh, just the music. We’re having a meeting upstairs. Student council.” He leaned in close to one of the photographs. “What are they pictures of?”

“Nothing really.”

“I totally suck at art. I’m super jealous of people like you.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Why are they all black and white?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t know. I’m just interested. Sorry.”

But now she felt bad for being so abrupt. “No, it’s okay. It’s just hard to explain. I think black-and-white photos are more honest. Color has no . . . integrity.” That was the best she could do with words. To really answer, she’d have to show him how the blacks in a color photo were always tinted red or speckled with yellow. How the whites were creams. How the grays were so often contaminated with blue. Eliza had always felt that fiction described reality better than nonfiction (or *her* reality, at any rate); in the same way, black-and-white photographs mirrored the world as she saw it more faithfully than color photographs did. Sometimes she dreamed in black and white.

“Look at that kid,” Peter said, pointing at one of the pictures. “Poor little guy!”

“Yeah, he’s kinda amazing.”

The photograph Peter was looking at happened to be her favorite. It had been taken outside a private elementary school just a few blocks from Hamilton. By chance, Eliza had passed by just as the kids were struggling to arrange themselves in alphabetical order for a fire drill, and one boy had immediately caught her attention. He was smaller than the others in his line, and dressed about ten years too old, in pressed chinos and a button-down shirt with a little red bow tie—an outfit that wouldn’t have been cool even if he *had* been ten years older. Every school had a kid like this. He stood in the very center of the line, exactly where he was meant to be—a point of stillness—as the student diffused into a buzzing, slow-exposure swarm at either end of the frame. You could already see the tough years of puberty stretching out before him, a minefield strewn with awkward rejections on dance floors and lonely Friday nights. He was imprisoned within his upbringing. Doomed.

“I feel like that kid sometimes,” Peter said.

“Are you joking? In what possible way are you like that kid?”

“You know. Just keeping it together. Being good.”

“And what would you be doing if you didn’t have to be good all the time?”

She hadn’t meant it to sound flirtatious, but everything was flirtatious in a darkroom. Peter looked down at her, and Eliza felt her pulse quicken. This was crazy. She didn’t know the first thing about him. And sure, seen from a purely objective standpoint, he was a handsome guy, but she’d always preferred the artsy delinquent types—the ones who’d already ponied up for their first tattoos and would be walking walls of graffiti by the time they were twenty-one. Or at least that’s what she’d preferred in her head. In reality, she’d never had a serious boyfriend, and she’d lost her virginity practically by accident at a summer camp for blossoming artists, to a pale Goth boy who only painted wilted flowers. But standing there in the unnatural bloodred twilight, only a few inches away from a beautiful stranger who happened to be Hamilton royalty, she felt the inner twist of desire, or at least the desire to be desired.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “I just get sick of it sometimes. Going to practice every day. Doing enough homework to get by. Dealing with my girlfriend.”

Eliza could picture this girlfriend. Stacy something. “I’ve seen her. Brunette, right? More make-up than face?”

Peter laughed, and even in the darkness Eliza could make out the moment when he realized he shouldn’t have been laughing. He distracted himself by looking back at the photos. “I wish I could do stuff like this. I wish I could . . .”

“Could what?”

His eyes were auburn in the red light. Too close. He reached around behind her and drew her toward him, and then their mouths were mashed hard together and he was lifting her up off the ground. She heard the fixer fluid sloshing over the edge of the bath and splashing onto the floor. He sat her back down on the table, still kissing her, his tongue rough in her mouth, and his hands were making their way up her shirt when the lights flickered on.

A skinny blond girl stood between the black curtains in the doorway, her mouth agape, like some cartoon character expressing shock.

“Are you an idiot?” Eliza said. “This is a darkroom! Turn the light off!”

The girl turned and ran, her heels clicking on the tile like a snicker.

“Shit!” Peter said.

“Who cares?”

“She’s a friend of Stacy’s.” He was already chasing after her, but he stopped just in front of the curtains. “Listen, I’m sorry about this.”

Eliza pulled down her shirt. “Don’t worry about it.”

He started to say something else, then gave up and left.

Eliza was surprised by her behavior, not to mention the suddenness of the kiss, but she wasn’t particularly worried. Assuming word even got back to Stacy, what was the worst that could happen? A confrontation? A catfight? Was one kiss really that big a deal, in the grand scheme of things?

Yes, was the answer. Yes it was.

By the time Eliza got to school the next morning, someone had already spray-painted her locker one huge black word with four capital letters: S-L-U-T. The same word had been written on a few hundred scraps of blue-lined notebook paper, which came pouring out of her locker when she opened it up, a flood of little anti-valentines. Suspicious eyes greeted her from every corner of the lunchroom and a few girls went out of their way to slam against her shoulder when they passed her in the halls.

The first day it was shocking. The second day it was infuriating. And every day after that, it got a little bit sadder, a little more isolating. With all the tools of social media at their fingertips, Stacy and her friends spread the word far and wide, even to the freshmen and sophomores, so that everywhere Eliza went, there were whispers and points and pointed smiles. The girl who'd prided herself on always staying under the radar was suddenly thrust into the spotlight, cast as the lead in a crappy high school production of *The Scarlet Letter*.

It totally, incontrovertibly sucked, in all possible ways, shapes, and forms.

And then everything got much, much worse.



“Hey, Judy,” Eliza said to the nurse working the front desk. “My dad awake?”

“Should be. Go on in.”

“Thanks.”

She walked past reception and down the hall, but was so distracted that she passed right by her dad's room. For some stupid reason, she couldn't stop thinking about Peter calling out to her across the quad that afternoon. She'd been so focused on ignoring him that now she couldn't even remember what it was he'd said. Something about the sky?

“Hey, Dad.”

“If it isn't Lady Gaga,” he said, sitting up in bed. She'd gotten used to seeing him like this, gaunt and hairless, studded with tubes, wearing nothing but a flowered dressing gown.

“Once again, I'd like to formally protest the use of that nickname.”

“You know I'm kidding. Gaga's a fucking hag next to you.” (For as long as Eliza could remember her dad had sworn like a sailor around her. There was footage of baby Eliza's first steps accompanied by the repeated cry: “Look at that kid fucking go!” And though Eliza's mom had waged a pretentious serious campaign against the constant stream of vulgarity, she'd lost the right to judge anyone for anything when she skipped town.)

“Untrue. But thanks anyway.”

Eliza took her usual seat by the window and started in on her homework. Her dad watched TV and flirted with the nurses. He still had a charming shred of an accent left over from his childhood in Brooklyn, and though a few women had taken an interest in the years since the divorce, they all fled the scene when they realized that he wasn't over his ex-wife.

“I just need a little more time,” he’d always say.

But time had run out on him. Hard as it was to believe, the ladies weren’t exactly lining up at the hospital door.

Up until her dad got sick, Eliza had believed the universe to be a fundamentally balanced place. She figured that, excepting the super lucky and the super unlucky, most people ended up with about the same amount of good and bad in their lives, when all was said and done. Which meant that if you happened to be ostracized by the majority of your high school because of one stupid kiss, you were owed some good news. It was only fair.

But not long after Eliza’s illicit moment with Peter in the darkroom, her dad checked into the hospital with a weirdly tenacious stomachache and a low-grade fever. And after a lab rat’s worth of tests had been administered, the diagnosis was delivered by a matter-of-fact oncologist with all the empathy of a GPS system correcting a wrong turn—stage III pancreatic cancer. Might as well have been a guy in a black robe with a scythe. At first Eliza couldn’t even believe it, considering all the other shit she was dealing with. But that diagnosis was her first taste of what she now recognized as the fundamental rule of life: Things were never so bad that they couldn’t get worse.

She cried for about a month straight, in classes and on buses, in her bedroom and in waiting rooms alone and by her father’s side while he got the chemo treatments that doctors said were unlikely to do much of anything other than make him nauseous. The grief was so profound that it transformed her. She went hard and numb as a frozen limb. Before, she’d walked around school like a leper, gaze perpetually set on the floor. Now, if some bitch tried to stare her down in the lunch line, Eliza would just stare back, dead-eyed, until the other girl got so unnerved she had to look away. The strange thing was that her frosty attitude earned her a sort of prestige (the difference between coldness and coolness was, after all, simply a matter of degree). She was befriended by Madeline Seferis—a.k.a. Madeline Syphilis—a famously promiscuous senior, who introduced her to a new way of expressing disaffection, by putting on a tight skirt and a lot of makeup and heading out to the clubs where the bouncers didn’t card and the college boys bought the drinks. “If you’re going to have the reputation,” Madeline said, “you might as well get the fun.”

But Madeline had gone off to college last September, and Eliza was left on her own again. The chemo did end up slowing the growth of her dad’s tumors, but good news was a weird thing when you were dealing with a fatal illness. Instead of a few months, the doctors gave him a year. That was how you could be lucky without being lucky. That was how you could be a winner and still lose.

“Dinnertime,” a nurse said, balancing a tray in each hand, like a waitress.

They dug into their overcooked penne and overly sweetened pudding. Eliza realized that she now ate the vast majority of her meals off of cafeteria trays.

“Doc says the stent is good to go, so I’ll probably be home tomorrow.”

“Great.”

“So what about you? Anything juicy happen at school today?”

“Not really. Well, sorta. Do you remember Peter?”

“You mean the Peter from last year?”

“Yeah. He tried to talk to me today. First time since . . . you know.”

Her dad shook his head. He knew the whole story. “That asshole. Didn’t know a good thing.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait.” He poked her chin gently with his fork. “You’re not interested in him, are you?”

“Are you kidding? He, like, wrecked my life.”

“I know. But your mom wrecked my life too, and you know my feelings about her.”

“I do.” Eliza knew them, she just didn’t understand them. How could you keep loving someone who cheated on you and then ran away? “But the answer is no. I’m not interested. He can fuck off and die for all I care.”

“There’s my sweet girl.”

After dinner, she gave her father a kiss and grabbed ten bucks from his wallet to pay for the hospital parking lot. She couldn’t handle being alone at home right now, so she headed out to the Crocodile to have a drink and maybe dance a little.

The guy who chatted her up at the bar was probably twenty-two, with a nicely trimmed blond Afro and the easy confidence of the stupid. They danced. They made out. And all the time, Eliza was thinking about Peter. Peter who sometimes felt like a little boy in a red bow tie. Peter who’d let his girlfriend ruin Eliza’s reputation. Peter who was still with that same girlfriend.

Screw him.

“So you wanna go back to my place?” the blond Afro guy asked.

“I don’t go home with strangers,” Eliza said. “But you can come home with me.”

He said he’d be cool with that. They always did.

Outside the Crocodile, a group of punkers was standing around in a haze of warm breath and cigarette smoke. Eliza recognized one of them from Hamilton—Andy Rowen. He had long brown hair down to his shoulders, and was finally beginning to triumph over the volcanic acne that had plagued him since puberty. She’d bought pot from him once, and he’d given her a discount.

“Eliza!” he said. “Holy shit!” His excitement at seeing her off campus was so sincere she was almost embarrassed for him.

“Hey, Andy.”

“Where you going? You guys should sit down and hang out.”

“Sorry, we were just leaving.”

Andy looked at her, then at her date, connecting dot A to dot B. She would have introduced them but she couldn’t remember the name of the guy she was about to take home. Something with a *J*?

“Hold up, though. You wanna see something amazing?”

“Sure.”

Andy pointed upward. She followed the line extending from his index finger out into the dark.

distance. A single spark of bright blue, like a puncture in the black skin of the sky. And hadn't Peter said something about a star?

"Wicked, right?" Andy asked.

Eliza knew what he meant by the word; it was one of a million different synonyms for "cool," "sweet," "ill," "rad," "dope," "sick." But for some reason, she felt like he had it wrong. The star seemed wicked in the original sense. Wicked like the Wicked Witch of the West. Wicked like something that wanted to hurt you.

Eliza had been labeled a slut by an entire high school. She wasn't speaking to her mom. Her dad was dying. But if she'd learned anything in the past year, it was that no amount of suffering could save you from more of it. And that star looked like a sure sign that more was coming.

Wicked indeed.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IT was good to be out of class.

Andy threw down his deck and hopped on, letting the pavement carry him effortlessly down toward the other end of campus. If only everything in life could be like that—effortless. If only there weren't all this school to get through, and homework, and all these expectations. If only you could get up when you wanted and eat some Cinnamon Toast Crunch and play some music and smoke a bowl and drive to school whenever and maybe take a class if you felt like it, if you were actually *interested* in it, and then just chill with your friends the rest of the time. If only . . .

“Andy Rowen!”

Midge Brenner: freshman and sophomore English teacher, and one of Andy's many faculty nemeses. Clearly, she missed having him in class, where she'd reamed him out on the daily for his controversial stance on homework (namely, that it represented a blatant transgression of every man's God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness). Now the only way she could get her authoritative jollies was by killing his buzz *outside* the classroom.

“Yeah?”

“As a senior, I would have expected you to know that skateboarding is not allowed on campus.”

“Totes forgot, Ms. Brenner. That's my bad.”

Andy did a little ollie in place before hopping off and kicking the board up into his hand, earning an extra-strength frown from Midge. Not that there was anything she could do about it. You couldn't get sent to the principal's office when you'd already *been* sent to the principal's office. That shit was called *double jeopardy*.

“Thank you, Andy.”

“Don't mention it.”

Actually, even though he'd been sent there, Andy wasn't going to the principal's office. Last year he and Mr. Jester had come to an agreement. Andy's infractions were frequent but minor, and the principal didn't have the time or energy to deal with every single one. Instead, whenever Andy got into trouble, he was to report to Suzie O, the student counselor.

In other words, he'd been outsourced.

Suzie O's office was located on the second floor of the library, far from the fascist administrator who worked out of Bliss Hall. It was quiet there, because nobody hung out in the library if they could

help it. That is, no one other than the librarians, toddling about behind the desk and in the circulation room, begrudgingly lending out their precious books. They seemed to see students primarily as things to be shushed; you could have a whole conversation with one of them that consisted of nothing but shushing sounds. Andy gave a fancy salute to the librarian behind the front desk as he walked up the stairs and out of her jurisdiction.

As he reached the second floor, he saw Anita Graves come out of Suzie's office, wiping at her eyes. Anita was pretty much the most clean-cut, put-together girl in the whole school. Her family had crazy money, and she was crazy smart—word was she'd already received her early decision acceptance from Princeton. So what the hell was she doing crying at Suzie O?

The counselor gave Anita a quick hug. "You think about what I said, okay?"

"I will." Anita sniffled, then shook her head with a single violent snap. Suddenly all the sadness was gone. She looked her usual self—sharp, focused, unflappable.

"Hey, Andy," she said, even smiling as she passed.

"Hey."

He turned to watch her go. Cute, in the way of certain high-strung girls, like a perfect pile of raked leaves you just wanted to dive into and scatter back over the lawn. He called out after her, "You know whatever it is, it's not worth it."

She didn't look back, but she did break her stride for half a second, which was really the most you could hope for with a girl like that.

"Eyes over here, Rowen." Suzie was leaning against the door frame. "I'm gonna guess you're not here in the middle of fourth period because you missed me."

Andy grinned. "That doesn't mean I *didn't* miss you."

"Come on in."

Suzie's office was actually pretty sweet, for an office. There was a fluffy brown couch long enough to lie out on, a mini-fridge stocked with soda, and a big basket with a layer of fruit hiding a secret stash of real snacks—what Suzie called her "childhood obesity facilitators." Best of all was the television in the corner, available for the occasional midday movie screening, if Suzie was in a good mood.

To say they were friends might have been a stretch, but they got along pretty well for a high school senior with "behavioral issues" and an overweight counselor in her forties. Andy could talk to her about anything: drinking, drugs, girls, his shit parents, whatever. It hadn't come straightaway, of course. The first few times he'd been forced to meet with her, he didn't say a word, just sat there staring at the wall until the bell rang. But Suzie was smart. One day, instead of trying to talk to him, she put on the first season of *Game of Thrones*. And as if that weren't enough right there, she'd started to recite the words along with the characters. It was too much. How could you hate someone who had memorized entire episodes of *Game of Thrones*?

"And to what do I owe the pleasure today, Mr. Rowen?"

“Same old. I was too funny for Ms. Holland. She got jealous.”

“I should’ve known. You want something to eat?”

“Oreo me, dawg.”

Suzie tossed him one of the blue packets of cookies. “So, only five months left. You psyched?”

“About getting out of this shithole? You know it.”

“And what’s your plan after graduation?”

Andy didn’t like talking about stuff like *plans*. Why were adults always so obsessed with the future? It was like the present wasn’t even happening. “I don’t know. Get a job. Move into an apartment with Bobo. Skate. Smoke. Enjoy life.”

“Sounds nice. Any thoughts about college?”

“You know, I totally forgot to apply. That’s on me.”

“What about Seattle Central? You could take a few classes, see how you feel.” Andy made a face and Suzie raised her hands, like a criminal caught in the act. “I’m just being real with you. A high school diploma used to be enough in this country. Now you’ll be lucky to make minimum wage with it.”

“I don’t care about money.”

“It’s not about money. I’m glad you don’t care about money. I’m talking about boredom. You think school is bad? A minimum-wage job makes school look like freaking Burning Man. Unless you have some kind of fetish for doing the same rote physical task eight million times a day.”

“Maybe I do.”

Suzie laughed. “Yeah, I know you probably get this all the time from your parents—”

“I don’t,” Andy said. “They don’t give half a shit.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Believe what you want, man.”

“What I believe is that you shouldn’t waste your potential flipping burgers.”

Andy unscrewed an Oreo and licked the creamy center. “Suzie, no offense, but you are stressing me out today.”

“That’s my job.”

“I thought your job was to help people deal with the stress they already have.”

“Strung-out people need to be chilled out. But chilled-out people maybe could use a good kick in the ass.” She mimed a kind of seated kung-fu ass kicking.

“Stressed people like Anita Graves? What was she doing here, anyway?”

“Everyone’s got their troubles.”

“I’d trade mine for hers.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“Why don’t you do me a real favor?” Andy said, popping the last Oreo into his mouth and talking while he chewed. “Teach me how to get laid. Bobo calls me Mary now, like the Virgin Mary. It’s

humiliating.”

“All right. Lesson one, don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s gross. Lesson two, go to college. Girls like guys with plans.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you’ve got a job and shit, and I don’t see the dudes beating down your door, do I?”

He’d only meant it as an observation, but as soon as he said it, the vibe in the room turned cold. Suzie wasn’t smiling anymore. “You’re a good kid,” she said, “but you’ve got a mean streak in you.”

Andy wanted to apologize, but he didn’t know how to put it into words. Just the thought of trying exhausted him. “Whatever,” he said, standing up. He pushed Suzie’s door out of the way like it was somebody trying to hassle him.



After school, Andy found Bobo already waiting for him in the parking lot, flicking the top of his lighter open and shut. He was wearing tight black jeans and a black Operation Ivy hoodie—both of them studded with patches and rips and safety pins.

“Mary!” he said, pulling a pair of headphones as big as coconut halves off his ears. “You made it! I was afraid we’d lost you for good when you got kicked out of Holland’s class.”

“I’m a survivor. So what’s on tap today?”

“Same old. We hang out here till we get bored, then we leave. I told everybody we’d meet them at the Crocodile at seven. The Tuesdays are playing.” Bobo pulled a rumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit two, and handed one to Andy.

“You sure you don’t wanna rehearse a little?” Andy asked.

“You know I don’t believe in that shit. We gotta book a show first anyway.”

“Never hurts to be prepared.”

Bobo shook his head. “Don’t be a bitch, yo. Let’s just skate.”

Together, they prowled over the Hamilton campus, hopping up on rails and jumping benches and sideswiping trash cans, until the sun started to go down and Hamilton’s athletes slumped sweaty and worn-out from the gym. Then they hopped into Andy’s station wagon, picked up some McDonald’s, and headed downtown.



The Crocodile was an all-ages club with a decent sound system and a delightfully scuzzy clientele. By seven, the heavy, distorted belch of the Bloody Tuesdays was already blasting out of the place like a weapon of mass destruction. Andy and Bobo ordered a couple of Cokes (improved immeasurably by the flask of rum Bobo kept in his back pocket) and sat down at a table. Halfway through the set, the rest of the crew showed up: Jess, Kevin, and Misery, Bobo’s girlfriend. She’d dyed her hair green last week, and it looked good.

They buried themselves deep in the moshing crowd and danced, though for Bobo and Misery, the

basically meant grinding and making out. Somehow Andy could hear the click of their tongue rings even over the music. He did his best to tune it out.

Andy had met Misery on the very first day of junior year and had a crush on her pretty much right away. She was a freshman, but already confident and cool and unapologetically punk rock. Unfortunately, before he could make a move, she met Bobo. Within hours, they were a couple. It had pissed Andy off at first, but what was he gonna do? Bobo had always been the alpha dog in their little pack—funnier, crazier, more willing to get in trouble. He'd been suspended from school twice already; it'd be a miracle if he made it to graduation.

The set ended and they all went back to their table, soaked in their own sweat and the sweat of strangers.

“So when is Perineum gonna play again?” Misery asked.

“When this dude writes some new songs,” Bobo said, punching Andy in the shoulder.

Perineum was their two-man punk rock/death metal band. They'd opened for the Bloody Tuesdays a couple of times over the summer but hadn't performed since. Andy had actually written a lot of songs in the past few months, but none of them were right for a lead singer who thought that music: eardrums = boxer: punching bag.

“Let's go outside,” Misery said. “I wanna smoke.”

The lead singer of the Tuesdays, a big ginger guy who called himself Bleeder, was already out there with his bassist. They were both staring up at the sky.

“That's some crazy-ass shit,” Bleeder said.

Andy looked up. The star was bright blue, like the center of the flame off a chemistry-class Bunsen burner.

“What is it?” he asked. “Like, a comet?”

“It's probably a satellite,” Bleeder said.

Jess shook his head. “Satellites move.”

“Not always.”

The door of the club opened, disgorging a wave of beer smell and feedback. Andy noticed her even before he recognized her—Eliza Olivi, on the arm of some blond dude with a ridiculous Afro. He was way older than her, and totally shitfaced.

“Eliza!”

“Hey, Andy.”

She seemed eager to get away, but when he pointed out the icy blue star, she stared at it for a long time. Then she walked off without even saying good-bye.

“You're so into that,” Bobo said.

“Shut up.”

“Come on, it's inevitable. You're the biggest virgin at Hamilton, and she's the biggest slut. You're just working the odds.”

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